

Conference Report

Local and Global Perspectives of Ethnic and Religious Conflicts: Interrogating the Muslim Built Environments of Europe.

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David Cameron, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and leader of the Conservative party, promulgated February 2011 the collapse in state multiculturalism, purporting that Britain advocated a polity whereby communities with characteristic social mores lead separate lives.ⁱ Propounding that Great Britain necessitate a vehement national identity, precluding

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International Workshop: Thursday 15th December 2011
Venue: University Campus Oldham, Cromwell Street OL1 1BB

It is now ten years since the attacks on the Twin Towers that took place in New York, and the major civil disturbances in Britain. The British riots that occurred in Bradford, Bursley and Oldham were a bleak reminder of previous racial segregation. There have been similar incidences in the European continent.

The aim of this workshop is to critically evaluate the changing attitudes of religious and ethnic understandings and conflicts within both the Muslim and the host communities in Western Europe and beyond. It is expected that this workshop would produce a special issue in the *Global Built Environment Review* (www.edgehill.ac.uk/gber) and/or *South Asian Cultural Studies* (www.edgehill.ac.uk/sacs). A number of European academics will participate and the workshop would include the following themes:

- Integration versus Segregation Discourse
- Diaspora, Loyalties and the Emerging Identities
- Fundamentalism and Radicalism
- Representations of Muslims in media and fiction

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individuals predilection to extremism, Cameron was accused of fomenting English Defence League propaganda, concretizing right-wing zealotry, and continuing to accentuate Muslim communities at the centre of counter-terrorism strategies. Moreover, anterior French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and, German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, espoused congruous rumination affirming multiculturalism had also failed in France and Germany.ⁱⁱ

Conversely, Dr. Moosavi, specialist in Muslim communities in Britain, affirmed British Muslims' are 'well-integrated in Britain', despite frequent xenophobic horrorism stereotyping Muslims' as outsiders.ⁱⁱⁱ Centring on the we/ them (non-Muslim/ Muslim) configuration, Moosavi reported an incongruity of cultural and religious identities and attitudes perceived by non-Muslims and Muslims; an ideological detachment cultivating an inference whereby Muslims' struggle with their hyphenated British identities and divided loyalties.

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Britain has been coined a broken society, devoid of cohesion and stability, and weakened by social and cultural fibres that once bound a multicultural Britain. Partition of ethnic minorities, a defining feature of societal rupturing, is a spatially palpable schematic developing and establishing in Britain's urban regions (Halsall 2010, p.4). Historically embedded, British Asians, particularly those of Pakistani and Bangladeshi lineage, are predominant ethnic minorities who have tended to endure social and geographical segregation (Modood, 1997; Poulsen, 2005; Peach, 2007), suffering deprived living conditions, educational difficulties and limited employment opportunities.

Segregation, predominantly interpreted as a negative cultural concept, is synonymous with ethnic minorities. Displaying inimitable physical, cultural and religious characteristics, ethnic minorities enthused by economic riches, plugged the UK labour shortage. Although initially applauded for their contribution to British economy, racial tensions emerged late 1950s among white populace anxious that South Asians monopolized scarce employment opportunities. Race relations further corroded following Enoch Powell's controversial Rivers of Blood speech destroying a palatable vision of a society devoid of racial tensions. Powell's dogma provoked racial fragility between white and growing South Asian populations. Racial violence erupted 1981 in Brixton; London, and Toxteth; Liverpool exposing mounting racial segregation that illuminated social and economic disproportion between white and ethnic minorities.

The violent community disorders of 2001 race riots provoked Amin (2002) to critique that these disturbances were a reminder of Britain's established racism and cultural intolerance. Home Office investigations affirmed that communities were living parallel lives; a principal failure within communities. Moreover, the London 7/7 bombings, plus international terrorist attacks in New York, Mumbai and Madrid encumbered strained relations between white and British Asian communities - both became suspicious of the other. Reverberations of 9/11, British Asians, Ahmed (2003) observed, became a synonym for extremism, fanaticism and terrorism. Consequently, factions of British Asian society experienced vulnerability exposed to derision from few white British citizens who questioned their loyalty to Britain. The Twin Towers disaster begets fundamental transformation of central government policy with the disbandment of social cohesion and the introduction of community cohesion. Community cohesion presented as a potential resolve to racial segregation.

How do Western European Muslims encompassing plural loyalties experience the developments outlined above? This seminar assumed to present an active debate in continuing the understanding of Muslims' positionality within Western built environments.

