Connected Communities

Communities defeating or endorsing extreme violence

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Executive Summary

Building upon research carried out under the auspices of the AHRC Connected Communities Project, Spalek and McDonald (2011), the study develops the concept and understanding of 'connectors' – individuals and groups who are positioned at intersections of different communities and who, by acting as conduits of connectivity, may reduce or in some cases increase the likelihood of violence and threat to life.

Most crucially, the study includes an historical analysis of communities as defeating and/or endorsing extreme violence, providing oft unacknowledged context to the two British case studies of extreme violence: violent radicalization of young British Muslims, and inter/intra-communal street violence of the type often associated with gangs but spilling out into the wider community as witnessed during the urban rioting of summer 2011. The accompanying literature review and analysis provides a resource for the development of further interdisciplinary research into intra and inter-community and state conflict, and conflict transformation. The review of both historical and contemporary social analyses offers the context necessary to better understand and situate qualitative data. Furthermore, the development of a consultative methodology with research advisors whose lived experiences illustrate and add to the wider literature has provided an exciting dialogic approach. The study therefore highlights the important connection between academic analysis of both historical and contemporary events with the lived realities of key social actors involved in community conflict.

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Key words

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Study Aims

The study focuses on two major sources of state concern in which communities have been identified as sources of support for and resistance against violence – violent extremism and urban rioting. Both examples not only illustrate communities in conflict, but stand as metonyms for contemporary public discourse and moral panic on the ‘new’ breakdown of society, the perceived increase in violent social conflict, and the role of young people, minority ethnic and religious communities as instigator ‘folk devils’ (Cohen 1973). And while history provides diverse examples of conflict and dissent within and between British communities and the state, there are historical moments that relate directly, not only as similar events, but in relation to the social and political processes that incubated them.

The aim is to better understand the role of communities in defeating or endorsing forms of extreme violence through the two case studies by:

- exploring contemporary discourse and analysis underpinning their construction as ‘new’ phenomena;
- challenging their normative construction as ahistorical, discrete events by providing relevant historical comparisons;
- developing an analysis which contextualises and illustrates the common nature of events and their links with common social processes;
- using the literary analysis as a basis for dialogue with community experts and practitioners of conflict transformation to test theoretical analysis against experiential knowledge, and to shape the agenda for future research and its practical application in conflict transformation.

Methodology

As a study aiming to better understand the links between historical and contemporary events and social processes, and the interface between normative discourse, academic theory and lived reality, the methodology developed has been one of connectivity and dialogue. While the literature review situates the two contemporary case studies within a broader history of similar events, it also incorporates analyses of the underlying social processes through which common threads and continuity can be drawn. It is necessarily inter-disciplinary, bringing together scholarly work in the fields of history, sociology, social policy, criminology and political science, to pinpoint the most relevant academic knowledge. As a study of social phenomena, the analysis connects theory with sociality. This element has been further developed through a consultative approach, in which the historical review has been shaped by dialogue with key social actors, whose expertise as practitioners, connectors and community members has provided focus and context for the study and offered direction for future research. While a number of these individuals and organisations have preferred to remain anonymous, it is with great thanks we acknowledge the contributions of Kirk Dawes and his team at The Centre for Conflict Transformation, and Craig Pinkney, Real ActionUK.

Introducing communities and conflict

Communities, their connections and associated complexities, have been the subject of considerable conversation and debate in the UK, particularly since the terrorist attacks
of 7 July 2005 and the English riots of August 2011. Much of the conversation has centred on the position of communities as impediments to and assistors of radicalisation and/or intra-communal street violence and rioting. This discourse has percolated between academe, the media, and government and has been fuelled by government policies and anti-terrorism and riot arrests and general chatter.

In February 2011, for instance, in a speech in Munich, Prime Minister David Cameron signalled a new stage by broadening the focus of government counter-terrorism policy. His comments signaled a move away from specific interest in violent extremism towards concern for more general forms of extremism/radicalisation – described as the ‘mood music’ to violence (Quilliam Foundation quoted by Githens-Mazer & Lambert 2009), with an underlying suggestion that this might require a greater engagement with some communities or elements within communities. The broadening of the focus of counter-terrorism policy toward radicalisation, viewed as a precursor/conveyor belt to violence, thus emphasizes the role of communities in this process, both as promoters of radicalism and as inhibitors.

