Young British Muslims, Counter-Terrorism and the State: Contesting the Policy Turn

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Introduction

Over the past decade national security has been at the forefront of political debate and policy-making. The terrorist attacks conducted by Islamic Fundamentalists inspired by al-Qaeda in New York in September 2001, Istanbul in November 2003, Madrid in March 2004 and London in July 2005 all serve as reminders of the capability of determined groups to puncture the myth that the nation state can ensure the security and safety of its citizens. Insofar as specific responses to the threat from terrorist networks have varied across different nations, in all Western nations counter-terrorism measures have been reviewed and augmented. In the United Kingdom, a veritable raft of counter-terrorism legislation emerged after 9/11 to combat what was politically defined as a ‘new’ and highly lethal form of terrorism (see Leitzinger, 2004; Peters, 2004). What has been striking about many of the legal developments in the United Kingdom has been the pre-emptive nature of law which has been defined to intervene early in the cycle to prevent future attacks (see McCulloch and Pickering, 2010; Mythen and Walklate, 2010). The driving logic of pre-emption is to prevent harms before they materialise, yet the tendency in government, policing and intelligence circles to ask the ‘What if?’ question has led to a blurring of the lines between fact and fiction, the real and the imaginary. As a consequence, in some countries state imaginings of worst-case scenarios have encouraged policies and law making which have skewed the balance between security and liberty (see Mythen and Walklate, 2008). Although beyond the ambit of this chapter, we should note that post-9/11 security responses have stretched...
way beyond national policy, with large-scale international military forays being launched in Iraq and Afghanistan under the auspices of the ‘War on Terror’. Notwithstanding the ruinous consequences of such incursions and the horrific and unpalatable loss of human life that has transpired,¹ our objective here is to deploy primary empirical data to elaborate some of the impacts of domestic counter-terrorism legislation on young British Muslims. In the United Kingdom, after the 7/7 attacks the police and security services firmly directed attention towards preventing further acts of ‘home-grown terrorism’ (see Evans, 2007).

While such efforts were not without foundation given that the 7/7 attacks were conducted by British citizens, the dominant ideology which has pervaded media and political circles has cast a cloud of generalised suspicion over Muslims in general and British Pakistani Muslims specifically. As such, British Muslims of Asian heritage are having to negotiate their identities in a context that demands allegiance to, and alignment with, ‘core British values’ while simultaneously being constructed as the potential enemy within: a suspect population that will literally explode unless it is adequately surveyed, policed and punished (see Chapter 6 for a critical exploration of the integration trends in European policies based on the view that there is a ‘dominant culture’ of the ‘native’ citizenry, into which migrants have to assimilate). It is expected that the state should seek to reduce threats to public security through the range of powers at its disposal – including proposing appropriate criminal justice legislation, conducting intelligence operations and engaging in legitimate policing. We will draw upon qualitative evidence, however, to demonstrate that the state has implemented forms of regulation that have been disproportionate to the threat and that has had deleterious effects on relationships between Muslim minority groups and the police. In order to illuminate a deterioration of community relations, we will draw on empirical data from a research project involving young British Pakistanis living in the North West of England.

While the actual efficacy of macro-policies designed to counter terrorism in Britain remains open to debate, here we wish to elucidate some of the micro-level effects of national policy-making on the everyday experiences, cultural practices and political viewpoints of those that find themselves at the sharp end of security policy. In keeping with the tone of this book we aim to demonstrate that despite the current financial crisis and attendant contraction in funding for critical social research, it is still possible to conduct research that asks unsettling questions of those in power – research, in effect, that may be outside the strategic priorities of major funding bodies or the needs of commercial