ethnicities

The Bristol School of Multiculturalism, and the political sociology of identity

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Nasar Meer
School of Social and Political Science, The University of
Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

The contributions in this symposium have considered and debated the distinctiveness of the Bristol School of Multiculturalism (BSM) for an understanding of political theory, broadly conceived. In this discussion, I would like to add an account of what the BSM has done for an understanding of the sociology of identity, specifically a political sociology that is concerned with minority and majority-relations (constituted in terms of power and not only numbers). While this is a theoretical matter, it is also an empirical one that in our case spans a sociology of racialisation which pluralises the criteria of relevance for studying these relations, specifically by adding ethno-religious culture. Equally, it brings religion and especially Islam into the field of ethnic and racial studies broadly conceived, not least in the discussion of British national identity. Of course in speaking of BSM approaches in broad terms, there is a risk that this may overlook internal differences amongst colleagues associated with it. This is not the intention. The purpose here is to take stock of a number of BSM contributions that might otherwise be overlooked or misattributed.

At the outset, however, it would be useful to locate BSM approaches within a longer story of the political sociology of minority–majority relations, at least as it has appeared in the UK. This includes what became known as a British 'race-relations' tradition through the work of another Bristol figure, the late Michael Banton, as well as researchers such as Ruth Glass, Shelia Patterson, and John Rex

Corresponding author:
Naser Meer, School of Social and Political Science, The University of Edinburgh, 22a Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh EH8 9YL, UK.
Email: nasar.meer@ed.ac.uk

and Robert Moore amongst others (see Meer and Nayak, 2013 for an overview and retrospective). The critique of this work is well documented and includes charges that these authors were 'atheoretical' and 'ahistorical', 'concerned with 'attitudes' and 'prejudice' rather than structural and political discrimination (Zubaida, 1972: 141). While in truth all of these scholars eschewed the narrow focus sometimes attributed to them, at its most searing, the complaint was greater than perceived analytical deficiencies, and extended to an alleged 'convergence between racist ideologies and the theories of "race/ethnic-relations sociology"' more broadly (Lawrence, 1982: 95).

Context is of course everything. Politically, race-relations approaches prevailed at a time when Suspected Person (SUS) Law policing (sanctioned under Section 4 of the Vagrancy Act 1824) was a routine feature of state criminalisation. Areas including St. Pauls in Bristol, Toxteth in Liverpool, Chappletown in Leeds, Brixton in London and Handsworth in Birmingham, had all been sites of violence, and it was in this context that the lament of an overly functionalist approach to race relations, which said 'nothing about the relations of power' (Lawrence, 1982: 135), resonated with critics (perhaps another symbol of the time was not a local but international issue – the Young Conservatives' campaign for the execution of Nelson Mandela, then still resident on Robben Island). Yet, it is noteworthy that trenchantly critical figures such as Robert Miles (1988) would later claim that they had in fact '"hijacked" his [Banton's] concept of racialization because...it spoke to a process...by which the idea of "race" took meanings in different contexts' (Miles, quoted in Ashe and McGeever, 2011: 2011).

What is certain is that a thread running through this broad tapestry of pre-BSM approaches to minority–majority relations concerned how to view minority communities as not only objects of study, but as partners in equality struggles. A prevailing view, summarised by Solomos, held that 'a multiplicity of political identities' could fall into the vehicle of 'an inclusive notion of black identity', while allowing the 'heterogeneity of national and cultural origins within this constituency'. Here the notion of a 'black' identity was taken to incorporate non-white racialised minorities, and a dominant strand of anti-racism emerged which sought to mobilise through a colour-based ethnicity. Or as a young Paul Gilroy (1982: 293) put it, 'all black people are Rasta whether they know it or not'.

If the rationale was that the terms of protest against discrimination should both refuse and accept the group identities upon which discrimination is based, and that demands for inclusion necessarily invoke and repudiate the differences that have been denied inclusion in the first place, then this specific calibration was to be stress tested in a number of places. Most notably, in Muslim reactions to the Rushdie affair, something that revealed a profound disjuncture between prevailing anti-racist discourse cataloguing Muslims as politically black at a time of emerging 'Muslim consciousness' (Meer, 2007).

In planting the seedbed for BSM approaches in this regard, Modood (1992: 272) illustrated the tendency with the example of anti-racist campaigners who opposed those Muslim protestors who agitated against Rushdie's The Satanic Verses.

