

When Students Turn to Terror

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A Closer Look

Albeit our screens and papers have been punctuated with claims of a rampant campus extremism recently, I am sure many of you will be glad to know, it has not, [in the academic community at least] been taken too seriously. For those of you not familiar with the report that has recently lent itself to new state endeavours, 'When Students Turn to Terror,' it reads something like this: The liberal ethos of Britain's university campuses have allowed them to be exploited by extremists of various kinds – of which the Muslim variety are most problematic. Universities have naively welcomed all high fee paying students, namely international students, at the expense of security and are oblivious to the cultural-terrorist havens they have nurtured.

Promulgated by a leading academic in the field of intelligence, who would blame the media for authoritatively citing this report, indeed one would assume it to be comprised of intelligent reporting. No doubt the media journalists, political commentators, and statesmen and women that make reference to this report have had little time to study its claims of evidence, methodology, and key assumptions. The only summary fact that has been of concern, as the report so vigorously claims, is that British higher education institutions are unwittingly, naively and greedily harbouring a variety of extremists.

Read the report in its entirety however, including the endnotes and one will find the report in fact amounts to nothing more than a Google cut-and-paste job, lacking academic rigour, ethical commitment and substantive empirical research. In fact, to be clear, the research for this report was in large part conducted by an MA student for his thesis. Researched by former journalist, Chris Pope, and given all the glam of a big name, Professor Anthony Glees, - 'one of the founding figures of academic study of in Intelligence and security issues,' as is self claimed, - it has been oft cited in tandem with new 'Muslim management' state commentary.

Yet, given the seniority and 'academic' source from which it ostensibly emerges, it is remarkable that over 50% of the sources for the report come from the media itself. Of the 195 citations in the report, over 100 are derived from the media. It should come as no surprise then that the report at best reads like a broadsheet and at worst a tabloid, reproducing and reiterating media 'facts,' even if they happen to be bias, inaccurate or downright irrelevant. And this is not to defame journalistic enquiry, merely to indicate the different nature of academic enquiry, - bound by ethical commitment to its 'subjects' of research, rigorous empirical and theoretical frameworks and more than a concise and refined use of language. To be clear we are not speaking of the content of the report and the polemical subject it raises, but the very manner in which the report has been compiled.

To be fair, Pope, does concede some way in to the report that the information used is 'openly available in the media' and through this they have identified a number of individuals and organisations that have attended or are using British higher education institutions for non-democratic or even illegal activities.' [p,48] Albeit this is questionable methodology even for an MA thesis, it is far more worrying given its ramifications for homeland security.

This interesting methodology of biographical accounts from newspapers together with scant primary data [i.e. interviews or participant observation] means we are left with a catch all approach that is neither consistent nor rigorous. That is why we end up with every named Muslim [prior to the date of publication] who happened to be a student suspected of extremist activity, even if they have never been charged and even if mistakes have indeed been made. Urslaan Khan for instance, was an Arabic studies student ' found to be travelling on his British Passport.'- Since it is likely this is the only passport he was issued being a local of Yarm, it is hardly criminal.

Further, and perhaps of concern to some universities, is the grounds on which they are named as campuses ensnared in the 'terrorist-extremist nexus.' Take the University of Manchester for example, one finds that of all 6 references implicating Manchester in the report, 2 are un-sourced, 1 is from a Trotskyist website, 1 is from an interview with the UJS, 1 is from the Sunday Times, and 1 from Jane's Intelligence Review. This hardly makes for ground-breaking evidence. Based on this admirable collection of sources, and given that the singular primary source used in this instance is from a national Zionist organisation not renowned for its favourable views on Muslims, it is indeed a questionable set of sources. Put another way, wouldn't we be raising eyebrows if we accepted interview data from lets say Al-Muhajiroun about Jewish student societies on campus?

It is indeed baffling then why in a report that quietly concedes its large media source, is claiming 'hard evidence' at every significant juncture in the report. On numerous occasions, [namely at the beginning and end of each chapter,] we are told of evidence as 'established fact,' yet no evidence transpires. Perhaps the idea is that if one repeats the word evidence often enough, and at key moments, it will be-come true. Further, given the fact that Glees and Pope themselves claim that ' no one in the security community knows whether particular universities are hotbeds of extremism or have any reliable means of finding out.' [p.30] it is remarkable that the authors feel able to make such vigorous assertions. Had the report been available for media consumption after October 5th, there is no doubt Middlesex and maybe even Lancaster University would have too been slipped in the terror directory. And of course when media sources fall short, and academic enquiry seems too much like hard work, Pope and Glees turn to an online encyclopedia for a summary of Al Muhajirounian philosophy.

Yet one could be forgiven for thinking Pope had interviewed all the Muslim voices that rapidly emerge towards the end of the report, particularly in the way quotes are presented directly from speakers, not from the papers in which their originally quoted. A closer look still, at the primary data, and one discovers that of the interviews conducted with university students and staff, [24 references in all- 6 of which are likely to be duplicated but unconfirmed because of their confidential status] most are from Brunel, the institution at which Pope and Glees are based.

There are two points of considerable concern here, firstly, to add further injury to an already sorry state of a report, even for those who remain unnamed in the report, it is not difficult to deduce their location, the trail leads us right back to Brunel. Any attempt at anonymity in this instance is lost. Secondly, the commentary that ensues from these Brunel based references are generalised as if indicative of UK campuses, when in fact information on other UK campuses are sought primarily from newspaper clippings and websites.