More recently, the riots of August 2011 further highlighted the role of community and ‘connectors’ (Spalek & McDonald 2011), both negatively and positively. The rapid escalation of events and the popular, political narrative implying the involvement of communal and criminal gangs as instigators, provided a perception of organised crime combined with individual opportunism. The result was an ahistorical analysis which removed the social and political contexts – mistrust between police and communities, structural inequality, youth unemployment, and social and political disenfranchisement – to explain away violence as the fault of communities, of young people and individual criminality. Such discourse, defied by famous community connectors such as Tariq Jahan, father of one of the three young men killed in the 2011 riots in Birmingham whose public speech following the deaths effectively ended the rioting, overlooks the positive historical and current involvement of communities in acting as mediators intervening in their communities with the vision to protect life.

‘New’ forms of conflict?

Nothing that has occurred in the last decade in terms of violence, radicalisation and gang violence in communities is new in either a UK or international historical context. Yet, the discourse on the topic, including the academic research, has almost exclusively ignored the historical dimension with the notable exception of work on “suspect communities” (Pentazis & Pemberton 2009; Hickman, Thomas, Silvestri & Nickels, 2011). The discourse of ‘New Terror’ for example, has contributed to the understanding – both in popular and academic circles – that recent Al-Qaeda and related forms of violence mark an unprecedented change in both the levels of violence and the motivations of perpetrators (Field 2012; Hoffman1993; 1995; 2006; Laqueur,1999, 2003; Rees and Aldrich, 2005:911). From this perspective, the violent radicalization of young British Muslims is viewed as a unique and contemporary problem – a ‘new’ form of violence emanating from a ‘new’ community. Similarly, the conflict between gangs and the 2011 summer riots have been cast as violent symptoms of a new social breakdown in which the contemporary socialities of young/working
class/minority ethnic communities have created a criminal, nihilistic, and ‘feral’ underclass.

On both areas – violent radicalisation and intra and inter communal violence and rioting – there is a much longer history, one which through careful examination, may generate historically literate social analysis and policy in the 21st century. It is therefore remarkable how little past historical examples where these elements are present have been examined, despite the relevance to current debates. In the interwar period of the twentieth century for instance, thousands of British citizens across a number of different communities, including in the West Midlands, were ‘radicalised’ and found themselves involved with entities on the far right or far left (Pugh 2002). In the 1930s, for ideological reasons, nearly 2000 young British men, against the wishes of their government, left their communities to fight, and in some cases die, in the Spanish Civil War (Baxell 2004; Hopkins 2000). In the same period, five young men, later known as the “Cambridge Five”, would be radicalised while at university and, as a result, turn against their country, revealing secrets to the Soviet Union that directly led to deaths (King 1998). Others joined far right organizations, including thousands who belonged to the British Union of Fascists, and engaged in intra-communal and inter-communal violence in the 1930s (Lunn & Thurlow 1980).

In previous centuries, other grassroots movements developed in Britain including the Luddites, whose involvement in radicalisation and violence in conjunction with a strong sense of ‘Commonality’ (Sale 2006), would, from contemporary state perspectives, illustrate the problematic role of community as a source of militancy and conflict. Even more relevant to the present have been past movements associated with religious extremism whose methods included the use of terrorism. Elements within marginalized Catholic communities, particularly in the Midlands, became engaged in a terrorism plot that sought to blow up Parliament in 1605, intending to remove the country’s political leadership (Fraser 2010). The Gunpowder Plot revealed the complexities of the interconnection between communities and radicalization with key individuals serving as ‘connectors’ across boundaries, while illustrating a recurring theme: the intersection of politics, social conflict and religion (Griset & Mahan 2002:10).