Convened ten years since 9/11 and civil disturbances in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham, this international workshop critically evaluated the changing attitudes of religious and ethnic understandings and conflicts of European Muslims'. Held at University of Huddersfield's Oldham campus, and jointly organized between Edge Hill University (UK), University of Huddersfield (UK) and Vrije Universiteit (The Netherlands), in conjunction with SACS and GBER journals, this conference was a retort to the dearth of academic literature centred on

the Muslim Built Environment of Europe, with links to local and global perspectives of ethnic and religious conflicts. Attracting an audience of international academics, staff, students and public representatives' nine international speakers engaged in active debates and presentations. Categorizing the symposium into four connecting thematic discourses, providing focus and diversity, each speaker presented their 20 minute paper followed by panel discussion.

Contributors

- Tasleem Shakur - Representations of South Asian diasporic Muslims' through fiction/ films and sports participation in the UK
- Kevin Burke – 'Mancunian Muslim' or 'South Asian Muslim': European experiential geographies and Disapora in the 'Curry Mile' Manchester, UK
- Peer Smets - Everyday encounters and notions of belonging attributed to Moroccan-Dutch and native born in an Amsterdam neighbourhood
- Ernest Kadembo – The complex blended brand: Multiculturalism and segregation in the dynamics of re-branding Oldham
- Kevin Brice – Media (mis)reporting of research on conversion to Islam in the United Kingdom: Dispelling myths or reinforcing them?
- Nath Aldalala'a – A decade on: Changes in Muslim-Minority discourse in Britain since 9/11
- Saliha Anjun, Andrew McKinlay, Chris McVittie – Muslims' religious and cultural identity in changing Britain
- Mohammed Dhalech – Reconnecting with nature and countryside: City Muslims in the outdoors
- Ilyas Mohammed – Islamist groups and recruitment in Europe

Theme 1: Diaspora, Attitudes and Emerging Identity of Muslims'

Shakur, Editor in Chief of GBER¹ and SACS, provided the keynote paper. Presenting primary research data, extrapolated via focus group discussions and participant observations, Shakur discussed changing attitudes, multiple loyalties and hybridized identities of young Bangladeshi and Pakistani sport participants and the on-going representations of South Asian Muslims portrayed in contemporary British film and fiction. Shakur discussed how Muslim representations through film and fiction have progressively transformed merging cultures, traditions and individual identities. Citing vague representations of South Asian Muslims in 1980s British movies, Shakur intimated that writers could be criticised for adopting a colonial construction of Muslims'. Shakur remarked that the cinematic production of Brick Lane presented emerging representations of diasporic identities projected through transient cultures and postmodernity. Shakur concluded by questioning the role of sports institutions in the community and continued misrepresentation and demonization of Muslims' in popular film.

Burke examined hybridity, space contestation and globalization along Manchester's Curry Mile. A distorted synonym of British perception towards South Asian communities, Manchester's infamous neon illuminated mile garners multiple hyphenated identities. Burke posits that second and third generation Muslims are constantly negotiating

¹ Global Built Environment Review - <http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/gber/>

alternative diasporic identifications that surface in different circumstances and social relationships, depending on the space and environment which are inhabited moved between. Although cultural rupture is evident, Burke opined, Manchester's Muslim community are integrated within dominant society.

Theme 2: Integration versus Segregation Discourse

Smets oration began suggesting the New York terrorist attacks did not evoke new conflicts but renewed exiting tensions. Smets paper centred on qualitative observations of native-born and Moroccan-Dutch encounters in the disadvantaged Diamant neighbourhood of Amsterdam. Focusing on social belonging and intra-ethnic contacts elucidates individual habits, motivations and judgements concerning daily behavioural patterns. Smets avowed that exhibited social connectivity revealed intra-ethnic civility that challenges public and political discourse.

Kadembo focused on city branding. Oldham (Greater Manchester, UK) recapitulated as a multicultural metropolis projects a diverse tableau of plural affiliations, and socio-cultural segregation embodied within Oldham inhabitants. Kadmebo contends that individuals are themselves a brand with unique identities, characteristics, motivations and aspirations whose idiosyncratic experiences are imputed as a reflection of Oldham's branding. While Oldham experienced rebranding in 2008, Kadmebo intimates that this is inconsistent with Oldham's populace suggesting social cohesion is a reverie.

Theme 3: Representations of Muslims in Media and Fiction

Brice explored media misreporting of research on British converts to Islam. Referencing research published in 2011, the report sought to dispel myths that Islam is a homogenous 'foreign' entity. Attracting a superfluity of media attention articles centred on quantitative data, inferred from 2001 census and London mosques statistics, which provided a conversion to Islam quotient. Estimated calculations, based on extrapolation and projection, were an indication of conversion rate but provided little evidence of mass conversion. Media (UK and international) misinterpreted the research, publishing propagating articles that Britain was undergoing Islamification reinforcing pre-existing stereotypes that the research sought to dispel.