He recalls, '"Fight racism, not Rushdie" stickers bearing this slogan were worn by many who wanted to be on the same side as the Muslims. It was well meant but betrayed a poverty of understanding'. Looking back, this marked a turning point for both the analysis *and* the mobilisation of race in Britain. A bolder argument is to say that prior to what became the BSM, the prevailing approaches were wholly inadequate. Banton's thesis was a prescription for assimilation, since it is only in an integrated order of race relations where differences lose their significance that social consensus can be achieved. As was evident, Muslims in Britain did not want to assimilate if this required surrendering important features of their identities, and instead contested their allocated civic status by mobilising for recognition. Although Rex's (1996) account was less prescriptive, he similarly held that Muslims should make their peace with the force of assimilation into a political culture where objections to Rushdie's text on the grounds of religious offence should not be entertained. Their collective sense of grievance would do little to help alleviate the position of Muslims caught – in Rex's terms – in some kind of 'underclass'; for the presence of a sizable population who are not only religious but who practice their faith publicly, and the further marginalisation of these communities through the disparity between state recognition of faiths, escaped Rex's account.

The instantiation of racialisation presented by Miles, meanwhile, offered little space to understand the subjective dimension of British Muslim protests. They were not passive victims of racism; on the contrary, their obvious agency in speaking out and mobilising against a perceived assault on sources of group identity was self-evident. More broadly, as Modood (1994) argued, Miles and some other anti-racists underestimated the powerful role that religious identification might play for some communities in an increasingly secular society. 'Even as I was writing,' states Modood (personal correspondence, 18 March 2013), 'a new claimant was emerging ... and so issues of recognition had to be more broadly confronted'. The implication, he maintained at the time, meant

> [w]e need concepts of race and racism that can critique socio-cultural environments which devalue people because of the physical differences but also because of the membership of a cultural minority and, critically, where the two overlap and create a double disadvantage. (1992: 272)

Looking back, Modood's concern to distinguish between people's 'mode of being' from their 'mode of oppression', was not normatively distant to Gilroy's revised argument that 'there can be no single or homogeneous strategy against racism because racism itself is never homogeneous'. Perhaps both, in their different ways, flowed in and out of the emergence of the 'new ethnicities' problematic. This sought to engage the shifting complexities of ethnic identities, specifically their processes of formation and change, and was given an authoritative voice in the work of the late Stuart Hall (1991, [1988] 1996). From a race perspective, new ethnicities captured the way in which 'identities had broken free of their anchorage

in singular histories of race and nation' (Cohen, 2000: 5), and so challenged both anthropological and political essentialism. At an earlier stage, maintained Hall, 'ethnicity was the enemy' (1991: 55) because it was conceived in the form of 'a particularly closed, exclusive, and regressive form of English national identity [which] is one of the core characteristics of British racism today' (Hall, [1988] 1996: 168). What Hall under-recognised, and perhaps also regretted, was that the hybridity this reflected was not only of the kind he described, but included a re-imagination of ethno-religious identities too, which takes us to a key area BSM innovation.

Sociology of racialisation

Over a corpus of work, BSM scholarship has articulated, deepened and expanded an approach to understanding anti-Muslim discourse and behaviour through a political sociology of racialisation. While this has increasingly become commonly accepted, it was not so when BSM scholars started making these arguments (Modood, 1996). There was much more interest in inscribing (or re-inscribing) the concept of Islamophobia with conceptual materials from the literature on Orientalism. The BSM contribution, building on scholars such as Miles, but not in straight-forward ways, elaborated instead on how the racialisation of religious minorities, including Jews and Muslims, could simultaneously draw upon signs of race, culture and belonging in a way that is by no means reducible either to the Empire or to hostility to a religion alone (Meer and Modood, 2009; Meer and Noorani, 2008).

   On the one hand, and especially given that religious discrimination in most Western societies does not usually proceed on the basis of belief but perceived membership of an ethno-religious group (e.g. Catholics in N. Ireland, Muslims in the countries of former Yugoslavia, and Jews in general), there was an established tendency of targeting religious groups and communities as opposed to beliefs and opposition to beliefs. Yet, hostility to Muslims was and is not a pure 'religious discrimination' phenomena but one which also traffics in stereotypes about for-eignness, phenotypes and culture. Here, there are obvious similarities between forms of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment that had remained under explored, and which herald important differences as well as similarities (Meer and Noorani, 2008).

   Of course how Muslims respond to these circumstances will vary, but what BSM scholarship has compelled us to consider is how religion has a new sociolog-ical relevance because of the ways it is tied up with issues of community identity, stereotyping, socio-economic location, political conflict and so forth. One the other hand, the question that is nevertheless posed for any contemporary concept of Islamophobia is whether it can, amongst other things, analytically capture the contingent racial and cultural dynamics of the macro-historical juxtaposition between 'Europe' and 'Islam'; sufficiently delineate the racialising component from the critique of Islam as a religion, and more broadly summon enough

explanatory power to stipulate how long established organising concepts within the study of race and racism may be developed and formulated in a sociologically convincing manner. In this respect, it is good to see that literature on race and racism now routinely features in the discussion of Islamophobia. What was especially important about BSM formulations was not only about what ideas of 'racialisation' could bring to bear on the conceptualisation of these matters, but also that 'cultural racism' was not merely a proxy for racism (Modood, 1997).

