

‘Parallel Lives’, by Ted Cante in Citizenship, cohesion and solidarity (Smith Institute: 2008)



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Parallel lives – the development of community cohesion

Ted Cante

The concept of parallel lives was first established in the report of the Community Cohesion Review Team (the ‘Cante Report’), which examined the causes of the race riots in Northern towns in England in 2001. It has increasingly become a means by which both the theory and practice of community cohesion can be understood and developed and has begun to be extended beyond the race and faith debate.

The term “parallel lives” was very deliberately chosen to emphasise that the two principal communities (white and Asian) that were the main focus of the report had little or no contact and had developed separately. The concept was neutral in that it illustrated that it was not a case of either community moving away from the other; both had remained in, or developed, separate spheres. Distinctive residential areas did not in themselves constitute parallel lives and were apparent only when supported by separate social, cultural, educational and employment patterns – the parallel lives did not meet at any point. The separation of communities by ethnicity and/or faith meant that there was a lack of shared experiences, with little opportunity for the emergence of shared values.

While the focus was very much upon the Northern towns, the term reflected findings in many different parts of the country and a wider concern about the many levels of both spatial and social segregation. The separation of communities into their parallel lives, even where less acute than in the Northern towns, created a situation in which many communities lived in

ignorance and fear of each other, with each feeling that others were receiving preferential treatment, often as the result of regeneration and other programmes.

Little or nothing had been done to break down the barriers between the communities, to promote interaction and mutual trust and understanding – prejudices were allowed to fester with little leadership at either local or national level to promote a positive view of diversity. In these circumstances, it was relatively easy for the far right and other extremists to develop myths and misinformation and stir up race and religious hatred – and to maintain the conditions under which disadvantage and inequalities would persist.

Separate development

This separation of communities had been constructed on the back of the racism and discrimination in the post-war period. Like migrants before them, the new wave of predominantly Caribbean and South Asian people found themselves pushed into low-grade housing, often clustered around employers that provided low-skilled and low-paid employment. The new migrants were received with great suspicion and often hostility. Even though anti-discrimination legislation was eventually introduced in 1965, the atmosphere remained highly charged, with Enoch Powell's "rivers of blood" racist rallying call gaining some considerable support in 1968. Not surprisingly, minorities built defensive support systems around themselves and anti-racist supporters, often associated with the left, were quickly rallied when any criticism of minorities began to emerge.

A defensive and protective policy based upon multicultural separateness gained support from both sides of the political divide. The right opposed integration and racial mixing and the left feared that it would precipitate further hostility and that the cultural heritage of minorities would be undermined in a wave of assimilation. The intention to "promote good race relations" – which was actually enshrined in legislation in 1968 – was never implemented with any real sense of purpose, and any discussion of the emerging multicultural model appeared to provide an opportunity to excite even more racist sentiment and to give greater oxygen to the far right.

Demands for social justice were, however, impossible to ignore and during the late 1960s an assertive "black" political consciousness, with support from developments in the United States, began to gather steam. This gave rise to a number of remedial programmes, often targeted at geographical areas and neighbourhoods where ethnic-minority groups were concentrated. This was also supported by a range of equal opportunity policies, mainly aimed at tackling discrimination in the workplace and key services like social housing. These initiatives had some success, and some of the values and ideals behind them were internalised and became more widely adopted as part of the "fair play" associated with liberal multiculturalism.

Nevertheless, some sort of notion of "separate development" seems to underpin much of our post-war race relations policy, with a high degree of both social and spatial segregation continuing. The 2001 reports all, in their

own way, provided evidence of the continuation of separate development. They showed that, rather than a gradual breaking down of social and economic barriers, “segregation” became the focus of policy. This was taken further into public debate by the idea that the country was “sleepwalking into segregation” – a phrase coined in 2005 by Trevor Phillips, then chair of the Commission for Racial Equality. Again, the difficulty of even discussing our multicultural model quickly became evident, as Phillips was accused of somehow attacking, or blaming, ethnic minorities. Subsequently, the CRE developed an approach to cohesion and integration based upon the three principles of “equality, participation and interaction”, but this was also attacked by some who believed that “integration” was some sort of coded move towards assimilation. However, the signs are that there is now room for a more mature debate about the sort of multicultural society that could, and should, be created.

There is no agreement about whether we are, in fact, becoming more segregated – or even what is meant by the term. Most of the debate centres on a comparison of the 2001 census with the data generated in 1991. This data is now acknowledged to be hopelessly out of date, with both inward and outward migration, as well as population turnover and churn, rapidly increasing even since 2001.

The censuses, in any event, provide useful data only in respect of spatial distribution of population. Results also depend upon both the type of index used and the level at which they are applied. There is now little agreement between academic studies on this point, and whereas Simpson⁴ argues that segregation is not actually increasing, Poulsen has found that there are a growing number of ethnic-minority “enclaves”, based upon his study looking at 16 UK major cities. The change in the composition of local populations as a result of white population change is significant. Over the period 1991 to 2001, census data reveals that, in those cities in which the ethnic-minority community is already heavily concentrated, the white population reduced by around 43,000 in Manchester, 90,000 in Birmingham and 340,000 in London. Over the same period in those cities, the ethnic-minority population increased by around 15,000, 58,000 and 600,000 respectively.

