RACE AND SPACE

Racial harassment, space and localism

Keighley is located in the Metropolitan District of Bradford which has a substantial ethnic minority Muslim population. In addition to its popular perception as a generally violent town, Keighley also stands out in the region for its notorious public record of racial incidents. At the beginning of 1988, the town suffered from a disproportionately high level of racial attacks. Despite having only 10% of the metropolitan area's Asian and Black population, it reported 42% of the area's 'racial incidents'. According to police records, the majority of offenders were white males and aged 12-16 years, and the main victims were young Asians (69% of incidents involved Asians as victims).

Sources of racism are found in the town's insularity and fierce independence from what is perceived to be the interference and 'do-gooding' of Bradford Metropolitan Council. In particular there is a highly focused resentment of Bradford's 'multicultural' and 'antiracist' policies perceived (unjustly) among the white population, as favouring Asians in areas like education, housing and leisure facilities. The reality is that social and economic conditions amongst Keighley Asians are worse than those of whites. A disproportionate concentration of unemployment among Asians, poor housing conditions, and segregated residential areas, exacerbate feelings of separation between the ethnic majority and minority. Overcrowded and inappropriately designed housing has the effect of forcing young people onto the streets, into the parks and town centre,

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where the bulk of racial incidents occur - places and spaces often lacking in conviviality and facilities, but offering a relative freedom from the surveillance of adult authority. Although working class white youth are only marginally better off than Muslim youth, they have

marked out their areas of influence in the town. Some, who have jobs, can get enough money to go for a drink and fight and sometimes get involved in drug use or 'Acid House' and 'Rave'.

Zones of unsafety

Most whites and Asians work and socialise within their own locality and ethnic group. Asian and white youth go to different places, and even schools record generalised separation between ethnic groups. A lot of this is due to the fact that Asians have mapped out zones of unsafety in the town which transcend individual instances of racial harassment. 'Safe havens' are established by the length of time Asians have lived in the area - the older the youth population, the safer, as well as by the geography of defensibility - foliage, hiding places etc. Without wishing to dismiss out of hand those explanations which lay the roots of racism at the door of an imperial and colonial legacy and a racially exclusive culture, what seems more important here is white territorialism. Young people have a map in their heads about racial harassment, even though this changes as they get older. As a result certain locales are avoided for fear of attack and harassment and others are racially contested. But this itself is very much tied up with the protection of an embattled identity which is seen by the white working class as much threatened, as perhaps Muslims see theirs as under attack.

Offending and harassment

Racial harassment seems to be part of a continuum of antisocial aggression and cannot be understood outside of this context of generalised antisocial behaviour. The problem is that 'race' provides a vocabulary of motive for fighting between adolescents, without there *necessarily* being an exclusively or even partially racist motivation. The issue is one of how to separate 'racially motivated behaviours' from 'just fighting' or incidental abuse. Young people, both Asian and white, routinely differentiate their actions and behaviours between racial targeting - 'I attacked him because he is Asian and I don't like Asians', and a more contingent 'fighting' - proving oneself through fighting. These two explanations may exist in the same situation - alternatively youth may be quite specific about why they are fighting - attributing a racial motive in one case, and a 'proving oneself' motive in another.
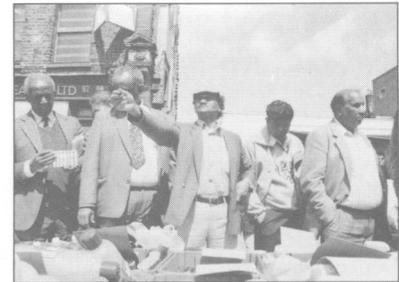
Andrew Hughes

This is not to deny or bury racially motivated behaviours in pedantic obfuscation but to clarify, as far as possible, what is really going on. Racial harassment and attacks by white young people, goes on amongst groups who at the same time, also demonstrate other forms of aggression. Specifically, white young people who target and attack Asians tend also to be involved in fighting and victimising other white young people. Often it is impossible to isolate the 'racial' incident from the general aggression. Generally, though, among the groups studied, the more property and non-racial offending going on, and the more serious and persistent this is, the more intractable and prevalent is racial harassment. The conclusion is that in a situation where there is a multiracial element, offending and racial harassment are likely to be associated, and in this context general offending is likely to indicate racial harassment and harassment, offending.

Recently there has been a marked increase in Asian on white harassment and attacks, whether retaliatory - settling old scores - or racially motivated. However, the self organisation of Asian youth to defend space and deter racists, does not take consciously political forms, but is rather a spontaneous and reactive mobilisation based in 'gang' networks. Although this is undoubtedly effective at the level of the street, there is the danger of criminalisation, and consolidation of 'ethnic areas' and territorial boundaries - 'we have our places, they have theirs' - rather than challenging the very existence of spatial apartheid in the first place.

References
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