Aldalala'a critiqued British novelist Martin Amis's Muslim-minority text. Aldalala'a evinced contemporary British fiction, categorized as either pre or post 9/11 prose, constructs or assists in creating new minority discourse that could affect intra-ethnic interactions. Constructed via discourse, and influenced by fiction, the we/ they configuration induces a genre of 'horrorism' inciting the threat of Islamism. Aldalala'a posits that minority discourse has created a new dimension whereby minorities are no longer represented and inclusively described, but defined by legislative and anti-terrorism acts.

Theme 4: Fundamentalism and Radicalism

Anjum presented qualitative data, educed from semi-structured interviews, which examined shifting social and political conditions and restructured Muslim cultural and religious

identities. Analysis of participant interviews suggested Muslims' identity and attitude construction facilitate sense of belonging and well being development.

Dhalech evaluated two initiatives, AMR and MOSAIC², conceived to encourage Muslim and BME communities to engage with nature and countryside. Providing a critical assessment of moderate Muslim and BME outdoor interaction, Dhalech intimated that institutional racism and media cant negatively portray Muslims within rural milieus, encumbering sustainable attachments with England's National Parks. Promoting intergenerational encouragement, personal development plans and training agendas, Dhalech argued that AMR and MOSAIC have proved successful organizations endorsing the egalitarianism of National Parks.

Mohammed presented a conceptual framework expounding constructed processes and discourses Islamist factions employ to motivate and recruit individuals. Centring on social and political infringements, from which a framework is formulated, Mohammed explicated internal and confrontational crisis that occur within an individual's psyche creating cognitive openings. Citing complex cognitive processes coupled with emotions and forced choice, Mohammed proposes this as a stimulus to why individuals join radical groups.

Smets (Assistant Professor, Vrije Universiteit) delivered the concluding précis citing workshop rationale was to analyze and debate ethnic segregation, rather than proffer solutions to racial tensions. Integrating scholarly discourse with community and political perspectives, represented by Abdul Malik-Ahad³ and Zokey Ahad⁴ respectively, political rhetoric dominated plenary sessions and defined contributor colloquies. Animated debate cogitated on subsisting and escalating racism and Islamophobia, Arab Spring civil resistance and pecuniary austerity complications, affecting statutory and voluntary sector involvement in tackling racial segregation.

Sponsored by SACS and GBER, this scholarly public workshop, a sequel to a conference organized in Birmingham, United Kingdom, titled 'Ghettoised perceptions versus mainstream construction of English Muslims': The future of the multicultural built environment', delivered a collection of important and provocative contributions that challenged social movements, and our understanding of the Muslim built environment in Europe. Attended by around fifty individuals, of which only 15% represented ethnic minorities, the conference provided a platform for established and relatively new scholars to promote and debate an academically dearth in literature discourse.

Organized, and promoted, as an international conference, international orators' attended from Vrije Universiteit (The Netherlands) and the University of Nizwa (Sultanate of Oman). Contributors provided diverse and insightful papers, connecting conference themes, but failed to deliver European papers outlined as a conference objective. Focusing on British and Dutch case studies exclusively, speakers also struggled to adhere to their 20-minute

² Mosaic: Building links between Ethnic communities and National Parks - <http://www.mosaicnationalparks.org/>

³ Managing Director of Tung Sing Housing Association Ltd

⁴ Assistant High Commissioner of Bangladesh, Manchester

time slot, several finishing abruptly or appearing rushed to complete their presentation. Moreover, the organizers could have done more to ensure a gender balanced contributor panel having invited only one female speaker.

Yet, were conference objectives met? The workshop interrogated and promoted debate on Europe's Muslim built environment, in the wake of international terrorist attacks. Providing a forum to widen our knowledge, network and collaborate with other Higher Education institutions, this workshop has benefited the student community, at Edge Hill University and the University of Huddersfield, through updating their knowledge and understanding of this emerging subject.

Endnotes

ⁱ State multiculturalism as failed, says David Cameron. *BBC News*, [online] (Last updated 18:55 on 05th February 2011) Available at: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12371994>> [Accessed 10 July 2012].

ⁱⁱ Nicolas Sarkozy joins David Cameron and Angela Merkel view that multiculturalism has failed, *Mail Online*, [online] (Last updated 13:07 on 11 February 2011) Available at: <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1355961/Nicolas-Sarkozy-joins-David-Cameron-Angela-Merkel-view-multiculturalism-failed.html>> [Accessed 10 July 2012].

ⁱⁱⁱ Moosavi, L., 2012. Muslims are well-integrated in Britain – but no one seems to believe it. *The Guardian*, [online] 3 July. Available at: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2012/jul/03/muslims-integrated-britain>> [Accessed 10 July 2012].

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