Other cities and areas experienced similar change. At the same time, the white population in the neighbouring areas, generally with a low proportion of ethnic minorities, showed considerable growth. Based on “natural factors” – birth and death rates – the white population would have been expected to remain static and, while the ethnic-minority population would have grown (because of a younger age range and higher fertility rates), it was also augmented by inward migration in some areas.

Layers of separation

We should, however, not let an argument over geography distract from wider notions of the “layers of separation” and need to remember that the concept of parallel lives was based upon the compound effect of communities separated from each other at spatial, social and cultural levels. If segregation was simply at the spatial level, the many other points of intersection with other

communities – for example, through education, employment and recreational spheres – then it is likely that these shared spaces would provide a means by which mutual knowledge, understanding and trust would grow, compensating for the limited interaction resulting from separation in a residential sense. It is the case that the various “layers of separation” that have been the subject of measurement appear to show an increasing tendency towards parallel lives. In particular, and of greatest importance, some compelling evidence has begun to emerge from the study of school populations, both in terms of changing composition and in comparison with the neighbourhood or area which they serve. A study of “parallel lives and ethnic segregation in the playground and the neighbourhood” found that:

... on average school segregation is greater than the segregation of the same group in the surrounding neighbourhood.

In addition, and using recently released data, Johnson, Burgess et al⁸ have now been able to explore the extent of ethnic segregation in schools and whether it simply mirrors that found in local neighbourhoods. Unlike their previous studies, the new data enabled them to base their conclusions on an analysis of every school in England, focus on much smaller and more relevant areas and utilise a graphical concentration profile. Their initial analyses:

... show national patterns of both residential and school segregation, with the clear suggestion that the latter is greater than the former, especially among those of South Asian ethnicity.

The position of schools also reflects to some extent, and especially in respect of primary provision, the nature of neighbourhood segregation, again giving credence to the view that spatial segregation is increasing. But segregated patterns of university provision have also been documented recently. There are 53 higher-education institutions with less than 5% ethnic-minority students. About 20 have more than 40%. Half of the Russell Group universities have fewer than 30 black students of Caribbean origin each, and there are more black Caribbean students at London Metropolitan University than at the whole of the Russell Group put together.

Structural and social segregation are inextricably bound together. Residential positions are also generally determined by socioeconomic position: over 70% of the ethnic-minority community live in the 88 most deprived areas in the country and are heavily concentrated in the worst housing in the inner cities. In other words, inequalities create separation and then perpetuate inequalities by maintaining different life chances and lifestyles, which in turn allow stereotypes and myths to be maintained.

Community cohesion

Community cohesion has been founded on the principle that it is insufficient to focus entirely on socioeconomic disadvantage and ignore the belief systems upon which it depends. In fact, the focus on remedial programmes may simply help to perpetuate the very myths and stereotypes that they seek to challenge. Cohesion programmes have been designed to proactively promote

the value of diversity and create a common sense of belonging, while still developing equalities programmes. Compared with a traditional equalities approach, cohesion is in many ways more challenging: not only are negative views tackled, but also community and civic leaders champion a compelling vision of a shared future. The focus of community cohesion programmes is therefore, of necessity, often the majority community or longer-standing residents who seem to have most difficulty in coming to terms with change – and particularly with recent migration.

Interaction programmes aim to promote understanding and respect between majority and minority communities and within them. They are also a means by which attitudes and values are challenged. They have been based upon “contact theory”, and, though this is not a new concept, recently a body of substantial research has shown that contact between groups can reduce prejudice and that in some cases the frequency of interethnic contact was the single biggest predictor of positive attitude change, a conclusion supported by new research specifically concerned with predictors of community cohesion. Contact theory challenges some profound ideas about our forms of associations and particularly the whole notion of “people like us”, which seems to be based upon an inherently racialised conception of our fellow human beings. The notion that we identify with, or even prefer, “people like us” appears to be very prevalent and firmly established in the thinking of a range of diverse opinion, from the extreme right wing, like Nick Griffin, to liberal commentators like Goodhart. It also seems embedded into academic studies, such as Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*, which distinguishes “bonding” and “bridging” social capital, whereby the latter “requires that we transcend our social and political identities to connect with people unlike ourselves”.

But who are people “like ourselves”? Contact theory rejects the stereotypical view and suggests that they are, or can be, the people we know and feel comfortable with because of regular contact – our circle of friends, acquaintances and colleagues; in other words, our various “in-groups”. This would suggest that people “like ourselves” are defined by social circumstance and familiarity, rather than by some idea about a common identity or heritage. Changing our associations appears to change our ideas about who is “like ourselves”. The aim of community cohesion is to tackle the “fear of difference” more generally and to enable people to be more comfortable with all areas of difference, including those based on sexual orientation, disability, social class and age. The community cohesion agenda can also be applied to all types of communities, whether in towns and cities or in suburban and rural areas where ethnic-minority and faith communities are very small. We therefore need to look beyond the immediate confines of the race debate, and the “fear of difference” is by no means confined to ethnic and faith divisions. Gays and lesbians, travellers and people characterised as “disabled” face issues that are similar, with preconceived notions and stereotypes creating barriers and allowing discriminatory behaviour to be justified on the basis of an imagined inferiority.

There is much good practice in these other fields that is now enshrined in social policy. For example, children with special needs are increasingly being

taught within mainstream schools, and mentally ill people are now often cared for in community settings. These developments have not been without controversy, and proposals to move people out of institutional care still meet with concern, and even hostility, in many areas. However, once provision has been established in the community, everyday contact generally results in the removal of fears and allows the differences between people to be seen in a more rational and reasoned way. Interaction allows them to be seen for what they are, rather than what popular misconceptions might suggest.

Critics of community cohesion generally characterise it as a “soft” programme based on “saris and samosas” – joyous experiences that do little to challenge structural inequalities. It is true that some programmes have developed in this limited direction, but that is because some people have chosen to interpret the community cohesion concept in that way, not a fault of the concept itself, which has always been clear about tackling inequalities at the same time as challenging attitudes.

An era of “super-diversity”

Community cohesion is also better able to respond to a wider range of identities in an era of “super-diversity”. Whereas previous equality programmes have been based around a small number of ethnic minority and white majority identities, cohesion attempts to relate to a wider conception of multiple identities, not only in respect of the “super-diversity” referred to above, but also in respect of faith, as well as those identities based upon sexual orientation or any other defining difference. And this also represents one of the most significant changes in direction developed by cohesion – the growth of diaspora communities that have become much easier to sustain and now sit alongside national identities.

The development of multiculturalism was set in an era of just a handful of identifiable minorities, principally from South Asia and the Caribbean, who struggled to maintain contact with the heritage country (and perhaps more readily clung to each other in what was a hostile environment). This contrasts with the position today, when migrants to and from Britain can take their identities with them, utilising satellite television, the internet, the ready availability of newspapers and other communications – and the ability to return home at a very modest cost, due to a much lower level of airfares. This means that the way migrants now view their association with the country that they happen to be in has changed profoundly. Migrants may be less willing to transfer their identity to their new country, and generally will be more likely to develop dual or multiple identities – and many countries formally recognise this through dual citizenship.

The UK government has begun to recognise this trend and has developed a series of citizenship initiatives to promote a clearer sense of belonging and shared purpose. Citizenship days and events, citizenship tests, and the emphasis on English as a common language, together with new ideas about earned citizenship, are all part of the reassertion of a national identity. This approach may well have its place, but the notion of “Britishness” remains contested and ill defined.

Community cohesion programmes tend to favour a much more bottom-up approach, developing a local sense of place. In general, people seem able to identify much more readily with a particular city or area than with a conception of “nation”. This is perhaps because belonging can be built through interaction with others and through participation in local civil society. It again supports the notion that a proactive approach to building a sense of belonging and promoting diversity, which is central to community cohesion, has to stand alongside more traditional approaches to equality.

None of this suggests that poverty and disadvantage do not have a real influence on competing identities and cohesion. It is difficult to believe that any society can be truly cohesive if any one section is particularly disadvantaged and disaffected and has no effective stake in society. Nevertheless, poverty and differential socioeconomic position cannot fully explain inter- and intra-community relations. The research undertaken by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion in support of its suite of reports also revealed that poverty and disadvantage only accounted for a “few percentage points of difference” to cohesion indicators and that not all deprived areas had low cohesion.

It is, of course, possible to conceive of a society based upon “separate but equal development”, a society in which parallel lives are seen as desirable and at odds with neither equal rights nor community cohesion. “Separate development”, however, assumes a racialised conception of society, in which we “stick to our own kind” – in which “kind” is based on “race” or ethnicity. In other words, in complete contradiction to what we now know about the fallacy of “race”, it is assumed that society will be divided by a social and political construct, clinging to the notion of “race” as a primordial distinction, reinforcing rather than challenging such a view. But can such divided societies, in which so few life experiences, communications and services are shared, ever really offer equal opportunities? In each society where separate development has become manifest, the socioeconomic position of the separate groups is very marked. With regard to the United States, where ghettoisation is most marked Cashin takes the view that, in practice, “through separation and segregation we are institutionalising and perpetuating inequality”.

The entrenchment of separate lives means that each group has little or no experience of each other’s daily existence. Experience of and access to key services like housing and education, as well as employment opportunities, are also divided. Neither side is in a position to appreciate the circumstances of the other, to judge the extent and nature of differences.

The opposite of parallel lives is not assimilation, as some commentators seem to fear. In fact, some form of clustering on the basis of distinct communities will help to maintain cultural heritage. Interaction is about shared experiences, building trust and understanding differences, not about being the same. Having some values in common does not mean sharing all values. But some level of commonality is necessary for a shared society and generating solidarity – and commonalities can exist only if society is indeed shared.

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