This is important because amongst the BSM explanations for ambivalence attributed to Islamophobia is that it reflects a commonly held narrow definition of racism which assumes that the discrimination directed at conventionally, involuntarily, conceived racial minorities cannot by definition resemble that directed at Muslim minorities. This reckoning is premised upon the assumption that Muslim identities are religious identities that are voluntarily chosen (see the case study of Incitement to Religious Hatred legislation in Meer (2008)). It is now analytically harder to sustain the argument, even if it is fielded, that while gender, racial and sexuality-based identities are ascribed or involuntary categories of birth, being a Muslim is about chosen beliefs (so too that Muslims should be afforded less protection than other minorities). Politically of course, and as the UK Government's rationale for their refusal to adopt the working definition of Islamophobia illustrates, this argument continues to be made.

Sociologies of Britishness

The second area to emphasise in the available space is how the BSM tradition of political sociology encouraged us to register the success of claims-making on national identity. Lawrence (1982: 47) was surely right that in the Britishness of the 1970s, 'the "alien" cultures of the blacks...was as either the cause or else the most visible symptom of the destruction of the "British way of life"'. Has this remained so today? It is true that racial criteria for membership of the nation have not dissolved, and that minorities can be viewed as an indication of national decline. If one were needed, a reinvigorated social and political movement of white supremacy, not least in 'mainstream' scholarship, is a reminder this (e.g., Kaufmann, 2018). Equally, however, we need to register the success of claims-making on the national identity of Britishness, through an agent-centred contestation, or minority claims-making, and which addressed Gilroy's (1982: 278) prediction that 'it will take far more than the will to create a "pluralist national identity" to prise the jaws of the bulldog of British nationalism free'. This appears not only in the self-definitions of minorities but also in the discursive formation of the Britishness writ large. This is not complete or settled, but it is a profoundly important multicultural success that BSM scholarship has tracked and kept uppermost in discussion (Uberoi and Modood, 2013, 2010).

What is described has been neither a linear nor stable development, and has frequently been resisted, as signalled in the responses to the publication of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (2000). Two decades since

then, a period that has included civil disturbances, wars abroad, and terrorism at home, as well as the distinctively multicultural London 2012 Olympics, the core idea that Britishness has been remade by black and ethnic minority Britons is hard to erase. Instead, we might argue that the precarious status of Britishness is best observed at an angle adjacent to ethnic and racial groups, and exercised in debates about devolution and independence. It remains an open question, however, as to where multicultural difference fits in these contexts (Meer, 2015, 2019).

BSM approaches to charting this empirically have included focusing on cases or events that have allowed us to observe and analyse the explicit operation of particular discourses so that, in contrast to the 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995) line of inquiry, we can examine explicit reference to accounts of British national identity and citizenship, and in contrast to the 'everyday nationalism' (Brubaker, 2006) approach, we can examine a discourse at a macro level rather than behaviour at a micro level. The cases selected have included debates about veiling practices, civil unrest, depictions of the prophet Mohammed and so obviously have an ethno-religious character to them, and which BSM scholarship has understood as intertwined with the re-making of national identities.

Amongst the reasons this is important is that part of the alleged breakdown of multiculturalism has been attributed to the role of religion, its relationship to the state, and the desire for its recognition in public life. This was especially evident in Gilroy's discussion of how multiculture could 'take off from the point where "multiculturalism" broke down' (Gilroy, 2004: xi). It seems that this 'breakdown' occurred as Asian and Muslim political claims rose in salience, with a solution which entails refocusing on secular socio-cultural interactions. It is this sociological and normative conception of community, the 'communitarian' thrust of the CMEB, for example, that Gilroy and some other 'multiculturalists' have distanced themselves from in their conceptualisations of 'multiculture' as multiculturalism without groups. It is one the BSM, however, has defended.

Mobilisations and the BSM futures

It is worth keeping in mind the kinds of political sociology the BSM focused on have their bottom up character too. Neither the government nor anti-racist groups desired or foresaw Muslim consciousness, nor understood how best this should be channelled. The latter point is a slightly different one describing Muslim participation in contemporary governance (O'Toole et al., 2016), but is related in so far the question of what form Muslim-state (local and national) engagement should take was raised long before Muslims 'became' Muslims. How do we calibrate group identity, agency and political participation in a way that engages in, but is not solely governed by, the prevailing political settlements? As BSM scholarship documented, forms of race relations and anti-racism expanded (through both contestation and consensus) into a category resembling multicultural citizenship, even though the term multiculturalism is politically damaged (Meer and Modood, 2014). This is joined by security agenda that has had mixed and complicated

outcomes, both stigmatising and empowering, but in ways that illustrate how the governance of minority-state engagement is always about more than regulation. This a strand of inquiry is keenly observed by scholars such as Dobbernack (2014), Lewicki (2014) and Massoumi (2016), and in ways that suggest that the BSM concern with empirically grounded political sociology has a bright future.

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