This brings us to another hole in this poorly stitched report, that of all the interviews conducted by Pope, including Brunel union officials, a former BNP activist and the UJS, not a single one is with a Muslim student from any student Islamic society, union, or FOSIS. Now this might be deemed remotely acceptable if the report was equally devoted to the terror-producing organisations it names [HT, AM, BNP & ALF] however the attention merited to each organisation is incomparable: Of 195 citations, 121 are focused on Muslim extremism alone, indicative not of empirical research, but of a recent media outpouring.

Of course, had our MA student or the Professor done any substantive empirical research before accepting the flurry of media interviews, they wouldn't possibly, and couldn't possibly have romantically characterised Britain's universities as free for all sites of liberal acceptance. Not when a number of institutions do not have even have the basic infrastructure in place to ensure equality practices are being maintained, [Hefce Progress Review, 2004,p.19] where institutional racism is rampant – evidenced in the stark racialised hierarchies[1] of older universities in particular, where it is known from primary research that European conventions on human rights have been abrogated by at least one union, where university prayer rooms and those peacefully praying in them have been violated at the whim of zealous union officials, where when Muslim students have partaken in the formal electoral processes of the union they are viciously resisted, and the list goes on.

To be clear, universities are generally safe places, however to claim their liberalness as part of the cause of the 'extremist problem' is an overstatement and failing to acknowledge some of the very illiberal, exploitative, and anti-free speech, practices that beset some [not all] H.E. institutions, including their respective unions.

It is also rather worrying that in the terminological clarifications Pope and Glees seek to impress us with, they choose to employ a distinction of Islamic and Islamist from a Panorama documentary, rather than from any substantive academic enquiry: a documentary that caused an outcry across Muslim communities for its horrendous bias and manipulation. The source of this 'well grounded' distinction aside, it is the polarisation of Muslim political subjectivity that looms large as well as the lack of commentary on what an Islamist constitutes. Thus whilst Islam is deemed essentially apolitical, Islamism is rendered extremely subversive and according to their definition, a prerequisite for extremist behaviour. In terms of this dysfunctional conceptual framework, Muslim subjectivities are thus either de-politicised or over-politicised beyond 'tipping point.' This polarisation, to be clear, is nothing new, but it is precisely these types of attempts at coming to terms with Muslimness that eclipse the perfectly legitimate and constitutional engagements many young Muslim students are engaged in.

What happens to the fervour with which some Muslim students have campaigned for Fair Trade, have in union with friends and foes ousted out the BNP from their unions, and have marched against the war? Is this Islamic or Islamist? Viewing Muslim subjectivities through an orientalist prism can only produce the nonsensical categories Pope and Glee come up with, even if they are done, on the panoramic authority of Islamic leaders on a Sunday night.

This terminological typhoon sweeps through the entire report, with many instances of conceptual interchange, collapse of distinction, and even the emergence of distinctions that originally did not exist, perhaps too many to cite here. However, it is worth mentioning that the definition of terrorism and its little sister, 'subversion,' [defined as ' action intended to overthrow parliamentary democracy by political, industrial or violent means. '] is completely in line with the revised anti-terror State Project. This is namely in their expansion of terrorism to include, " those who attempt, for political purposes to justify and glamorise illegal violent acts: ' A state vision with some teething problems. However, one can only recoil at a definition which identifies the state as the only potential victim of terror and subversion. That subversion/terrorism is something only of any significance when it happens to 'parliamentary democracies' is indicative of the westoxified ethnocentrism that plagues the report. For according to their own definitions, other forms of governance that do not abide by the western model can not suffer terrorist onslaught, even if that happens to be illegal occupation or invasion.

Alongside the broader ethical, conceptual and terminological flaws that embroider this report is the way in which a confused immigrant identity [yes British Muslims are referred to as 'Second generation immigrants'] an unfulfilled multiculturalism [integration in to British ways' will prevent extremism thesis] and a concentration of Muslims in any one institution [too many Muslims might 'spoil the broth'] is rendered a contributory factor to campus extremism. The latter in particular is reflected in the recommendation that these 'ethnics' ought to be dispersed and divorced from their insulated communities. 'Clearly,' according to their extensive research, Black ghettos are no doubt far more dangerous than white ones, which is why integration in to 'British habits' are recommended as a corrective to Muslim radical thinking and not applied to the BNP'S white racist enclaves. The BNP or the ALF seem not to have any cord connecting them to any community by virtue of their race, class, neighbourhood, social club, church, or Pub. But maybe we should be writing to all the pubs in the country asking them to be vigilant, especially after 9pm when they've had a bit too much to drink and the BNP begin brainstorming their next Muslim bashing rampage.

These omissions regarding 'communities' are indicative, as indicative as all the coded words used to speak about Muslims in the report, as 'ethnic,' 'international students,' and sometimes without qualification, just plain old 'British Muslims.' So what begins as a noble declaration of distinction merely becomes a silent synonymity between the subversive agents of terror and the impassioned Muslim student calling for universal justice. Perhaps then the most rigorous statement made in this report comes in its final ramblings, that " Of course we cannot know [because we are not able to find out precisely what goes on in student clubs and societies, whether official or unofficial.' [p.104] My own recommendations in light of it would be that Pope should stick to Journalism, and Glee, well by the sound of British Intelligence these days, British Intelligence.

References

[1] . This racialised hierarchy can be seen more concretely, as Puwar remarks, in the tiny number of black professors at the top with most Blacks at the bottom of the academic scale- with many in the less prestigious institutions. Black women are more likely to be found on the lower rungs of higher education institutions with a notable presence of South Asian women as researchers. Puwar, "(Dis)Locating South Asian Women in the Academy." P. 3 op cite., Modood, T. & Fenton, S., Ethnicity and Employment in Higher Education (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1999).