**Key Theoretical Concepts**

The following conceptual tools and frameworks have been central to the project analysis:

- Commonalities and historical continuum of community-based conflicts
- Social Contract Theory
- The Role Of Non-Electoral Forms Of Political Action and Dissent
- Activists, Agitators, Radicals > Connectors and Mediators
- Frame alignment as a precursor to conflict transformation

**Summary: Understanding Connectors**

**Key issues:** Connectors as credible grassroots influencers; non-traditional community leadership; bridge builders and burners within and between communities and state; fluid roles: agitators and mediators
Conclusions

Developing a socially connected, consultative approach within the study has provided an on-going dialogue in which the ideas and examples from the literature have been discussed with key community experts. Reviewing the literature while reflecting on the experiential practitioner knowledge gathered during consultation leads to a number of key conclusions:

- **Understanding the complex and multifaceted nature of inter & intra community and state conflict requires a deep, historically literate understanding of social and political contexts.**
- **The histories of communities cannot be divorced from their contemporary sociality: experiences of power differentiation, forms of oppression and the development of communal identities shape contemporary events.**
- **The tendency for normative discourse to portray communal violence as an aggregation of individuals’ acts undermines the role of structural social processes and contexts, which historical analysis shows to have repeatedly provided the conditions for violence in context over time and place. Violence characterised as ‘ethnic’ or ‘religious’ is often underpinned by entrenched structural challenges from social alienation to inter-communal economic competition articulated through the scapegoating of Others.**
- **Forms of conflict with and between communities cannot be characterised as monolithic: the causes and processes are multiple, complex and subject to constant change. The tendency for public discourse to simplify and reduce, or policy to attempt to identify clear explanations and solutions, prevents the recognition of diverse experience from within communities.**
- **The politicisation of public and policy discourse relating to inter and intra community violence suppresses critical voices from within communities – often for political expediency and benefit at the expense of conflict transformation. In both case studies, grievance and dissent against the state, its relationships with the grassroots nationally and internationally such as community-police relations and foreign policy, are largely ignored in favour of a focus on individual psycho-social causality.**
- **Communities can be the location of violence, but they are also non-homogenous and loosely bounded. The notion of community endorsement or rejection of violence is therefore equally complex – elements of communities may support or participate in violence at a particular time, and those same elements, or indeed different ones, may work to prevent or end conflict. This does not happen uniformly throughout a community.**
- **Connectors, those individuals whose credibility and influence within community networks and in various forms with the state, are the one constant in communal support, participation or rejection of violence. While some analyses have discredited connectors as vociferous minorities who do not reflect the views of the wider community, it is these relatively small networks who are able to exert influence as instigators or mediators in times of violence.**
- **Crucially, connectors operate between, beyond and through traditional state-
community boundaries. This ambiguous positionality is a source of power as individuals and networks may act as agitators, mediators or pacifiers, bridge-builders or bridge-burners, despite the historical, structural, social and political contexts. For example, grassroots intervention to prevent or halt violent extremism, gang related conflict, or wider social unrest can succeed despite continued community discontent or long term state-controlled issues such as unemployment, local resource distribution, foreign policy or police brutality. Conversely, conflict can be fuelled based on misinformation, rumour and fear-mongering, or indeed, consciousness raising relating to injustice and forms of community oppression.

If connectors’ engagement is achieved through frame alignment, in which conflict transformation with the state and other communities is deemed of mutual interest, at which points does the alignment cease? And how might community attempts and successes to transform conflict without structural change act as pacification in the face of oppressive contexts and disingenuous public and state discourse? And finally, to what extent are connectors able to navigate and negotiate such dilemmas, in which loyalty to communities or the state are presented in binary, and conflict and justice are so intimately linked?

Future research questions

The complexities brought out through the literature and practitioner engagement reveal areas which would benefit from the interdisciplinary, socially connected methodology developed within this study. In particular, the role of the conflict as politically and/or socially motivated and historically rooted, leads us to ask how long term conflict transformation and non-violence at the level of community can be achieved without the social and political structural changes for which the state is responsible. Furthermore, the assumptions and value judgments made towards community-based conflict might be further unpicked to question the impact of connectors’ power to endorse or defeat violence if injustice and structural inequality persists, as history demonstrates. To what extent might community conflict reflect, highlight and challenge social and political disadvantage?
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Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx