

RACISM, RESISTANCE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

ISLAMOPHOBIA, ANTI-RACISM AND THE BRITISH LEFT

SCARLET HARRIS

Islamophobia, anti-racism
and the British left



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Scarlet Harris

MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Series editors' foreword

John Solomos, Satnam Virdee and Aaron Winter

The study of race, racism and ethnicity has expanded greatly since the end of the twentieth century. This expansion has coincided with a growing awareness of the continuing role that these issues play in contemporary societies all over the globe. *Racism, Resistance and Social Change* is a new series of books that seeks to make a substantial contribution to this flourishing field of scholarship and research. We are committed to providing a forum for the publication of the highest-quality scholarship on race, racism, anti-racism and ethnic relations. As editors of this series we would like to publish both theoretically driven books and texts with an empirical frame that seek to further develop our understanding of the origins, development and contemporary forms of racisms, racial inequalities, and racial and ethnic relations. We welcome work from a range of theoretical and political perspectives, and as the series develops we ideally want to encourage a conversation that goes beyond specific national or geopolitical environments. While we are aware that there are important differences between national and regional research traditions, we hope that scholars from a variety of disciplines and multidisciplinary frames will take the opportunity to include their research work in the series.

As the title of the series highlights, we also welcome texts that can address issues about resistance and anti-racism, as well as the role of political and policy interventions in this rapidly evolving discipline. The changing forms of racist mobilisation and expression that have come to the fore in recent years have highlighted the need for more reflection and research on the role of political and civil society mobilisations in this field.

We are committed to building on theoretical advances by providing an arena for new and challenging theoretical and empirical studies on the changing morphology of race and racism in contemporary societies.

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Introduction

Islamophobia is a term that is now well established in Britain. It is also a term that continues to provoke a dizzying range of reactions, from rage and derision to outright confusion. A 1997 report from the Runnymede Trust, entitled *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, is often cited as the moment that saw Islamophobia's initial introduction into the lexicon of British political discourse (Sayyid 2010). In this seminal report, Islamophobia was defined as 'a useful shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims' (Runnymede Trust 1997: 1). In the emphasis on attitudes towards Islam – the report distinguished between 'closed' versus 'open' views – religion appeared to underpin the very concept of Islamophobia.

Attempts to land on and implement a formal definition have continued apace in the years since, with the Runnymede Trust (2017) publishing a further report twenty years later, its straight-to-the-point title, *Islamophobia: Still a Problem for Us All*, indicating the little progress that had been made in the intervening period. Arriving decades into the 'war on terror', the 2017 report also strikes a much more urgent tone, and a much more assertive definition of Islamophobia as 'anti-Muslim racism' (Runnymede Trust 2017: 1). Quick on the heels of the second Runnymede report came the establishment of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims, which in 2018 introduced a 'working definition' of Islamophobia based on a nationwide consultation with Muslim communities, organisations and professionals. Islamophobia was, the report claimed, both 'rooted in racism' and 'a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness' (APPG 2018: 11). In the years that followed, this definition was adopted by all major political parties in Britain (including those in Scotland and Wales) except for the Conservative government, in power at Westminster at the time.

This was but one indication of what all those in favour of adopting the APPG definition were up against. In other quarters there was a markedly stronger shift towards a position of complete disavowal. From the 'new

atheists' such as Richard Dawkins, to significant segments of the Conservative Party, the very concept of Islamophobia was under intense scrutiny as critics argued it undermined counter-terrorism efforts and posed an existential threat to 'free speech' (Massoumi et al. 2017a; Warsi 2019; see also Walton and Wilson 2019). Perhaps just as importantly for discussions in this book, regardless of its broader reception, the APPG definition did little to clarify Islamophobia's precise relationship to racism. Was Islamophobia an 'off-shoot' of racism, or did it sit firmly within a broader understanding, existing alongside a number of other, plural *racisms*? No wonder, given such prolonged semantic wrangling, that some have described Islamophobia as being straight out of the 'devil's dictionary' (Sayyid 2010: 5).

And yet the material consequences of Islamophobia are stark and violent. Beyond the demonstrable institutional Islamophobia within British party politics (Holmwood and O'Toole 2017; Labour Muslim Network 2020; MCB 2020; Al Jazeera 2022), statistics on 'hate crime' (for all their limitations) underscore the fact that Muslims are disproportionately the victims of street-based harassment and violence in Britain, with 44 per cent of religious hate crimes recorded in England and Wales in 2022/2023 targeting those perceived to be Muslim (Home Office 2023a). Similarly, in a landmark report on Islamophobia published in Scotland in 2021, 75 per cent of Muslims surveyed believed Islamophobia to be an everyday issue in Scottish society, and 78 per cent believed it was getting worse (Hopkins 2023). Muslims and Islam now occupy centre-stage in far-right conspiracy theories, arguably displacing (although never completely replacing) Jewish people as the primary targets of fascist violence (Meer 2013b). Furthermore, and despite years of lucid critique and organised resistance from affected Muslim communities in particular, the structures of the British state's counter-terrorism regime continue to be strengthened, positioning Muslims as a permanent threat to the safety of the nation.

At this point I want to introduce one of the most prominent themes of the book. Its particular relevance for a discussion of Islamophobia as a form of racism will become increasingly clear as we move through the subsequent sections of this introductory chapter. *Prevent* is the name given to the UK government's flagship 'counter-extremism' policy. It was developed under New Labour and first launched in 2007, and has been expanded under subsequent governments since (Kundnani 2009; Heath-Kelly 2017; Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2022). The central assumption of *Prevent* is that interventions can be made by public sector staff working in education, healthcare, local authorities, policing and criminal justice to minimise the risk of individuals being drawn into 'violent extremism'. The policy mandates institutions across these sectors to train staff in monitoring and reporting purported signs of 'radicalisation', which include a dubious range of behavioural and

circumstantial indicators, including ‘increased religiosity’ (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2022: 136). In spring 2024, the government unveiled a new definition of ‘extremism’. The previous definition, introduced in 2011, defined extremism as ‘vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs’ (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2023: 37) and had underpinned the (over)policing of Muslim communities under Prevent for several years. The new definition places a similar emphasis on ‘tolerance’, ‘fundamental rights and freedoms’ and ‘liberal parliamentary democracy’ but represents a wider remit by identifying ‘ideologies’ (rather than action) that aim to undermine these values (Francis and Cooney 2024). And yet, echoing long-standing assessments of Prevent, criticism of the new definition of extremism has highlighted its anti-democratic thrust, particularly in relation to political dissent (Rights and Security International 2022; Amnesty International 2024). Conservative politicians’ public pronouncements linking Palestine solidarity protests and specific Muslim-led organisations to the new definition have further underlined the actual threat to freedom of expression in this renewed attention to the category of ‘extremism’, as well as the relentless focus on Britain’s Muslim communities, who bear the brunt of its material impacts.

While no data are collected on the religion or ethnicity of those referred to Prevent, in 2017–2018, 44 per cent of issues referred to Prevent were recorded as relating to so-called ‘Islamist extremism’ (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2022: 3). Following tweaks to various subcategories of ‘extremism’ recorded under Prevent (discussed further in Chapter 4), this figure dropped significantly, but the targeting of Muslims remains significantly disproportionate, with 24 per cent of referrals being for ‘Islamist extremism’ as recently as 2019/2020 (Home Office 2020),¹ and 16 per cent two years later (Home Office 2023b), despite Muslims constituting just 5.7 per cent of the population (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2022). More revealing in demonstrating the Islamophobic design of Prevent is the notion of ‘Prevent Priority Areas’ (PPAs) and ‘priority neighbourhoods’: places identified in early iterations of Prevent as requiring additional funding based purely on their significant Muslim populations (Kundnani 2009; Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2022). Following criticism of this approach, in the following years the process of allocating Prevent resources through the identification of PPAs has been made intentionally more opaque and therefore harder to scrutinise (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2022). It should be noted that Prevent represents just one arm of a much wider counter-terrorism apparatus, which also includes *Channel*, a programme for those individuals who have been deemed legitimately at risk of ‘radicalisation’ following referral to Prevent. Crucially, only a tiny minority of Prevent referrals are passed on to *Channel*;

for instance, in 2017/2018 the figure was 5 per cent (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2022). Unsurprisingly, there have been various attempts to reform Prevent over the decades, with Sir William Shawcross – a man with a history of publicly expressing Islamophobic views – most recently appointed by the Conservative government to lead an ‘independent’ review of the policy. This was met with significant resistance from Muslim civil society with a widespread ‘boycott’ and the publication of the *People’s Review of Prevent* (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2022), as well as a subsequent response to his recommendations, including his suggestion to refocus Prevent on ‘Islamist extremism’ (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2023; see Chapter 4 of the present volume for further discussion). Reflecting extensive research (Kundnani 2009; Heath-Kelly 2017; Fernandez 2018; Abbas 2021; Fernandez 2024), the empirical accounts of Prevent that appear throughout the following chapters are testament to its far-reaching and deleterious impact on Britain’s Muslim population.

As we can already begin to see, then, far from being the sole remit of bigots and the ill-informed, Islamophobia represents something much more enduring at the heart of British liberalism. Furthermore, as I seek to emphasise throughout this book, tendencies on the British left have reflected these trends. The case for advancing a coherent theoretical understanding of Islamophobia, one that helps rather than hinders those already engaging in anti-racist and left-wing work, has evidently never been stronger. This book opts to use the term Islamophobia precisely because of this urgent context. Indeed, I am more concerned with what Islamophobia *does* (its effects) (see Lentin 2016) than in identifying its most accurate descriptor. In any case, we should not assume that simply replacing the term Islamophobia with something else – even, for instance, the phrase ‘anti-Muslim racism’, which chimes with the arguments in this book – would circumvent the conceptual disagreements about the nature of the problem. Additionally, Islamophobia is a term that is now commonly used and recognised, both across communities already organising to resist it, and in mainstream discourse. The multifarious groups who employ the term may not share a perfect understanding of its meaning, but its widespread usage still offers the most promising starting point for a critical conversation on conceptualising and collectively resisting Islamophobia.

A generative nexus: Islamophobia, anti-racism and the ‘British’ left

Crucially, this book seeks to develop a particular analytic nexus, bringing together accounts of Islamophobia, anti-racism and left politics that have largely remained theoretically and politically distinct. A note here on the

use of the descriptor ‘British’: the keen-eyed reader will quickly notice that discussions of the ‘British left’ in this book by and large refer to England and Scotland, and very rarely Wales. As I address in further detail below, the empirical research that grounds the book’s analysis – namely conversations with a range of activists and those working for third-sector organisations – took place in two major cities in England and Scotland, but is nonetheless relevant for debates taking place across the whole of the British Isles and indeed beyond. I ask the reader to bear in mind this use of ‘Britain’ as a shorthand and I acknowledge the urgent need for further research that addresses the specific historical and present conditions in Wales as they pertain to questions of racism and racialisation, anti-racist and left organising, and the British state (see Williams et al. 2015 for some discussion of this).

Caveats aside, whilst Britain boasts a rich history of radical anti-racism and militant class struggle, the relationship between the two has been far from straightforward. In England, the organised British left has historically fluctuated between, on the one hand, racist exclusion – especially at the height of British imperialism, which large swathes of the left were active in promoting – and, on the other, widespread participation in anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggle. Crucially, though, periods of active anti-racism on the left have been catalysed and led by those on the peripheries of racialised belonging (Virdee 2014). In Scotland, a particular brand of national exceptionalism has left even less space to reflect on the limits of the left when it comes to questions of race and racism (Davidson et al. 2018). Undergirding this contemporary exceptionalism is a deep historical amnesia concerning Scotland’s role in British imperialism, colonialism and transatlantic slavery in particular. For all the well-meaning attempts from the left to distinguish Scottish and English politics, we simply cannot escape the historical entanglements between the two. More than this, thinking through this relationship in a more *relational* way (see Goldberg 2009) – seeking the similarities and connections between racism, anti-racism and left organising in Scotland and England, as much as tracing their distinctive cultural, social and political characteristics – offers a fresh perspective on the limits and possibilities of anti-racist organising across national sites.

Recent years have seen left movements in England and Scotland enjoy dramatic, generation-defining successes alongside crushing, sometimes fatal defeats. The campaign for Scottish independence in 2014, in which the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) was a major force, and the movement around Jeremy Corbyn between 2017 and 2019 – whilst technically and crucially opposed on the question of independence – mobilised similar constituencies, situating themselves against the ‘status quo’ of Westminster politics. Both of these movements were, of course, accompanied by painful and, in the case of the latter, ultimately catastrophic losses, but the energies

unleashed by them did not simply vanish into thin air. In more recent years, and in the midst of a series of overlapping crises – from police violence to the COVID-19 pandemic – extra-parliamentary social movements in Britain have taken centre-stage. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which was reignited in the summer of 2020, led to the largest ever street-based anti-racist mobilisations, despite the COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time. The following year saw thousands take to the streets again, this time to protest the Conservative government’s authoritarian Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill (also known as the Policing or PCSC Bill). With these two fresh waves of protest movements came a seemingly new vocabulary as debates about police violence, systemic racism and – crucially – police and prison abolition moved from the fringes and into the mainstream. As I finish writing the first draft of this book, Israel’s genocidal assault on Gaza has mobilised people once more – weekly street protests, the picketing of arms factories, occupations of public space, sit-ins and ‘die-ins’ and the rest – all globalising calls for abolition and building on long traditions of internationalist, anti-imperialist solidarity.

My own ongoing intellectual preoccupation with Islamophobia, anti-racism and the left has emerged within the context sketched out above. I have been episodically involved in anti-racist and left politics for the last fifteen years. Like many of my peers, a short, frustrating period of this was spent trying to organise within party political structures of the British Labour Party during the heady days of ‘Corbynism’. Much more formative was my earlier involvement in student activism around Palestine in the early 2010s, and the seeds of this book can probably be traced to a summer spent in Palestine in 2012: an experience that offered the most clarifying lesson in the dynamics of state racism, power and resistance. Over the years that followed, my frustrations were compounded by heated exchanges with others on the left about the very existence of Islamophobia *within* Britain. These conversations, whilst bewildering, ultimately led to many of the questions underpinning this book. I have also spent the last decade living, working and studying in both Glasgow – Scotland’s largest city – and Manchester, my home town and England’s ‘second capital’. Parts of this book are a reflection on these two cities; their respective nations; the pull of civic and national identities; and the anti-racist practices that they enable and, more often than not, curtail. In thinking more critically (but hopefully sympathetically) about the British left and its relationship to Islamophobia, racism and anti-racism, this book asks: how can those on the left better respond to the issue of Islamophobia? What might a properly anti-racist approach to Islamophobia look like? Whom can we learn from, and what frameworks are currently holding us back?

As crises proliferate, transformative politics take on a new urgency just as the shifting terrain reveals novel openings and channels for resistance. As Stuart Hall reminds us, ‘every crisis is also a moment of reconstruction’ (Hall 2017 [1987]: n.p.). The ruptures of the current moment should therefore push us to explore new articulations of the challenges we face, and different ways of organising together. By exploring Islamophobia within a broader framework of anti-racist work and left politics, this book aims to contribute to a more joined-up discussion, connecting theory and practice in the service of anti-racist struggles in Britain and beyond.

Conceptualising Islamophobia

Race, racialisation, nation

A primary concern of this book is with how activists understand the phenomenon of Islamophobia, and what this means for organised resistance to it. The political implications of such a relationship cannot be overstated. This book is also concerned, therefore, with how Islamophobia *should* be understood, and from the very beginning adopts a particular conceptual framework in approaching it. Put simply, I understand Islamophobia as a form of racism, possessing its own unique, often complex characteristics, but always interacting with other racisms and processes of race-making. This is far from a controversial position, but does rest on key conceptualisations of race and, crucially, the process of racialisation. As many scholars have demonstrated, race is socially embedded, historically contingent and endlessly adaptable. Following Stuart Hall, we might think of it as a ‘floating signifier’: in other words, not as a fixed, biological reality but as a ‘system of classification’ (Hall 1997: 3) that we use to make sense of the world. Similarly, the concept of racialisation describes the *process* by which meaning is attached to groups of humans who are perceived to share particular phenotypical or cultural characteristics (Miles and McGeever 2011). In this way, the concept of racialisation unsettles the assumed ontological reality of race and points to how so-called ‘races’ were and are ‘made’. As a group of billions, Muslims radically defy any attempt at phenotypical classification, but they *are* fixed along cultural lines, often through visible cultural signifiers such as the hijab and other forms of veiling (see Tyrer 2013; Garner and Selod 2015). As the earlier discussion of Prevent outlined, such signifiers have a material impact when attached to notions of ‘extremism’ and operationalised through Prevent-related infrastructure. ‘Muslimness’ is therefore read off the body of Muslims themselves; as Garner and Selod (2015: 12) remind us, ‘people (physical bodies) are the ultimate site of racism, even if the path toward those bodies lies through cultural terrain’.

Importantly, this cultural fixing often works in conjunction with forms of racialisation based on phenotypical difference. One generative way of thinking about this is to put Islamophobia into dialogue with other forms of racism. Taking a cue from Goldberg's 'relational' (2009) approach to studying racisms, Nasar Meer (2013a, b) argues that tracing the historical and contemporary connections between Islamophobia and antisemitism reveals 'how racialized categories have saturated cultural portrayals of Muslims and Jews' from the work of Shakespeare to modern-day conspiracy theories, pointing to the co-constitution of race and religion in the treatment of both Muslims and Jews at various historical junctures. Thus, the concept of 'cultural racism' has emerged as a useful tool in highlighting the role of culture (including religion) in processes of racialisation (Meer and Modood 2009) and the long and entangled history between notions of biological and cultural difference (Balibar 1991; Meer 2013a; Hund 2014; Goldberg 2015; Meer 2018a). Of course, it would be remiss not to mention at this point the seminal work of Edward Said (2003 [1978]) and the influence of his concept of Orientalism on contemporary discussions of Islamophobia as a modality of cultural racism. Orientalism, as both 'discourse' and 'discipline', constructed an enduring binary between the so-called East and Europe (or the West). The former became 'one of [Europe's] deepest and most recurring images of the Other', the latter 'its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience' (Said 2003 [1978]: 1–2). Orientalism fundamentally shaped western ways of 'knowing' Arab and Muslim life, and discursive constructions of Muslim cultural difference today – particularly those that work through the liberal register discussed in the following section – can be traced back to this relationship (Valluvan 2019).

This being said, a conceptual overinflation of racism (see Miles and Brown 2003; Song 2014) risks obscuring the ways in which experiences of Islamophobia can vary dramatically between Muslims racialised along differently colour-coded lines. See, for instance, a recent report from the Muslim Council of Britain and Everyday Muslim (MCB and Everyday Muslim 2002) that attends to the specific experiences of Black, African and African-Caribbean Muslims in Britain – the perspectives and experiences of whom have often been marginalised. Also worth considering is the work of scholars such as Leon Moosavi (2015), whose work demonstrates how the whiteness of white Muslim converts, while contingent, offers a degree of protection from Islamophobia in comparison to their non-white counterparts. Any theoretical discussion of Islamophobia as a form of cultural racism should therefore remain sensitive to these specificities of racialised experience *within* the category of 'the Muslim' alongside the role of other intersections of difference such as gender, sexuality and class.

More than just a theoretical position, treating Islamophobia in this way – in other words as one modality of racism that is entangled with others and which has embodied consequences for Muslims – has important political implications. Most obviously, it recentres the experiences of Muslims, working against the tactical ‘separation of Islamophobia as ideology from Muslims themselves’, which underpins Islamophobia’s deniability and permissibility (Alexander 2017: 13). Relatedly, it opens up historical and contemporary resources for resistance. For example, it allows us to trace how South Asian communities in particular came to be racialised as Muslim in a British context (Kundnani 2007), how this impacted the anti-racist coalitions of the 1970s and 1980s (Ramamurthy 2013), and how ‘raceing’ the concept of Islamophobia today might help to reconnect Islamophobia with other forms of racism at the current conjuncture to promote broader, more durable anti-racist coalitions (Alexander 2017). Just as the defence of Islamophobic practices so often relies on the fundamental misunderstanding and common refrain of Muslims ‘not being a race’, interrogating the connections between Islamophobia, race and – as we shall see – nation offers the starting point for a more effective anti-racist response to Islamophobia.

It would be impossible to talk about race and racisms in the current moment without also critically engaging with the relationship between race and nation, and the stark fact of the current ‘nationalist moment’ enthralling Britain and other western nations in particular (Valluvan 2019: 4). There is a rich history of scholarly work dedicated to examining the indelible relationship between race and nation in Britain (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982; Gilroy 2002 [1987], 2004; Shilliam 2018; Valluvan 2019), best captured in Paul Gilroy’s (2004: 121) assertion that: ‘Brit[ish] nationalism cannot be purged of its racialized contents any more easily than a body can be purged of the skeleton that supports it.’ Scotland, on the other hand, remains conspicuously absent in the vast majority of such discussions. This is, it must be said, not because of an absence of racism in Scotland. Race is an ‘absent-present’ in Scotland (Meer 2018b: 121) and racism an enduring feature of life for many racially minoritised people living there (Young 2018; Marek 2019) despite the impact of a distinctive political culture and devolved powers in the policy field (Meer 2018b; Mulvey 2018). Aside from some notable exceptions such as Davidson et al.’s 2018 collection (tellingly entitled *No Problem Here*), the lack of attention paid to Scotland, race and nation becomes even more puzzling on account of the political force of Scottish nationalism in recent decades. Whilst some have made the case that the centrality of the national question in Scotland has stymied the kind of ‘racialisation of the political process’ (Miles and Dunlop 1986: 26) that we have witnessed in England, more recent debates have focused on a popular historical amnesia that sustains a set of myths about

the Scottish nation and its ‘people’, including the notion that racism is quite simply an English problem (Davidson et al. 2018). Reflecting this, the literature that does attend to Islamophobia in Scotland is not only sparse but plagued by a form of exceptionalism that reduces Islamophobia to its most individual and atomised expressions (see Hussain and Miller 2006; Bonino 2017; and a subsequent critique by Harris 2018). And yet the significance of liberal renderings of ‘the Muslim’, alongside the Scottish government’s emphasis on civic nationalism (in opposition to the nativism of the English right) (see Valluvan 2019), suggests that Scotland offers particularly fertile ground for exploring the underrecognised dimensions of the relationship between Islamophobia, race and nation.

Islamophobia and liberalism

To insist on Islamophobia as one form of racism amongst others, and importantly as a form of *structural* racism (see the discussion in the next section), necessitates addressing its relationship with liberalism. In this book I use the term liberalism to refer to the political philosophy characterised by ‘a supposedly general set of political norms’ (Mills 2017: 48) including those of individual freedom, human rights, secularism, tolerance and free speech. Contrary to much popular discourse across Europe and the USA, discussions in this book refute any sharp distinction between liberal and illiberal persuasions when it comes to the reproduction of racisms. Philosopher Charles W. Mills (2017: 32) argues that actually existing liberalism has, from its outset, been marked by race (see also Lentin and Titley 2011):

Racial liberalism, or white liberalism, is the actual liberalism that has been historically dominant since modernity: a liberal theory whose terms originally restricted full personhood to whites (or, more accurately, white men) and relegated nonwhites to an inferior category, so that its schedule of rights and prescriptions for justice were all color-coded ... So racism is not an anomaly in an unqualified liberal universalism but generally symbiotically related to a qualified and particularistic liberalism.

Indeed, the exposition of the racist roots of liberalism has long occupied those writing in the anti-colonial tradition. Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism*, for example, put forth an eviscerating critique of the ‘sordidly racist’ ‘pseudo-humanism’ (Césaire 2000 [1950]: 37) of western bourgeois society, most notably its espousing of supposedly universal liberal values in the pursuit of colonial domination. In this context, colonised populations were situated firmly outside the category of the human; the ‘uncivilised hordes’ were viewed as a grave threat to the values and lives of those in the West, hence the ‘thingification’ of colonial relations that Césaire (2000

[1950]: 42) describes, as well as Fanon's (2021 [1952]) account, published two years later, of the psycho-social impact of this dehumanisation on the colonised. Crucially, Césaire (2000 [1950]: 36) also argued that Nazism was 'cultivated' by Europe itself; in other words, it derived from the 'boomerang effect' of European colonialism's brutal dehumanisation of colonial populations (41). This is where, as Arun Kundnani (2023) points out, we can trace a divergence in different traditions of anti-racism: on the one hand, a liberal anti-racism that viewed Nazism as an irrational rupture of European liberal democracy, and on the other, a radical anti-racism established through the anti-colonial liberation struggles of the Global South, which – reflecting Mills' (2017) account above – understood the 'symbiosis' of liberalism and racism.

First, the liberal value placed on free speech is wielded in support of Islamophobic utterances, framed as the right to legitimately 'critique' a religion or religious practice (see, for instance, Walton and Wilson 2019). Second, the notion of 'Islamic extremism' is presented as a threat to liberal values more generally, paradoxically justifying counter-extremism legislation across Europe which has radically undermined freedom of expression for Muslim populations (Titley et al. 2017; Amnesty International 2023). One of the most illustrative examples of these contradictions, of course, was the aftermath of the 2015 attack on the offices of French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, which saw an intensification of 'freedom of speech' – alongside its bedfellows of 'democracy' and 'tolerance' – as a marker of civilisational difference (see Titley et al. 2017).

Fast forward almost a decade to Britain in spring 2024, when the Conservative government's unveiling of a new definition of 'extremism', with its renewed emphasis on liberal values and political systems (see the discussion earlier in this chapter) points to a hardening of such relationships. Furthermore, whilst there are *in theory* legal limits placed on 'hateful' speech aimed at Muslims in Britain, the risk of association with 'Islamist terror' that Muslims have to contend with 'undercuts' this legislative protection (Abbas 2021: 455). In other words, the ability of Muslims to respond to Islamophobic 'hate speech' is restricted as part of a broader imperative for self-censorship. Leaving aside the questions surrounding the anti-racist potential of hate crime laws (see Chapter 4), the point here is that Muslims are framed as being *incapable* of participating in the liberal commitment to freedom of expression, rendering them extra vulnerable to forms of securitisation, (self-)censorship and interpersonal harm.

Another key way in which Islamophobia has become entangled with liberal claims around freedom is through the lenses of gender and sexuality. Over the past few decades, a new 'common sense' has established itself across North America and western Europe concerning the need to 'save'

Muslim women from their own ‘oppressive’ cultures (Bhattacharyya 2008; Abu-Lughod 2013). Spivak’s 1985 adage of ‘White men ... saving brown women from brown men’ (Spivak 1994 [1985]: 92) has been reformulated in the context of the ‘war on terror’, with faux concern for the plight of Muslim women (and the attendant assumptions regarding Muslim men) used to justify and defend all manner of deadly policies, from the invasion of Afghanistan to the war on Iraq, and – most recently – Israel’s genocidal siege on civilians in Gaza (see Aldossari 2024). More broadly, Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) has demonstrated how a preoccupation with ‘saving’ Muslim women circulates in international best-selling novels, in print and digital news media, in approaches to international development, and in mainstream politics, which has seen a discourse of ‘women’s rights’ embraced across the western political spectrum and by all genders such that ‘the line between progressives and right-wingers has blurred’ (Abu-Lughod 2013: 7). These political realignments have been so significant that they have prompted the development of new theoretical concepts, as seen in Sara Farris’ (2017) discussion of ‘femonationalism’ (which builds on Jasbir Puar’s seminal concept of homonationalism, discussed below). Femonationalism describes:

on the one hand, the attempts of western European right-wing parties and neo-liberals to advance xenophobic and racist politics through the touting of gender equality while, on the other hand, it captures the involvement of various well-known and quite visible feminists and femocrats in the current framing of Islam as a quintessentially misogynistic religion and culture. (Farris 2017: 4)

For Farris, these trends also perform a political-economic function in a broader racialised and gendered economy of care, as racially minoritised Muslim women are filtered into particular sectors of the economy in the name of integration into the workforce.

In the UK specifically, the sexualised and gendered tropes attached to the ‘oppressed’ Muslim woman and her oppressive male counterpart have been central to the UK government’s counter-terrorism agenda. A deeply reductive conception of Muslim women’s ‘empowerment’, for instance, has been at the forefront of counter-terrorism policy, with the assumption that ‘liberating’ Muslim women from their own ‘culture’ offers a kind of ‘vaccine’ (Rashid 2016: 39) against political violence. This has been a particular problem in the third sector, with organisations actively participating in these discursive framings in order to secure funding via Prevent, made worse by the wider context of intense competition over resources (Rashid 2016).

However, others have nuanced this figure of the oppressed Muslim woman through accounts that reveal the contingency of her victim status. Tania Saeed (2016: 15), for example, suggests that representations of Muslim women in Britain ‘oscillate’ between victim and potential terrorist. Reflecting

the emphasis on ‘women’s empowerment’ within counter-terrorism policy (Rashid 2016), there also exists an assumption that Muslim women are vulnerable not only to gendered violence within Muslim ‘culture’ but also to radicalisation, with Saeed (2016: 67) identifying a ‘vulnerable-fanatic nexus’. Similarly, Madeline-Sophie Abbas (2021: 194), building on Sherene H. Razack’s (2004) discussion of the representation of ‘imperilled’ Muslim women (and ‘dangerous’ Muslim men) in Norwegian responses to forced marriage, suggests thinking instead with the concept of the ‘imperial/led’ Muslim woman in order to capture fully the fluid ways in which Muslim women are categorised ‘as *both* objects of terror at the hands of violently patriarchal Muslim males, and its subject as “terrorists” and “extremists” [*italics my own*]’.

Scholarship on sexuality further reveals the novel political alliances that coalesce around the figure of the Muslim woman and her imagined male counterpart. Puar’s (2007) seminal work on homonationalism addresses the incorporation of the queer subject into the national body as part of a pact that has seen the simultaneous reification of the illiberal, queerphobic terrorist ‘other’. This has included, of course, a centring of gay rights discourses in justifications for neoliberal warfare. However, as abolitionist scholar Sarah Lambie (2013) emphasises, this process is not simply a matter of a (neo)liberal co-optation of an otherwise neutral rallying cry for ‘gay rights’. Rather, as Puar’s homonationalist subject reminds us, political subjectivities are increasingly tied to ‘investments’ (to use Lambie’s phrasing) in racialised state logics and practices. Furthermore, this tendency can be traced in left movements more broadly, with ‘social movements ... redefining their politics in ways that actively infuse traditional recognition claims with punitive and deathly logics’ (Lambie 2013: 247), as can be witnessed in the rise of and subsequent critiques of carceral feminisms (Davis et al. 2022). Worryingly, these tendencies have played out in banal settings, including in the domain of British primary and secondary education, where LGBTQ-inclusive education has been increasingly couched in wider government agendas of ‘promoting British values’ and ‘countering violent extremism’. As protests organised by Muslim parents against the delivery of LGBTQ-inclusive education have recently re-emerged, this time in Manchester (Billson 2023), any left-wing response must also contend with the ways in which the delivery of this element of the national curriculum has been infused with a ‘civilisationist rhetoric’ (Balani 2019: n.p.), and reflect critically on how the claims and distinctions implicit in the shifts outlined above might preclude possibilities for anti-racist and queer alliances in this context and elsewhere.

What are the implications of these increasingly knotty entanglements between gendered and sexual identities, and racist and Islamophobic state

violence? As I highlight throughout the book, the British left has been far from immune to these shifts. The mobilisation of ostensibly liberal discourses across multiple articulations of Islamophobia (from the far right to liberal politicians) poses a serious challenge for effective anti-racist organising. Remaining critically vigilant against the ways in which state violence is justified in the name of the marginalised requires an openness to alternative frameworks for thinking through Islamophobia.

Islamophobia, state racisms and racial capitalism

In engaging with processes of racialisation, race and nation-making at the heart of Islamophobia, alongside understandings of liberalism's role in sustaining Islamophobia as a particular modality of racism, we can begin to develop an alternative critique of Islamophobia that is radically anti-racist, but also self-reflexive. Although extending well beyond the scope of this book, thinking and writing on racial capitalism has been integral to connecting conceptualisations of Islamophobia to the wider political imperatives that drive it, including refocusing attention on the role of the state. One of the core arguments in this book concerns the dire need to connect different articulations of Islamophobia that move from the everyday to the structural, and the structural to the everyday, as well as to bring Islamophobia into a more relational view with other modalities of racism (see Goldberg 2009, 2015). It is primarily in this sense that I address various but interconnected 'scales' of Islamophobia throughout the book, riffing off Meer's (2013b) discussion of scales of Islamophobia in terms of frequency and geographical spread. An engagement with theories of racial capitalism can help us to make these connections.

Cedric Robinson's (2000 [1983]) *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* offers one of the most comprehensive accounts, although not the first, of the development of racial capitalism. Robinson's core thesis, that the development of the world capitalist system depended on the racialised *differentiation* of populations for its survival and success, has inspired subsequent work on the changing dynamics of contemporary racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya 2018, 2023; Kundnani 2020); the specific role of prisons, policing and securitisation in the development of racial capitalism (see Gilmore 2007; Go 2023); the role of borders in racial capitalism (Walia 2021); and, most relevant for this book, a small but crucial body of literature that situates Islamophobia within this wider story of global 'exploitation, appropriation [and] expulsion' (Bhattacharyya 2018: 37).

Aside from some notable exceptions that explicitly connect Islamophobia with the conceptual framework of racial capitalism (see, for example,

Ali and Whitham 2021; Kundnani 2023) much of this latter work relates Islamophobia to the politics of empire (Kumar 2012; Kundnani 2017; Massoumi et al. 2017b), with Islamophobia providing an ideological vector for the maintenance and legitimisation of western imperial violence in the twenty-first century. Relatedly, scholars have also approached Islamophobia as a form of domestic state racism, emphasising the mechanisms and institutions of control that target Muslim populations, reinforcing political hegemony in the face of deepening crisis (see Kundnani 2014, 2020; Bhattacharya et al. 2021). This includes thinking about how ‘racisms of the border, of law and order, and of counter-terrorism are the arenas within which the complex fears, tensions, and anxieties generated by neoliberalism and its discontents are projected and worked through’ (Kundnani 2020: n.p.). In other words, whilst liberal discourses undergird Islamophobia, we also need to pay attention to the economic demands of neoliberalism. Whilst the collectivist spirit of the Global South has been perceived as representing the limit of capitalism’s capacity to universalise itself (Kundnani 2023) – and therefore the limits of neoliberalism in more recent decades – similar ‘cultural’ values attached to Muslim populations in Europe are seen to rub up against the individualism and entrepreneurialism required of the neoliberal project (Valluvan 2019).

Despite such insights, we might consider whether a more general lack of explicit writing on Islamophobia in conjunction with racial capitalism can be chalked up to a number of tendencies in thinking about capitalism more broadly. Aside from the Marxist ‘blind spot’ when it comes to race – which in itself prompted the writing and rediscovery of theories of racial capitalism – as I have already made clear, academic accounts of Islamophobia have tended to neglect its relationship with race, racism and racialisation (Meer 2013a; Alexander 2017). This is despite Robinson’s emphasis on processes of racialisation *within* Europe (including those pertaining to Muslim populations) that preceded colonisation (Robinson 2000 [1983]; see also Meer 2018a). Furthermore, the secularist tendencies of leftist movements (Hall and Back 2009) would suggest an additional barrier to taking Islamophobia seriously as an important mode of racialised differentiation within a broader system of racial capitalism.

Despite these challenges, theories of racial capitalism speak to some of the most pernicious articulations of Islamophobia in the current moment. Recent years have seen an uncritical resurrection of the ‘white working class’ category in politics, the media and even academic spheres, along with attached associations of cultural and economic marginalisation, with said populations often being described as ‘left behind’ (Virdee 2014; Shilliam 2018; Valluvan 2019). This rhetoric has posed a real challenge to the left, racialising class in ways that simultaneously obscure the entanglements

between the two, and situating Muslims not only outside the boundaries of class but as a threat to the wellbeing and way of life of so-called ‘white working class’ communities (Ali and Whitham 2021). Theories of racial capitalism, on the other hand, reject the false dichotomy of race versus class that has once again reared its head in invocations and mobilisations of the ‘white working class’. Instead, in viewing race and racism as integral to (rather than as a by-product of) capitalism, they allow us to think through race and class together, whilst also taking seriously the ways in which differently racialised people suffer under (and struggle against) capitalism in varying, but crucially intertwined, ways (Bhattacharyya 2018).

As such, focusing on racisms as they function at the level of and through the state does not necessarily detract from attending to ordinary experiences of Islamophobia and other forms of racism, or indeed the ways in which they enter into the everyday lives and psyches of non-Muslim people. In fact, more than simply a backdrop to racism, everyday life is a site for the ‘making’ of race, and attentiveness to everyday forms of racism can help to reveal the ‘*continuity* of racism’ (Smith 2016: 6), from the everyday to the structural and historical, and back again. With the above in mind, at various points and in different ways over the following chapters, I push for a closer engagement with the multidirectional complexities of Islamophobia as well as the inescapable entanglements between capitalism, class, race and state racisms.

Anti-racism in Britain: a historical, sociological account

As should be clear by now, this book aims not only to offer an alternative account of the phenomenon of Islamophobia itself, but to do this through and in the service of those involved in anti-racist thinking and practice. However, anti-racism is very rarely considered a topic worthy of scholarly – never mind empirical – enquiry (Lentin 2004; Bhattacharyya et al. 2020). Whilst the heyday of British anti-racism saw public intellectuals such as Ambalavaner Sivanandan contribute erudite analyses of both racism and anti-racism to the radical left in Britain, more recent decades have seen a dearth of academic literature on anti-racism. Tracing the contours of British anti-racism over the last half-a-century offers critical resources for making better sense of racisms, including Islamophobia, in the current moment, but also provides clues as to why, exactly, accounts of radical anti-racism now appear to be so few and far between.

From 1968, Britain exploded with the energy and radicalism of British Black Power. As the Black Power movement travelled from the USA to the British Isles, it was infused with a ‘distinctive British accent’ (Narayan 2019: 946), producing analyses and practices that characterised anti-racism

in Britain for the next decade and beyond. This included the powerful concept of political Blackness, which saw Blackness reconfigured to refer not to phenotypical signifiers but to a collective experience of racism. Crucially, this collective experience comprised not only racist encounters on the streets of Britain, but also the racism of the British state, whether under British colonial rule or within the ‘imperial core’ of Britain itself (Narayan 2019), thus reflecting ‘the militancy of formerly colonized people on the move through history’ (Shafi and Nagdee 2022: 30). As such, at the heart of British Black Power lay a global outlook and a staunch commitment to anti-imperialism (Narayan 2019; Shafi and Nagdee 2022).

However, as Azfar Shafi and Ilyas Nagdee (2022) emphasise, 1981 marked a turning point in the history of British anti-racism. Following uprisings across the country that saw racially minoritised communities clash with police in a number of major English cities, the British state began to pursue a strategy of ‘containment and incorporation’ vis-à-vis the British Black Power movement. In the years that followed, an organic anti-racism ‘from below’ was channelled into state institutions and non-governmental organisations reliant on state funding, and eventually transformed into a state-sponsored anti-racism ‘from above’. This shift proved lethal, resulting in a wholesale evacuation of anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism from British anti-racism. By the 1990s, the ‘degradation of Black struggle’ (Sivanandan 1985) in Britain was complete, with anti-racism now reduced to its most individualised and marketable forms: the ‘racism awareness training’ of Sivanandan’s 1985 critique just as recognisable now in the popularisation of ‘unconscious bias training’ (see Bourne 2019).

The new millennium ushered in further challenges for whatever remained of an anti-racist movement in Britain. The rise of neoliberalism brought about new modalities of racism and novel ‘enemies’, with the ‘war on terror’ and the intensifying global border regime playing major roles in delineating racialised boundaries, both material and symbolic (Kundnani 2007, 2020). In Britain, this period was marked by the rise of state integrationism, which saw the ‘riots’ of 2001 in northern English towns coalesce with the imperatives of the war on terror to situate ‘self-segregation’ along religious lines as the source of apparent racial conflict (of course ignoring the role of the far right – and lack of protection from police – in the events of 2001). Thus, it was predominantly Muslim communities who became the focus of politicians and governmental reports insisting on the need for more ‘integration’ of those living ‘parallel lives’ (see, for instance, Cantle 2001 and Casey 2016). As Kundnani (2007: 131) describes, within an integrationist framework: ‘Racism was no longer “institutional” but defined instead as a prejudice arising from unfamiliarity. It was to be understood as an outcome of segregation, not its cause’ (Kundnani 2007: 131). This had a profound

impact on anti-racism, which, having strayed so far from its radical roots in the late 1960s, was now ‘reduced to a conflict management exercise carried out by the state’ (Kundnani 2007: 133).

We might usefully think about these trends in anti-racism in Britain in relation to wider analyses of the ‘postracial’, which has been identified as a key feature of (neo)liberal racisms (Lentin and Titley 2011; Valluvan 2016). Scholars have long emphasised the ways in which ‘postraciality’ casts racism as a historical problem, ‘freezing’ it in specific racist regimes of bygone eras whilst simultaneously reducing racism to the terrain of the interactional and aberrant (Goldberg 2015; Lentin 2016; Bonilla-Silva 2017). Meanwhile, racisms proliferate through postracial registers of cultural rather than (strictly) biological difference. Anticipating the emergence of what he calls ‘post-racism’ some time before the emergence of writing on ‘the postracial’ in sociology and adjacent disciplines, Etienne Balibar (1991: 21) warns of ‘a destabilization of the defences of traditional anti-racism in so far as its argumentation finds itself attacked from the rear, if not indeed turned against itself’. We have indeed seen Balibar’s observation play out in widely repeated claims over subsequent decades that ‘white working class’ communities and their representatives have been unable to address local concerns for fear of being labelled racist.² The anti-racism that flourished in the decades before is now, perversely, presented as a threat to successfully ‘integrated’ and safe communities.

Meanwhile, racism has taken on an unprecedented ‘debateability’ (Titley 2016) marked by an ‘incessant, recursive attention as to what counts as racism and who gets to define it’ (Titley 2016: n.p.), which works to legitimise it. Within this dynamic lies a recurrent ‘denial and redefinition of racism’ (Lentin 2018: 411), which Alana Lentin (2018, 2020) pithily sums up as the ‘not racism’ paradigm wherein identifying or ‘calling out’ racism is viewed as an unhelpful imposition by so-called elite actors and even a threat to freedom of expression. While Lentin suggests that the ‘not racism’ paradigm overstates the hegemony of anti-racist positions, the point is that it functions to frame racism as only ever an individual moral failing and, furthermore, as narrowly defined according to a biological understanding of race. All this incessant noise leaves little room for a serious conversation about state racisms, never mind state-sanctioned Islamophobia.

These political and social transformations are borne out in the few empirical studies of anti-racist organising in Britain, and indeed in the very reason that there is so little interest in anti-racism within academic disciplines such as sociology.³ In one of these rare accounts, Lentin (2004: 131) argues that British anti-racism is ‘shaped by the split between the oppositional interpretations of racism as either institutionally engendered or as a set of behavioural attitudes’. Indeed, this observation is one that resonates

with much of the discussion in this book, which ranges from questions of counter-terrorism and the nation state, to critiques of a liberal telling of Islamophobia that centres notions of fear, hatred and even criminal intent. Given that Lentin's (2004: 3) concern about 'the unparalleled mounting of Islamophobia as a previously overlooked form of racism' was expressed almost two decades before I am writing, the need to connect analyses of Islamophobia with questions of anti-racism appears even more urgent.

In spite of the apparently bleak outlook sketched out above, as I argue throughout the book, the lessons of Britain's rich history of radical anti-racism continue to reverberate – but we need to pay close attention. To this end, in the following chapters discussions of Islamophobia are grounded in both historical and sociological accounts of anti-racism. In engaging with first-hand accounts of activists, I not only take seriously anti-racist thinking and practice as objects of sociological enquiry (see Bhattacharyya et al. 2020) but also acknowledge that anti-racist activists and movements themselves produce vital sociological knowledge (Meghji 2024).

Methodology and scope of the book

The arguments developed throughout this book are empirically anchored in understandings and practices 'on the ground'. Over the course of fourteen months, and originally as part of my doctoral research at the University of Glasgow, I took part in twenty-nine in-depth research conversations with activists and community workers involved in various forms of work challenging racism and Islamophobia. All those I spoke to had either worked or organised in at least one of the two cities of Glasgow and Manchester, and discussions took place between October 2017 and December 2018. While just over half of individuals identified as Muslim, I also spoke to those with other religious affiliations (including those identifying as Jewish, Catholic, Church of Scotland/England, and Alevi) and none at all. My interlocutors came from a range of ethnic backgrounds, but around a third identified as Pakistani, Pakistani Scottish or Pakistani British, reflecting the significant Pakistani communities in both cities. Overall, I spoke with ten people who identified as women and nineteen who identified as men. While women are overrepresented in the third sector (Laxton 2018), as I detail below, the majority of those I spoke to were involved (primarily) in grassroots anti-racist organisations; the gender imbalance in the research is therefore indicative of the notoriously male-dominated character of anti-racist work more broadly (Lentin 2004).

The timescale of discussions is relevant for a number of reasons. First, the period of time in which interviews took place followed a number of key

events – discussed in subsequent chapters – including the Scottish independence referendum, the vote to leave the European Union (i.e. the Brexit vote) and the Manchester Arena attack. On the other hand, conversations took place before some of the major political and economic shifts and flashpoints for anti-racism of the last few years, most notably: the sharp demise of the Labour left following the 2019 general election; the global BLM movement of 2020; the 2021 UK-based ‘Kill the Bill’ (KTB) protests; the COVID-19 pandemic, which provided an unprecedented backdrop to these mobilisations; and Israel’s 2023–2024 assault on Gaza. [Chapter 4](#) in particular speaks to these events, reflecting on the themes of the preceding chapters to consider their implications for ongoing anti-racist work.

Those I spoke to were involved in a range of organisations, projects, and campaigns with a focus on racism and/or Islamophobia that were active in Glasgow and Manchester at the time conversations took place. From the very beginning I wanted to try and capture the diversity of work – whether explicitly anti-racist or not – that addressed the problem of racism(s) and/or Islamophobia. As such, I drew heavily on my own networks – left and otherwise – to reach a cross-section of activists and community workers who I felt reflected the diversity and breadth of this work in the two cities, resulting in conversations with individuals involved in faith-led organisations (including student groups), trade union organisations, council/government-funded ‘ethnicity’-focused organisations, migrant solidarity organisations, grassroots organisations with a focus on policing/criminalisation, local anti-fascist organisations, and other grassroots anti-racist organisations. Of course, the messy realities of grassroots networks and organising pose a challenge for any attempt at neatly categorising or typologising people’s involvement in this work, and so I also spoke to activists who were reluctant to affiliate themselves with any single organisation, and others who were much more ‘promiscuous’ in their activities, having been involved in a number of initiatives over many years.

As the above suggests, I did not set out to speak solely or even necessarily to those who considered themselves ‘on the left’. Although there is, of course, a strong likelihood that anyone involved in work challenging Islamophobia and/or other racisms also identifies as left-wing or holds left-wing views, considering the cultural and political shifts in recent decades, this was never a given. Thus, the emphasis on left politics in the book developed somewhat organically. The British left has been variously cohesive and fragmented at different historical junctures, and yet many have still attempted to write about it, from within it, and in many ways *to* it, especially with regard to the intersection of racism and class politics (see Sivanandan 1990; Gilroy 2002 [1987]); Hall 2017 [1987]). Nevertheless, where I use the terms ‘left’ or ‘left-wing’ in the book, I generally take the

lead from those I spoke to, whose discussions of their own activism and work often connected Islamophobia with anti-racism and broader left politics. And, whilst not taken for granted, those I spoke to did often consider themselves as being ‘on the left’ or had been involved with and had things to say about left-wing organising in Britain. Particularly instructive in this regard were accounts from non-Muslim activists on the left that underpin the discussion in [Chapter 2](#), and those of left-wing Muslim activists whose incisive critiques of the broader left animate [Chapter 3](#).

Structure of the book

Alongside this introduction and a final concluding chapter, the book is split into four main substantive chapters. Taken together, these chapters connect popular discussions of Islamophobia with critical scholarship and anti-racist practice ‘on the ground’ to offer a reassessment of Islamophobia – and resistance to it – for our turbulent times.

[Chapter 1](#) begins the analysis by exploring the relationship between anti-racist resistance, experiences of Islamophobia and the politics of place. I focus on the two British cities of Manchester and Glasgow, cities with strong senses of identity: counter-cultural, multicultural, rebellious in spirit yet proudly welcoming, and both occupying particular positions in relation to the political centres of power in Britain. The chapter interrogates the ways in which anti-racism comes to be articulated via place-based narratives of these cities and their respective nations, and the possibilities and limits that this poses for modes of anti-racist resistance to Islamophobia. The chapter draws together discussions with activists and community workers living and working in these two cities, with two key case studies of (supposedly) anti-racist intervention: first, the city-wide response in Manchester to the 2017 Manchester Arena attack, which saw a number of initiatives encouraging the city to ‘come together’ in the face of anticipated and actual racism directed at Muslims in particular. And second, an unrelated but equally revealing campaign funded by the Scottish government drawing on narratives of national identity to address racist ‘hate crime’. Both of these interventions, along with the popular narratives reached for by activists, reveal the ways in which residents, cities and even entire nations can come to be imbued with an apparently ‘natural’ capacity for anti-racism. Narratives of exceptionalism, alongside notions of civic and national character, multiculturalism and diversity, circumscribe responses to racism more broadly and Islamophobia in particular. The chapter also reflects on a broader backdrop of resurgent nationalism across the political spectrum, focusing on left nationalism in particular. I end the chapter on a cautionary note to warn

that, while these mainstream responses may offer a convenient framework for responding to ‘illiberal’ expressions of racism and Islamophobia, their entanglements with broader nationalist projects render them a dead end for anyone in pursuit of radical anti-racist change.

In [Chapter 2](#), I focus in on Islamophobia as a specific modality of racism, building on the arguments in the previous chapter to consider the ways in which Islamophobia has come to be popularly understood as primarily an interactional phenomenon, and crucially what this means for anti-racist interventions and forms of resistance. Conversations with activists pointed to a tendency to conceptualise Islamophobia through the lens of fear and (un)familiarity, and notably in relation to the feelings and grievances of ‘white working-class’ communities. I offer a critique not only of the assumptions that underpin these narratives of dealing with ‘difference’ – narratives that are often tellingly ambivalent – but also wider liberal conceptual frameworks that activists draw on in their attempts to make sense of the problem of Islamophobia. The second half of the chapter considers how these understandings – combined with the material realities of ‘doing’ anti-racism in recent decades – sustain particular practices and strategies on the ground. I focus on how these practical approaches coalesce around three key themes: representation and resilience, dialogue across difference, and a notably punitive reflex often articulated through action on Islamophobic ‘hate crime’. Situating both conceptualisations and practices within longer historical trajectories (both discursive and material) reveals how hegemonic, liberal frameworks have shaped approaches to Islamophobia in ways that are both limited and limiting, having profound implications for the possibility of mounting an effective challenge to Islamophobia from the anti-racist left.

[Chapter 3](#) homes in on the relationship between Islamophobia and the British left. Developing an important thread from the previous chapter, it begins by addressing an ambivalence amongst non-Muslim activists in talking about and challenging Islamophobia, as well as the neglect, or ‘omission’, of Islamophobia as an issue of concern on the left. First-hand accounts from Muslim activists demonstrate not just ambivalence and omission but also the persistence of Islamophobia *on* the left, in other words the active reproduction of Islamophobia by fellow (non-Muslim) leftists. Connecting with themes of left nationalism and the liberal roots of Islamophobia across other chapters, the discussion reveals how Islamophobia interacts with discourses around gender and sexuality to ensure its reproduction across multiple political registers. Reflecting a concern for organising practices that runs throughout the book, the chapter moves on to consider how we might think about the role occupied and played by Muslim activists on the British left today. Drawing on Satnam Virdee’s (2014) concept of the ‘racialised outsider’, I make the case that Muslim leftists’ ‘everyday’ confrontations with forms of structural Islamophobia combine with forms of political education

(forged through left movements) to grant them a unique perspective on contemporary Islamophobia, and to situate them in a particular relationship with the wider British left. While the accounts in this chapter point to crucial historical and contemporary resources for crafting a more properly anti-racist response to Islamophobia, they also raise challenging questions about the potential for solidarity-building in the current moment.

The final substantive chapter – [Chapter 4](#) – reflects on the debates that animate the preceding chapters in relation to some of the most recent developments in anti-racist organising and left politics. It explores how an emerging politics of abolition in Britain, stoked by the BLM and KTB protests of 2020–2021, might offer a new model of radical anti-racism. More specifically, I consider how an expansive abolitionist politics might usefully respond to the problem of Islamophobia across multiple dimensions, from the punitive dead end of hate crime legislation to properly confronting claims of ‘legitimate concerns’ that continue to trouble the left. But more than this, I make the case that a rigorous analysis of Islamophobia can help to enrich and expand a politics of abolition, offering novel points of connection and terrains of solidarity. A long tradition of abolitionist ‘world-making’ reveals resources not only for nurturing some version of an ‘abolition democracy’ (Du Bois 1999 [1935]) in Britain, but for a reinvigorated, anti-imperialist anti-racism fit for the demands of our current moment.

By pulling together the multiple threads that run throughout the book, the concluding chapter seeks to reiterate the analytic purchase of connecting sociological understandings of Islamophobia, racism and anti-racism, emphasising once again the political value of connecting theory and practice. We end by returning to the limitations, tensions and openings at play in recent responses to Islamophobia to ask what lessons might be gleaned for the anti-racist left at this current juncture, and how these might contribute to a renewed and decidedly radical effort to eradicate Islamophobia and its many attendant violences.

Notes

- 1 In 2020/2021 data were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2 See, for example, the 2016 Casey review ‘into opportunity and integration’ (Casey 2016) and the framing of the child sexual exploitation cases in Rotherham and Rochdale (Cockbain and Tufail 2020).
- 3 Claire Alexander (2018), for example, notes that scholarship on questions of race and ethnicity in Britain has reflected the fragmentation of the politically Black subject that came in the wake of British Black Power, contributing to a disconnect in theorising racism across differently racialised positions. This is a clear move away from the theorising done by anti-racist movements themselves but also disincentivises the study of such movements.

1

Islamophobia and the politics of place in anti-racist work

Introduction

On the evening of 22 May 2017, Manchester Arena – a large stadium in the city centre of Manchester – was targeted by a suicide bomber while it hosted a concert by global pop superstar Ariana Grande. Twenty-three people died, including the attacker, and many were injured. In the wake of the attack, the city itself quickly became an anchor to which a form of collective grief attached itself, and nowhere was this more obvious than in the sudden popularisation of Manchester’s long-time emblem, the worker bee. The worker bee, symbolising Manchester’s industrial heritage, has long been a part of the city’s official coat of arms, but now the emblem took on a new lease of life. Buses and shop fronts were adorned with the symbol, while Manchester-based tattoo artists began offering free bee tattoos as part of an initiative to raise money for the victims of the attack, resulting in lengthy queues around the city. Beyond the worker bee, mass vigils were organised. At one of them, local poet Tony Walsh delivered a rendition of a poem dedicated to Manchester’s character and resilience, powerfully entitled ‘This Is the Place’, and in a celebration of defiance, Grande returned to the city a few weeks later to perform at the ‘One Love Manchester’ concert. This flurry of organised responses to the attack was not surprising in and of itself; after all, collective grief calls for collective ritual. But clearly, such a constellation of responses also sought to communicate a particular message about Manchester as a city, and this drew on a well-worn script: Manchester and its residents as resilient and industrious, disdainful of authority and pretence, but also – and perhaps most importantly in relation to the arena attack – as a progressive model of multiculturalism.

I wanted to open the chapter with reference to this troubled period of time in the city for a number of reasons. First, because I think it represents a particularly compelling example of the stories we tell about the places we call home: about how these stories become especially attractive in times of crisis, or when responding to complex and difficult collective problems. And

second, for the more empirical reason that, speaking to anti-racist activists and community workers in 2018, I was surprised at the frequency with which the attack and its aftermath came up in conversation. Both Muslim and non-Muslim individuals spoke about the city ‘coming together’ in the face of potential and actual racism, and this narrative was premised on a fantasy of Manchester as a city unwavering in its anti-racist commitments.

I noticed a similar pattern amongst those I spoke to in Glasgow. Having lived in Scotland for some years at the time, I was more than familiar with the brand of uncritical Scottish exceptionalism that circulates around conversations to do with racism. As this chapter explores, even where there has been some kind of reckoning with the city’s grim role in transatlantic slavery, racism appears to be ‘frozen’ (cf. Lentin 2016) in these past colonial relationships. In the academic literature on Islamophobia in Scotland, the nation appears strangely sequestered from the global processes that sustain structural Islamophobia, which is always elsewhere, while either the Scottish state remains absent or its postracial character is tacitly accepted (see, for example, Hussain and Miller 2006; Bonino 2017; and a subsequent critique by Harris 2018). Speaking to activists and community workers revealed the depths of these assumptions as Glasgow was colloquially reproduced as exceptionally welcoming, ‘tolerant’ and (by Scottish standards) ‘ethnically diverse’. And yet, sometimes even within the same conversations, a different picture of ‘the city’ emerged: Libyan families in Manchester subjected to violent police raids in the weeks following the arena attack; the media frenzy around the mosque that the attacker happened to attend, which fuelled months of targeted abuse by the far right; and, in Glasgow, the quietly corrosive effects of the Scottish government’s counter-terrorism policies, as well as outright racist abuse on the city’s streets.

In light of these contradictions, this chapter considers the role played by appeals to ‘place’ in *anti-racist* work. It explores the ways in which people I spoke to mobilised narratives of place-based peculiarity in their understandings of both racism and anti-racism at multiple levels: at the level of the individual, at the level of the city as a supposedly anti-racist space and at the level of the nation state. Importantly, this is less a discussion about the spatial politics of Islamophobia, an area that critical geographers have been paying increasing attention to (see Hopkins 2024 for an overview of this work), and more a reckoning with the limits of discourses of civic and national belonging for those on the anti-racist left. I argue that the contradictions that emerge in the stories people tell about places should call us to task, pushing us to consider how anti-racist work can remain committed to local concerns but take us beyond ‘place’ as an organising principle for an anti-racist politics.

‘People know the script here’: narrating an anti-racist populace

What really makes a Mancunian? What does it mean to be a Glaswegian? And can some form of Scottishness be harnessed for progressive ends? As recent decades have been characterised by nationalism’s renewed ‘clamour’ (Valluvan 2019), these have become increasingly tantalising questions. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that discussions of racism and anti-racism in the city were so frequently refracted through the lens of civic and/or national identity. Indeed, those I spoke to quickly reached for well-worn markers of civic (and in the case of Scotland, national) character. Scots, for example, were deemed to have ‘a nicer social conscience’ than the English and were described as disinclined to ‘make a fuss about things’. At the same time, while Scotland was frequently contrasted with England, my interlocutors also referred to what they saw as affinities between people living in Manchester and Glasgow. When Dan, who is involved in anti-fascist community work in Manchester, said that he felt that Manchester and Glasgow were very similar cities, I asked him in what ways he felt this was the case. Revealingly, Dan’s reply foregrounded what he referred to as a ‘vibe’ and a shared ‘nature’:

D’ya know what, without sounding like a prick, because of a vibe, that both the cities have ... I think they’re both very friendly cities, and you can talk to most people in both cities quite easily ... there’s just something about the nature of people from both those cities that I think is quite similar.

‘Tolerance’ was another key descriptor that participants reached for in reflecting on anti-racism and the city. For example, Paul, who has been involved in anti-racist work through a group affiliated to his local football team, explained: ‘I think that Scotland and Glasgow in particular is a very tolerant place. I really do not have the answer as to why this is but to say I am proud of it would be an understatement’, while Sara, a Scottish Pakistani woman who has lived in Manchester for a number of years, described the aftermath of the arena attack in the following way:

When the Manchester attack happened it really brought the city together, and that’s when people could identify themselves as a Mancunian and go ‘no, this is our city’. We are tolerant, we always have been, and this has reinforced how tolerant we are, and we will not let people break us, and we will not be divided as a community.

The concept of ‘tolerance’ is a particularly ‘seductive’ aspect of liberal multiculturalism that nonetheless ‘obfuscates the power involved in setting the limits of tolerance’ (Lentin and Titley 2011: 31). In Scotland in particular, the assumption of a natural capacity for ‘tolerance’ has a long pedigree, and the notion of the tolerant Scot was central to the ‘official’ story

told about Scotland's role in British colonialism and transatlantic slavery. A widespread and wilful national amnesia, aided by the 'liberal hegemony' of late-nineteenth-century Scotland, ensured that abolitionism became the story that defined Scottish involvement in this global system of dehumanisation and exploitation, despite all the evidence to suggest that Scotland and Scottish people were deeply – even disproportionately – complicit (Devine 2015: 22). In more recent years, academics have helped to sustain the myth, now so commonplace as to be almost banal, that an apparent lack of racism in Scotland is in large part down to the good 'nature' of Scottish people (see, for instance, Bonino 2017, and Harris 2018 for a subsequent critique). This idea of 'tolerance' was implicit in an account from Kadhim, which also revealed the ways in which a construction of an essential and particular anti-racist predisposition shapes the sorts of anti-racist strategies that are pursued on the ground. Kadhim helps to run community projects as part of a faith-based organisation in Glasgow, and in explaining the approach taken by the organisation to the issue of Islamophobia, he tells me:

I think there is something to be said for a consistent, steady approach, indirectly, that's appealing in this dynamic, especially in Scotland. I find people don't like, you know, direct, [intimidatory]. It's not like America where you can really shake somebody by the throat and say 'be this, be that, be a proud person', you know, they like subtle things.

Elaborating on this, Kadhim describes a blood donation project (that encourages young Muslims in Scotland to donate blood) as an example of what he sees as an appropriate approach to tackling Islamophobia in Scotland:

I think with blood donation, because it's an act that ... everyone does it, especially in Scotland, you're sitting there, you're seeing all ages, everyone donates, no one makes a fuss, this is Scotland as well – we don't make a fuss about things. And who are we to make a fuss about it? That's what I think, and I spoke to the blood donation centre themselves and I say 'what do you think about these different things' and they say to me 'look I like your approach because the non-Muslims they'll look at you, they'll identify you anyway, whatever, they see a woman with a headscarf or whatever, they'll say okay there's Muslims just donating blood, just like us'.

The idea of tolerance, while not explicit here, is alluded to in the insistence that Scottish people 'don't make a fuss about things'. As such, a blood donation project is viewed by Kadhim as a suitably 'subtle' approach to tackling Islamophobia in the way that it encourages others to view young Muslims as a productive (and similarly 'fuss-free') part of the nation.

Alongside a backdrop of liberal hegemony, in the cases of both Manchester and Glasgow there are other historical relationships and ongoing processes that are important in an analysis of why supposedly natural capacities for

anti-racism appear to be so readily reproduced in conversations about racism and the city. Manchester has long occupied a particular place in popular culture, representing one of a number of ‘un-London’s’, to paraphrase Alex Niven (2019: 77). Testament to this is the phrase ‘This is Manchester, we do things differently here’, a refrain made famous by the portrayal of Manchester icon Tony Wilson in the film *24 Hour Party People*. Tired as it may be, the refrain has since taken on a life of its own, symbolising a particular Mancunian attitude of defiance and determination but also ‘open-minded[ness]’ (Haslam 2000: xxvii). What becomes more interesting is when this portrayal of Mancunians is used to frame anti-racist practices. Dan, for instance, refers to the ‘we do things differently here’ refrain when reflecting on the anti-fascist organising he has been involved with in the city: ‘So in terms of organising, in terms of us as an organisation, we’ve always done things differently. Not to quote “we do things differently here”, but ... I think there’s a big North/South divide in terms of anti-racism organising.’ Expanding on this reflection, Dan differentiates anti-fascist organising in Manchester from the tactics that tend to be favoured ‘down south’ at ‘big anti-fascist mobilisations where everyone will dress in black and run around’. Interested in this distinction, I ask him the following:

Scarlet: But like that tactic of – like, black bloc tactic¹ basically, is what you’re referring to ...?

Dan: Yeah, yeah yeah yeah.

Scarlet: Do you think that’s alienating for people in Manchester?

Dan: Yeah, big time. I think – and if you take it back to ... yeah, in Manchester and most northern cities. But specifically in Manchester you know, I think people see that and they’re like ‘what ya doin’?!’, like especially if you go to more local areas – Bolton, Bury, Rochdale, Levenshulme, wherever – I think it’s super alienating for people. And I think that goes back to, yeah to the Islamophobic thing as well, like ... you need to engage with local communities and engage normally. Me dressed up in a balaclava all dressed in black and going ‘don’t worry guys I’m gonna protect your neighbourhood’, people be like ‘Who the hell are you? Get out.’

Another participant, Espo, describes what it was about the residents of Manchester that prevented a racist ‘backlash’ in the city in the wake of the arena attack:

It’s like for example we had the Manchester bombing ... last year, yeah last year now, and I remember at the time there was a fear that there might be a massive backlash, but there wasn’t, from my understanding or from my opinion. There probably were little isolated incidences of, of backlashes, but generally there wasn’t, because people know the script here, which is that, you know, they’re

not gonna swallow the sort of narrative that's thrown their way, you know, they can think for themselves. Because number one, they're all intelligent people, because we're Mancunians, right – kinda goes against what I was saying, but, yeah I'll just say that – but ... they've seen enough to know better. I think that's the best way of putting it. They've seen enough to know better.

Importantly, both Dan and Espo appear to recognise the limits of a place-based framework for making sense of anti-racism. Dan's caveat early on ('not to quote ...') nods to the ways in which the refrain has become a cliché: the kind of phrase that might adorn the walls – lit up in neon – of trendy bars in Manchester's Northern Quarter. And Espo, having previously pushed back on portrayals of Manchester as 'unique' in the ways in which dynamics of race and racism played out in the city, here acknowledges the contradictions in his claim that all Mancunians are 'intelligent' and therefore inclined towards anti-racism. Nevertheless, in both instances, civic pride seems to have a particular and enduring appeal. This appears to be the case even for individuals who directly experience racism in the city – indeed, at various points in our conversation, Espo himself recounts experiences of interpersonal and structural racism, from school to the workplace. This pattern of contradiction, between the actual experiences of racially minoritised individuals living in Manchester and the narratives they reached for about anti-racism in the city, repeated itself across multiple conversations with my interlocutors. Perhaps we don't do things so differently here after all? But it also prompts the question of *why* even the most critical activists continued to reduce anti-racism to a place-based personality trait.

We have so far addressed what the residents of Manchester and Glasgow (and to some extent the north of England and Scotland) *are* in these narratives of exceptionalism, but what are they *not*? Places are, as Doreen Massey (2005) reminds us, deeply relational. In the case of Manchester, a key 'other', or antithesis, is undeniably represented by London as the centre of political and cultural power. The 'we do things differently here' attitude of the 'Madchester' era was intended to mark a break from, and opposition to, London as the centre of musical and cultural production – a time when punk music and the burgeoning alternative rave scene in Manchester were challenging this hegemony (Redfern 2005). This positioning of Manchester in opposition to London has continued apace, from Britpop feuds to Andy Burnham's (mayor of Greater Manchester) celebrated resistance to Westminster-imposed restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Walker et al. 2020). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, in conversations about anti-racism in Manchester, London was frequently positioned as the cold, anonymous 'other' to Manchester, with its warm, no-nonsense people and sense of togetherness. Compare, for example, Dan's differentiation of London and Manchester, recounted previously through the lens of anti-fascist tactics,

with Asma's description in the following quote, where she juxtaposes 'northern friendliness', 'connection' and 'community' with the city of London. Once again, this attempt to sketch out a particular Mancunian identity and its 'other' took place against the backdrop of the arena attack:

Scarlet: Yeah. Why do you think that ... why do you think the reaction was so positive in Manchester, compared to, you know, responses to terrorist attacks elsewhere, for example?

Asma: Like, I've actually thought about it quite a lot to try and like, try and think, and I don't know whether it's just so clichéd, and maybe it's the bias in me, but I genuinely believe Manchester's multiculturalism is actually celebrated more. Like I dunno ... like everybody talks about London being this multicultural hub, right? Which it is, but I don't feel like they're as connected there, I dunno whether it's the northern friendliness ... there is definitely more of a community feel when you're in Manchester compared to when you're in London. Like I go to London a lot and it's not the same, nowhere near the same.

Interestingly, Asma goes on to draw out what she sees as similarities between Manchester and Glasgow:

And even like – so you're in Glasgow right – and my best friend went to uni in Glasgow, she now lives there, and every time I go to Glasgow I'm reminded of Manchester. Like it's the exact same ... feeling that I get. And I think they're even friendlier 'cause they're Scottish, so they're like even more friendly.

If London represents Manchester's primary cultural and political 'other', then who or what stands in as the 'other' for those narrating a Glaswegian or (more often than not) Scottish predisposition towards anti-racism? Revealing in this regard is the following extract from Kadhim:

I think [it's] a Scottish thing as such as well, everyone – because Scotland's culture is almost like fight [for] the underdog type thing as well, like always stick [up] for the person that's ... they must have something wrong with them, something – the oppressor must have something wrong with them to be picking on these people so we'll fight for them, and I guess a big one... well Edward's Army, all this sort of thing, it goes back to that.

The brief mention of 'Edward's Army' here is a nod to the 1314 Battle of Bannockburn in which the Scots, led by Robert the Bruce, defeated the much larger army of England's King Edward II. The victory is commemorated in the lyrics to 'Flower of Scotland', widely considered to be Scotland's unofficial national anthem. As poet and writer Jackie Kay (2007: n.p.) wryly observes: 'Scotland's self-image is one of a hard-done-to wee nation, yet bonny and blithe.' As I sketch out below, there are various factors that play into this mythologising of Scotland and its people as historically oppressed,

but as Kadhim's account suggests, within this vision lies the notion that, as a consequence of their own historical experiences, Scottish people have a particular capacity for empathy and solidarity with other oppressed groups. Yet this identification with victimhood also needs to be understood in relation to the occlusion of Scotland (and Glasgow's) historical role – alongside England – in British colonialism (Mullen 2009; Devine 2015; Davidson et al. 2018). In this sense, Kay (2007: n.p.) also notes that a particular form of collective remembering and forgetting ensures that 'the plantation owner is never wearing a kilt'.

At other times, a similar argument was made by participants that drew on the experiences of the Irish in Scotland, and the influence of the Irish republican struggle in particular. It was suggested by some that there were more opportunities and openings for doing certain kinds of anti-racist work in Glasgow on account of the historical presence and influence of Irish republicanism in the city. Scholarly accounts of left movements in Glasgow do indeed reveal the significant role played by activists of Irish Catholic heritage in 'catalysing' a culture of anti-racism within left movements in Glasgow, at a time where anti-Irish racism was particularly acute in Scotland (Virdee 2014). These two arguments – that Scottish people have been historically oppressed by the English, and that Irish people *within* Scotland have led a particular struggle against the British state, and in doing so have enriched anti-racist struggles – are patently different. Yet in conversations about racism and anti-racism in Glasgow, this distinction was not always clear. I want to suggest, then, that such a slippage between 'oppressed' and 'oppressor' begins to point us in the direction of something sociologically important.

To say that Scotland has been historically oppressed by England is clearly to obscure the power relations that have structured, and continue to structure, racism across the globe, as well as the racialisation of certain populations – notably Irish Catholics and Jewish people – *within* the 'imperial core' of Britain (Virdee 2014) and within Europe more broadly (Robinson 2000 [1983]). A reckoning with Scotland's role in transatlantic slavery, then, as well the ways in which this has shaped the city of Glasgow itself and the lives of those living there, is integral to any anti-racist politics worth its salt in Scotland. But to say as much does little to explain where these narratives come from, and why they might appeal to otherwise critical and 'progressive' activists. Alongside a popular historical amnesia, other scholars have pointed to the classed experiences and legacies of Empire. Could it be that the narrative of the anti-racist Scot that emerged in conversations might also derive from a sense of *classed* oppression that has come to be understood and articulated in relation to the British state?

The Highland Clearances offer a useful point of consideration here, not least because they remain central to some of the more extreme interpretations

of an apparently colonial relationship between Scotland and England that make up what historian Stephen Mullen (2016: n.p.) calls a ‘Scottish school of pseudo-historiographical victimology’. Importantly, however, the ‘unevenness of the Scottish colonial experience’ (Macdonald 2006: 126) and the (arguably classed) experiences of domination and dispossession that it produced within Scotland, including the Highland Clearances, have tended to be interpreted through the singular lens of English colonisation (see Connell (2004) for a critique of this in relation to Scottish literary criticism). There is, on the other hand, a growing body of research demonstrating the huge profits amassed by Scottish elites through transatlantic slavery, and furthermore, the use of these profits to purchase vast swathes of land in the Scottish Highlands and Islands, a process that contributed directly to Highland Clearances across Scotland (MacKinnon and Mackillop 2020). Here are revealed the intimate material connections that structure experiences of exploitation and dispossession within *and* beyond Scotland – connections that are so often obscured in debates about Scotland’s role (or lack thereof) in British imperialism and colonialism.

With this context in mind, we can begin to see how the modern-day Scot – understood as historically oppressed and therefore ‘naturally’ inclined towards anti-racism – might have emerged as a sort of counter-hegemonic identity. It is also significant that there were few references amongst those I spoke to in Glasgow to Scotland’s historical role in colonialism, and where colonialism was mentioned in research conversations, it tended to be in relation to Britain more generally. At one of various public events I attended over the course of the research, I heard a prominent academic scholar refer to the recent academic and public interest in Scotland’s historical role in transatlantic slavery as a ‘cultural awakening’. However, the above suggests that such a ‘cultural awakening’ may be harder to translate into understandings of contemporary forms of racism in Glasgow than we might otherwise hope. This gap between a burgeoning academic and public interest in Glasgow’s colonial past, and actual anti-racist work on the ground, might be partly explained if we understand the narrative of the ‘anti-racist Scot’ as a product of the complex legacies of these histories: encapsulating a particular counter-hegemonic appeal at the same time as it contributes to the erasure of Scotland’s colonial history. Nevertheless, the prevalence of appeals to an essential ‘Scottishness’ requires some critical reflection, not least because of the ways in which they have also been mobilised on a wider scale by Scottish authorities, as I address later in the chapter. In a similar way, the everyday reproduction of Mancunians as essentially community-oriented and savvy, and, as such, as possessing some kind of anti-racist predisposition, certainly obscures the broader structures that underpin racism, but cannot be properly understood outside the material regional disparities that exist within

Britain, as well as a distinct ‘structure of feeling’ (Niven 2019: 127), that shape this identification with marginality.

Any critique of the limits of such an essentialist, individualising framework must, at the very least, acknowledge the broader relationships that shape the contradictions thrown up in how people narrate a supposedly ‘anti-racist’ populace. Going further, what would it mean for these connections between classed and racialised oppressions to be articulated as part of an anti-racist politics? How do we make the case that racialised and classed forms of exploitation and marginality are intimately entangled, and furthermore, that these knots can be traced in relation to place, in potentially generative ways?

To paraphrase Gargi Bhattacharyya, how can we reveal the ways in which, under racial capitalism, we are all living difficult lives but in different ways?² The following sections consider these questions as they further explore what a fixation on ‘place’ as an organising framework for anti-racism does to our analyses of racism and our anti-racist responses. I argue that, more often than not, the attachment of anti-racism to place obscures racism’s multi-scalar nature, and in doing so impoverishes our anti-racist efforts.

Multiculture, segregation and the city

Closely tied to the narrative of a ‘natural’ capacity for anti-racism amongst those living in Manchester and Glasgow was a ‘spatial vocabulary’ (Phillips 2008: 180) of ‘segregation’ and ‘integration’. Dominating many discussions about racism, anti-racism and the city was the notion that the multicultural and ‘mixed’ (in other words, desegregated) character of the two cities served as a major mitigating force against racism and Islamophobia. In this section I explore how these narratives overlapped and differed in the two cities, drawing as they do on different geographical ‘others’ to sustain claims of the anti-racist potential of urban multiculturalism; or, to use Paul Gilroy’s (2004: xi) term, ‘conviviality’, that is: ‘the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life in Britain’s urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere’. However, bearing in mind the radical intentions of Gilroy’s use of conviviality as much more than merely ethnic diversity (de Noronha 2022), I go on to ask what these patterns tell us about the ubiquity of a particular framework for understanding Islamophobia, racism and anti-racism.

My exchange with Asma, touched on in the previous section, in which she contrasts the ‘community’-like feel of Manchester and Glasgow with London, offers a key example of the invocation of multiculturalism and (de)

segregation in understandings of anti-racism. In Asma's account, an appeal to an essential Mancunian or Glaswegian anti-racist character (most obvious in the references to friendliness and 'connection') combines with an understanding of multiculturalism (what Asma calls 'multiculturalism') as guarding against racism. As part of this same discussion, Asma goes on to say:

One thing I think that helps, like in Glasgow for example there's a large Pakistani population there, which is predominantly Muslim. And it's the same in Manchester, there's a large Muslim population in Manchester, so I think people have grown up side-by-side with Muslims.

This notion of a measurable relationship between levels of ethnic diversity and the prevalence of racism (in this case, Islamophobia) came up time and again in research conversations. Neighbourhoods associated with high levels of ethnic diversity across both cities offered shared reference points for asserting claims about such a relationship. For instance, Espo offered a summary of this relationship when he reflected on Manchester's various migrant communities, his own sense of safety as a Muslim man living in Manchester and what he described as a 'resilience' in the city to racist discourses:

You know, I don't think people swallow that rubbish as easily as they would in other cities. But that's not to say Manchester's unique, 'cause I think any major city, you've got Birmingham, you've got Manchester, you've got Liverpool ... I don't think it's to do with place necessarily. I think it's to do with it being a multicultural city. I think if it's a multicultural city, even though there might be minorities ... if you have enough, it's like a critical number of Black people, Chinese people, Asian people, Arabs, whatever, then I think it's fine.

Accounts such as this one raise a key question: what or where is the (variously) implicit 'other' to these diverse and apparently convivial English cities? The answer seemed to lie in a particular set of northern towns and small cities outside Manchester: Ashton under Lyne, Oldham and Rochdale (all part of Greater Manchester) and, further afield, Burnley and the city of Bradford were all mentioned in conversations with those living or working in Manchester. Bethan Harries' (2017) research with young people in Manchester has revealed similar patterns of imaginative comparison. Through their attempts to make sense of and articulate race in their everyday lives, and as part of a broader articulation of the apparently 'post-racial' nature of Manchester, the young people that Harries spoke to frequently made distinctions between Manchester and other nearby towns including 'Bradford, Burnley and Oldham', which were 'drawn upon by the young adults in order to offer comparison as something "worse"' (Harries 2017: 49). While those I spoke to did not evoke these peripheral towns quite in the same way – in other words, where the primary purpose was to project racism elsewhere – it does seem that an imaginative comparison to, or

counterpoint with, these towns plays a role in the way that racism is understood to operate more generally. We should ask, then: what is the function of these symbolic ‘others’ to the projection of Manchester’s multicultural conviviality? Crucially, Harries (2017: 49) argues that these towns, which have significant South Asian and Muslim communities and are often associated with what came to be called the 2001 ‘race riots’ ‘have some purchase in the national imagination’.

One discussion in particular reveals the extent of these popular associations and comparisons between, on the one hand, the ‘postracial’ multiculturalism of urban centres and, on the other, the imagined racism and segregation of peripheral postindustrial towns. John is an activist who has been involved in anti-racist work through trade unionism for a number of years. Having worked across Greater Manchester and the adjacent county of Lancashire, he highlighted what he saw as some important distinctions between different areas:

I think I would say that Manchester is more cosmopolitan and more ... and there’s less of a sense I think of segregation than there would be in places like Burnley maybe, yeah. Parallel lives ... Now Oldham it’s much more, much more the parallel lives things I think. And Oldham is in Greater Manchester but it’s a separate borough with its own identity ... But I think in Oldham maybe, maybe because of Islam, maybe because of the, you know, the war on terror ... maybe it’s taking longer. I think Manchester’s a lot more open.

John’s use of the phrase ‘parallel lives’ in relation to towns such as Burnley and Oldham is telling. It points towards a vocabulary and framework that undergird contemporary debates on ‘diversity’ in Britain, and which appear to have a particularly wide appeal. The phrase was popularised in the Cattle Report (Cattle 2001), a ‘community cohesion’ review commissioned by the Home Secretary in the wake of the (so-called) ‘riots’ that took place in towns and cities across the north of England in 2001. The report famously used the ‘parallel lives’ analogy to describe what it framed as the major contributing factor to the disturbances, in other words the spatial and social ‘self-segregation’ of Asian Muslim communities from their white, non-Muslim neighbours.

This diagnosis – and others that followed – introduced a broader trend of ‘integrationist’ thinking that would come to dominate political and policy debates for decades to come. And within this integrationist paradigm, Muslim communities were targeted as particularly problematic, their cultural difference and apparent refusal to ‘integrate’ seen as the source of conflict (Lentin 2004; Kundnani 2007; Shafi and Nagdee 2022). One of the more explicit iterations of integrationist rhetoric in recent years can be found in the Casey Review, a 2016 government report that reproduces

many of these tropes, including the notion of self-segregating, culturally problematic Muslim communities, which are situated in opposition to a distinct ‘white working class’ (Casey 2016: 80).

As my conversations with activists and community workers revealed, and as I go on to explore, this logic has now become deeply and widely embedded in popular understandings of racism and anti-racism across the political spectrum. I am not suggesting that activists I spoke to were in agreement with the conclusions of the Casey Review and its predecessors, but that the hegemony of integrationist thinking has resulted in a sort of tacit acceptance of its terms of reference, and as such, in its fundamental assumptions about racism’s causes and effects. Most relevant for the current discussion is the ways in which these frameworks are embedded in ‘place’, and subsequently mobilised to imbue places with an anti-racist disposition, always in contrast to a more (potentially) racist, culturally problematic or conflict-prone ‘elsewhere’.

Indeed, these same narratives of integration and segregation were just as prevalent amongst those I spoke to in Glasgow. When it comes to conventional measures of ‘ethnic diversity’, Manchester is significantly more ‘diverse’ than Glasgow (although Glasgow is by far Scotland’s most diverse city) and Glasgow in particular is less diverse still – almost incomparably so – than London.³ Unsurprisingly, then, discussions in Glasgow were much less about actually existing levels of ethnic diversity in the city compared to other urban centres (and, notably, Glasgow was rarely discussed as an overwhelmingly ‘white’ city compared to the other urban centres in relation to which it was situated). Rather, in conversations in Glasgow, notions of segregation and spatial integration appeared to be doing even more work than conceptions of convivial urban multiculturalism in people’s attempts to explain racism and Islamophobia in the city.

When asked to reflect on the differences between racism in Scotland and England, a number of participants in Glasgow drew on a repertoire of terms and images to describe racialised communities in England. Communities down south were ‘isolated’, ‘ghettoised’ and ‘segregated’. Meanwhile, communities in Scotland, and in Glasgow in particular, were juxtaposed with those in towns and cities in England. Maria, who works for a faith-led organisation in Glasgow, does just this when she describes the following:

I did feel like living in England, travelling around England, the borders between communities was stronger, and then when you come up to Scotland, I don’t know whether it’s because it’s a smaller place or because it’s used to having a lot more tourists than just kinda being more residential or whatever, that they’re used to it ...? But it just seems a lot more diverse and people seem to kind of accept it.

Later in the discussion, she goes on to say:

[In London] it's in pockets. So because everything's separated and everything's different, and communities are settling with people that they know, everything is kept a little bit separate. It's easy to play the blame game. Whereas in Glasgow everyone's a bit closer together, it doesn't take very long to get from the West End to the east side, north, south, wherever it is. So I think that makes a difference, geographically.

Like Dan's, Maria's account hints at the assumption that an exposure to cultural difference guards against racism; on account of the desegregated nature of the city, people in Glasgow are more 'used' to diversity, and therefore less susceptible to racist scapegoating. And Kadhim echoes this same step in logic when he describes his sense of how people in Scotland have reacted to terror attacks associated with Muslims. Kadhim suggests that the response in Scotland does not develop beyond what he calls a 'wee flare-up' because, he says, people in Scotland have 'everyday access' to Muslims. He goes on: 'they've got friends, everyone's got someone, that contact that they have, [and they go] you know what, nah, it's just a one off or isolated'.

We might assume particular organisations or campaigning groups to be more susceptible to an integrationist framing of racism depending on how closely aligned groups are to the state or to the way in which racism is conceived by the 'public political culture' (Lentin 2004: 179). Yet such a framework for explaining racism was drawn on by a wide variety of individuals I spoke to who were involved in a range of organisations and activist groups with varying political traditions and commitments. So, while the likes of Maria and Kadhim, who work for two different faith-led organisations, pointed to the apparent issue of 'segregated' communities, so too did activists involved in more explicitly anti-racist work. Mo, for instance, who has been involved in challenging the far-right in Glasgow, reflected on why the far-right has, historically, had less of a base in Scotland than in England. After suggesting that far-right groups such as Britain First would struggle to recruit members and target racially minoritised communities in Glasgow, he explains:

They wouldn't be able to do that here because where would they go? Where would you go? You know? ... who do you target, 'cause our communities are so diverse, it's mixed, you know? ... you can't really go and target anybody. I mean I can't think of a single place in the whole of Scotland where they could. Back in the day they used to say Pollokshields [an ethnically diverse area in the Southside of Glasgow]. Well, when you go to Pollokshields it's very mixed, it's not like that ... they can't really target anywhere, so I think that's the reason. So they cannot form a base, and they cannot target anything for that reason. So I think that's one factor.

It should be noted that widespread assumptions about the extent and significance of ethnic segregation – for instance in the geographical ‘elsewheres’ that individuals refer to, either implicitly or explicitly, in the account laid out above – more often than not fail to reflect the reality on the ground where, overall, ethnic segregation across the UK has in fact decreased (Finney and Simpson 2009). Furthermore, the enduring appeal of an integrationist narrative as demonstrated in these accounts did not always chime with the actual experiences of those same individuals, or others in the city, whose experiences of racism and Islamophobia could not in any way be straightforwardly mapped onto apparent levels of ethnic segregation. As Harries explains in relation to her research in Manchester: ‘the young people gravitate towards these kinds of narratives, even when their lived experiences offer far more complex and nuanced understandings of living with difference’ (Harries 2017: 52). And so, in light of the above, we are forced to ask a different question: what do these discourses indicate about (and ‘do’ to) our shared frameworks for making sense of Islamophobia and other forms of racism? And, as a consequence, how do they shape our collective anti-racist responses?

In the following two sections, however, I focus on how a stubborn attachment to place in different modes of anti-racist discourse can elide the multi-scalar nature of racism, and the profound role of the state in reproducing forms of structural Islamophobia.

The Manchester Arena attack: (Anti-)racism, temporality and scale

I want to return us now to the events at the opening of the chapter, namely the Manchester Arena attack and the ways in which the city’s anti-racist credentials were refracted through discussions of the attack and its aftermath. I have so far tried to make sense of why it is that appeals to place are so readily available to those discussing anti-racism in Manchester and Glasgow, and how hegemonic discourses around ‘integration’ and ‘segregation’ further contribute to these appeals. But what can they tell us about popular understandings of racism and anti-racism more widely? And, more specifically, what gets lost or rendered invisible when we tether our understandings of racism and anti-racism to notions of place?

It is not my intention here to dispute the feeling, echoed amongst many I spoke to, that the response to the attack by civic leaders and much of the general public in Manchester was a welcome one. And it is difficult not to be moved by testimonies from those living in Manchester at the time who, alongside the shared grief, narrated very real – and in some ways unanticipated – experiences of solidarity and care. Sara, a Muslim woman, summed

this up when she told me how the unity on display following the attack made her feel: ‘for the first time in my life I felt like, actually I belong here, this is my city now’. Similarly, Asma, another Muslim woman, described the unexpectedly ‘beautiful’ response from others in the city:

I love Manchester and you know I was born there and I know the community so well. But obviously you just never know what the reaction is – normally it’s a very negative reaction in response. So I think it kind of just typified what Manchester is ... ‘cause I remember – what’s it called, god – is it Albert Square? You know where they had the whole [vigil] thing, and there was thousands of us there, and I remember a random lady just came up to me and just hugged me. And for me I was like, this is the Manchester I know and this is exactly what, you know the kind of response, and it was just kind of beautiful. And so I think, if you were to speak to the majority of people, probably 99 per cent of people would say the reaction was positive.

Similar scenes of togetherness were recounted by Jeffrey, a Jewish man involved in interfaith work in Manchester. Jeffrey became visibly emotional as he recounted how a group of Muslim clerics and other faith leaders, unsure of what the public reaction would be, were met with ‘spontaneous applause and cheering’ from the crowd as they arrived at a city centre vigil.

We can celebrate these snapshots of mutual care and support whilst also remaining attentive to the ways in which certain accounts of conviviality – both academic and, in this case, popular – can be ‘severed from a broader critique of the dehumanising structures of racism’ (de Noronha 2022: 160). In this way, they take us away from Gilroy’s original conception of conviviality as denoting the ‘messy’ and ‘contingent’ ways in which people live with difference within ‘societies structured by racial division and hierarchy’ – hence the radical potential, rather than guarantee, of convivial relations (Gilroy 2004; de Noronha 2022). In the same spirit, we can critically reflect on what accounts such as those above actually *reveal* about popular conceptions of racism, anti-racism and place. One significant characteristic is their temporality. The responses that emerged in discussions – vigils, mass gatherings, performances, statements of condemnation, fundraising campaigns – are temporally bound events, arising in response to actual, anticipated or potential racist outbursts or eruptions. Reflecting this, John commented that he was surprised that the city did not ‘implode into racial violence’ following the attack. On the other hand, Madiha felt that ‘people turned out for the vigil and then that was it’. Both of these examples reveal the ways in which racism is primarily imagined as ‘event’ (Lentin 2016) rather than context. That is to say, racism here represents a rupturing of the ordinary conviviality of the city. It is an aberration that demands a specific event-like response, either as a preventative or corrective measure. However, as Goldberg (2015: 163) makes clear, ‘conceived as a set of dispositions and

commitments, anti-racism is a process ongoing in its undertaking. It is not reducible to a singular event.’

Taking Goldberg’s assertion seriously, I want to emphasise how alternative accounts from participants point to the rippling effects of Islamophobia, and its endemic nature, that become lost when we think about racism and anti-racism in terms of discrete ‘events’. While all of the conversations that I draw on here took place at least a year after the Arena attack, a number of those I spoke to mentioned an ongoing campaign of harassment directed at a mosque in south Manchester that the attacker had attended. The mosque had been continuously targeted by the English Defence League (EDL), a far-right organisation, for its supposed association with ‘Islamic extremism’, and some of those I spoke to in Manchester were in the midst of organising a counter-demonstration in anticipation of yet another far-right protest outside the mosque. Madiha, an anti-racist activist involved with organising the counter-demonstration, described how this was made more complicated because, in addition to the baseless accusations made by the far right and stoked by the press in the wake of the attack, the mosque was still being ‘investigated’ by authorities almost eighteen months later:

Actually in Manchester, because of the level of fear in the community, the mosque won’t do anything political. So even now we have called a demonstration outside the Mosque ... because the English Defence League have said they’re having a demonstration at the mosque, and the mosque – we are working with the mosque to have the demonstration – when we put up a statement saying ‘the mosque is supporting this mobilisation against the EDL’, they had to ring me up and say no you have to take our names off there, because in reality, we’re a charity and we’re being investigated by the police and the charities commission all the time. And actually there’s a lot of mosques in Manchester that don’t talk about them being investigated, and therefore they shut down on speaking to us.

Madiha’s account points, first, to the limitations of viewing Islamophobia in terms of a singular, bounded ‘event’, since the Islamophobia of the far right and the Islamophobia of the state (both, it must be noted, justified via an appeal to the dubious concept of ‘Islamic extremism’) have endured well beyond the immediate aftermath of the attack; and, second, to the level or scale at which Islamophobia, and racism more broadly, are seen to operate. Much of the discussion around the reaction to the Manchester Arena attack focused on individual or group interactions, whether that was the perceived (and real) threat of violence on the streets, or the reactions of benevolent strangers, as in descriptions of Muslims being hugged or applauded by (non-Muslim) members of the public. Where the policing of Muslim communities was discussed, it was rarely in relation to the arena attack, yet as Madiha’s

description suggests, these various scales of Islamophobia are deeply interconnected. As I discuss further in [Chapter 2](#), we cannot comprehend everyday forms of Islamophobia, or the far right's mobilisation around the idea of 'Islamic extremism', separately from mechanisms of securitisation that coalesce around the construction of the 'Muslim extremist'. Even if we address the interactional level on its own terms, particular accounts from those I spoke to should at the very least guard against complacency. Indeed, a number of participants commented on the spike in Islamophobic street-based violence following the attack. Nevertheless, these sorts of accounts were able to sit alongside the larger story of the city's tolerance and unity precisely because they were viewed as aberrations, divorced from a wider political context in which Islamophobia is as much reproduced and sustained by liberal political discourse and policy as it is expressed in illiberal violence.

As in Madiha's account above, there are alternative, less-heard stories of the city that complicate the one-dimensional picture of Manchester as liberal utopia if we attend to them properly. Whilst some of my interlocutors did suggest that their identification with the city was strengthened through the response to the attack (recall, for instance, Sara's comment: 'this is my city now'), others were significantly more ambivalent. Sultan, an activist who has been involved with various anti-racist campaigns in Manchester, offered one such account. Beginning with a recognition of the spike in violence directed at Muslims in the wake of the attack, Sultan went on to offer a rare insight into the state's attack on Muslim communities in Manchester:

At the same time there was I think either like a 400 per cent spike in attacks against the Muslim community, so it was clearly happening. And then ... then you kind of saw these ... more and more interest in, in Manchester, in Moss Side, you know what are the lives like of these people, that we didn't give a shit about before, but we now all of a sudden give a shit about now, because this guy [the perpetrator of the Manchester Arena attack] – you know – went to the barber's here and stuff like that. And I've always been really interested, you know I knew a lot of these lads on Claremont Road, on Princess Road and stuff like that, and ... I think what was really interesting is – I mean I always knew the disparity between like media narratives and reality, but you know we can experience that disparity. I think maybe it challenged the cosmopolitanism of Manchester, you know the ... Manchester prides itself on being a radical city ... but I think it really tested like the ... the mettle of Manchester as a kind of cosmopolitan place.

The 'interest' that Sultan almost euphemistically refers to here suggests, first, an alternative focal point for considering civic responses to the attack. For these responses were not only taking shape in the form of mass vigils in

city centre squares, but – more quietly, often under the cover of darkness – in the long overpoliced migrant communities of south Manchester. This was an experience shared by Zaynab, a community activist whose description of the city's response to the attack was, like Sultan's, more ambivalent than most. On the one hand, she suggested that public events organised in the wake of the attack were an important part of the city 'healing'. However, over the course of our short conversation, she also pointed to the realities of securitisation, overpolicing, estrangement and guilt by association, explaining how, on account of the Libyan heritage of the perpetrator of the attack, Libyan families in the city had been the targets of police raids and Libyan community groups had lost access to premises because of the stigmatisation of their community. Furthermore, I heard how Muslim businesses and organisations that the attacker had frequented or been in contact with had come under investigation, as the earlier example of the mosque shows. In a skewering of this logic, Zaynab asked why the authorities were not investigating Asda, since the attacker had shopped there. Finally, I was told that a sense of shame and a fear of further victimisation prevented these sorts of stories from being shared more widely.

Of course, the ongoing state-sanctioned targeting of Muslim communities in Manchester is not solely a consequence of the Arena attack, and this was underscored in discussions about the implementation of the Prevent agenda in the city more broadly (see the introduction for some more background on Prevent as a policy). From universities and schools, to social media and political events, the issue of Prevent frequently reared its head in research conversations in both cities, and a number of such discussions are explored in further detail in subsequent chapters. Relevant here, however, is the commission set up by mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham following the arena attack: the Greater Manchester Preventing Hateful Extremism and Promoting Social Cohesion Commission. The aims of the commission's final report, entitled *A Shared Future* (GMCA 2018: 5), included an evaluation of use of Prevent in Greater Manchester, as well as how a 'distinctive community-led Greater Manchester approach to challenging hateful extremism could be developed'. The commission's report was published only a couple of months before I began speaking to people in Manchester as part of this research, but I suspect its publication was overshadowed by the ongoing aftershocks of the attack, which clearly dominated popular discussions. In addition to the many critiques of the overarching Prevent duty that were put forward by the activists and community workers I spoke to, Abdul – who has been involved in work within the Muslim community in Manchester challenging Prevent – shared his thoughts on the commission's approach:

Scarlet: Going back to Manchester as a specific city, do you think that sort of scrutiny about the policy dimension really, has that been harder [or] easier than other places?

Abdul: It's been hard everywhere. It's hard everywhere. It's the hardest thing to do, because the people who do it are gonna be portrayed as a threat, they're gonna be isolated by the council. I mean the Andy Burnham review, for example, on Prevent. You know, look at the people he had on there. There's nobody with a critical mind. It's all people you can trust and people who're gonna agree with the agenda and ... and yet on the ground, when we talk about Prevent, people are more interested in listening to us than they would that, so we have the community behind us, and the community recognise it, but the council just ... [tails off]

Resonating with Abdul's critique of the commission, the recommendations of the report focused on managing perceptions of Prevent through improved communication, rather than addressing the structural discrimination that many argue is an inherent part of the policy (see Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2023). Thus, while some participants praised the response of Andy Burnham and other council leaders following the Manchester Arena attack – and indeed the 'strong leadership' of the council became the dominant narrative in its wake – this clearly sits in tension not only with criticisms of the council's approach to counter-terrorism, but with the experiences of Muslim individuals and communities, particularly those in racialised and overpoliced areas of the city.

What becomes obvious when we shift our focus and attend to these alternative experiences of the city is that an authentic, organic and inclusive civic identity – the kind that facilitates the spontaneous conviviality that people found real comfort in – will continue to be undermined as long as local authorities continue to sanction and enforce violent counter-terrorism measures. Furthermore, they draw our attention to the limits of appealing to what Sultan described as a 'Mancunian civic provincialism', or what we might think of as a kind of 'neighbourhood nationalism', to take from sociologist Les Back (1996: 49), as part of our anti-racist politics. The conjuring of a particular Mancunian identity in response to actual or potential racism may promise a less obviously racialised terrain than that of the nation, but it provides only a partial view of how racism operates, not just within the city but as a function of the nation state, of which the city is a part. Thus, the dominant narrative around the response to the Manchester Arena attack, echoed by a number of those I spoke to, (inadvertently) obscures the enduring quality of Islamophobia, as well as its multi-scalar character. We

cannot let sentimentality cloud our analysis; as committed anti-racists we must reckon with the ongoing racist and Islamophobic violence perpetrated in Manchester, sometimes by fellow Mancunians, and often sanctioned by our elected representatives.

‘Dear racists’: Bystander anti-racism and the Scottish state

Sometime in 2018 during the course of my research in Glasgow I began to notice a series of billboards and posters dotted around the city. What was striking about them was the way in which they were designed to resemble letters, with the first line addressing the recipient in large, emboldened type. These giant letters were addressed to various groups of ‘haters’ (Calderwood 2018): ‘Dear bigots’, ‘Dear homophobes’, ‘Dear transphobes’ and – the one that for obvious reasons caught my eye – ‘Dear racists’ (see Figure 1.1). All carried messages of condemnation, a warning to the recipients that the offence in question would be reported to authorities, and all were signed off with a pithy final line: ‘Yours, Scotland’. It soon emerged that these letters were part of a national campaign launched by the Scottish government and Police Scotland aimed at tackling various forms of ‘hate crime’. Scottish government-led campaigns have previously caught the attention of sociologists interested in the politics of race. Minna Liinpää (2018), for example, focuses on the Scottish National Party’s (SNP) ‘Homecoming’ campaign, which sought to encourage the ‘return’ of ‘ancestral Scots’ through a series of cultural and sporting events. Such events orbited around particular ideas of Scottish heritage, relying heavily on a ‘Highland culture’ continued in diaspora. Furthermore, they specifically targeted those living in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, while the nation’s colonial relationships with India and the Caribbean were conspicuously absent. Thus, Liinpää reveals how the campaign’s foregrounding of a particular (implicitly white) vision of Scottish ancestry, heritage and culture was in tension with the SNP’s public discourse of ethnic inclusivity and civic nationalism. Similarly, Jan Penrose and David Howard (2008) consider the Scottish government’s earlier ‘One Scotland, Many Cultures’ campaign, highlighting the ambiguities in the way that the campaign framed Scottish national identity in relation to race and culture. However, less has been written about what these sorts of campaigns indicate about the framing of *racism* as an issue by the Scottish government, and if and how this framing plays out on the ground amongst individuals and groups working on issues of race in a Scottish context.

One way of thinking about the ‘Dear racists’ campaign is via Alana Lentin’s (2017) concept of bystander anti-racism (see also Lentin and


Dear
racists,


do you threaten people because
of where they're from or the colour
of their skin? Do you hurl language
so vile it makes people scared to
leave their homes?

Well, your hate has no home here.
We're making a stand and if we see
or hear anything we're calling you
out and calling the police.

Yours, Scotland

Hate crime. Report it to stop it.

 POLICE
SCOTLAND
POLEAS ALBA

 Safer
Scotland
Scottish
Government

onescotland.org

Figure 1.1 A design from the 2018 Scottish government campaign to tackle hate crime. Crown Copyright.

Humphry 2017). Lentin develops her argument on bystander anti-racism in relation to Australian racism studies to describe the prevalence of an ‘ahistorical, individualising and pathologising view of racism’ (Lentin 2017: 132), one that provides a veneer of anti-racism but fails to explain the political conditions that lead to the public expressions of racism with which the field – and wider public debate – is so preoccupied. In the ‘Dear racists’ campaign, we see the nation itself constructed as a sort of anti-racist bystander, an example of the individualisation of racism writ large. Somewhat ironically, this version of Scotland as an anti-racist bystander is reproduced and presented by Police Scotland and the Scottish government, whose names and logos appear clearly at the bottom of the poster. The threat contained in the letter and wielded by its imagined national signatory to ‘call the police’ on the imagined racist recipients thus comes across as incongruous at the very least.

Looking back on this aspect of the ‘Dear racists’ campaign from the standpoint of our present moment, in the wake of the huge anti-racist mobilisations of 2020 and the ongoing debates on racist police violence, only underscores the absurdity of the elisions at play in the messaging of the campaign. It is worth remembering, too, that before the groundswell in mobilisation and public debate, we were witnessing a wave of attention around the issue of white people calling the police on their Black neighbours and peers for a range of innocuous and mundane behaviours (see for instance Walters 2020). While many of these examples come from the United States, the same patterns of racialised policing continue to occur across Britain. Indeed, Police Scotland were ‘called’ to the scene in 2015 shortly before Sheku Bayoh was restrained and killed by several police officers on a street in Kirkcaldy (Akhtar 2022).

Set against this wider context of racialised police violence, the ‘Dear racists’ campaign represents a striking occlusion of the role of particular state institutions in perpetuating racism (in this case, the police), and a repositioning of them as part of an imagined anti-racist collective, here represented by the nation. This is, of course, not a new phenomenon, but the popularisation of the idea of ‘hate crime’ has opened up new avenues for parts of the (nation) state to position themselves as anti-racist whilst sustaining more insidious, structural forms of racism (see Chapter 3 for further discussion of this). ‘Dear racists’ thus offers a particularly stark example of how a fixation on place obscures the structural dynamics of racism and Islamophobia, particularly when the place in question is imbued with a pre-given anti-racist disposition. What conditions make possible a public campaign to tackle racism that completely exorcises the colonial history of the nation state, as well as the racist history and present of the police as a state institution, rendering ‘bystander anti-racism’

the most desirable approach? As we know, the postracial shapes not just racisms but anti-racist responses in profound ways, with ‘responsibility for racist expression ... reduced to an individualized account, to a bad apple, a rogue element’ (Goldberg 2015: 65; Bonilla-Silva 2017). Crucially, Goldberg (2015) also argues that policing and militarisation are central to the ways in which racism operates in a contemporary postracial context, with racism projected onto individual ‘offenders’ whilst the policing and securitisation of racially minoritised populations intensifies.

Research conversations about policing, racism and Islamophobia in the Scottish context certainly complicated the messaging of the ‘Dear racists’ campaign. In [Chapter 3](#) I explore in some detail the experiences of Muslim anti-racist activists in both cities who had encountered first-hand the machinations of British ‘counter-terrorism’. The specific context for these encounters in Scotland, however, was laid out by Keith, who is involved with an organisation focusing on policing in Scotland. Keith begins by describing his sense of the insidious yet increasing presence of the police in particular spaces in Scotland: ‘In the Muslim community at large, a police presence has become totally normalised. Nobody thinks twice about, you know, if there’s a Muslim event then there will be a police presence or a police stall. People tend to see it as a bridgebuilding exercise.’ He goes on to suggest that there is a clear strategy by Police Scotland to maintain such a presence in Muslim-led spaces, characterised by what he describes as ‘an extreme determination by the police to build relationships with Muslim organisations’, including mosques. Such community-oriented tactics mirror the strategy of co-optation by police forces in England as part of the UK’s counter-terrorism strategy (Rashid 2016; Kundnani 2014; Abbas 2021) and, in this sense, are somewhat unremarkable. More interesting, however, is the way in which Police Scotland have been able to carve out a much more benign identity, distinct from their English counterparts. This was reflected in an account by Raj, who works for an anti-racist organisation in Glasgow, and who recounted a front-page news story from 2017 that focused on Police Scotland being accused of institutional racism (see Hutcheon 2017). It was not the claims of institutional racism that were shocking, Raj explained, but the fact that they were deemed worthy of an ‘exclusive’ front-page spread by a major Scottish news outlet. For Raj, this was an indication that various Scottish institutions had failed to reckon with the reality of institutional racism in the police force, to the extent that the accusation was seen to be somehow revelatory. Raj described his feeling that the same would not happen ‘down south’, since ‘the Met accepted it [the claims of institutional racism], begrudgingly, really begrudgingly, but then put in place things to move them forward’. In this respect, Raj saw the reaction to these claims in the Scottish press and by Police Scotland as an indication of ‘how race

is viewed in Scotland' and as part of what Raj described as a more general 'backwardness' in relation to tackling racism in the country.

Keith similarly cautioned against the notion that the way the police operate in Scotland is in any way 'better' than in England, particularly in relation to the policing of Muslim communities, explaining the following:

I suspect Prevent in Scotland has in fact been more effective in pressuring the Muslim community and shaping the views of [the] Muslim community and keeping them out of participation in controversial areas of politics than it has in England.

It's been perhaps a more 'softly, softly' approach, so if you see the primary problem as being how 'in your face' and abusive Prevent is, rather than how much it's impacted on Muslim participation in political life, then you can say, if you want, that Prevent in Scotland is better. To me, it seems worse and more dangerous, and I think it's very problematic when people highlight Prevent in Scotland as a success story. It probably is from the government's point of view. It isn't from ours and it shouldn't be from the Muslim community's.

The implication, then, is that the police in Scotland are better positioned to absolve themselves of associations with institutional racism than the police in England, because of the histories – and more specifically the 'crises' (or lack thereof) – of racialised policing in each country. Seen against this backdrop, the absurd reference to the police and policing in the 'Dear racists' campaign makes more sense: Police Scotland have faced little in the way of widespread public scrutiny or resistance in the way that other British policing institutions have. More than this, the alignment of Police Scotland with a (supposed) anti-racism campaign (and the structures of the 'tackling hate crime' agenda ensure that this alignment is material as well as symbolic) further insulates them from critique at the same time as it strengthens their ties with 'suspect' communities. The inclusion of Police Scotland as part of a conception of Scotland as an anti-racist bystander, watching over the nation's vulnerable, only strengthens these insidious relationships.

We can see, therefore, how broader narratives of place, difference and distinction play out in discussions of anti-racism in a way that obscures the role of the state and its institutions in the reproduction of racism and Islamophobia in Scotland. This resonates with the presentation of Manchester as an 'anti-racist city', which, I have argued, often takes place at the expense of a recognition of the state-sanctioned racist violence that takes place there. And yet, such discussions were complex and often contradictory. Alongside the cautionary tone taken by Raj and Keith, there were others I spoke to who felt that Scottish electoral politics represented a genuine break from the increasingly nativist and authoritarian politics of Westminster. Chris, who has been involved in anti-fascist work in both Glasgow and Manchester described the

political context in England as ‘the polar opposite’ of the SNP’s ‘embracing [of] multiculturalism and diversity’. While Clive – having also lived and worked in both cities – put it the following way:

I think Scotland’s a lot less diverse so definitely there’s a lot more ... [sighs] it’s hard, kind of on the ground there’s a lot [of racism] but it doesn’t really reflect in voting patterns and stuff like that necessarily. People in Scotland, political parties, seem to be more liberal, and diversity is a good thing in Scotland in the political forum whereas in England I think that’s less so.

Clive’s exasperation in trying to describe his sense of racism in Scotland is telling, as it points to some of the tensions between people’s actual experiences (‘on the ground’) and an ‘official’ political narrative of (non-)racism in Scotland. This tension was apparent throughout many conversations with those living and working in Glasgow, just as it was in Manchester, not least in discussions with Muslim activists and community workers. Many of those I spoke to had been on the receiving end of the sort of racism – the ‘threats’ and the ‘vile language’ – that the ‘Dear racists’ campaign referred to, but also the forms of structural Islamophobia rendered invisible with the narrow focus on ‘hate crime’ and the uncritical inclusion of the police. At times, these experiences were articulated in conversations alongside a framing of Scotland and Scottishness as exceptionally inclusive, with little or no comment on the apparent contradictions raised in such accounts. However, others used these personal experiences to reflect on and ultimately disrupt the construction of Scotland as a straightforwardly inclusive nation. Fatima, who had been involved in an Islamic student society as well as student politics in Glasgow and beyond, talked at length about navigating the frustrations of Scottish exceptionalism as a young Muslim woman:

In Scotland in particular I think this is an issue where we’re always like, you know, ‘it’s not as bad in Scotland’... and we say that about a lot of things whether that’s like Islamophobia or whether it’s about Prevent and we’re always like ‘no, no, no, it’s like really bad down south’. And to an extent, yeah, you know the kind of stories we hear from other [organisations], but we’re very much undermining the problem that there is in Scotland, and there is very much a big problem here in Scotland, whether it’s on an institutional level or a grassroots level, and like even when you get involved in anti-racism organisations or student left-wing organisations, or just left-wing organisations in general, there is very much Islamophobic rhetoric going round, and when you do kind of try to bring it up it’s like ‘oh, you know, well in Scotland we’re really inclusive’ ... and it’s just like, you know, that’s not really my experience.

The discourse of Scotland diverging from England, particularly in its approach to policing and counter-terrorism, is often disputed by individuals’ actual experiences. Similarly to the contradictory accounts of those in

Manchester, these alternative empirical realities push us to consider how the construction of Scotland as uniquely inclusive might actually hinder efforts to address the very real Islamophobia that people experience both locally and nationally.

To be clear, it is not that local and national particularities do not matter when it comes to anti-racist work. There may well be openings and opportunities afforded to anti-racist activists mobilising in Scotland on account of the political terrain that do not exist in the same way for those organising in England. As long ago as 1986, Robert Miles and Anne Dunlop argued that the long preoccupation with Scottish nationalism and religious sectarianism in Scottish electoral politics had pushed the issue of ‘colour-coded’ racism off the political agenda. This is not to say that racisms, of varying articulations, were absent from Scottish life during this period. Anti-Irish racism was a major structuring factor in Scottish society, and even a cursory glance at sectarian politics in Glasgow today suggests that anti-Irish racism is an enduring feature of life in the city (Virdee 2014; McBride 2018). Nevertheless, the ‘racialization of the political process’ (Miles and Dunlop 1986: 26) in Scotland has been different from that in England. The SNP’s dominance in recent decades, and the increasingly intractable question of Scottish independence, suggest that this claim holds true. We might then consider how this difference in the racialisation of the political process – along with devolution – creates space for (at least some) divergence on policy in Scotland, for instance in the realm of refugee services (Mulvey 2018) or race equality frameworks (Meer 2018b).

However, this book is less concerned with the policy field (and whether or not these narratives accurately reflect race equality in Scotland) and more interested in the limits and possibilities for a popular anti-racist politics. I have argued that the desire to project racism elsewhere in fact reveals more about the ubiquity of a particular form of anti-racism than it does about any distinct form of anti-racist culture in Scotland. We might consider, then, how modalities of anti-racism in Scotland might respond to the particular conditions (openings and opportunities, as well as limits) of Scottish politics, without falling into an uncritical attachment to place. In the next section, I consider how a global resurgence of nationalism in recent years, including in Britain and its constituent home nations, further burdens such questions.

Britishness, Englishness, Scottishness and the allure of left nationalism

As crises proliferate, not only has the pull of nationalism grown stronger, but a nationalist politics has come to be rearticulated and re-embraced across a range of political positions (Valluvan 2019; James and Valluvan

2020). As I outlined in the introduction, the imbrication of nationalism with forms of cultural racism, including the centrality of ‘the Muslim’ to liberal expressions of nationalism in recent decades, has been well documented. But much less has been said of the relationship between anti-racist work and this nationalist resurgence. In this final section of the chapter, I consider how notions of Britishness, Englishness and Scottishness enter into understandings of Islamophobia, racism and anti-racism amongst those I spoke to, and critically reflect on how this shapes – and might shape – the sort of anti-racist projects we choose to pursue.

Where Britishness came up in research conversations, it was most often met with a general sense of cynicism. In particular, the UK government’s emphasis on ‘British values’ and the implementation of ‘fundamental British values’ (FBV) in creating policy were a source of ire amongst many I spoke to. As discussed in the introduction, FBV have been defined by the British government as ‘democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs’ (Department for Education 2014 quoted in Habib (2018): 6). The rhetoric of ‘British values’, as Sadia Habib (2018) demonstrates, has formed a crucial part of the government’s Prevent agenda, and has mainly applied to educational settings, where the delivery of ‘British values’ has been incorporated into the national curriculum across England. Muslim participants in Manchester were the most vocal in this regard, often recognising the deeply racialised nature of such a project. As Leila, a local councillor in Greater Manchester, explained:

When we talk about British values, for me, that really gets to me. ‘Cause they are universal values, they are human values, they are values that belong to everybody. They’re not just British values, and I think, automatically, that always brings an element of racism to me, that ... why is it that British values are more important than anyone else’s values?

That Leila infers racism as part of the discussion around British values speaks to the broader racialisation of Britishness. In her own navigations of British identity as a Muslim woman, but also via a political education that incorporated Kashmir and Palestine, Leila was well placed to articulate the indelible relationship between racism and constructions of Britishness. In Scotland, where education and policing (in other words, the nexus of policies such as Prevent) are devolved matters, the FBV agenda has not been implemented in the same way (see Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2023). Nevertheless, a scepticism of ‘Britishness’ percolated through a number of discussions in Glasgow. Alongside Muslim participants who, like Leila, were quick to recognise the racialised limits of any category of ‘Britishness’, a critique also emerged from non-Muslim participants whose political

education was strongly rooted in, or else influenced by, Irish republicanism. In addition, the role of Celtic Football Club – one of Glasgow’s two major teams, and a club with a strong Irish Catholic identity – was often a topic of discussion, alongside the anti-imperialist politics associated with parts of its support.

What conversations across both cities suggest, then, is that various political repertoires contribute to a common mistrust of the category of ‘Britishness’ as a basis for any form of progressive politics. However, this is complicated when we consider how English and Scottish nationalisms are related to views on, and approaches to, forms of British nationalism. An exchange with Chris was particularly revealing in this regard. Chris, who helps to organise anti-fascist and anti-racist community events in Greater Manchester, explained how and why an anti-fascist football tournament that he had been involved with had been intentionally arranged to coincide with, and to reflect on, St George’s Day – in other words, it was an attempt to ‘reclaim the day’ for anti-racist ends. Earlier in the conversation Chris had recounted how an immersion in the Irish republican struggle had provided him with an early political education, and so I was interested in how he reconciled this with (what seemed to me) a valorisation of English identity. Chris explained the following:

The motivation behind [the event] was because the St George’s flag has been bastardised as, you know – I mean the butcher’s apron [Union Jack flag] is a bastard of a flag, but the St George’s flag, you know there’s no reason for it to have right-wing links, and it has. And for us it was about learning about the man St George and cascading that information to local young people and then celebrating what he was, and he was a majorly multicultural and diverse character, so it was an ideal opportunity to use that date when other organisations use that date for right-wing ... work ... So we thought it was a pretty cool idea to sort of reclaim the day.

Chris then goes on to describe how he also differentiates Scottish nationalism from British nationalism, and relates this to his approach to the St George’s flag:

I’m for [Scottish] independence because I think it’s an easy way for us to get social change in Scotland. Certainly not any nationalistic tendencies, and then with the St George’s flag, you know people should be proud of their culture and should be able to celebrate culture and heritage without shoving it in the face of others and making it nationalistic, you know there’s lots of things that English people can celebrate without having it under a UK banner. And so, you know, celebrating individualism and your culture and heritage shouldn’t be specific to the far right, and it seems to be quite often. And then I s’pose on the Union Jack thing, oh yeah fucking hell Britain’s history under that flag is disgusting.

In this account, Chris distinguishes between Britishness, Englishness and Scottishness in strikingly strong terms via his commentary on flags. The Union Jack is described as the ‘butcher’s apron’, representing a ‘disgusting’ history of British colonialism, whereas the St George’s flag is presented as a deracialised symbol of English ‘culture and heritage’ that has simply been appropriated by the far right. Scottish nationalism is presented as purely instrumental – a force for social change – and again, stripped of any racialised connotations. Alex Niven (2019: 25) complicates these distinctions in his discussion of Englishness as little more than a feeling of a ‘condition of loss’, in large part due to the particular historical relationship between England, its populace and the British Empire. Niven’s analysis serves as a reminder, then, of the challenges, if not impossibility, of attempting to disentangle Englishness from Britishness – an argument that applies in much the same way to attempts to sever an imagined ‘Scottishness’ from Scotland’s imperial past and present, as discussed earlier in the chapter.

This being said, we might want to consider where the insistence on reclaiming a sense of Englishness in particular comes from on the left. Valluvan (2019), drawing on Virdee’s (2014) arguments vis-à-vis the racialisation of the English working class, emphasises how exclusionary forms of nationalism ‘become contoured by so many different ideological vocabularies and sensemaking schemas’ (Valluvan 2019: 39), with the ‘left behind’, so-called ‘white working class’ playing an integral role in the latest iteration of nationalism embraced by the organised left.

There were uncritical allusions to this repertoire in several conversations with anti-racist activists I spoke to, especially in discussions of those ‘segregated’ smaller towns in Greater Manchester and Lancashire that were addressed earlier in this chapter. In [Chapter 2](#) I explore this repertoire further in relation to talk of ‘white working-class’ communities having ‘legitimate concerns’, in other words economic and social grievances that become racialised. However, here I want to suggest that attempts to reclaim Englishness as part of anti-racist work, and to distinguish so sharply between a deracialised Englishness on the one hand and a problematic Britishness on the other, are best understood as part of this history of ‘socialist nationalism’ (Virdee 2014) and a more current embrace of nationalism on the left (Valluvan 2019; Bhattacharyya et al. 2021). Most importantly, this body of work emphasises the ethical and political limits of a left-wing project that actively chooses to embrace the terrain of the nation.

England, rather than Scotland, has tended to be the focus of these critical discussions of left nationalism, although Valluvan (2019: 59–60) does make note of a scepticism about the potential for a post-independent Scotland to completely avoid a ‘majoritarian turn’. Mobilisations of Scottishness in articulations of anti-racism may not draw on the trope of the ‘white

working class’ in quite the same way as those of Englishness, but they still risk reproducing essentialised notions of national belonging, diverting the focus of anti-racist work away from common experiences of structural racism across cities and national borders. Furthermore, the ‘white left’ in Scotland may well provide fertile ground for a particularly Scottish articulation of left nationalism, as accounts from Muslim activists in [Chapter 3](#) suggest. Similarly, while it might be easier to construct a narrative of exceptional Scottish inclusivity, any serious anti-racist project in Scotland must reckon with the nation’s historical entanglements with British imperialism, and – just as importantly – with how these histories shape contemporary forms of racism and anti-racism in Scotland today.

The appeals to Scottishness or Englishness as an integral part of anti-racist work raise some challenging questions, not least in the current political context. Debates around the utility of left nationalism are not ‘new’ but have certainly been re-energised in recent years, taking on particular significance in relation to Brexit, the continuing dominance of the SNP in Scotland, and the rise and subsequent defeat of the British Labour left between 2017 and 2019 under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership. The flagrant nativism of recent Conservative governments and the fractured left’s relationship to nationalism were further animated by the COVID-19 pandemic and attendant authoritarian impulses – border closures, public health and policing all take on new meanings and are reshaped against the backdrop of such an unprecedented crisis ([James and Valluvan 2020](#); [Harris et al. 2021](#)). Indeed, the proliferating and ongoing crises of our time are set to render the ‘collectivist conceits’ of nationalism all the more appealing to those on the left ([James and Valluvan 2020](#): 1239), just as nationalist registers such as that of ‘progressive patriotism’ are being reworked and pitched as a pragmatic necessity for the left ([Tinsley 2022](#)).

And yet, the deterritorialisation of global neoliberalism has been accompanied by an intensification of exclusion through national borders and labour exploitation in the economies of the Global North ([Bhattacharyya 2018](#); [Walia 2021](#); [Bradley and de Noronha 2022a, b](#)), rendering certain populations exceedingly vulnerable. Crucially, these processes of late capitalism rely on ideas of national belonging and unbelonging. With this in mind, the challenge for the anti-racist left will be to keep insisting on the deadliness of nationalism, in spite of its seductions and intentional remarketing.

As explored earlier in the chapter, there may well be some instances in which a place-based identity offers something of a counter-hegemonic position, rubbing up against a larger, richer, more powerful ‘other’. In the examples we looked at, this was often London or the wider British state. However, we must make a distinction between the everyday, often unremarkable existence of civic identities in the context of urban multiculturalism – and, yes,

their counter-hegemonic, even anti-racist potential – and the active mobilisation of nationalism for the purposes of a supposedly left project. Without careful reflection there is a risk that such seemingly benign civic identities end up being ‘hooked’ onto wider articulations of nationalism that sustain very real (and violent) forms of inequality that, ironically, can result in the erosion of the inclusive qualities of civic identities for those positioned as external ‘others’ to the nation. I leave the final word on this to Sultan, who offered the following poignant reflection on a declining sense of belonging in Manchester:

More and more Muslims who are like hard-core Mancunians to the bone – like [my friend], he grew up in Moss Side, proper like Manc lad, and like loads of my mates who are Muslim who I play football with who are born and bred in Whalley Range, in Moss Side, in Hulme, in Levenshulme. They don’t consider themselves as anything other than Mancunians. But I think that maybe they’re beginning to question that a bit more, and about their place in the city. And they may not be as drastic as thinking ‘I wanna leave’, but that sense of distance in their own home is I feel like a new-ish phenomenon.

An urgent question remains: what alternative frames of reference are available to those on the left, outside those promised by the nation state? While this problem extends well beyond the scope of a single book on anti-racism, in the following chapters I continue to draw on the insights of activists to consider how we might begin to respond.

Conclusion

What can a focus on place tell us about understandings of racism and anti-racism? This chapter has argued that focusing on the ways in which participants articulate a sense of place in discussions of racism and anti-racism reveals important patterns in how racism is more widely understood across different geographical sites. Furthermore, it has traced the ways in which these articulations permeate multiple, imbricated ‘levels’ of analysis: from the narration of an inherently anti-racist populace, to the effects of urban multiculturalism and city-wide ‘segregation’, and finally at the level of the imagined nation.

In highlighting continuities both horizontally and vertically, I argue that – despite important contemporary and historical specificities – those I spoke to in both Manchester and Glasgow offered similar articulations of how place interacts with (anti-)racism. These correspondences point to a deeply rooted (but often implicit) shared understanding about what exactly constitutes racism, and how it operates. Most significantly, across a surprisingly diverse range of activists and community workers, racism is conceived

of as a problem of interacting (or not interacting) with cultural difference, shaping (as I go on to argue in [Chapter 2](#)) how Islamophobia as a specific form of racism is thought through and responded to.

Appeals to place and accompanying narratives of civic or national exceptionalism raise urgent questions for those involved in anti-racist work. Clearly such claims are intentionally mobilised at specific moments in attempts to ‘push back’ on more explicit manifestations of racism (or in moments that represent catalysts for such racism), as in the mobilisation of a Mancunian identity following the Manchester Arena attack. Similarly, claims of a distinct brand of Scottish anti-racism, whether in terms of the circulation of everyday discourses about individual Scots or the attempts by the Scottish government to narrate Scotland as an anti-racist nation, cannot be understood outside popular perceptions of Scotland as the historic ‘underdog’ in relation to England and, in particular, the hegemony of Westminster politics.

This being said, a critical analysis of Scotland’s role in British imperialism and transatlantic slavery reveals the limits of attempting to construct any straightforwardly progressive ‘story’ about Scotland and its residents, as initiatives such as the ‘Dear racists’ campaign seek to do. Furthermore, accounts by a number of Muslim participants disrupt uncritical appeals to urban conviviality that emerge in relation to both cities. They suggest that without a reckoning with the wider reproduction of racialised difference through the vector of nationalism, the potentially counter-hegemonic properties of a civic identity remain limited.

Finally, these findings are particularly significant when viewed alongside the recent resurgence of nationalist politics, but particularly forms of left nationalism. Accounts from activists raise, reanimate and at times complicate questions for those on the left with regard to the promises of nationalism. Ultimately, the mobilisation of forms of national belonging as a strategy by those on the left cannot help but risk sustaining structures of exclusion and control that anti-racists should be fighting to dismantle.

Notes

- 1 ‘Black bloc’ is a tactic typically used by anti-fascist protestors in which members of a group wear black clothing and face coverings in order to protect their identities and mitigate surveillance by police and counter-protestors.
- 2 In discussing the dynamics of racial capitalism, Bhattacharyya explains that the logic of differentiation helps us to think through ‘how people are dispossessed but dispossessed differently in the processes of capitalist remaking and development’, adding that ‘racial capitalism is a way of thinking about how we’re all leading shit

lives, but differently shit lives. It's not about hierarchies of dispossession, but it's about how these parallel processes happen to fix us all in lives which are far less than what we deserve and need' (Left Book Club 2021: n.p.).

- 3 For the purposes of a discussion on Islamophobia, and to give a sense of the differences in 'ethnic and cultural diversity' for those readers less familiar with a UK context, it is worth noting some statistical figures here. Data from the 2011 UK Census indicate that Muslims in Scotland made up only 2.8 per cent of all Muslims in the UK (95.5 per cent of Muslims in the UK reside in England), yet Muslims still constituted the largest religious minority in Scotland (Elshayyal 2016). Of London's population, 12.4 per cent identified as Muslim, and 15.8 per cent identified as Muslim in Manchester (MCB 2015), while in Glasgow the figure was closer to 5 per cent (Elshayyal 2016).

2

On fear, (un)familiarity and interaction: The limits of the liberal in approaches to Islamophobia

Introduction

How do those engaged in forms of anti-racist work ‘on the ground’ actually understand Islamophobia as a social problem? What available frameworks do activists draw on, and with what consequences for anti-racist practice? This chapter develops a critical appraisal of the links between theory and practice in relation to work around Islamophobia. Building on the findings of [Chapter 1](#), I take a closer look at conversations with a set of activists and community workers to consider how understandings of Islamophobia shape the practical approaches to tackling it that these actors advocate and put into practice.

The first half of the chapter focuses on how Islamophobia is conceptualised as primarily a problem of fear and (un)familiarity; how these assumptions manifest in discussions of the recently revived category of the ‘white working class’; and the ways in which these discourses individualise and cauterise the problem of Islamophobia, presenting it as an interactional phenomenon. Ambivalence around the legitimacy of these affective registers (who is fearful and why? To what extent are these fears rational?) poses particular challenges for those on the left. The second half of the chapter considers how these understandings – combined with the material realities of ‘doing’ anti-racism in times of crisis – sustain particular forms of action on the ground, namely ones that prioritise the mediation of individual and group presentation, interaction and transgression. Situating both these conceptual and responsive tendencies within longer historical trajectories (both discursive and material) reveals how hegemonic, liberal frameworks have shaped approaches to Islamophobia in ways that are both limited and limiting, having profound implications for the possibility of radical, anti-racist intervention.

Islamophobia as fear and unfamiliarity

Discussions with individuals in both cities revealed a tendency to talk about Islamophobia in interactional terms. When asked how they would define

Islamophobia, a significant number of those I spoke to emphasised the emotion of fear – that is, fear of Muslims and/or Islam – as a key driver of Islamophobia. This is, perhaps, unsurprising, given the ‘etymological fundamentalism’ (Sayyid 2010: 13) of popular discussions of Islamophobia, in which a ‘preoccupation with the suffix [i.e. ‘phobia’]’ has dominated (Bunglawala 2017: 69). In the interests of moving towards a sociological analysis of Islamophobia and organised resistance to it, we must ask: what assumptions are folded into the idea that fear is the primary driver of Islamophobia? Whose fear is centred in these discussions; why and with what consequences? Most notably, the fear that people referred to in discussions was more often than not understood to be irrational, as the following extracts from my conversations with Clive, Alan and John demonstrate:

I would say it’s an irrational fear of the religion of Islam and people who would say they are Muslims. So yeah it’s an irrational fear, it’s a fear that’s not based in any kind of truth or experience.

Well Islamophobia basically means an irrational fear of Islam.

There’s obviously a nervousness so ... it’s a fear that leads to hostility I suppose. And the fear is often irrational, but you can’t necessarily just dismiss it as stupid, you’ve got to address it.

This recurring trope raises important questions: where does such an irrational fear come from? How is it *produced*? Indeed, these were key questions put to my interlocutors whenever ‘Islamophobia-as-fear’ emerged in conversation. Answers to this question overwhelmingly referred to a lack of knowledge on behalf of those who ‘fear’ Muslims, understood as deriving from a *lack of exposure to cultural difference*. Or, to put it differently, an *unfamiliarity* with Muslims: a ‘total ignorance’, as one of my interlocutors put it. During an exchange about the necessity for intervention when someone is verbally abused, Dan, an anti-fascist activist in Manchester, explains the following:

[O]bviously I don’t know where people are from when they say something, but I’ve no doubt that comes from a community thing, of there being no community, no community spirit, or they might live in a purely white working-class area, which is fine, but that doesn’t give you the right to be a dick, do you know what I mean? And that’s a thing of fear, that’s not like these are bad, bad, like inherently bad people. Like if they’re scared or if they’re worried or if they’re genuinely afraid of like every Muslim’s gonna bomb ’em, which is obviously mental, but if that’s a genuine fear that they have, do you know what I mean, then that needs to be addressed, as much as it sounds ridiculous. But these people have only ever grown up with white people, only ever see Muslims do bad things on the telly; the right-wing media portrays all Muslims as bad people anyway; they get the *Daily Mail* delivered. What other narrative do you expect them to have?

Dan's comment that particular 'fears' are 'obviously mental', with the colloquial use of the term 'mental' here designating a state beyond reason, again points to an assumption about the irrationality of such fear. Furthermore, the central theme of ignorance – having a lack of, or incorrect, knowledge – is captured in Dan's reference to the combination of white homogeneity and media representation. Dan's description here echoes those of others I spoke to who also suggested that individuals who consume such media are also unlikely to encounter Muslims in their everyday lives, and therefore media consumption compounds a lack of exposure to difference.

Conversely, Espo – a young Muslim man involved in a faith-led organisation and other grassroots anti-racist work in Manchester – provided an alternative perspective to Dan's description of the effect of the media on 'white working-class' lives. Echoing some of the accounts of the effects of everyday multiculturalism discussed in the [previous chapter](#), Espo recounts his experience growing up in a multicultural neighbourhood in south Manchester. He suggests that an everyday multicultural and multiethnic 'conviviality' (Gilroy 2004) guards against the misinformation in some parts of the media:

I mean I grew up in Moss Side, Rusholme, and I didn't face any racism growing up, ya know? 'Cause I was in a very mixed community and no one really gave a crap about what anyone else was saying or what they heard in the media or whatever 'cause you're just getting on with your life.

While Espo goes on to talk about various instances of racism and Islamophobia that he experienced as he got older, this brief nod to the conviviality of the multiethnic neighbourhood of his youth chimes with Dan's account, despite it coming from the different perspective of a life experienced in a multicultural neighbourhood, rather than one understood as homogeneously white.

Importantly, at the centre of these narratives which evoke the emotion of fear is the assumption that there exists a community, or communities, of white non-Muslims, who have little or no contact with Muslims in their everyday lives. As discussed in [Chapter 1](#), these communities are imagined as working class, occupying smaller towns either completely distinct from, or at the peripheries of, the multicultural urban conurbations of Manchester or Glasgow.

One argument, outlined above, is that these 'white working class' communities are passive consumers of the demonisation of Muslims, and simply need more exposure to cultural difference in order to combat the irrational fear engendered by cultural segregation. And yet conversations with activists and community workers that oriented around this problem of fear and unfamiliarity pointed to the ways in which the rendering of Islamophobia as

a purely pathological issue allows the boundaries of the identified ‘problem’ to shift.

Alan offers another account of Islamophobia-as-fear. Alan is involved with multiple faith-based and interfaith projects in Manchester, and identifies as a Christian. As part of our discussion, he talked about his understanding of Islamophobia by reflecting on his experiences as part of, and interacting with, different religious communities across the city:

There is fear both sides, and I think that’s, that needs to be – Islamophobia isn’t, isn’t purely a kind of indigenous white issue, there is fear from within Islam of the rest of British society. ‘They’re trying to convert us’ or ‘they’re trying to make us westerners’. And there is, particularly within parts of Islam, a significant reaction against western culture. Boko Haram, for example, means western education is forbidden. So, western education is seen as leading our young people away from Islam, by many, and so part of the whole problem that we have ... fear goes both ways.

Alan’s insistence that ‘fear goes both ways’ is particularly interesting here. Because irrational fear is understood primarily as an adverse individual reaction, Islamophobia is considered an ‘issue’ for Muslims in Alan’s account as much as it implicates those identified as ‘indigenous’ and ‘white’. So, we start to see where the ‘problem’ is located: a lack of interaction with cultural difference. Moreover, as Alan’s account suggests, this is understood as a problem that affects Muslims as well as non-Muslims. In Alan’s description, we see how an equivalence is made between fear of Islam on the one hand, and fear of ‘western culture’ by Muslim individuals on the other. The reduction of Islamophobia to the level of the individual allows for the collapsing of these otherwise distinct phenomena. Such accounts reflect a broader ‘culture of racial equivalence’ as Miri Song (2014: 108) would call it, which obscures a wider political and historical context of racialised inequality and institutional discrimination. They also demonstrate how reducing Islamophobia to an individual, pathological problem impacts on whose ‘fear’ gets acknowledged and centred in accounts of Islamophobia. Indeed, in many such accounts, fear was attributed rarely to the victims of Islamophobia, but more often than not to the potential or actual perpetrators.

In other conversations people offered accounts that focused on the ‘ease’ with which people could channel their experiences of social inequality – poverty, inadequate housing, homelessness, unemployment and austerity were some of the issues mentioned – into racism, Islamophobia and appeals to nationalism. In other words, blaming Muslims and migrants for individual and collective fears over *access to resources* was interpreted as simply being ‘easier’ than holding those in power to account. The following

extracts, taken from two quite different conversations in Glasgow, are key illustrations of this:

In some parts of Edinburgh, in some parts of Glasgow, if you say can't get a council house in the scheme that you've already grown up in then you're gonna look for someone to blame and that often isn't the council, it's usually people of colour that have just moved into your scheme ... There's a lot of hardship in Glasgow and a lot of poor people who are struggling, and so therefore when you're struggling you're gonna look for something or someone to blame and I think immigrants and immigration and people who are not white Scottish are easy. (Clive)

I think they react to something and reacting in a racist way seems much more easier than any other way. And when you have like a community or when you have like a group of people who went through austerity or who are jobless or who went through a lot in life, and if the first thing you see on TV or in a newspaper [is] saying 'our jobs being taken by Muslims' or by refugees, asylum seekers, you're automatically going to blame them 'cause either you don't see the bigger picture or it's easier to blame another group than saying 'oh the government is too big to change', but if we get rid of these people, that might change something. (Elisa)

I am less interested in interrogating the validity of this claim about 'easiness' and more interested in what it says about conceptualisations of Islamophobia and racism more broadly, particularly in relation to understandings of class. Although a significant number of those I spoke to articulated a connection between Islamophobia and class inequality, as in accounts such as those above, the role of the state in these dynamics often remained unclear or sometimes altogether absent; the notion of 'ease' tells us little about the reproduction of Islamophobia through particular state institutions. Instead, if we recognise instances of everyday racism as being intimately connected to – and as saying something important about – wider structural conditions (Smith 2016), we have to ask: what social and political factors create the conditions for this 'easy' blaming? And what or who is responsible for producing them? These are questions to bear in mind as we continue to critically consider the ways in which narratives of 'fear' can transform the terms of the debate when wider political and material conditions, including the role of the state, slip from view.

Islamophobia and the 'legitimate concerns' of the 'white working class'

Whilst notions of irrational but easy blaming punctured most conversations around 'fear' and Islamophobia, elsewhere a particular framing of the 'concerns' of supposedly 'white working-class' communities represented a shift

towards a different narration of fear, similarity, difference and claims to the nation. In these discussions, reported fears appeared to be given a degree of credence, so that ‘cultural difference’ was paradoxically positioned as both the problem and the solution. In these discussions, activists attempted to grapple with the connections between Islamophobia, racism and class in good faith, yet often ended up reinforcing the very categories of difference they hoped to challenge.

During a discussion about the anti-fascist community work Dan is involved with in Manchester, he describes a particular approach to working with communities in the north of the city:

You know we’re not going in there with a manifesto of ten things, but in terms of things like ... if you’re going in there protesting something, people have got legitimate concerns about stuff. Whether that’s immigration, or you know, there’s no work, or the welfare of their children, or whatever, any problems that arise and they’ve got legitimate concerns, rather than going out and leathering [beating up] someone, which is all well and good, and needed, thoroughly needed [in some instances] ... these people’s concerns still need to be addressed, still have to be realised ... the hate and the anger a lot of the times is just misguided or ignorance.

There are a number of presuppositions Dan appears to be grappling with here that require some careful consideration. Firstly, in Dan’s description, ‘immigration’ appears as the first in a series of what he names as ‘legitimate concerns,’ alongside a lack of work and the wellbeing of children. These are concerns that, in Dan’s formulation, cannot be straightforwardly ‘dealt with’ through the anti-fascist tactics of physical confrontation and self-defence. Understandably, Dan situates these issues firmly outside of the realm of the fascist.

Importantly, the communities that Dan is referring to in this example are popularly understood as ‘white working-class’, and he uses this formulation explicitly earlier in our conversation (as in his description of people who ‘have only ever grown up with white people, [and] only ever see Muslims do bad things on the telly’). The mention of immigration at the outset of a discussion of ‘legitimate concerns’ further confirms that it is the needs and desires of non-immigrants that form the focus of discussion. In the discursive realm of ‘legitimate concerns’ – one that forms part of a wider discussion about Islamophobia and fear – immigrants and Muslims are conceived of as distinct or absent from these ‘feeling’ communities.

Where does the figure of the Muslim fit in as part of this binary of ‘native’ and ‘immigrant’, of those with ‘legitimate concerns’ and those embodying the source of the concern, the ‘problem’? Aside from the fact that discussions of immigration emerged from questions relating to Islamophobia (as if to say: too much cultural difference is also a source of Islamophobia), we can

consider the role played by the figure of ‘the Muslim’ in notions of national belonging. As Valluvan (2019) makes clear, a deeply held characterisation of Muslim difference has animated the integrationist ‘debate’ on immigration for more than two decades. Muslims, in their ‘presumed liberal inadequacy’, ‘must be thus either denied access (through immigration controls) or reformed (acculturated) in order to realise the civic ethos and principles of liberal equality that render them literate members of the national culture’ (Valluvan 2019: 72–73). This distinction between (rational, neutral) citizen and Muslim ‘other’ in wider political discourse points to how the discussion of ‘legitimate concerns’ becomes entangled with ideas of national belonging and claims about who exactly has the ‘right’ to make demands of the state.

Reflecting Valluvan’s prognosis of exclusion or acculturation, the narrative of cultural difference as a ‘problem’ about which certain groups of people have ‘legitimate concerns’ not only emerged in reference to immigration – within which the figure of the Muslim is central – but was also evident in the form of an ambivalence around how to discuss and approach apparently ‘cultural’ practices associated with Muslims. My discussion with John offers a useful example. John is a white, non-Muslim man based in Manchester, who had been involved in anti-racist work in the city through trade unionism. Like others I spoke to, John was clear that, in his own words, ‘familiarity breeds respect, not contempt’. Throughout our conversation, John was thoughtful and authoritative, and keen to draw on his own experience of anti-racist work with communities in Greater Manchester. At various points in our discussion, John raised a number of issues that he saw as animating the ‘worries’ of non-Muslim people, and amongst these issues was what John referred to as ‘the burqa’. After describing Boris Johnson’s now-notorious newspaper column as ‘offensive’ and ‘despicable’, John continued:¹

It’s a whole debate, but what I did find is that quite a number of people – including people who are not racist – don’t like the burqa. And don’t understand it. And I was trying to think about this as to how I felt about it ... what I think I thought was, well three weeks after I had a conversation about it, I didn’t see a single person wearing one. And it might just be where I went, but I was coming to Manchester ... and then I went to a part of Burnley, and I saw quite a few people wearing them. And so I think if people think that there are a lot more people wearing them and it’s growing, and then they think well, am I going to be made to wear one? And what would it be like if everyone wore one? And I think it’s about your perspective, and I’m not worried about it because I honestly feel it will die out, it’s an anachronism. And even if it’s growing slightly, it’s still a small number of people. But I think if you genuinely believed everyone were going to wear it, I think a lot of people would say well that’s ... that’s a more austere society than I would like to live in.

John's description here chimes closely with Dan's account of 'genuine fears'. While John concedes that people whom he judges to 'fear' the imposition of the burqa possess an unrealistic sense of its everyday presence or significance, he nonetheless grapples with the legitimacy of these grievances. The mention of the town of Burnley is significant here, being one of a number of towns in the north of England associated with the discourse of ethnic or cultural 'segregation' that the 2001 Cattle Report, and subsequent 'community cohesion' reviews, have made central to their diagnoses of troubled communities. Tellingly, the phrase 'parallel lives', used in the Cattle Report to describe the separateness of Muslim and non-Muslim residents living within the same towns, was also used with little critical reflection by activists in conversations with them.

Notably, in the extract above, John also emphasises that the cohort of people he perceives as 'not liking the burqa' includes 'people who are not racist'. Interestingly, this comment swiftly follows John's condemnation of the identifiably *illiberal* remarks by Boris Johnson. Thus, an important distinction is made between the 'extreme' Islamophobia of Johnson and the misguided but not completely illegitimate *fear* of certain non-Muslim communities. I will return to these distinctions between 'racists' and 'not racists' in the following section, but we might consider John's account as reflecting a wider fixation on the *illiberal* in which expressions of Islamophobia are viewed as aberrations, divorced from a political context in which Islamophobia has become a mainstream feature of liberal political discourse and policy (Mondon and Winter 2017).

My aim so far has been to draw attention to and begin to unsettle some of the assumptions and distinctions underpinning narratives of (imagined) communities 'fearful' of Muslims, where this fear is understood as variously – sometimes ambiguously – legitimate. However, developing a properly anti-racist critique of Islamophobia from the left demands more. It requires that we place these claims in their wider social context, so that rather than naturalise such claims, dismiss them as plain bigotry or a kind of false consciousness, we can assess their affective power and what work they are doing at the current conjuncture, particularly in relation to Islamophobia.

Descriptions of people fearful of 'being bombed' or – rather fantastically – being forced to wear the burqa, do point us to something important. We know that emotions play a central role in the maintenance of structural racism (Bonilla-Silva 2019) as well as racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya 2018). In this case, we might think about descriptions of the emotional states of 'white working-class' communities as circulating as part of a wider 'affective economy' (Ahmed 2004) of Islamophobia, characterised in part by a fear of (but also disgust at and desire for) the phantasmic Muslim other (Abbas 2021; Ali et al. 2024).

As I argue later in the chapter, the conjuring up of an ever-present but opaque threat to the safety, security and wellbeing of the ‘native’ population invariably leads to deeply held investments in punitive forms of state violence, even amongst historically marginalised populations and groups (see, for example, Lambie 2013). Activists I spoke to *did*, it should be noted, grapple with the role of digital and print media in sustaining these ideas, as well as the ways in which these ‘fears’ are inflated, augmented and often bear no resemblance to people’s everyday realities on the ground. And yet, because these understandings of race and class are not part of a wider analysis that sees the reproduction of racialised difference as integral to racial capitalism, activists are constrained by an interactional framing even when grasping for structural explanations, the role of the state always just slipping from view. Thus, we are left with the question of why this entanglement of race and class is consistently mobilised in otherwise good-faith attempts to make sense of particular expressions of Islamophobia, and in ways that risk obscuring rather than illuminating the reproduction of difference that activists are clearly striving to name.

The resurrection of the category of ‘white working class’ in recent years in both political discourse and academic research is instructive here. As the Cantle Report demonstrates, an integrationist agenda has long dominated mainstream British politics (Kundnani 2007; Valluvan 2019). But Donald Trump’s election and the success of the UK campaign to leave the European Union in 2016 were hailed by politicians and media pundits across the political spectrum as signalling a renewed ‘revolt’ by the supposed ‘white working class’ (Mondon and Winter 2019), understood as long economically abandoned and newly righteous in their anger. And some academic accounts only reinforced the analysis that the ‘white’ ‘left-behind’ had been mobilised to deliver such victories (Mondon and Winter 2019).

In December 2019, around a year after the last interviews for this research were conducted, the Conservative Party swept to victory in elections in Britain. Many accounts that followed parroted the idea that working-class sections of the electorate had – in a sort of confirmation of the Brexit vote – supported the Conservatives in response to decades of neglect by the British establishment, causing the Labour Party to squander its ‘red wall’ of votes across the Midlands and the north of England. Crucially, the narrative of a ‘left behind’ ‘white working class’ was one that appealed to and gained traction on parts of the left as much as anywhere else, drawing on an ideological vocabulary of ‘left nationalism’ that – as I discussed in the [previous chapter](#) – has long seen an embrace of the nation by the organised left, but which has found renewed ground in recent years (Virdee 2014; Valluvan 2019; Bhattacharyya et al. 2021). That versions of the ‘white working-class’ narrative were discernible in research conversations – particularly those that took place in England – should therefore come as no surprise.

Furthermore, the veneration of both Glasgow and Manchester's working-class histories and identities forms an important backdrop to these discussions. Alongside the erection of statues of working-class figures (such as Mary Barbour in Glasgow) and the commemoration of local workers' struggles (including the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester) in recent years, accounts from those I spoke to frequently identified the strong working-class identities and radical histories of these cities. We might consider, on the one hand, the ways in which these histories help to inform a particular, often implicitly racialised, vision of the historical working class (see Virdee 2014; Niven 2019). And yet, accompanying the public displays of, and personal attachments to, a particular working-class civic identity is an alternative story: one of declining industry and a retreat from class politics, marked by decades of attacks on a multiethnic working class, its associations and institutions. In a paper addressing the social and political conditions that led to the Brexit vote in 2016, Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever (2018: 1810) argue that the vote to leave Europe can be understood not only in terms of a resurgent racialised Englishness, but also the way in which 'the period of working class defeat under the Conservatives led by Thatcher was accompanied by the loss of alternative class frames of resistance, including those that re-imagined the working class as multi-ethnic'.

Of course, Brexit was and is just one symptom of the multiple crises currently besetting Britain, both economic and political. A decades-long process has seen the hollowing out of welfare and public services and a shift towards a state that promises protection from and punishment of an array of 'dangerous others', but which is – according to Gargi Bhattacharyya and colleagues – simultaneously abusive and neglectful of those it claims to care for: more akin to a 'state patriarch' (Bhattacharyya et al. 2021). This reconfiguration of the state has compounded the broader crisis, leaving in its wake a 'deep desire to be controlled, to be under control, for someone to make the situation controlled' (Bhattacharyya et al. 2021: 146–147). In their seminal work *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 2013 [1978]), Stuart Hall and colleagues traced how from the late 1970s, the figure of the Black 'mugger' was mobilised to reassert hegemonic power at a crucial historical conjuncture following the unravelling of popular consent throughout the postwar period. In the third decade of the twenty-first century, the racialised folk devil of the Black 'mugger' has morphed and proliferated: the terrorist and the 'Pakistani grooming gang' join ranks with more established symbols of danger and social decay (Bhattacharyya et al. 2021). If *Policing the Crisis* taught us anything, it is that a collective desire for control and a sense of security is readily met by a politics of law-and-order authoritarianism in Britain.

As many activists intuitively pointed to, we *are* in the midst of crisis, and a great many people are suffering. There *is* both a sense of scarcity and very real poverty. Against this backdrop, calls for surveillance, criminalisation, even internal militarisation, gain momentum. As I argue in the final chapter, these calls pose some of the most significant challenges for the anti-racist left at the current conjuncture. They also frame the ‘legitimate concerns’ and subsequent demands to ensure ‘our’ safety and prosperity, whether limiting access to public services according to immigration status, strengthening ‘counter-terrorism’ legislation or increasing prison sentences. Of course, elsewhere in Europe hijab, burqa and abaya bans have been introduced in nations with their own peculiar (but overlapping) histories of hegemonic control and racialised state formation, having acute implications for Muslim communities. In the context of political and economic crisis in Britain, however, ‘austerity Islamophobia’ has led to a particular logic of (dis)entitlement in which Muslims are viewed as part of the racialised masses of the ‘undeserving poor’, and pitted against the imagined non-Muslim ‘white working class’ – the deserving recipients of state support (Ali and Whitham 2021; see also Shilliam 2018). This is despite Muslim populations facing disproportionate levels of poverty and deprivation (MCB 2024), often remaining at the sharp end of the ‘organised abandonment’ of multiethnic working-class communities in Britain (Ali and Whitham 2021; Bhandar 2022).

This alternative lens on British Islamophobia is situated in a broader analysis of racial capitalism, which understands the fundamental imbrication of race and class, and the pivotal role of racism in the development of capitalism as a world system (Robinson 2000 [1983]). Such an analysis allows us to disentangle the *illegitimacy* of the racism that cuts through so-called ‘legitimate concerns’ from the genuine feelings of abandonment, insecurity, anxiety and fear that emerge from lives lived under perpetual crisis: feelings that come to be ‘worked through’ and projected onto, amongst others, the monstrous figure of the Muslim (Kundnani 2020; cf. Hall et al. 2013 [1978]). But more than this, placing Islamophobia in the context of racial capitalism in Britain as it currently functions inserts Muslim communities into an alternative story of classed abandonment, exploitation and dispossession, unsettling the very category of ‘white working class’ in the process. Thus, an analysis of racial capitalism both explains the appeal of the ‘legitimate concerns’ narrative amongst anti-racist activists *and* offers an alternative framework for making sense of how Islamophobia functions in the current moment. It is this recentring of questions of the state, racial capitalism and crisis that sets apart an emerging politics of abolition – one that I put into dialogue with the issue of Islamophobia in Britain – in [Chapter 4](#).

Who, then, are the ‘real’ racists?

The various understandings of Islamophobia so far addressed push us to consider where – if at all – Islamophobia actually resides. If Islamophobia is considered as the product of variously (il)legitimate fears of cultural difference, what does that mean for how we identify and name Islamophobia? And how does it relate to a broader understanding of how racism functions? Accompanying the various articulations of Islamophobia-as-fear-and-(un)familiarity were particular distinctions regarding who counted as the ‘real’ racists/Islamophobes, and therefore who should be considered the targets of anti-racist attention and action.

‘Real’ racists were framed by a number of activists as both pathologically unique and a sort of ‘hangover’ from another time or era. In the extract below, for instance, Dan makes a distinction between ‘Blood & Honour’ types (a reference to the neo-Nazi organisation that became particularly prominent in the 1980s), and otherwise persuadable individuals – in this case young men involved with the ‘Football Lads Alliance’ (FLA). The FLA was founded in June 2017 in response to the terror attacks that year, and by October had mobilised a crowd of up to 50,000 to its national march (Hope Not Hate 2018: 23). The Democratic Football Lads Alliance (DFLA), whose first march took place in Birmingham in early 2018 (Hope Not Hate 2019) has since usurped the FLA and is of particular interest here, as its mobilisation in Manchester in June 2018, and the wider response from the left, was mentioned by a number of those I spoke to in the city.

And also a lot of Blood & Honour types, yeah? Who’re in their forties and fifties. Forties, fifties, sixties ... do they deserve a slap? Yes. Do they deserve to be put six feet under? Yes. But is it worth engaging and going to prison for? No. These people are past it man. They might have done stuff in the eighties. Also, people who were in Blood & Honour will get their heads kicked in ten times and still go out and do stuff, like they’re hard-line Nazis, that’s what they are. Lads who go to Football Lads Alliance stuff that are in their twenties, these are the people that we need to be engaged with and talk to and [educate].

There may well be, as Dan suggests, some important qualitative differences between far-right groups that come to inform the sorts of strategies that anti-racist and anti-fascist activists pursue. Nevertheless, the distinction drawn between these two groups – irrelevant Nazis of a bygone era on the one hand, and misguided but redeemable young men on the other – deserves some critical attention. Indeed, discussions with particular activists in Glasgow echoed these distinctions. In such cases, the distinction appeared to contribute to the idea that Islamophobia is less of a problem – if a problem at all – in Scotland, and a number of people referred to the historical

absence of fascist activity in Scotland (in other words, identifiable ‘racists’) as an indication of an absence of Islamophobia. Of course, the notion that Islamophobia is a negligible phenomenon in Scotland, or one that exists only on the very fringes of society, is not borne out in surveys that have been conducted in the years since these conversations took place. For instance, a 2021 cross-party inquiry into Islamophobia in Scotland found that 75 per cent of Muslims surveyed reported that ‘Islamophobia is a regular or everyday issue in Scottish society’ (Hopkins 2023: 1). Nevertheless, Paul, who has participated in anti-racist work as part of a group affiliated to his local football team, describes as part of a written interview how the Scottish Defence League (a far-right organisation in Scotland also referred to as the SDL) have been consistently challenged in Scotland, and links this to a perceived absence of Islamophobia:

If I am completely honest I don’t think challenging Islamophobia as a single entity factors into the work we do; I don’t think it is a huge problem in the country where we reside. We challenge all forms of discrimination equally, be that on the streets or in the terraces. We would never shy away from challenging Islamophobia if we felt it was a huge problem in Scottish society – like any time the SDL rear their ugly face, they have been challenged and sent back under their rock.

Similarly to Dan’s description of ‘Blood & Honour types’, members of the SDL are distinguished from wider society via the insinuation that they exist ‘under a rock’ and are therefore temporally and spatially separate. This phrase shares a curious resonance with Dan’s insistence that Blood & Honour ‘types’ are ‘past it’. In Paul’s case, the purported absence of Islamophobia in Scotland specifically reflects the kind of broader assumptions regarding racism (or the lack thereof) in Scottish society that I outline in [Chapter 1](#).

What can be said about the broader shared frameworks that appear to circumscribe these distinctions between a cohort of ‘real’ racists and the rest of society? As Barnor Hesse (2004: 15) argues, the liberal, Eurocentric conception of racism that has come to dominate popular understandings of racism in Europe and North America privileges the Holocaust as the ‘paradigmatic experience of racism’, foregrounding the ‘political extremism of fascist racism’. In so doing, however, ‘it has rendered inviolable the vaunted western ideal of a universal liberal political culture, only aberrantly fascist and benignly colonial’ (see also Césaire 2000 [1950]). Subsequently, such a model neglects alternative histories and experiences of racism, most notably the structuring force of western colonialism, its grounding in political liberalism and the contemporary implications of these relations – in other words, racism as constitutive of contemporary western ‘liberal democracies’. Thus, the liberal, Eurocentric conception of racism conceals as much

as it reveals: ‘The concept of racism is doubly-bound into revealing (nationalism) and concealing (liberalism), foregrounding (sub-humanism) and foreclosing (non-Europeanism), affirming (extremist ideology) and denying (routine governmentality)’ (Hesse 2004: 14).

Applying Hesse’s critique to the question of Islamophobia and the various attempts to come to an ‘official’ definition, Salman Sayyid (2010) makes the case that Islamophobia has tended to be viewed through this same Eurocentric, liberal lens. Importantly, the Eurocentric concept of racism, framing racism as an aberration of western modernity rather than a product of it, ‘cannot conceive of racism without identifiable racists’. In the absence of ‘self-ascribed racists’, racism is reduced to a problem of false consciousness, individual ignorance, or conspiracy (Sayyid 2010: 12).

The dominance of a Eurocentric conception of racism helps to explain the tendency amongst some of my interlocutors to make distinctions between ‘hard-line Nazis’ and other groupings, including recent far-right organisations such as the DFLA. Broader accounts of racism also pointed to a particular historical framing at work; for instance, in a poignant account of his own political education, John described watching a documentary on the Holocaust as a teenager:

and from that moment on I got it, and when I heard [the] National Front were sympathisers of Hitler I ... it was just a no-no to me, and has been ever since. And so I suppose really ultimately by a youngish age I’d formed the view that the main lesson of the last hundred years is the way that the politics of hate turned a relatively civilised country into a monstrosity. And it could happen again. And so when the BNP [British National Party] came to [my hometown], I just thought, well zero tolerance. A bit like a disease, you can’t allow ... you can’t allow it to grow to a certain size and hope it won’t grow more. You have to stamp on it, but it wasn’t possible, but it wasn’t possible to physically stamp on it; it had to be politically neutralised.

John explains how his learning about the Holocaust, and the awareness that ‘it could happen again’, has motivated his continued involvement in anti-racist work. However, in John’s account we also see echoes of the Eurocentric conception of racism, in which the racism of Nazism is understood as a kind of rupture, turning a ‘relatively civilised country into a monstrosity’, as John says. Furthermore, John goes on to describe the racism of the BNP as analogous to a disease, again suggesting that more recent far-right groupings are a deviation from an otherwise ‘healthy’ society. In the absence of Nazis, neo-Nazis or card-carrying BNP or SDL members, one of few formulations left to explain the continuing presence of racism is that ‘racism is produced by ignorant and uninformed people rather than racists, the unintended consequences of the actions of otherwise decent people’ (Sayyid 2010: 12).

Elsewhere, scholars have identified this individualising and moralising discourse around racism as a symptom of the ‘postracial’ (Goldberg 2015; Lentin 2016; Valluvan 2016; Bonilla-Silva 2017). In the same way that liberal values are put to work in both the enactment and defence of Islamophobia, liberalism is integral to the postracial. ‘The post-racial is in fact symptomatic of the liberal conceit writ large’, says Sivamohan Valluvan (2016: 3). Moreover, the individualising tendencies of the postracial – the emphasis on individual culpability over structural inequality and collective responsibility, for example – are indicative of the wider neoliberal consensus within which postracial claims comfortably sit (Valluvan 2016).

Relatedly, the Eurocentric, liberal conception of racism is bound by an understanding of racism as a biological doctrine (Hesse 2004), which fails to account for the specific racialisation of Muslim identity (Sayyid 2010) even as Muslim populations, precisely because of their ‘presumed liberal inadequacy’ (Valluvan 2019: 73) face disproportionate levels of state coercion, violence and interpersonal abuse. Yet when Muslims are situated outside ‘race’, and postracial discussions of racism are characterised by ‘deflection, distancing and denial’ (Lentin 2016: 34), Islamophobia – and its intimate relationship to race and racism – slips even further from view. Alana Lentin’s (2018: 401) recent discussion of what she terms ‘not racism’ might also be instructive here. ‘Not racism’ has become, according to Lentin (2018: 406), ‘the major discursive filter through which race matters are sifted’. It is characterised by ‘the denial and redefinition of racism’, becoming ‘a central formulation for the expression and legitimation of racism’. Lentin (2018: 411) argues that the constant appeal to ‘not racism’ in popular and political discourse is only possible because of the ways in which racism – bolstered by ahistorical academic analyses – has been and continues to be understood as a ‘moral wrong’, ensuring that ‘a separation is thus established between the properly racist and the purportedly commonsensical, honest, and practical views of the “non-racist” majority’ (Lentin 2018: 406).

But what happens when the purported fears and anxieties of the ‘communities’ in question are given a degree of credence, with the implication that what seems initially misguided might actually contain a kernel of truth that we on the anti-racist left should be taking seriously? The conversations around the (D)FLA and how to approach it appeared to revolve around one point of contention in particular: how should anti-racists understand and respond to this organisation, whose core message has focused on addressing ‘Islamic extremism’? Dan, who had elsewhere made distinctions between ‘real’ racists and those attending FLA marches, continued to grapple with how these distinctions played out in strategies adopted by those on the anti-racist left:

After that [the original FLA march] there was another demo that was called by a more explicitly racist or far-right group, on the anniversary of the bombing [the 2018 DFLA march], so that must have been this year, on the anniversary of the bombing for victims of the Manchester bomb. You can't protest that as a left-wing group, or as a left-wing community organisation. Because the narrative that then comes from that is that you're supporting the people who bombed Manchester. The far right aren't daft. They're pretty stupid but they're not daft in terms of stuff like that. [Another anti-racist organisation] actually went out and protested it, and looked like idiots, because – of course they did. But ... you can't protest stuff like that, and the whole thing of like 'we're not Islamophobic, we're just against Muslim extremists', then the whole line, all the lines become very blurred very quickly. And it's very difficult to ... we're against Muslim extremism as well, do you know what I mean? Who in their right mind wouldn't be?

Yet other conversations in Manchester revealed alternative interpretations of the DFLA's mobilisation in the city. As part of our conversation, Madiha – an anti-racist activist in Manchester – recounted her horror at the response (or lack of it) to the emergence of the DFLA by others on 'the left'. Referring to statements made by a senior trade union official, whose calls for dialogue with the DFLA and criticisms of the left were reported around the time of the DFLA's emergence by a range of media outlets (see Dathan 2018; Kimber 2018), Madiha says:

Can you imagine [if] he said that about Mosley, or Hitler, or Mussolini, or any of these fascists? You know, I couldn't comprehend, and I remember thinking I feel slightly panicked because I don't know how to respond to him, because this was not what I was expecting. And then he talked about ... you know, and he's had a meeting with the Democratic Football Lads leadership, and actually he understands their concerns.

As the discussion continued, Madiha – evidently astonished by the statements coming from this senior trade union leader – suggested that such demands for engagement with the DFLA were reminiscent of 'talking about hugging a Nazi'. For Madiha, they were entirely inappropriate given what she understood as the DFLA's denial of her very right to exist as an ethnic minority Muslim woman.

If nothing else, the various positions represented by this particular trade unionist, and by Dan and Madiha, suggest that there are ongoing debates and tensions amongst anti-racists in terms of how to make sense of and respond to newer articulations of Islamophobia. Dan's reference to a common rebuttal made by or on behalf of Islamophobes – 'we're not Islamophobic, we're just against Muslim extremists' – and the seeming impossibility of responding effectively in the face of this (the 'blurring of lines', as Dan describes) also points to what Claire Alexander (2017: 13) describes as a strategic

‘separation of Islamophobia as ideology from Muslims themselves’ – a sleight of hand that conceals the usefulness of a cultural framing for the reproduction of Islamophobia, including the concept of ‘Islamic extremism’ in the securitisation of Muslims under the wider, ongoing ‘war on terror’. This is, I argue, a process of obfuscation that the left has struggled to identify and name.

Diverging understandings and approaches emerge, at least in part, from specific subjective experiences, and this is a point I develop further in the [next chapter](#). In this sense, the demand for dialogue and engagement is much more likely to come from a white, non-Muslim man who does not experience the same direct threat of violence as a visible Muslim woman might from members of an organisation such as the DFLA. This being said, the positioning of the DFLA as no different from Nazis, as in Madiha’s account, paradoxically reifies a liberal concept of racism that ‘freezes’ racism in particular racial regimes, in this case the Holocaust. It fails to capture the complex ways in which Islamophobic discourses are mobilised, and accusations of racism simultaneously defanged, as well as the connections between those deemed the ‘real’ racists, and the entrenched Islamophobia of mainstream, liberal British politics. In [Chapter 3](#), I attend to the experiences of Muslim women activists as they are shaped by the centrality of the *figure* of the Muslim woman in liberal and leftist articulations of Islamophobia. Such experiences shine a clarifying light on the relationship between liberalism and Islamophobia, and more specifically offer a counterpoint to the notion of easily identifiable, illiberal racists. However, in this next section I want to foreground how the framings outlined above, however well intentioned, have vital consequences for responding to Islamophobia in an organised capacity.

Representation and resilience

In this second half of the chapter, I am interested in how the sometimes ambiguous discourses and understandings touched on throughout this chapter – those of fear and unfamiliarity, ‘legitimate concerns’ and ‘real’ racists – translate into practices on the ground. More widely, what are the implications of the hegemonic place of liberal and Eurocentric definitions of racism for anti-racist responses to Islamophobia? And what other structures contribute to the entrenchment of particular ways of understanding and responding?

In the following sections, I draw more widely on conversations not only with grassroots activists but also those working to challenge Islamophobia through third-sector and community organisations. These individuals I refer to as ‘community workers’, although it should be noted that this is not an

easily defined category, nor one that is distinct from more grassroots forms of activism. Indeed, a number of those I spoke to saw their efforts to challenge Islamophobia as exceeding organisational boundaries. As I emphasise, some community workers had previously been, or were still, involved in more informal forms of campaigning or organising, while some of those more familiar with grassroots organising had plenty to say about their experiences working within the third sector. Crucially, reflections from a range of perspectives revealed the practical limits of responding to Islamophobia through a liberal framework.

Discussions with activists and community workers pointed to the dominance of three key approaches in which liberal conceptualisations of Islamophobia were reflected and entrenched. The first of these was in attempts to – broadly speaking – address and rectify popular representations of Muslims, whilst building the resilience of Muslims themselves. The second emerged in an emphasis on ‘dialogue’ across difference, while the third approach was framed by a concern with punishment and was articulated in widespread discussions of Islamophobic ‘hate crime’. I attempt, however, to set all of these approaches against the challenges of responding to Islamophobia within a wider environment of dwindling resources and the degradation of left infrastructure and movements, as well as the realities of contending with the variously explicit articulations of Islamophobia that permeate life in contemporary Britain for many Muslims.

It is perhaps unsurprising that, should Islamophobia be framed as primarily emerging from a ‘fear’ of Muslims, one impulse is to attempt to assuage that fear. One key channel for such an approach is via interventions in how and where Muslims are represented and how they are popularly perceived. This tendency played out across a range of practices and spaces referred to in conversations, from the pragmatic blood donation projects that Kadhim spoke of (see [Chapter 1](#)) to more visually oriented campaigns that sought to act as a counter-balance to broader media discourses of Muslims. However, the limits of such a representational approach did not go unremarked upon. The accounts of two individuals who worked for different faith-based organisations – one in Manchester and the other in Glasgow – offer a clear example of the logic of such an approach. Maria and Espo both described schools-based projects in which Muslim individuals (particularly Muslim women) would talk to students as part of a session aiming to unsettle ‘stereotypes’ of Muslims:

Then we do have a schools project as well which is also national, so we get people to go into schools and kind of break down barriers in that sense because the young people are actually getting to talk to Muslim women from their own experience and we get to explain to them how we practise and why we believe what we believe. (Maria)

A lot of the volunteers for that particular service that we offer are women; some of them are covered women, they wear the hijab, so when they go [into schools] they're really sort of myth-busting straight away with their ... with them appearing and taking part, so some of the kids have a sort of skewed perception of what Muslim women are and then they meet professional women that are dentists or have their own businesses and they're volunteering and they're spending time with the kids, they're like 'oh! I didn't realise that Muslim women could do this, or you're allowed to do that, that's not what we've heard.' (Espo)

Phrases such as 'myth-busting' and 'breaking down barriers' point to a shared understanding that students' interactions with actual Muslim women – in all their diversity and complexity – are a crucial element in challenging Islamophobia. When depictions of veiled Muslim women as either powerless victims or terrorists in waiting remain a core component of the cultural 'othering' of Muslims across various political registers then the desire, especially by Muslim women themselves, to reclaim such representations and renarrativise experiences is more than understandable.

And yet some of those who advocated for such an approach were also acutely aware of its limitations, with a number of activists vocalising the limitations of 'discourses of compatibility' (Lentin and Titley 2011: 52). Espo, for example, explained that the schools' project addressed only the 'symptoms' of Islamophobia, while other organisations were 'better equipped' to deal with the 'causes', which he suggested included the police, media, government and even the education system itself. 'You need to deal with Islamophobia at its source there', Espo was quick to explain, 'and unless we do that, I think it'll continue'. This required, according to Espo, more than Muslims 'being nice and showing their humanity', an approach that he felt was too often uncritically pursued by Muslim-led organisations. Importantly, Espo's critical insights into the limitations of such an approach reflected a wider analysis that centred the role of the state as the 'source' of Islamophobia, as the focus of his other activities – namely grassroots organising around Prevent – was testament to. In [Chapter 3](#), I address the ways in which a certain cohort of Muslim activists such as Espo and a number of his peers come to acquire a critical 'second sight' (Virdee 2017) that allows them to connect the 'everyday' to the structural in their analyses of Islamophobia. This critical perspective is not only reflected in the practices and approaches of such activists but rather forms part of a symbiotic relationship in which participation in social movements and struggles (and we might think of organised resistance to Prevent in this case), in conjunction with personal experience and collective memory, comes to shape activists' analyses of Islamophobia.

Nevertheless, in lieu of a wider critical analysis connecting different 'scales' of Islamophobia, it is difficult for an approach that centres on representation

to avoid rendering cultural difference as the problem, and cultural similarity as the solution. Islamophobia becomes about interaction (or lack thereof) with actually existing Muslims, reflecting a wider politics of representation that limits our political imaginations and the kind of anti-racist claims that can be made, but also sustains ‘a very particular conceptualisation of the space of politics and the workings of racism’ (Bhattacharyya et al. 2021: 85). That is: ‘By positing racism as a process of exclusion from sites of power and of public visibility, we imagine politics as a bounded community where to be included is to overcome racism’ (Bhattacharyya et al. 2021: 88). This not only legitimises the nation state and its attendant symbolic and material boundaries of belonging and non-belonging, but also risks essentialising the ‘communities’ that are supposed to be represented as part of these efforts at inclusion and/or projections of similarity and respectability.

Such an approach is complicated by not only the critical reflections of more radical activists, but also the fact that so many of the encounters with Islamophobia that people themselves described appeared to render these representational approaches completely inadequate. In other words, the structural nature of accounts of Islamophobia – including the lingering awareness of the power of the British state, the instinct to connect the local and the global – seemed to far exceed the practical approaches to tackling Islamophobia that many favoured, or at least felt were available to them. One quintessential example of this was the work that occupied Kadhim, the Glasgow-based community worker whom we met in [Chapter 1](#). Alongside blood donation projects, Kadhim had worked with young people within the city’s Arab community, and was an advocate of a particular approach to Islamophobia that had a strong focus on identity, both in terms of how non-Muslims perceived Muslim people and in terms of supporting young people to engage with questions of their own Muslim identity:

Along with a friend I set up a specific charity to focus on educating youth, get them prepared, knowledgeable of their religion but as well as how to interact in society, face the challenges in society. You mention Islamophobia; in a way we try and do things in a more indirect way, so rather than say ‘this is a challenge, we have to face it’, it’s done like if you become a better person you will automatically by default become more accepted and your identity will be less insecure in that respect.

A tendency to individualise responses to Islamophobia – for example, the focus on strengthening young people’s ‘identity’ by Kadhim – at first appears to be a product of an interactional understanding of Islamophobia. Indeed, when asked directly how he would define Islamophobia, Kadhim replied that it was ‘a reticence against any form of Islamic projection of identity’. But, Kadhim’s account also underlined a stark reality for young Muslims in

Britain who – in Kadhim’s own words – are ‘getting challenged over faith ... on their clothes, everything that’s about them’. This sense that a certain level of resilience is required simply to exist as a young Muslim person in Britain chimes with everything we know about the normalised nature of Islamophobia. In a context in which the counter-terrorism agenda has produced a hyper-vigilance around how Muslims present themselves and Muslim individuals are relentlessly asked to account for and justify their Muslimness, it is not surprising that Kadhim views both the development of a collective counter-narrative and the building of individual resilience as priorities in the fight against Islamophobia.

Nevertheless, as in the focus on representing ‘real’ Muslims through schools-based projects, such an approach does reveal its own limitations. Not only does it place the burden of challenging Islamophobia on the shoulders of Muslims, but the wider conditions that force Muslims into a defensive position vis-à-vis responding to Islamophobia are sustained by the same discourses of respectability and compatibility. In addition to a popular politics of representation, these discourses also have to be situated in the context of state integrationism in Britain, which the British state pursued particularly aggressively following the so-called ‘race riots’ in 2001. In the decades since, Muslim communities especially have been subject to acute pressure to demonstrate allegiance to ‘Britishness’ in the face of government-led condemnations of ‘self-segregating’ Muslim communities (Kundnani 2007).²

Alongside this decades-long government agenda, Kadhim’s personal and political biography offers some further important context for why work to challenge Islamophobia so often gets channelled into the individualised containers of ‘identity’ and ‘resilience’. Having Iraqi heritage, Kadhim spoke movingly of the long shadow that the invasion of Iraq and subsequent ‘war on terror’ cast over his early adult life. As I discuss in more detail in [Chapter 3](#), the war on Iraq was a formative political experience, shaping how he came to understand the world and his own place in it. But he also recounted how the ultimate failure of the anti-war movement to prevent the devastation wrought in the name of the ‘war on terror’ led to serious doubts about the efficacy of collective action, ultimately leading Kadhim to focus his efforts elsewhere. For Kadhim and many others, the human catastrophe of the invasion and subsequent destruction of Iraq marked the ultimate failure of mass protest, shaping his sense of the kinds of strategies worth pursuing decades later. The dissipation of the anti-war movement in the intervening years can only have added to this sense of despondency. This wider political context and timeline have important implications for how we make sense of responses to Islamophobia today, particularly those that are led by Muslim activists or Muslim-led organisations. Crucially, they also point to historical resources for rethinking how Islamophobia operates,

and for (re)orienting an anti-racist response to Islamophobia at the current conjuncture. This is further explored in [Chapter 3](#), but for now, we return to the strategies and approaches complemented by a liberal understanding of Islamophobia as an essentially interactional phenomenon.

Dialogue across difference

An adjacent strategy to these more representational approaches focusing on Muslim identity was one that centred calls for dialogue between different groups, namely Muslims and non-Muslims. This tendency was particularly prominent amongst faith-led and/or interfaith organisations and projects. Alan, for instance, whom I introduced early on in the chapter, explained how dialogue was central to his interfaith project, and how it worked to unsettle what he saw as the source of Islamophobia:

So we're dealing on a religious basis with both similarity and difference. Now, that will then ... those topics then act as a way to build relationships, so we'll always have food with the dialogue ... all the time food, fabulous food. And so we're beginning to get to know each other ... we then begin to talk about some deeper issues. Issues like, where do I belong? Am I Pakistani, or am I British? Or what does it mean to be British Pakistani, or British Muslim? And, you know, we as Christians will talk about issues about ... do we see ourselves as firstly British, or are we Christians who happen to be in Britain, so how do I relate to Pakistani Christians? ... so these issues of identity, really. Identity and belonging are key issues. So we begin to talk about how do I see myself, how do I understand myself, and that relates to Islamophobia significantly, because you know, EDF [EDL] and all that kind of stuff, and the whole British Christian identity ... they're real issues of identity, that we have an identity crisis in this country, and continue to develop that, and Islamophobia is partly connected into that, 'I don't know where I belong, I don't know who I am ... so I cling onto a particular picture of Britishness', or whatever. So we try to just articulate these kinds of issues.

Alan's persistent reference to identity and belonging reveals much about the assumptions that underpin this particular understanding of Islamophobia, and the solutions that subsequently present themselves: multicultural societies unsettle identities that were once stable and knowable, producing 'fear' of difference, but it is possible to come to a shared understanding – or to build new, shared identities – through interaction and dialogue. Interestingly, this logic shares some key features with the claims of others I spoke to whose organising was underpinned by much more radical repertoires and traditions. We can think back to Dan's anti-fascist work and his understanding of Islamophobia as primarily a problem of interacting

with difference, for example. Indeed, both Alan and Dan emphasised the importance of developing relationships across boundaries of difference as a key deterrent to Islamophobia. For Alan, this involved a ‘technique’ of dialogue that would develop relationships that could ‘cope with pain’ so that, in Alan’s words, ‘When an incident happens, the bomb goes off or, you know ... underground, buses or whatever, the relationship is strong enough for folk to be able to talk to each other, and to be able to almost carry their communities through those kinds of incidents.’ Dan, on the other hand, couched his assessment in a critique of the left’s reactive approach to tackling racism. Nevertheless, his call for long-term relationship-building in anticipation of Islamophobic flashpoints was remarkably similar to Alan’s. Rather than what he perceived as the fruitless cycle of protest, Dan called for people to:

go out into communities now and build relationships, educate people, organise people around like general anti-racism sentiment, or just community spirit, for the next ten years, so that inevitably when this happens again [a terrorist attack] ... when there’s another inevitable spike when something else happens, there’s actually, you know, there’s been a huge campaign or protest in place so that when stuff like that happens people actually go, well nah, you know Muslims aren’t to blame, because I live with them, ’cause I know them, ’cause I’ve done stuff with them for the last ten years, ’cause they’re an inherent part of my community.

Working towards more convivial relations within and between communities is an integral part of anti-racism. Many thinkers and writers have stressed the importance of convivial multiculturalism in sustaining anti-racist cultures and, conversely, the left’s neglect of this powerful source of organic anti-racism (Gilroy 2004; Valluvan 2019; de Noronha 2022). However, as I pointed to in [Chapter 1](#), there are also distinctions to be made between the radical potentials of convivial anti-racism and the more anodyne accounts of ‘diversity’ and multiculturalism that lend themselves to a depoliticised lens on urban life in which the racism of the state fades from view (de Noronha 2022). In this sense, we must remain vigilant about the relationship between broader conceptualisations of racism and Islamophobia and the advocating of particular strategies on the ground. The fact that an interactional framework for understanding Islamophobia shapes practices in similar ways across multiple political positions is testament to its dominance, and calls for dialogue should be situated in their specific social and political context: what do they mean in the current political climate, and where do they come from?

Resonating with Alan’s claim that ‘fear goes both ways’ in the functioning of Islamophobia, calls for dialogue take for granted that all parties are able to participate on an equal footing, reflecting the deeply liberal

assumption of ‘natural’ equality amongst rights-bearing citizens (Mills 2017). And yet, as so many accounts in this book demonstrate, this is simply not the case. There is a fundamental tension between calls for dialogue and the wider structural conditions in Britain that restrict the possibility for such dialogue. Echoing extensive research (Abbas 2021; Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2023; Amnesty International 2023), the chilling effect of the British government’s counter-terrorism agenda was made very clear across conversations with Muslim activists and community workers. Aziz’s cousin ‘got pulled in to the police because of a post that he put on Facebook’. Madiha described how the introduction of Prevent ‘shut down a lot of discussion within the community’, resulting in ‘this sense that we can’t talk about politics’. Similarly, Sultan explained how, as a lecturer in Manchester, he had witnessed the way Prevent had ‘frozen the ability’ of his Muslim students to ‘speak to certain things’. Meanwhile, Abdul talked of the censoring of Muslims through restrictions on hosting public talks, as well as the increasing pressure on charities and mosques to ‘say the right thing’ or face being ‘cut off’ from the support of local councils and police departments. Many of those I spoke to were also acutely aware of the threat of Prevent to the ability of children and young people to express themselves in educational settings: stories that had circulated in the media around the time, and which captured the absurdity of criminalising children’s speech, combined with first-hand fears of children saying the ‘wrong thing’ at school and risking referral to Prevent.³

We know, of course, that in the years since these conversations took place, this atmosphere of censorship and intimidation has only intensified (see Amnesty International 2023). As Chapter 4 demonstrates, the People’s Review of Prevent has underscored the detrimental impact of Prevent on children and young people, pointing to the urgent need to coordinate more ‘joined up’ action against systems that not only diminish the capacity of young people to engage openly in political discussions, but reproduce carceral logics and harms. At the same time, the British government’s attack on civil liberties more broadly continues apace, so that individuals, organisations and movements at odds with governmental domestic and foreign policy are increasingly accused of ‘extremism’, including when it comes to critiquing Prevent (see Jenkins et al. 2022; Rights and Security International 2022). The logical conclusion of this trend led to a Conservative government policy of non-engagement with, and threats of criminalisation towards, the largest representative body for Muslims in Britain, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) (Sabbagh 2021). It is worth noting here that the MCB is hardly radical. It garnered legitimacy through New Labour, its establishment in 1997 representing a ‘formalisation of British Muslim identity politics’, with its main focus being liberal claims to inclusion (Elshayyal 2018: 106).

Both the first-hand accounts and broader political trends outlined above cast a new light on calls for mutual exchange. Encounters not with individual bigots, but with various institutions and arms of the British state, point to the ways in which the ability to speak and to respond, even in ways that might only (or at least) attend to the symptoms and wounds of Islamophobia, become radically curtailed for Muslim populations living in Britain. Calls for dialogue emerge from a liberal attachment to notions of political ‘debate’ and free speech. The point here is not to advocate for a wholesale rejection of such values, but to recognise the deeply racialised core of liberalism (Mills 2017) in conjunction with the present reality, which shows that in the context of the continuing ‘war on terror’, freedom of expression and the ability to engage in mutual dialogue are differentially distributed. As Arun Kundnani (2007: 168) writes:

What was never acknowledged [by the architects of the ‘war on terror’], was that it was specific communities, designated as ‘suspect’, that were having their liberties removed in order that other communities could be offered the pretence of security. If the cost of the ‘war on terror’ was a rebalancing of liberty and security, it was a cost that was unequally distributed between different groups.

As the spaces for public speech – never mind dissent – are increasingly closed off to Muslims in Britain, our strategies for resistance may have to contend with this and move beyond anodyne calls for dialogue across difference.

The punitive reflex and Islamophobic ‘hate crime’

Another challenge comes when we consider the punitive reflexes that emerge in well-established organised responses to Islamophobia. I have suggested that those deemed ‘fearful’ rather than racist are understood to require more exposure to Muslims – albeit the right ‘kind’ of Muslims – but this is often accompanied by carceral logics and practices aimed at those who are considered ‘too far gone’ or to have ‘gone too far’. Outside anti-fascist approaches of direct confrontation, the ‘real racists’ require the full force of the law. This was most obvious in my own discussions with activists and community workers in the consistent reference to Islamophobic ‘hate crime’. In fact, the precipitous rise of a hate-crime-related vocabulary and infrastructure in Britain offers a useful terrain on which to explore the hegemony of interactional understandings of Islamophobia and racism more widely, but also the ways in which these sustain harmful state practices that hinder a properly anti-racist response to rising Islamophobia.

Hate crime is defined by the Police and Crown Prosecution Service in the following way:

Any criminal offence which is perceived by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by hostility or prejudice, based on a person's disability or perceived disability; race or perceived race; or religion or perceived religion; or sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation or transgender identity or perceived transgender identity. (Crown Prosecution Service 2024)

Many of those I spoke to used the term 'hate crime' routinely, suggesting that it is now a taken-for-granted way of framing and responding to experiences of racialised violence and harassment. Moreover, I heard about a range of infrastructural measures across multiple organisations and sites that had been introduced under the rubric of tackling hate crime; for example, a number of third-sector organisations that individuals worked or volunteered for were designated hate crime reporting centres. Others were involved with, or reported on, a number of campaigns that focused on raising awareness of and improving the reporting of hate crime, or described participation from community organisations in the development of national policy around hate crime.

These shifts are reflective of what John Burnett (2013: 13) has identified as a 'hate crime agenda'. The emergence and consolidation of this hate crime agenda over the past twenty-five years in Britain has in part been facilitated by a lethal combination of government policy, dwindling resources and an increasingly competitive funding environment for third-sector organisations. One brief account from Akbar demonstrates the impact of the Equality Act on the work of third-sector organisations. Introduced in 2010, the Act reflected a broader governmental approach to equalities that (reflecting the concept of hate crime) mandated organisations to address a range of 'protected characteristics' including age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

[The] most recent change as I says was the Equality Act 2010, which then, you know, we changed our name because it wasn't just about race in terms of the work that we done, originally it was all about race and how do you support individuals with racism or discrimination from the race aspect, then now we're into the nine protected characteristics, so therefore we had to change the name to, to the acts and also in terms of the work that we do so we do work with, if needed, with all the nine characteristics, resources allowing.

A cursory look at this organisation's annual reports over the years tells a similar story, with the organisation reorienting itself over the course of the 2000s away from monitoring and campaigning against racism

specifically, and towards a substantially wider remit to incorporate a range of inequalities. At the time of our conversation, Akbar explained how the organisation that he headed up had begun to focus much more on work supporting victims of hate crime, whether that be signposting them to other relevant organisations, or supporting them in reporting incidents to the police.

This new imperative for third-sector organisations to prioritise hate crime as part of a broader drive to widen their remit across various '(in) equalities' has been compounded by an acute lack of resources and a highly competitive funding environment in which, to use the words of one third-sector worker I spoke to, organisations have to pander to the 'flavour of the month' in order simply to survive.

I think that, to be fair to the government, whether it's a good decision or not, they are short of money to give to voluntary organisations and third sector organisations, and so to be in receipt of that money you kind of need to be doing things which are aligned with their policies and objectives, and at the moment that kind of flavour is about community cohesion and hate crimes and ... Islamophobia is big and people do recognise that and so if we're working to kind of combat that under the auspice of community cohesion, the government is up for supporting that ... it does depend what the flavour of the month is, so we can't always be as holistic in our approach as we would like to be.

While many of those working in the third sector emphasised the ways in which wider funding priorities dictated the work of their organisations, others I spoke to were much more critical of these shifts, identifying a definite dilution of anti-racist politics in the move towards tackling hate crime. Ruksana, involved in migrant solidarity work in Glasgow, was clear: 'before we used to talk about all these things as racism. You know we never used to talk about faith-based crime or this hate crime or that hate crime.' Taking seriously the ubiquity of the hate crime agenda, including its widely used vocabulary and well-established infrastructures across both Manchester and Glasgow, we desperately need to ask: what function is this framework serving? Does it help or hinder the development of an anti-racist account of Islamophobia?

First, the rapid rise of the hate crime agenda should be considered part of a much longer story of the strategic containment and incorporation of radical anti-racist politics by the British state (Shafi and Nagdee 2022). The logical conclusion of a decades-long shift from an anti-racism 'from below' to a state-led anti-racism 'from above' has emerged as follows: appeals for protection from racist 'hate' are now channelled almost exclusively towards the police and criminal justice system – the very

apparatus of British state racism (Shafi and Nagdee 2022). In this way, the hate crime agenda functions as ‘both punitive and symbolic’ (Burnett 2013: 13), relying on popular investments in punishment as well as a wider shift (back) towards a politics of law and order in recent years (see Bhattacharyya et al. 2021). Tackling hate crime offers the appearance of anti-racism, a kind of anti-racist alibi, as long as racism is viewed as an individual aberration that demands a punitive response. And as long as it does, the state’s role in sustaining racialised violence on multiple scales (from the ‘everyday’ to the structural) will remain obscured. The account of the Scottish government’s ‘Dear racists’ campaign in [Chapter 1](#) offers one flavour of this trend.

Furthermore, the infrastructure of the hate crime agenda, from designated reporting centres to the police-endorsed ‘hate crime awareness week’, ensures an uncritical proximity of policing and the criminal justice system to racially minoritised communities, victims of racialised violence and anti-racist activists. The space for critiquing the state’s role in reproducing Islamophobia via the surveillance and securitisation of Muslim communities – and indeed the repercussions for street-level violence of constructing Muslims as a ‘suspect community’ – becomes increasingly squeezed as organisations work alongside the police in monitoring, reporting and punishing hate crime.

Testament to this are reports from some activists of the ‘extreme determination’ of local police forces to build relationships with Muslim organisations as well as the difficulties this has presented for working across different organisations to challenge Prevent, particularly in Scotland (see [Chapter 1](#)). As previously discussed, this is compounded by an increasing reliance on the state for dwindling third-sector funding, which engenders a further reluctance to ‘rock the boat’, as one activist described. In such a context, it is clear that campaigns and projects that focus on ‘tackling hate crime’ offer an uncontroversial and well-funded avenue to pursue ostensibly anti-racist work. Nevertheless, they not only fail to address but actually risk sustaining the wider structural conditions driving Islamophobia. The dilution of explicitly anti-racist work alongside the ‘flattening out’ of Islamophobia through the pressures to address a plethora of ‘protected characteristics’ further diminishes the potential for critical reflection, never mind radical critique. The symbiosis between liberal and *illiberal* articulations of Islamophobia (Mondon and Winter 2017) is obscured through this punitive reflex, and the wider paradox remains: ‘the rhetorical commitment to stamp out racism has emerged at exactly the same time as a reinvigorated commitment to deal with, criminalise and discipline “race”’ (Burnett 2013: 16).

Conclusion

How we think about racism has profound implications for how we respond to it. Fighting racism requires, as the great A. Sivanandan reminds us:

an organic relation between theory and practice – a relationship that takes in the general (state, society, economy etc.) and the particular (the individual, the community etc.) both at once, moving between the two levels – seeing the general in the particular and the particular in the general. (Sivanandan quoted in Gordon 2014: 2)

As this chapter has sought to highlight, an overemphasis on the interactional and interpersonal can lead to myopic perspectives, obscuring the role of the state in Islamophobia, but also the ways in which Islamophobia percolates at different scales and across different political registers. Fear and (un)familiarity were central features in the accounts of those I spoke to; more ambiguous was how this fear was ascribed to particular constituencies, its framing as variously legitimate/illegitimate, and the perceived role of too little or too much exposure to cultural difference as the source of Islamophobia.

It comes as no surprise that the conceptual frameworks that many activists and community workers instinctively reached for were ones undergirded by liberal registers that have long dominated popular conceptions of racism and mainstream attempts at ‘anti-racism’. But these become particularly problematic (and indeed slippery) when combined with recently reinvigorated and deeply racialised discourses around class. The challenge for the left, as I have demonstrated, is to untangle genuine experiences of classed dispossession, exploitation and abandonment and to resituate them in relation to the state – and state racism – at the current conjuncture. Projects and campaigns that focus on representations of Muslims, on building individual resilience in the face of relentless Islamophobia, on facilitating mutual dialogue across different communities and perspectives, and on punishing instances of ‘hate’ all emerge from wider conditions that, in conjunction with conceptualisations, render particular practical responses to Islamophobia especially appealing or viable. These conditions, as the latter half of the chapter began to explore, include the perceived failures of social movement struggles, and the realities of third-sector funding structures and dwindling resources, as well as a broader authoritarian impulse that has been consolidated by and through the British state in recent years.

By introducing an analysis of how liberal discourses sustain Islamophobia, and bringing this to bear on our understanding of more ‘illiberal’ articulations, we can see how a fixation on, for instance, ‘the burqa’ or ‘Islamic terrorism’ cannot be understood in isolation from, on the one hand,

expressions of biological racism (as in neo-Nazi organisations), but, on the other, a wider liberal agenda that codifies categories of ‘extreme’ and ‘moderate’ into law and policy via counter-terrorism legislation. At the centre of this intersection lies the racialisation of Muslims. This racialisation is complex and sophisticated, differs from (but also overlaps with) other forms of race-making, and requires a careful and considered response that moves beyond a binary view of ‘racists’ versus ‘non-racists’. An uncritical deployment of liberal understandings and approaches to Islamophobia obscures these conditions and relations of power, leaving intact the very structures that sustain Islamophobia, and damaging our collective capacity to respond adequately and sensitively to it in our current moment.

Notes

- 1 In a 2018 column in the right-wing *Telegraph* newspaper, Boris Johnson referred to Muslim women who wear the burqa as resembling ‘letterboxes’ and ‘bank robbers’, leading to a surge in Islamophobic attacks targeting Muslim women in particular (Parveen 2019).
- 2 See the introduction for a more detailed discussion of the development of state integrationism and its impact on Muslim communities in Britain.
- 3 Two examples in particular were referred to in discussions. In one case, nursery staff threatened to report a four-year-old child to authorities after he drew a picture of his father cutting up a cucumber and was misheard pronouncing ‘cucumber’ as ‘cooker bomb’ (Quinn 2016). In another case, a ten-year-old child was reportedly referred to police for misspelling ‘terraced house’ as ‘terrorist house’. While police at the time denied that this was the sole reason for the child being referred to authorities, they also conceded that ‘no concerns were identified, and no further action was required by any agency’ (BBC News 2016).

3

Islamophobia and/on the British left: Muslim activists as ‘racialised outsiders’

Introduction

The last two chapters have offered a broad-brush critique of tendencies in anti-racist thinking and ‘doing’, including the ways in which they pertain to Islamophobia as a specific modality of racism. In this chapter, I develop these critiques with a tighter focus on the relationship between Islamophobia and the British left. I begin by unpacking an apparent ambivalence on the part of non-Muslim activists in talking about and challenging Islamophobia, and address the omission of Islamophobia as an issue from left agendas and organising spaces. Foregrounding the first-hand experiences of Muslim activists, I go on to interrogate the persistence of Islamophobia *on* the left, including its explicit reproduction by non-Muslim left activists. Connecting with themes of left nationalism and the liberal roots of Islamophobia in other chapters, the discussion reveals how Islamophobia interacts with discourses around gender and sexuality to ensure its reproduction across multiple political registers.

Reflecting a concern for organising practices that runs throughout the book, the chapter moves on to consider how we might think about the *role* of Muslim activists on the British left today, drawing on Satnam Virdee’s (2014) concept of the ‘racialised outsider’. Muslim activists’ ‘everyday’ confrontations with forms of structural Islamophobia combine with forms of political education forged through participation in left movements to offer them a unique analysis of contemporary Islamophobia. As we will see, the experiences *and* analyses of Muslim leftists therefore place them in a particular relationship with the wider British left, and a unique position from which to challenge Islamophobia. While the accounts in this chapter point to crucial historical and contemporary resources for crafting a more properly anti-racist response to Islamophobia, they also raise challenging questions about the potential for solidarity-building in the current moment.

Islamophobia and the left: ambivalence and omission

As the [previous chapter](#) began to demonstrate, the British left – broadly speaking – has failed to get to grips with the complexities of Islamophobia as a form of racism. The reinvigoration of the category of the ‘white working class’, and the embrace of this by certain sections of the left, has contributed to ambivalent responses to Islamophobia from often well-intentioned activists voicing classed grievances alongside anti-racist commitments. Furthermore, the dominance of liberal understandings of racism has muddied the waters for activists (or, to use the words of one, ‘blurred the boundaries’), obscuring the role of the state and making it even harder to identify Islamophobia’s discursive tendencies across different domains.

But beyond the evidence that some non-Muslim activists were struggling to navigate the ‘slipperiness’ of Islamophobia and its relationship to race and racism, there was also a broader sense amongst Muslim activists that Islamophobia was simply not an issue that the ‘white left’ is interested in organising around, at least not in any sustained way. For some, this was chalked up to the overwhelming whiteness of the left, particularly in Glasgow. Aziz’s experience organising with a radical grassroots organisation in the city was testament to this feeling. Born and raised in Glasgow, Aziz (who also identified as having Pakistani heritage) recounted his sense of not ‘belonging’ in left organising spaces dominated by what he described as ‘white, middle class people mostly from England’:

Even though I’ve spent like lots of time, a lot of my friends are like white middle class, there’s still like a kind of ... there’s so much experience that they’re unable to appreciate. Or might be sympathetic and want to understand but like there’s still like a gap there and I felt like ... yeah, like one of the things was like there’s so many Black and brown people in Glasgow and I just couldn’t see them in these organisations. Like talking to friends, they’d never heard of these organisations, they wouldn’t have anything to do with them.

However, adding to a ‘gap’ in understanding, engendered by both racialised and classed experiences, was the absence of an analysis of Islamophobia in particular, as Aziz went on to explain:

And the organisations which I feel do have that, like, radical critique of power, like say radical left migrant solidarity groups, I don’t see much from them in terms of talking about Islamophobia. I don’t think I’ve ever heard that word used once, or anti-Muslim racism, as a part of their work.

This sense of omission was palpable in accounts in Manchester too, with one activist who had been heavily involved in campaigning locally against Prevent insisting that ‘the Islamophobia thing, the anti-Muslim thing is not

a product of the anti-racist movement, it's a product of the Muslim community', and that 'the anti-racism movement hasn't been leading the [work around] Prevent, the dissection of it, the analysis of it; all the different elements has been done by Muslims ... and then taking it wider, [they have] made alliances.'

When asked whether he felt that it was an ongoing issue that the anti-racist movement did not seem to take Islamophobia seriously, Abdul agreed and suggested that it was because 'a lot of their thinking was rooted in leftist, Marxist thinking, and religion didn't come into it'. This was a reflection shared by Sultan, another activist in Manchester, who suggested that the economic reductionism of the 'white left' combined with a kind of race-blindness to place limits on coalition-building:

What it is about individuals on the white left is that they're willing to make broad coalitions, but then ... and they're fairly like ready to do that. But then when it comes to like a Muslim woman who's dressed in a full abaya, then it's like, well let's just have a quick think about this. And that kind of puts what they understand as this broad coalition under strain. I think as well it has something to do with ... I mean it's a theoretical point but it manifests itself probably ... the problems of the kind of economic reductionism of a lot of the white left, and their ignorance of their own whiteness and their identity.

These thoughtful reflections return us to the problem of ambivalent understandings of, and responses to, Islamophobia's particular articulations via notions of cultural difference. Specifically, we can consider them in light of John's discussion in [Chapter 2](#) of people's 'fears' around the burqa and his attempts to grapple with the legitimacy of such fears. I earlier argued that part of the difficulty that John and some other activists seemed to express in their accounts had to do with the availability but inadequacy of liberal frameworks for making sense of racisms, but particularly for dealing with the 'not racist/racism' (Lentin 2020) claims around Islamophobia. In other words, the fixation on identifiable racists and definitively *illiberal* Islamophobia prevents an analysis of the liberal underbelly of Islamophobia, including the ways in which it might show up even in well-meaning attempts to address 'legitimate' concerns. In addition, the increasing popularity of a kind of left nationalism, as addressed in [Chapter 1](#) (and returned to later in this chapter), adds to the difficulties in understanding Islamophobia as a form of cultural racism and as connected to other modalities of racism, colour-coded or otherwise.

It comes as no surprise that these struggles to 'get to grips' with Islamophobia might impact on the broader left's ability to take it seriously, to identify it wherever it exists and to face it head on. But moments like the one Sultan refers to – the 'let's just have a quick think about this' hesitation

of solidarity-building across difference – speak more widely to the limits of the British left’s vision of who counts as ‘the’ revolutionary subject. Theories of racial capitalism (as explained in more detail in the introduction) have offered a crucial rejoinder to the race-blindness of orthodox Marxist accounts in which the (white) industrial working class are understood as the primary agents of revolutionary change. In ‘stretching’ Marxism’s scope to consider the decisive role of colonialism and transatlantic slavery in the development of the capitalist world system, W. E. B. Du Bois (1999 [1935]), Cedric Robinson (2000 [1983]) and others writing in the Black Radical tradition recentred the revolutionary potential of the enslaved, formerly enslaved and non-white workers of the world. The results of this are summarised in Gargi Bhattacharyya’s thesis that ‘there is no pre-determined political agent who holds the key to revolutionary change’ (Bhattacharyya 2018: 12).

When it comes to Muslims, however, who often face racialised differentiation on multiple fronts (colour-coded and religious), we also have to consider what the tendencies of the anti-racist left vis-à-vis race *and* religion mean for the inclusion of Muslims in left imaginaries (and subsequently any anti-racist left project). As pointed to by Abdul’s earlier comment, and as Stuart Hall has suggested, ‘our secular sociological selves’ as well as the secular legacies of communist and socialist projects have prevented the left from a proper reckoning with the dynamics of the current conjuncture (Hall and Back 2009: 683). Beyond this, there are many more questions pertaining to secularism and Marxism, and to Islam and political subjectivity, that stretch well beyond the scope of this book. Hence, the discussion here aims to prod at the limits of the left’s attempts – or lack thereof – to organise across racialised difference rather than to present any definitive ‘solutions’. As David Roediger makes clear in his discussion of organising across difference during the initial BLM era, forms of solidarity that the left might have assumed to emerge ‘naturally’ across groups with varying aims and objectives but ostensibly similar relationships to capital did not necessarily come to fruition. He argues that ‘to comment on such matters is not to suppose that solidarities in these areas cannot or will not develop but it is to say that timing, spatial distance between groups, varied histories, and difference in the forms oppression takes can make the achievement of unity a large and long task’ (Roediger 2017: 165). Roediger insists that, rather than take it for granted, ‘we ought to be willing to make solidarity uneasy ... seeking it by owning its difficulties’ (188). As the following sections highlight, the difficulties in building solidarity around the issue of Islamophobia are multiple but not insurmountable. However, to say that Muslim activists are not able to rely on the support of many non-Muslims on the left, despite ostensibly shared political commitments, somewhat downplays the problem. As we will see, omission and ambivalence around Islamophobia not only produce

neglect of it as an issue by the left but actually facilitate the reproduction of Islamophobia in left spaces and networks. Experiences of Muslim activists (and Muslim women activists in particular) encountering Islamophobia on the left follow a long history of racism on the British left and situate them in a particular relationship vis-à-vis their non-Muslim counterparts and wider 'leftist' struggles, one that is both oppressive but also – as historical movements show – potentially generative.

Between liberalism and the 'white left': Muslim activists as 'racialised outsiders'

In addition to the omission of Islamophobia as an issue to be taken seriously, I often heard how Muslim activists struggled to find a political 'home' on the left, even while they held radical critiques of power, or had been involved in various leftist groups, initiatives and campaigns. Alisha, an anti-racist activist and Muslim woman based in Glasgow, described herself as occupying an isolating position between the radical left (whom she also referred to as the 'white left') and the more liberal-leaning Muslim-led activism in the city. I asked Alisha whether she felt that these two constituencies remained somehow separate in Glasgow, to which she replied firmly:

Completely and utterly separate. Completely separate. And it's got a lot to do with the radical left I think. Because I've been involved in the radical left and I've left those organisations a long time ago and what I found in terms of what they did, was that they, a lot of them involved Muslim organisations and Muslim people, individuals, within specific campaigns, and when that campaign finished, those people in those organisations were dropped. Rather than having an approach which involved them in all the work that they do, and kept, you know, and kept them on board ... and those organisations becoming a part of a movement. They didn't become part of a movement.

Later in our conversation, seeking more clarity on how Alisha understood her own position in relation to the radical left and the liberal Muslim-led activism that she described, I asked whether she considered herself a kind of 'bridge', to which she answered:

No, no. Because I feel like I'm excluded. Deliberately excluded from the Muslim group, because of my [radical] politics, and I'm constantly being critical of the left, for their kind of ... for what they're doing wrong ... So I feel quite isolated, somewhere in the middle.

Similarly, Aziz's earlier critiques of the omission of Islamophobia along with an absence of other Muslims in left spaces in Glasgow were accompanied by a critique of various mainstream, liberal approaches to tackling Islamophobia (summarised in his diagnosis that 'they ignore power and

structure’) as well as a reflection on the small-‘c’ conservatism of the Muslim community in Glasgow. Aziz explained how he saw very little ‘crossover’ between the ‘radical left’ and Muslim activists like himself, resonating with Alisha’s account of occupying a kind of liminal place as a Muslim on the left: a place ‘somewhere in the middle’. How can we begin to make sense of this position occupied by Muslim *leftists* in particular? Pursuing a more agential perspective, what *role* might leftist Muslims play and continue to play from this vantage point and through this specific relationship to the wider British left?

Crucially, but unfortunately, the reports outlined above form part of a much longer story of racialised exclusion on and from the British, and especially English, left. One of the most thorough accounts of this is offered by Satnam Virdee (2014) in his book *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*. In it, Virdee seeks to remedy ‘race-blind’ accounts of the ‘making, unmaking and remaking of the working class in England across two centuries’ (Virdee 2014: 8), foregrounding instead the pivotal role of race and nation in this process. While some periods were marked by a surprisingly high degree of interethnic solidarity within the English working class, others were characterised by the active participation of white workers in exclusionary forms of nationalism and outright racism. Thus, Virdee’s analysis, while emphasising that the English working class ‘was a heterogeneous, multi-ethnic formation from the moment of its inception’ (Virdee 2014: 162), also disrupts notions of any inherently anti-racist predisposition amongst the English working class and its institutions.

Emerging from these relations, and central to Virdee’s analysis, is the concept of the ‘racialised outsider’, denoting the unique position and perspective of Irish Catholic, African, Caribbean, South Asian, Arab and Jewish migrants within the English working class. These ‘racialised outsiders’, while often excluded from the imagined terrain of the nation that infected working-class politics at various historical junctures, also played a ‘catalytic’ (Virdee 2014: 45) role as activists in moments of working-class anti-racism and multiethnic solidarity. The inclusion of those who might now be considered white in this story – including notable left-wing figures from Jewish and Irish Catholic backgrounds – underscores the power of racialisation in shaping the boundaries of English working-class identity, and the way in which this was tied to an ‘expansion’ of nationhood at various points to incorporate new groups into the working class just as it inevitably excluded others.

Virdee’s sweeping historical account finishes with the institutionalisation of anti-racism in the public sector in the late 1980s. Given seismic political shifts in the intervening years, notably the ‘war on terror’ and the ways in which it has reconstituted Britain’s imagined ‘others’ (Kundnani 2007), it is not surprising that the figure of ‘the Muslim’ is broadly absent from Virdee’s

analysis of the ‘longue durée’. Nevertheless, Virdee’s work pushes us to consider how we might locate the racialisation of Muslims within a particular history of left politics. Furthermore, a consideration of the relationship between Muslim activists, Islamophobia and the British left in the current moment might also help to enrich the concept of the racialised outsider, advancing accounts of the adaptability of ‘race’ across both colour-coded and cultural boundaries.

The following sections, then, bring further empirical material from conversations with Muslim activists into dialogue with particular elements of the concept of the ‘racialised outsider’ alongside other sociological and historical accounts that help to shed light on the relationship between Muslim activists and the wider British left at the current conjuncture.

Gendered Islamophobia on the left

The ambivalence of some activists in speaking about and responding to Islamophobia sometimes felt like it shared a worrying proximity to Islamophobic logics. Discussions that veered into addressing ‘legitimate concerns’ (see [Chapter 2](#)) were a case in point. But perhaps even more concerning were reports from Muslim participants of directly encountering Islamophobia in left organising spaces and networks. These should not, of course, be understood as distinct from the aforementioned but harder-to-name discourses of ‘legitimate concerns’ in which classed grievances often sat side by side with ‘cultural’ ones. Nevertheless, an attentiveness to the gendered dimensions of these discourses helps to reveal how Islamophobia functions across the political spectrum, including through those ‘ideological vocabularies’ – a phrase I borrow from Valluvan’s (2019: 15) account of nationalisms – associated with more liberal and left tendencies, and increasingly in a way that blurs political distinctions between the two.

Thus, while some activists such as John were preoccupied with the ‘fears’ of ‘white working-class’ communities regarding the burqa and so-called ‘grooming gangs’, Muslim activists themselves were often forced to contend with various presentations of gendered Islamophobia. Islamophobic logics and practices have increasingly incorporated liberal discourses of women’s (un)freedom (Abu-Lughod 2002, 2013), ‘rights’ (Abu-Lughod 2013; Farris 2017), ‘empowerment’ (Rashid 2016) and economic integration (Farris 2017), but these are often combined with or can shift towards notions of risk, with the figure of the Muslim woman also representing a vulnerability to ‘radicalisation’ and an underlying potential to inflict violence herself (Saeed 2016; Abbas 2021). This preoccupation with the figure of the Muslim woman – and the veiled Muslim woman in particular – has deep

colonial roots, connecting to the colonial imperative to ‘unveil’ colonised women who were seen as variously helpless, sexually desirable, unknown and a potential threat to the colonial order (Fanon 1965; Said 2003 [1978]).

However, at the current conjuncture, this ‘obsession’ (Abu-Lughod 2002: 786) with the figure of the veiled Muslim woman has been expressed across the political spectrum, producing novel political alignments (Abu-Lughod 2013; Farris 2017). Crucially, it also permeates the field of the ‘everyday’. Indeed, many of the examples of Islamophobia referred to by Muslim women across both cities reflected the ordinariness of gendered Islamophobia. Of the nine Muslim women I spoke to, all had stories to share of their own, or friends and families’, encounters with Islamophobia. Most often, these accounts reflected a trepidation concerning their own or others’ visibility as Muslim women in public spaces. Sometimes people feared physical and verbal abuse, or had experienced such abuse, in ways that shaped their ability to move freely in the world. Asma, for example, an activist I spoke to who had been involved in campaigns against Prevent at her university, reflected on how she felt when she began wearing a hijab in her early twenties – a time that coincided with the Manchester Arena bombing:

I wasn’t in Manchester, which didn’t help – and for the first time I was a hijabi, so I remember being like ‘I am a visibly Muslim woman now’ ... I was considerably more worried this time about going to work the next day, and you know going around Manchester as considerably more visible. Luckily nothing happened to me, but friends – things happened to them, and you know whenever a terrorist incident happens, wherever it happens in the world, there are so many messages sent out [within the Muslim community] being like, especially women, like ‘if you’re going on public transport, be careful’. Try to avoid public transport, like stay at home if you can. Like these messages are the norm.

Madiha, another activist who – at the time of our discussion – wore a hijab, disclosed that she had been physically attacked because of her visibility as a Muslim woman. Although she did not share the details of the attack during our conversation, when I asked Madiha how she thought people generally conceptualised Islamophobia, she emphasised the rippling effects of a wider environment of Islamophobia on the day-to-day lives of Muslim women:

So I don’t think people ... I think Muslim people understand it, because it affects every part of our life. We’re very aware of it. To the point where we’re worried about what our kids say in the playground. You know I’ve had parents say to me I’m thinking about home-schooling my child, because I’m scared they’re gonna say something that’s gonna get them reported to Prevent. To the point where I’ve got a friend whose daughter is in primary school and has just started wearing a hijab, and [the mother’s] like ‘god what are people

gonna think? Like I don't want her to wear it, she wears a random colour that doesn't even go with her school uniform, so normally I'd be worried about her thinking I've got no fashion sense because I dress her so badly in different colours, but now I also have to worry about, you know, what are people gonna think about the fact that I'm forcing her to wear this?'. [The mother] had to go in and speak to the school and you know luckily she's a governor so she's quite comfortable doing that, but why should we have to? So yeah ... we live and breathe it.

I don't think wider society has any understanding. It's interesting, they recognise it when it's said. So the Boris Johnson comments, everyone recognises it was racist, and people didn't like it. But I think ... I mean it was interesting when I was at this meeting yesterday with [Labour Party MP] Diane Abbott, she said 'I don't necessarily think Islamophobia is the biggest form of racism that we're seeing, but it's the most dangerous because it's so easy to package it up as being quite liberal.' You can package it up as you're doing it on the grounds of women's rights. You can't really do that against Black people. And it's true. You know, they can package it up by saying they're concerned about the fact that I'm oppressed, and that's why they're judging the way I dress. And they want to force me to remove my headscarf, but they don't think that's a form of oppression.

As Madiha's account makes clear, gendered Islamophobia is not the sole domain of supposedly identifiable racists harassing Muslim women on the street. In Madiha's narrative, the calling out of Boris Johnson's incendiary comments on Muslim women who wear the burqa – easily recognisable to non-Muslims as unacceptably racist – is understood as exceptional within a broader trend of misunderstanding and underrecognition by 'wider society'. Similarly, the everyday anxieties that visible Muslim women in particular are forced to contend with play out against a backdrop of normalised Islamophobia in which Muslim women and girls are situated in different moments on a spectrum of 'vulnerable-fanatic' (Saeed 2016). As we see above, discussions range from worries about being perceived as *oppressive* as a Muslim parent ('forcing' a child to wear a hijab), to feeling surveilled in the school environment, to experiencing the gaze of concern from others as a visible Muslim woman. In this way, it should come as no surprise that a number of Muslim women activists reported having to navigate similar tropes within parts of the left, and it was the trope of the 'oppressed' Muslim woman in particular and, implicitly, her 'dangerous' male counterpart that seemed to resonate the most in this context. This included two Muslim women activists who had experienced Islamophobia during their time in left-wing student politics, including Fatima, who recalled being 'the only Muslim on [the] floor' at a national student union conference. Following a speech she made at the conference, she was also surprised by the reaction of her fellow union members:

After finishing it and even during lunch, a lot of people were like ‘oh you know you were really articulate up there’ and you know, ‘you know I just didn’t really imagine like as a female Muslim you could like go up there, you know that was really brave’ ... you know, it’s like the moment you speak up or show any kind of resistance it’s like ‘oh you know this is incredible’ kind of thing, so you’re not like as submissive as the media paint you out to be ... and it’s that kind of rhetoric that pushes Muslims from getting involved in it anyway.

Fatima’s account points to the ways in which notions of Muslim women as essentially oppressed or submissive circulate in ostensibly left-wing organising spaces in ways that are not only exclusionary for Muslim activists, but in keeping with the broader logics of Islamophobia that those on the left purport to challenge. We surely have to view these experiences in left spaces within the wider political and historical context outlined above, in which ostensibly progressive discourses concerning gender and liberation have joined with Islamophobic ideas concerning the oppressed (but potentially violent) Muslim woman. However, as I emphasised in [Chapter 1](#) in particular, the organised left have their own relationship with, and ‘ideological vocabulary’ (Valluvan 2019: 39) of, nationalism that might further undergird the experiences of Muslim activists on the British left.

While the veiled Muslim woman has become one of the ‘iconic figures of non-belonging’ (Valluvan 2019: 5) across the political spectrum, thus occupying a central place in debates on gendered Islamophobia, this can only be properly understood in relation to the racialised construction of her ‘dangerous’ male counterpart (Razack 2004). Beyond the patriarchal imperatives to ‘save’ Muslim women, the representation of Muslim masculinity as violent, excessive and sexually dysfunctional has been absolutely vital to the global ‘war on terror’ (Bhattacharyya 2008; Bhattacharyya et al. 2021), with long established orientalist tropes undergirding new articulations of unassailable Muslim difference. Furthermore, as Jasbir K Puar’s (2007) concept of homonationalism also demonstrates, notions of sexuality further reinforce the juxtaposition of Muslim masculinity and supposed western ideals:

In an era where enemies of the West are portrayed as lacking the ability to gain pleasure from even the most straightforward of heterosexual relations, western culture is presented as tolerant and attentive to more diverse methods of showing love and experiencing pleasure. The alleged sexual dysfunction that is attributed to extremists and terrorists becomes contrasted with the supposedly healthy attitude to sexuality that characterises free societies. (Bhattacharyya 2008: 6)

Such racialised and gendered constructions of Muslim men as essentially threatening and invariably sexually deviant have also played out in more

parochial British settings in recent years. The racialised moral panic of ‘Pakistani’ or ‘Muslim’ ‘grooming gangs’ (Pakistani and Muslim often used interchangeably alongside ‘Asian’) haunting Britain’s streets emerged in the wake of the Rotherham and Rochdale ‘grooming scandals’, but has taken on a particularly powerful force in its resonance with wider representations of Muslim masculinity in the context of the war on terror, as well as differently racialised but overlapping moral panics concerning Black men and ‘gang’ violence (Bhattacharyya et al. 2021). In Rochdale and Rotherham, two towns in the north of England, the discovery and subsequent investigation of wide-scale sexual abuse and exploitation of local girls was refracted through a deeply racialised lens by both media and politicians (Tufail 2015; Cockbain and Tufail 2020).

As such, it is not surprising that the topic of so-called ‘grooming gangs’ presented itself in conversations with some activists. Alongside John’s discussion of the burqa (see [Chapter 2](#)), he also raised the topic of ‘grooming’, linking it explicitly to the questions of the far right and anti-racism. On the one hand, John was quick to note that the issue of ‘grooming’ had been taken up, exaggerated and weaponised by far-right activist Tommy Robinson in order to stoke his ‘racial civil war’ rhetoric, as John described it. In contrast, far from being a problem linked to any one religion, John felt that the perpetrators of this kind of sexual violence were ‘probably doing it in defiance of the Muslim faith’. At the same time, John suggested that there had been some ‘controversy’ within the anti-racist movement concerning the issue of ‘grooming’, and emphasised his view that:

There should be no equivocation in condemning sexual abuse of any kind by anyone, and there should be no excusing it because of who’s involved in it or anything like that. And if there is any evidence of that, that’s something that’s been a problem, I believe, and we should openly say that.

John’s emphasis on ‘not equivocating’, which is a phrase he repeatedly used, reflects a narrative reproduced in official reports as well as the mainstream media that authorities in Rotherham and Rochdale failed to address the problem of child sexual exploitation properly for fear of being labelled ‘racist’ (Tufail 2015). While John attempted to deracialise the issue of grooming through his suggestion of an ‘even-handed approach’ to this serious social problem, the suggestion that the *accusation* of racism functioned to protect the perpetrators is part of a wider framing of the issue, reproduced as much by liberal commentators and politicians, that understands ‘Muslim culture’ to be a driver of sexual violence and an inability or unwillingness to name this as a factor in its perpetuation (Cockbain and Tufail 2020). Moreover, this culturalist framing has tended to neglect the role of structural factors that play a major role in child sexual exploitation and abuse, including poverty, institutional failures, and a broader culture

of sexism and victim blaming in Britain (Valluvan 2019; Cockbain and Tufail 2020). Thus, John's insistence on 'not equivocating' fails to reckon with the ways in which the spectre of the 'Muslim' or 'Asian' grooming gang functions as a deeply racialised moral panic (Bhattacharyya et al. 2021). Paradoxically, it obscures the sexualised and gendered dimensions of Islamophobia, and the ambivalence that follows is readily transformed into a culturalist framing of Muslim deviance and depravity that now forms the basis of 'legitimate concerns' of 'white working-class communities' whom the left continues to fail. In this framework, Islamophobia morphs from a phenomenon that requires careful consideration and collective resistance to a buzzword that prevents the left from seeing clearly and acting decisively.

The 'second sight' of Muslims on the British left

As previously mentioned, Virdee's account of the racialised outsider moves beyond the experience of exclusion or outsider status to explore the ways in which racialised outsiders helped to sustain a 'current of proletarian internationalism' (Virdee 2014: 164) on the left. Virdee (2014, 2017) makes clear that the collective memory of colonialism, along with the experience of racism in the 'imperial core', provided this particular set of actors with 'a privileged epistemological standpoint ... [that] helped them to see through the usual fog of blood, soil and belonging' (Virdee 2017: 13), which they then brought to bear through their participation in radical struggles. Crucially, according to Virdee, this 'second sight' did not emerge necessarily or solely from lived experience. Drawing on Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (originally published in 1903), Virdee (2017: 2403) makes clear:

[S]uch a condition generated no necessary collective resistance in and of itself. In fact, W. E. B. Du Bois drew our attention long ago to how, with regard to the racialisation of African Americans, the weight of such structural oppression could just as easily contribute to destructive forms of symbolic violence and the internalisation of racism, of 'always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity'. And such a mental state contributed, more often than not, to a state of submission not resistance, a resigned acceptance to one's given lot in life.

It was the combination of experiences of oppression and engagement with a politics of socialist internationalism at various historical junctures that provided racialised outsiders with a particular analysis and unique position as catalysts of anti-racism within struggles for working-class emancipation in Britain. I return to this important point in the following section, but here I want to consider how first-hand experiences – especially with the

machinations of the British state – might at least contribute to an ability to ‘see through the fog’ of Islamophobic discourses and practices: to see with more clarity where otherwise there might be ambivalence and omission.

We can consider this in relation to the experiences of Muslim women discussed above. Reflecting the contentions of Black feminists who have long argued for the embodied knowledge that emerges from first-hand experiences of oppression (Collins 2000), Muslim women come to recognise and know Islamophobia partly – to quote Madiha – because they ‘live and breathe it’. More specifically, their encounters with the intersection of the harms of state surveillance and deeply gendered liberal discourses of ‘saving’ Muslim women and girls from their own culture (which paradoxically positions them as bearers as much as victims of that culture – see Rashid (2016)) grants them a unique perspective not afforded to, in Madiha’s words, ‘wider society’.

As I cover throughout other chapters in this book, many Muslim individuals I spoke to shared accounts of the British counter-terrorism regime, ranging from local communities facing counter-terrorism raids (see [Chapter 1](#)) to the impact of Prevent on the ability to host public talks and engage in open debates in university settings (see [Chapter 2](#); see the introduction for a more detailed discussion of Prevent as a policy). Often, these experiences informed their own understanding of and approach to Islamophobia in important ways. These connections are clear in Madiha’s account outlined in the previous section, but others I spoke to shared a similar healthy scepticism – if not a sociological analysis – that emerged at least in part through their personal encounters with counter-terrorism policies. A key example of this came from Aziz who, in describing his own critique of the police’s role in counter-terrorism – and therefore his confusion at the proactive approach of certain Muslim-led organisations to build relationships with local police forces – draws on a personal experience:

They [the police] would be a part of implementing Prevent ... they would be a part of referring people on to an anti- or deradicalisation course. Because yeah my cousin got pulled in to the police because of a post that he put on Facebook and they were chatting to him about that, and they let him go, but it kind of made clear to me that yeah, like Strathclyde police are just as much a part of the – or do similar things to the police in England, in terms of demonising Muslims.

Furthermore, this proximity to the mechanisms of counter-terrorism (albeit through a family member) works not only to connect the everyday with the structural in Aziz’s analysis, but also to unsettle any claims of civic and national exceptionalism in Scotland of the kind discussed in [Chapter 1](#). An understanding of the centrality of the counter-terrorism apparatus to the reproduction of Islamophobia shifts the conversation away from differences

in the ‘attitudes’ of people in Scotland towards shared institutional features: in this case, the continuities of counter-terrorism policies across Britain that are designed to target Muslims.

In other words, the Muslim activists I spoke to who had witnessed or experienced the (often glaring) injustices of counter-terrorism practices were able to draw on these experiences to make better sense of the wider functioning of Islamophobia, and to draw connections between everyday Islamophobia and particular state institutions. Those activists who incorporated their encounters with state power into their understandings of Islamophobia might be understood as helping to ‘stretch’ the way in which Islamophobia is understood to operate, often unsettling particular place-based assumptions along the way.

In addition to first-hand experience, in Virdee’s (2017: 2403) analysis of a ‘second sight’, ‘collective memories of colonial subjugation’ were powerful ingredients in the ability of racialised outsiders to unsettle and challenge the inculcation of nationalist forms of belonging amongst their socialist counterparts. A similar kind of collective memory was recognisable across a number of conversations with Muslim activists I spoke to, with several recounting family members passing on stories of injustice and colonial oppression in ways that shaped their political outlook as adults. For example, early on in our discussion, Alisha had casually mentioned that her anti-racism ‘comes naturally’. Seeking some clarification on what she meant by this, I asked whether she meant that her experience as a woman from an ethnic minority background had granted her a kind of anti-racist predisposition. She agreed, but this was soon followed by a much more nuanced reflection on her upbringing:

When I was growing up, I’m not really sure where my politics came from. Well I do actually, I know it comes from my dad, because he was very knowledgeable about what was going on in the world. Totally, totally no formal education whatsoever, and his English was terrible, but he ... whenever the news was on it was always like *World in Action*, *Panorama*, the *News at Six*, the *News at Ten*, the news whenever it was on, so I was always there watching and he always, he kind of ... he used to tell us stories, the kids, me and my brothers, about India, the partition, about Palestine, about Egypt, the politics there, and I think I was the only one in the family that was interested, so I learnt my politics from him. And I suppose my values. I think seeing that injustice and seeing what the West did to the Middle East and to the Indian subcontinent, I saw that as injustice.

Ruksana shared a similar reflection, recounting a long story that her mother had told her about her encounters with British soldiers as a child in Taxila (a city in modern-day Pakistan) under British colonial rule. Her maternal grandfather, Ruksana said, had warned her mother about ‘the colour of these

people': 'but what he meant was beware of what the British are like. So they had a great sense of like what colonialism had done in terms of taking over their country. That to me has, to this day still has, resonances for the work that I do here.' Accounts such as these point to a much more dynamic and holistic way in which people's anti-racist outlooks and commitments were and are formed. Of course, we can also think about these stories of politicisation through collective memory alongside instances in which experiences of colonial subjugation did not necessarily engender radical perspectives or commitments, such as Espo's suggestion that there were generational differences that saw 'many of the older Muslim generation, perhaps first-generation migrants not born here in the UK, feel indebted to Britain for "saving them" and "providing a life"', producing a 'misplaced gratitude' and a subsequent reluctance to 'rock the boat'. Espo's erudite diagnosis of the legacies of colonial rule and its impact on the capacities for resistance within Britain's Muslim communities points us to the limits of assuming that experiences of oppression 'naturally' or necessarily produce forms of collective resistance. Testament to this are the ways in which radical anti-racism was strategically co-opted and contained by the British state from the early 1980s (Shafi and Nagdee 2022), in particular through the appointment of 'ethnic representatives' who 'entered into a pact with the authorities' that saw them collude in suppressing local resistance in exchange for maintaining their own power within communities (Kundnani 2007: 46–47). Importantly, this resembled a 'colonial arrangement' in which the distribution of government funding for 'ethnicity'-based projects was wielded to break up radical multiethnic coalitions and to stifle any criticism from community leaders themselves (Kundnani 2007: 47; Shafi and Nagdee 2022). Thus, it was not only the psychic internalisation of colonial relations by members of subjugated communities now settled in Britain, but also the importation of structures of colonial domination, that worked to limit collective anti-racist resistance.

Nevertheless, as Virdee's 'second sight' suggests, the availability of certain frameworks for making sense of collective memories of colonial subjugation and experiences of racism in the 'imperial core' can help to engender a distinctly different and more radical outlook. That is to say, while personal experience is important, it is only in conjunction with forms of political education that it comes to sustain a particular analysis of Islamophobia.

Political education of Muslim leftists: legacies of British Black Power

Radical currents of anti-racism swept the UK from the late 1960s until the early 1980s, the most influential of which was British Black Power, an umbrella term for a movement that included a plethora of organisations

and activist groups. Crucially, British Black Power was in part characterised by its commitment to political Blackness, in which Black was a political rather than phenotypical signifier, pointing to a collective experience of racist oppression under British colonial rule and subsequently within Britain itself. Thus, political Blackness underlined a global, anti-imperialist outlook as much as a politics of solidarity amongst non-white people within Britain (Narayan 2019). At least for a period, and notwithstanding serious cleavages around gender and sexuality, British Black Power sustained the kinds of multiethnic anti-racist coalitions that have become almost unthinkable today. Perhaps most relevant for the focus of our discussion here is the Asian Youth Movements (AYMs), which saw second-generation South Asian young people embrace a politically Black identity to join forces with other communities in the fight against the racism of the streets and the British state (Ramamurthy 2013).

Of course, the transformative potential of such a broad-based, anti-imperialist, anti-racist movement was plain to see. From 1981, following the uprisings that swept cities across the country, the British state moved towards a concerted 'strategy of containment and incorporation' (Shafi and Nagdee 2022: 42). This involved violent police repression as part of a shift towards a broader politics of 'law and order', which not only targeted movements directly but also emerged as a way of 'managing' the broader crisis of authority that had unravelled through the postwar period (Hall et al. 2013 [1978]). Alongside more coercive measures, state multiculturalism saw the introduction of new funding regimes that apportioned resources according to different 'ethnic' communities, breaking up networks and coalitions in the process. Thus, British anti-racism was transformed from a multiethnic, militant, grassroots movement 'from below' to a state-sanctioned exercise with an emphasis on managing 'cultural difference' (Kundnani 2007; Shafi and Nagdee 2022).

Whilst political Blackness has now been rendered broadly 'unintelligible' (Shafi and Nagdee 2022: 34), and the politicisation of 'Muslimness' has changed the contours of anti-racist work (Kundnani 2007; Ramamurthy 2013), this period of intense anti-racist activity contains important insights for a critical conversation on Islamophobia and the British left. Moreover, it offers an indication of the particular frameworks that have helped activists to make better sense of the dynamics of Islamophobia in the current moment, as well as their own place in these relations of power.

Notably, several activists cited legacies of British Black Power as having a significant influence on their own approach to Islamophobia, both conceptually and practically. This was particularly the case amongst activists in Manchester, with references to various local and national movements and organisations that fell under the broad umbrella of British Black Power.

Sultan, for example, had been involved in an organisation that focused on policing, including campaigning against police violence and the overpolicing of racially minoritised communities in the city. He described how histories and legacies of British Black Power played a decisive role in the approach of the organisation:

You know there are people that come from a particular Black Power tradition that have inputted into the organisation, or who were around when political blackness was an important anti-racist term in the seventies and eighties. You know, there is people like myself and one or two other people who are shaped around the politics of like the Asian Youth Movement in the seventies and eighties. Other people that were coming from socialist anti-fascism. You know not to say like the Asian Youth Movement and the Black Power movement weren't socialist in orientation, they absolutely were. I mean the Asian Youth Movement were primarily funded by the Indian Workers' Association anyway. But more like in terms of like, you know they were primarily from the white left, or white working-class communities, and so yeah they were like massively, massively important.

Later on in our discussion, Sultan explained how traditions of Black self-organisation provided not only analytical resources for making sense of racism and Islamophobia, but – as in the description above – had a direct influence on the strategic direction of the organisation, with activists from London-based ‘monitoring’ groups (with roots in the politics of British Black Power) contributing to initial organising meetings.¹ In Sultan's account, there was a strong sense of how such influences came to shape organising practices on the ground in conjunction with personal experiences, and Sultan was clear that his own encounters with racism in a ‘primarily white working-class industrial town’ as opposed to a more ‘urban, metropolitan environment’ were an equally important part of the holistic way in which a particular analysis came to be adopted by himself and fellow activists.

In perhaps the most explicit example of the link between radical anti-racist histories and the work of Muslim activists today, Abdul (who, as mentioned previously, had spent time in recent years organising in Manchester to challenge Prevent), explained how his involvement in the Black housing movement in the 1980s allowed him to ‘see racism within Prevent’. In a discussion around the work of local councils, Abdul expressed his frustration that, unlike the Muslim community in Manchester, many council workers failed to recognise the racism that characterises this controversial government policy. Crucially, in making his point, Abdul linked the impact of Prevent on Muslim families – where the weaponisation of social work has been part of the nexus of ‘counter-terrorism’ (see Kapoor 2018) – with arguments made by the Black housing movement:

You have to keep reminding society about how things have happened in the past. So I can remember in the late eighties and nineties, when Black people were targeted by social workers. And part of that Black housing movement – there was the first Black director of social services who called out the whole social work industry, for stigmatising and taking Black people, and Black kids into care, because they were seen as needing protection. So that level of debate is lost because the people involved in councils are not the people who've been grounded in anti-racism work in the past.

Indeed, the Black housing movement was certainly a movement that embraced political Blackness (Harrison 1995), and Sivanandan (1982: 6) goes so far as to suggest that it was primarily around the shared experience of discrimination in the housing sector 'that black self-organisation and self-reliance grew, unifying the respective communities'. Abdul's own involvement in the Black housing movement as a South Asian man is further testament to the multiethnic coalition that cohered around structural racism and demands for improved material conditions in certain sectors, including housing, education and employment (Sivanandan 1990). For Abdul, his involvement in the Black housing movement of this period not only influenced his ability to 'see' the racism at the heart of Prevent, but was also the source of his opposition to the policy 'from the beginning' and within his own workplace, where he ultimately refused to manage the Prevent programme when asked to do so.

The influence of histories of radical anti-racism on Muslim activists in Glasgow was much more limited. The causes of this geographical disparity warrant much more sociological attention, extending beyond the scope of the discussion here. It might be summarised, however, by Raj's claim that, after cutting his teeth in anti-racist movements in London in the 1980s, he moved to Glasgow to find that the city was, in his words, 'ten or twenty years behind London' in terms of anti-racist organising. This was in part, in Raj's view, a matter of demographics: 'the numbers' (of Black and brown people) were simply 'not there'. These sorts of reflections are, in my view, testament to the comparative lack of action in Glasgow during the decades that were animated by the rapid rise and lasting influence of British Black Power in many major English cities.² Indeed, this is a view shared in one of the very few academic articles addressing the existence of historical anti-racism in Scotland, in which Anne Dunlop (1993: 93) argues that it is 'difficult to trace a parallel process' of growing Black self-organisation in Scotland to that which was witnessed in England from the 1970s.

This being said, there was one organisation in Glasgow that came up in multiple conversations about radical anti-racist legacies, and which appears too in Dunlop's article. The Scottish Asian Action Committee (SAAC), which Raj referred to as the 'one group ... in those days that was

doing anything remotely radical', was established in the early 1980s and appears to have been active for at least a decade (see Dunlop 1993). Initially launched on the back of a campaign challenging a particular instance of racism in the Scottish judicial system, the work of SAAC evolved to focus on researching and campaigning against racism in the areas of housing and education and in the interests of the city's South Asian community, but also, as Dunlop (1993: 96) notes, on '[placing] racism on the Scottish political agenda'. Discussions with activists revealed the ideological persuasions of SAAC, and the longer-term – albeit limited – impact of the organisation's analysis on the more recent work of particular activists and organising in Glasgow. Bob, an ex-Labour councillor who had been involved in SAAC during its earlier years, told me that the Indian Workers' Association (IWA) were 'running the show'. It was, according to his account, 'largely run [in a] more communistic way', which – Bob being more of a 'Labour man' – led to his eventually 'disassociating' from the organisation. Interestingly, Dunlop's account of SAAC chimes with this state of affairs, with a number of Muslim organisations breaking away from SAAC in 1983 because of disagreements over its claims of endemic racism in Scotland. It follows that an organisation made up of activists from the IWA would end up pursuing a more radical agenda; the IWA was, as many have noted, one of the foremost Black Marxist organisations in Britain throughout the 1970s and 1980s and had a significant influence on other organisations embracing the politics of British Black Power (Sivanandan 1990; Ramamurthy 2013). Crucially, the IWA sought to assert the importance of race and Black self-organisation in the class struggle against a Eurocentric, class-reductionist 'white metropolitan Left' (Sivanandan 1990: 79). That the broader labour movement in Glasgow found themselves at odds with SAAC's analysis, then, is hardly surprising.

The legacy of SAAC's radical approach was nonetheless felt amongst individual activists despite such fractures, with Ruksana explaining how the work of the organisation provided her with a particular 'analysis' of racism. In Ruksana's words, before working with members of SAAC, she 'had a sense of what the inequalities were but ... didn't really have an analysis'. At the time of our conversation, Ruksana was heavily involved in work supporting migrants in Glasgow, and went on to describe how SAAC had provided a model for running an anti-racist organisation with a focus on institutional discrimination but a strong connection to affected communities – a model that she continued to put into action in her own work:

Ruksana: There was no doubt about it that what they had done in particularly the eighties was pivotal to what went after that. I certainly learnt a lot and I don't think I've forgotten the lessons that you have to

kind of understand the constructs of racism and how it operates and the insidious way that it operates.

Scarlet: So do you see some of those continuities between the work that that committee did and the work that you do now –

Ruksana: Absolutely.

Scarlet: – in [your organisation]?

Ruksana: Yeah, the model is very much to do with: do the case work, learn how the client is affected and then challenge the policymakers or the government or speak about it at a policy level.

Scarlet: Yeah, that's interesting that there's that thread there.

Ruksana: Yeah, but if you don't know what's happening on the ground, first-hand, if you can't see it, feel it, touch that, then it's ... your policy is really dry, it's not easy to try and translate it. I'm not dismissing, you know, policymaking in general, but you can certainly challenge government policy, like the asylum process. And you can certainly challenge the way racism happens, and show that it can happen in an education context, or it can happen in a housing context, and that it has to be addressed.

These histories of radical, Black-led anti-racism, and the ways in which the politics of British Black Power ripples through the present, add further detail to the contemporary treatment and role of Muslims on the British left. They point to the symbiotic processes that contribute to the unique position and 'second sight' of the racialised outsider, which not only include personal experiences and collective memory of racism and subjugation, but crucially also exposure to and participation in radical currents of collective struggle.

The anti-war movement: politicisation and dissipation

If the period of British Black Power politicised one generation of anti-racist activists in Britain, then the invasion of Iraq, the anti-war movement and the ensuing 'war on terror' politicised the next. My own earliest memories of collective political action include being taken on a demonstration against the Iraq war after school; of marching through the dark streets and watching someone spray an anti-war slogan on a billboard. In art class some years later I painted a huge piece depicting Blair and Bush, their uncanny faces looming over a naïve tagline that read: 'the real weapons of mass destruction'.

Conversations with activists reflected this presence of the war, and opposition to it, in early engagements with an internationalist politics, and a recognition of the political significance of the anti-war movement cut across

gender, ethnicity, religion, age, geographical location and current political involvement. Descriptions of anti-war demonstrations being exceptionally ethnically ‘diverse’ reiterated the ways in which the anti-war movement facilitated broad coalitions, bringing together the ‘white left’ (a phrase used by a number of activists), Muslim-led organisations and other Muslim constituencies – in particular Muslim women activists – in fragile but productive ways (see Phillips 2008; Massoumi 2015).

Crucially, through its anti-imperialist politics, the anti-war movement offered a framework for connecting military interventions abroad with the treatment of racially minoritised populations, especially Muslims, *within* Britain. As Arun Kundnani (2007: 185) writes: ‘the grassroots anti-war movement that emerged after 9/11 demonstrated the possibilities and challenges of a politics of collective action that sought to make connections between war, racism and attacks on civil liberties’. More than this, it ‘successfully conveyed the message that Muslims were not an isolated minority but part of a wider social movement against racism and imperialism’ (185). This was clear in an exchange with Madiha, in which I asked her to reflect on the differences between anti-racist activism in Manchester contemporarily, and anti-racist work in the city during the anti-war period that she had earlier described as formative in the development of her own radical politics. In her answer, Madiha contrasted the political context of then and now, highlighting the urgency of the present moment, but also revealing a key tenet of the anti-war movement:

The politics are a lot sharper around it [now]. So it was very kind of ... so when we did the anti-war years we did talk about, you know, *if you’re gonna kill Muslims over there or see them as the enemy over there, you’re gonna see a growth of racism and Islamophobia in Britain* [italics my own]. But it was very – a soft approach. Whereas now, I mean ... so we did have like terrorist raids and we did have things like people being prosecuted. I remember we had a campaign for someone who’d written a poem. And she was prosecuted for writing this poem. On the grounds that she just happened to work at Heathrow Airport. So we did those kind of campaigns, but not to the extent that you’re getting now where you’re hearing about mosques being fire-bombed or the, you know, Gurdwara being firebombed, or Didsbury Mosque being targeted the way it is.

If you’re gonna kill Muslims over there or see them as the enemy over there, you’re gonna see a growth of racism and Islamophobia in Britain. Such a tenet neatly captures the anti-imperialist, anti-racist sensibility that activists were exposed to through their participation in the anti-war movement of the 2000s. It marked an important moment of multiethnic (and multi-faith) collective struggle in more recent years that connects to – but simultaneously helps to make sense of – the increasing domestic securitisation of

Muslims, as well as racialised violence on the streets. The role of Muslim women in the movement proved to be particularly significant, as the figure of the Muslim woman activist emerged as a ‘condensing symbol’ that helped to bridge differences between various Muslim organisations and the wider left in the absence of an ‘institutional skeleton’ (Massoumi 2015: 733–734).

However, discussions around the anti-war movement also pointed to the dissipation of the movement and a diminishment of anti-imperialist politics in the intervening years, despite the unprecedented levels of securitisation, surveillance and control that Muslims in Britain now face. In [Chapter 2](#), I discussed how a favoured politics of representation and resilience amongst some Muslim activists I spoke to must be considered in light of the failure of the British government to ‘heed the warnings’ (Kundnani 2007: 9) of the anti-war movement and the subsequent alienation of young Muslims from official democratic processes (see Kundnani 2007) but also from the possibilities of collective action. As my discussions with Kadhim revealed, his early adult life as a man of Iraqi heritage living in Britain was profoundly shaped by Britain’s imperial relationship with Iraq. The invasion and subsequent war introduced a young Kadhim to the vocabularies and dynamics of the ‘war on terror’ and provided a first-hand education in the politics of empire:

I remember I was at school, I was sixteen at the time I think? And it came on, they put a TV on just randomly, it was never done in those days, put the TV on and just showed you. And at that time I didn’t know what this meant. Terrorism wasn’t even in my head, this word that’s been coined a billion times since, but I really hadn’t come across it, even though there was twin tower bombings in ’91, ’92. I think it was in America. So it had happened before, but not in my lifetime had I seen it so graphically, and for me the aftermath – I mean [Britain] going to Iraq, which had nothing to do with it really, and caus[ing] a war again against another country that, you know, has just had war for so many years. Obviously my family were involved directly, and so on, so that was really an emotionally powerful time.

But the significance of the war on Iraq in Kadhim’s early adult life was accompanied by a strong sense of the anti-war movement as having ultimately failed in its mission to prevent the devastation wrought by imperial invasion and war:

This might seem controversial as well. My thought process towards protests and demonstrations has changed over the years. So having been involved in the community for a long time, I’ve seen protest after protest, and I think it’s reached a saturation point ... I mean in the Iraq war for example, 2 million people, biggest protest in history and yet still our government said ‘it was only 2 million, it wasn’t 60 million’ sort of thing. That’s the fundamental line they say, so there’ll never be enough.

Similarly, Alisha's celebratory tone when describing the 'diversity' of anti-war marches – which she described as 'unusual' in Glasgow – was matched by her disappointment that the networks established in the city during this period were ultimately 'allowed to ... dissolve, [and] dissipate' following the invasion of Iraq. An account by another activist, Keith, suggests that where those networks did manage to sustain themselves, the focus of their work shifted. The Scotland-based organisation that he was involved in at the time of our discussion, which broadly focused on policing and criminalisation, initially emerged out of the networks established during the anti-war movement. However, in the years that followed, the organisation began channelling their resources towards more domestic concerns, including the securitisation of Muslim communities in Scotland. This change in direction makes sense if we consider Madiha's earlier claim that the anti-war movement revealed the connections between the treatment of Muslims 'over there' and those living 'here', but also the sense that the conditions facing Muslims in Britain have become increasingly dire in the years since.

Despite the anti-war movement initiating a generation of activists into a politics of anti-imperialist internationalism against the backdrop of the global 'war on terror', the dissipation of the movement has been in keeping with broader trends of 'containment and incorporation' (Shafi and Nagdee 2022: 42) vis-à-vis British anti-racism, resulting in what Shafi and Nagdee have recently described as the 'eviction of anti-imperialism from the antiracist register' (34). In this sense, the strategic response of the British state to the perceived threat of British Black Power was largely successful, with what passes for anti-racism now resembling a state-led exercise in managing cultural diversity (as discussed in [Chapter 2](#)) or otherwise extremely online debates fixating on questions of ethnic and racial identity (see [Chapter 4](#)). This trend includes the NGO-isation of anti-racist work; the institutionalisation of anti-racism into party political structures (namely via the Labour Party); and, as Sivanandan (1990) foreshadowed in his searing critique of 'racism awareness training', a profitable anti-racism industry (Shafi and Nagdee 2022).

Even amongst the more critically minded, activists patently no longer share the popular vocabulary of class struggle and political Blackness that animated anti-racism's zenith. Nevertheless, I maintain that many of the Muslim activists I spoke to carried the same spirit of 'proletarian internationalism' evoked by Virdee (2014: 164) in his account of the racialised outsider. Despite the strategic containment and capitalist co-optation of anti-racism that began in 1981, the lessons and legacies of previous currents of anti-imperialist struggle continue to percolate in the analyses and approaches of particular activists. More specifically, there are historical resources that are carried into the present through the 'second sight' of Muslims on the left, whose own biographies and personal encounters combine with collective memory and political education to situate them in a unique relationship to broader left movements.

Notably, the analyses and approaches adopted by these activists – whether that be an understanding of the indelible connections between colonialism and contemporary Islamophobia, or the irrefutable racism at the heart of the Prevent agenda – sit in tension with a pattern of ambivalence and omission on the ‘white left’ with regard to Islamophobia, and more broadly with a resurgent (but not new) left nationalism. Muslim women on the left may play an even more specific role here; while Muslim women activists strategically deployed the figure of the ‘oppressed’ Muslim woman in their participation in the anti-war movement (Massoumi 2015) (and in doing so helped to promote a particular image of the movement as ‘inclusive’), in the current moment they may perform a more critical function as simultaneously ‘in’ and ‘outside’ the left.

More optimistically, Virdee’s work teaches us that these tensions can be generative, celebrating the ways in which ‘racialised outsiders’ ‘proved to be the conduit through which anti-racist ideas, consciousness and political practice ... came to be transmitted to the left wing of the organized labour movement and beyond’ (Virdee 2014: 165). The question that remains is the extent to which, in the current moment, Muslim activists are actually able to shape the politics of the wider British left against the rising tide of law-and-order authoritarianism. As the following chapter explores, events in recent years have lent a renewed sense of urgency to such questions but have also pointed to emerging analytic frameworks that might reinvigorate and reconfigure a multiethnic, anti-imperialist, internationalist left around the key issues of today.

Conclusion

As this chapter has indicated, there is real cause for concern regarding the left’s relationship with the problem of Islamophobia in Britain. This ranges from avoidance and omission, to ambivalent understandings, to outright complicity. The experiences of Muslim activists themselves offer valuable insights in this regard, revealing exclusionary tendencies and the uncritical circulation of Islamophobic discourses in spaces that might otherwise be considered unquestionably ‘inclusive’. The specific ways in which gender and sexuality have been folded into contemporary expressions of Islamophobia help to explain such collusions, and more widely have resulted in some novel – some might say unholy – political alliances (Puar 2007; Bhattacharyya 2008; Farris 2017). Furthermore, the elisions between Islamophobia, race, gender and sexuality conceal the functioning of Islamophobia beyond the obviously ‘illiberal’, and as such require a much more careful analysis and disciplined approach from non-Muslim activists.

This may seem like a bleak prognosis, but this chapter has also sought to offer some resources for hope. For this reason, the latter half of the chapter focused on the agentic role of Muslim activists on the left. The encounters with normalised British state Islamophobia that Muslim activists are forced to contend with can, in conjunction with forms of political education, open up alternative analyses and approaches to Islamophobia that – contrary to the liberal, often myopic, approaches outlined in previous chapters – refocus our attention on the role of the British state and its global relations. Re-engaging with histories of radical anti-racist struggle – from British Black Power to the anti-war movement – as well as those who carry the legacies of these movements into their present thinking and practices, can also help to expand our thinking outwards: in other words, connecting Islamophobia to other modalities of racism and sites of struggle.

These connections can be seen in the work of Muslim activists in Manchester in particular (such as Abdul, Sultan and others) whose accounts suggest that where economic reductionism has led to a neglect of the issue of Islamophobia amongst some parts of the left, Muslim activists have self-organised, developing their own analyses, coalitions and spaces for resistance, somewhat paradoxically drawing on Marxist traditions and theoretical resources in the process. We might view the ongoing work around securitisation and policing (including Prevent), for example, as a continuation of community self-defence campaigns, in spite of the myriad efforts of the British state to contain and suppress the radical energies of such traditions.

In all these ways, there are reasons to be hopeful. Ultimately, what is required is a braver confrontation with the left's complicated relationship with Islamophobia, including a dose of humility, some introspection and an exercise in listening to Muslim leftists.

Notes

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- 1 See, for example, Suresh Grover and Jas Nijjar's conversation on the birth of the Southall Monitoring Group, now known as The Monitoring Group (Nijjar 2021).
- 2 See, for instance, Ramamurthy's (2013) account of the AYMs, which emerged across English cities such as London, Manchester, Sheffield and Bradford. There is no evidence, however, of any AYMs having been active in Scotland.

An anti-racism for our times: Islamophobia and the politics of abolition

Introduction: the shape of the current crisis

A series of events have marked the last few years out as particularly significant and especially challenging for anyone organising on the left. In Britain in particular, the catastrophic collapse of Jeremy Corbyn's Labour vote in the December 2019 general election signified the culmination of political realignments across class, age and place (Graeber 2020) and the start of a distinctly authoritarian turn across the political spectrum (Bhattacharyya et al. 2021). The ragtag left coalition brought together under Corbynism barely had time to process this political loss, never mind strategise a way forward, before the COVID-19 pandemic upended daily life in the spring of 2020. And while the pandemic exposed our radical, 'planetary' (Gilroy 2004) interdependency, it also exacerbated the racist, authoritarian reflexes at play in Britain, with a police-led rather than public-health response characterising the government's approach to the unfolding crisis.

As such, the unprecedented BLM protests of the summer of 2020 coalesced with an intensification of policing in the name of public health. COVID-related policing targeted those already at the sharp end of racist police violence (Harris et al. 2021) but also made way for a massive expansion of police power with the introduction of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill – also known as the PCSC, or Policing, Bill and now a fully ratified Act. In the months that followed, new waves of protest were set in motion as the Bill made its way through the channels of legislative approval, with the KTB coalition building on the energy of the BLM mobilisations to call for a wholesale 'withdrawal of consent' for British policing (Day and McBean 2022). Revelations of extreme gendered violence at the hands of serving police officers¹ triggered an independent investigation into the internal culture of the Metropolitan Police, the conclusions of which were clear: the Met Police was institutionally racist, sexist and misogynistic (Casey 2023). With this, the latest crisis in British policing was brought into even starker relief. Moreover, it was and is set against an ongoing 'cost of living' crisis that, like the decades of austerity that preceded it, is having

a disproportionate impact on racially minoritised populations (including Muslim communities), and yet also feeds into a racialised scarcity mindset in which differently racialised working-class communities are pitted against each other in an attempt to manage the crisis (Whitham and Ali 2023).

It is within this context of crisis and resistance, enclosure and opportunity, that a nascent British movement for abolition – aimed at policing, prisons and borders, but articulating a vision well beyond the dismantling of these systems – has emerged. Issues of policing, criminalisation and securitisation have increasingly taken centre-stage in conversations about racism and anti-racism, and an abolitionist vocabulary appears to have moved from the margins and into the mainstream, posing real challenges to the liberal preoccupation with representation and reform. Taking a cue from Stuart Hall's conjunctural approach and his commitment to 'mapping the specificity of the present' (Gilbert 2019: 5), this chapter speaks to the coming together of crisis and opportunity post 2019 to ask: what is at stake for the anti-racist left in this moment? How might Islamophobia factor into an emerging abolitionist politics? And how might an expanded politics of abolition offer new ground for solidarity-building?

The chapter begins with an overview of the key principles and origins of a contemporary abolitionist politics for the less familiar reader. I then make the case for how abolition can provide a generative alternative framework for thinking about and responding to Islamophobia in contemporary Britain, reflecting on the critiques of mainstream approaches laid out in earlier chapters. At the same time, and as I go on to argue, an analysis of Islamophobia enriches the content and expands the parameters of abolitionist work. An abolitionist politics that properly addresses Islamophobia can help to connect a constellation of ongoing anti-racist struggles within Britain, but just as importantly points us to a much broader, more global abolitionist 'horizon'.

Police, prisons, borders and beyond: mapping an abolitionist politics

The BLM protests of 2020 mark a much-referenced flashpoint in contemporary anti-racism. They were the largest anti-racist street protests since the abolition of slavery according to some reports (Mohdin et al. 2020), and for many young people would have been their first experience of a mass mobilisation on Britain's streets. Indeed, the youthful profile of the protests did not go unremarked. Scholar and journalist Gary Younge (2021: n.p.), for instance, reflected on the feeling of organic spontaneity, of well-established anti-racist organisations 'catching up' with the 'new mood'. I attended one of the large BLM protests in Manchester on 6 June 2020. It was by no

means the first BLM protest held in the city (as many as 3,000 had attended one in 2016 during the first wave of protests, and several other mobilisations took place throughout June 2020), but it certainly felt significant for its size and lack of organisational leadership: newspapers reported an attendance of 15,000 and the march was initiated by a sixteen-year-old with little experience of organising, via a hashtag on Instagram (Mohdin et al. 2020; Mwamba 2020).

This lack of leadership and organisational capacity has been noted as a weakness of the movement by some, yet also credited as an indication of a popular and growing anti-racist sentiment (Younge 2021). And while the BLM protests held together – at least momentarily – an ad hoc mixture of anti-racist traditions, tendencies and allegiances, they also revealed the contradictions at play within a movement brought together under a kind of ‘floating signifier’ (Hall 1997; Younge 2021). ‘Black Lives Matter’ could mean various things to many people, illustrated, for example, through disagreements over Palestinian solidarity within the movement (Olaloku-Teriba 2020), which I discuss in more detail later in the chapter.

Even if the demands of the BLM movement in Britain were varied, and even at times contradictory, at least some of these demands signified that abolitionist ideas around policing had entered more mainstream forums. The call to ‘defund the police’, popularised through the US BLM protests but often seen on UK soil, was one such example. With the funding structures of British policing rendering such a demand notably more awkward in a British context, activists soon tailored the phrase to local conditions, playing on the troubled notion of ‘policing by consent’ to urge the general public to ‘withdraw [their] consent’ for policing (Day and McBean 2022). This migration of a vocabulary of police and prison abolition – developed in the context of the USA – has combined with established networks of feminists, anti-racists and anti-capitalists in Britain to mark the emergence of an increasingly identifiable abolitionist movement in the UK. Much in the same way that Black Power travelled to Britain, interacting with the specific local and historical conditions and taking on a ‘distinctive British accent’ (Narayan 2019: 946) to contribute to the emergence of British Black Power, what we are currently witnessing in Britain is an abolitionist movement that builds on enduring traditions of radical thinking and organising specific to a UK context to rearticulate a transformative anti-racist vision fit for the current conjuncture. The specific genealogies of the current movement for police, prison and border abolition, and in particular the extent to which this movement represents a continuation of long-established forms of British Black radicalism, deserve much more academic attention – although Day and McBean (2022) do make clear that present-day abolitionists are building on the work of earlier generations of radical activists. For now,

however, I want to focus on the broader principles that frame this ‘abolition revolution’ (Day and McBean 2022).

The expansiveness of abolition as a way of understanding the world and the role of carceral systems within it, as well as a mode of organising and of relating to each other, does not in the first instance appear well suited to the confines of a book about anti-racist and left organising in Britain, never mind the question of what resistance to Islamophobia as a specific modality of racism might look like in such a context. Nevertheless, this book is about troubling the limits of the left’s imagination, about uncovering the less obvious connections between struggles, and luckily the work of abolitionists provides ample material for such a task.

Perhaps the primary principle of an abolitionist politics is best summed up in activist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s often-paraphrased claim that abolition is much more about *presence* than absence (see Gilmore and Petitjean 2018). Central to this assertion is the understanding that the dismantling of violently racist systems can only take place alongside the creation of alternative structures, institutions and ways of being that radically alter the current conditions (poverty, insecurity, war, climate catastrophe, to name but a few) within which policing, prisons and borders are deemed necessary. That is, an abolitionist politics requires a much wider commitment to societal transformation than the simple end of these institutions as we know them. In this way, contemporary prison abolitionists have been heavily influenced by W. E. B. Du Bois’ concept of ‘abolition democracy’ (Davis 2005; Gilmore and Petitjean 2018). In his seminal text *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois (1999 [1935]) offers an account of the period between 1860 and 1880 in the United States in the wake of the civil war. One of Du Bois’ central arguments is that during this period of what he calls ‘Black Reconstruction’, a major shift in power took place that altered the economic and political relations in the United States in the wake of the legal abolition of slavery. Previously enslaved Black people actualised their new-found freedoms of suffrage and political assembly to build new democratic infrastructures and institutions. The establishment of new public schools, hospitals, welfare programmes and political organisations by newly liberated Black people in the wake of the formal abolition of slavery displaced the power of the former planter class in the South. This was a movement, then, to create the social conditions necessary for the full democratic participation and flourishing of Black people in US society. It was, in Du Bois’ terms, a movement to establish an ‘abolition democracy’ that far exceeded the absence of the institution of slavery. It was ‘a fleshly and material presence of social life lived differently’ (Gilmore and Petitjean 2018: n.p.).

But the tragedy of this period was the ultimate incompleteness of the abolitionist project. The backlash to Black Reconstruction from the white elites, their re seizing of power and subsequent reversal of the gains of this period

represented a shift ‘back towards slavery’ for Du Bois (1999 [1935]: 670). As a reign of white revanchist terror swept the southern states, colonial relations morphed into the violence of lynchings and segregation. While Slave Codes were formally abolished, they were rearticulated in the legislation of Black Codes, which saw Black people criminalised en masse through new categories of crime, such as vagrancy, which white people were exempt from. Convicts were then put to work as part of a brutal system of convict leasing and county chain gangs, with ‘hundreds of Southern fortunes ... amassed through this enslavement of criminals’ (Du Bois 1999 [1935]: 698–699). Consequently, the racial composition of the prison population in the US South saw a dramatic shift from overwhelmingly white to overwhelmingly Black (Davis 2005). From these reformulated relations of servitude emerged the inescapably racialised modern US prison system (Davis 2003). The idea of ‘abolition democracy’, then, represents the unrealised post-emancipation society that Black Reconstruction promised: not only the dismantling of one particularly violent system, but the creation of an entirely new world. Abolition as *presence*, not as absence.

Applied to the contemporary politics of abolition, the concept of abolition democracy points to both imaginative and practical efforts to conjure such a new world. Kennetta Hammond Perry (2022: 544), for example, describes how Black-led abolitionist projects in Britain have challenged official ‘scripts’ of white British abolitionism vis-à-vis Britain’s role in transatlantic slavery, helping to expose the colonial roots of British institutions such as policing, prisons and the education system. Similarly, abolitionist scholars have highlighted the particular and multidirectional histories of British colonialism that have come to shape policing and the criminal justice system in Britain. While Britain played a foundational role in the horrors of transatlantic slavery and the subsequent birth of modern policing and prisons in the USA, Britain’s colonisation of parts of Africa, the Middle East, and South and East Asia came to shape policing and prisons in Britain in profound ways. Research has underlined the carceral dimensions of Britain’s numerous colonial regimes, from discourses of collective criminality to the use of brutal counter-insurgency tactics, as well as the ways in which strategies and practices that had been developed in the colonies ‘returned’ to Britain to influence the policing and imprisonment of racially minoritised populations within the colonial metropole, a process that Tanzil Chowdhury (2021) calls the ‘colonial boomerang’ (see also Go 2023). Tracing these relationships between Britain and its multiple colonies pushes back on liberal accounts of Britain’s role in the abolition of transatlantic slavery but also liberal accounts of the development of prisons and policing within a European context that obscure the punitive logic and normalised violence of policing and penal systems under British colonial rule (Brown 2002; Moore 2014).

In addition to attending to histories of racist dispossession and domination, abolitionist modes of organising have centred an ‘imaginative querying about what must become present’ (Perry 2022: 553), building on a genealogy of abolitionist theorising to address the conditions of life for racially minoritised populations in Britain at the current conjuncture. The work of abolitionists cannot be reduced to an exercise in navel-gazing, however. As I argue towards the end of this chapter in relation to expanding abolitionist struggles, abolitionist solidarities rely on a vision of ‘worldmaking’. However, the focus on *presence* in abolitionist work also has a markedly practical application that can be identified in a plethora of work focusing on harm reduction in the here-and-now. Discussions of abolition and utopia offer insights into how abolitionists grapple with the tension between addressing the urgent demands of the present whilst working towards the ‘horizon’ of an abolitionist future. Some scholars have applied the concept of utopia in a negative sense in order to argue that, contrary to popular discourse, it is the established logic of criminal justice rather than abolitionism that should be understood as ‘comprehensively utopian’ (Coyle 2018: 89). The argument follows that the logic of criminal justice is utopian in a literal sense, in the way that it ‘describes a place that does not exist’ (Coyle 2018: 82). This is the case in its representation of a shared social world in which a minority of actors transgress laws (i.e. ‘commit crimes’) upheld by institutions that by and large keep the general public safe from the harm of such transgressors. On the other hand, penal abolitionism, while having inevitably utopian aspects in its imagining of that which does not *yet* exist, is better characterised by a ‘grounded realism’ (Coyle 2018: 85) in the way that it ‘[builds] on what we know to be the case’ about humans and the social world (Coyle 2018: 85–86). In other words, abolition takes seriously the reality that laws are widely and frequently ‘broken’ without consequence, and that outside the categories of behaviour that get labelled as ‘crimes’, we are all capable of causing harm to others. Transgression and harm are facts of human life; the question is how we make ‘immediate humanitarian interventions’ to reduce the harms enacted by current systems whilst imagining and developing radical alternatives to address and reduce social and interpersonal harms (Scott 2013: 107): a careful balancing act which has led others to advocate for an ‘abolitionist real utopia’ (Scott 2013).

Contrary to misconceptions, abolitionists do not make a sharp distinction between reform and abolition. Reforms can play a vital role in the long and difficult *process* of abolition, but the relationship of reforms to the wider system is crucial. Attempts to reconcile the reality and demands of the here-and-now with the dreams and imaginings of the not-yet-here are perhaps best illustrated by a distinction that abolitionists make between reformist and non-reformist reforms, also sometimes called carceral and abolitionist

reforms, respectively. The former describes small tweaks or changes to current systems that expand their reach and power, while the latter points to efforts to do the opposite: ‘measures that reduce the power of an oppressive system while illuminating the system’s inability to solve the crises it creates’ (Berger et al. 2017: n.p.). In the case of policing in Britain, reformist reforms have a long pedigree. The emphasis on community policing, better training and efforts to recruit more ethnic minority police officers began with the Scarman Report following the 1981 uprisings (Shafi and Nagdee 2022); such ‘recommendations’ have been repeated with every report into police misconduct in the intervening years, trapping us in an endless cycle of ‘reforming reformed reforms’, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore puts it (2007: 14). More recent measures to supposedly improve police accountability can also be understood as reformist reforms; huge investments have been made in police body-worn cameras, for instance, yet evidence for their impact on police behaviour and accountability is extremely patchy and instead they have helped to legitimise and bolster forms of police surveillance (Big Brother Watch 2017). Meanwhile, video recordings taken by victims of and bystanders to police violence are often felt to be a more effective tool in holding the police to account (Harris et al. 2021) – unsurprising, given the pivotal role of viral videos in raising public consciousness of racist police violence in recent years.

As we will come to see, an abolitionist critique of reformist reforms exposes the limits of seeking redress via the criminal justice system, focusing critical attention instead on the violence inflicted by the state itself. Abolitionists highlight how, far from being a ‘protector’ of marginalised people, the state is a ‘perpetrator in its own right, [systematically targeting] populations according to historically shifting profiles’ of good/bad, conforming/deviant, victim/perpetrator, criminal/law-abiding, citizen/non-citizen and so on (Haritaworn 2010–2011: 70). The abolitionist principles sketched out above, whilst rooted in long traditions of Black radicalism, are replete with resources for thinking through and responding to a multiplicity of racisms. More specifically, as accounts throughout this book demonstrate, questions of policing, securitisation, criminalisation, and experiences of ‘everyday’ harm and their relationship to the state are absolutely central to the functioning of Islamophobia in Britain. The relevance of contemporary Islamophobia to any comprehensive project of abolition, then, seems obvious. And yet, notwithstanding a handful of recent exceptions (Day and McBean 2022; Manzoor-Khan 2022; Surviving Society 2022), we rarely hear the issue of Islamophobia talked about in abolitionist terms or, indeed, discussions of police/prison abolition include more than a passing reference to Islamophobia. Why should this be the case, and what would a more joined-up analysis of Islamophobia and abolition look like?

Abolishing Islamophobia

As I have already hinted at, the thinking and action of those on the anti-racist left with regard to the issue of Islamophobia can rub up uncomfortably against an abolitionist praxis. This is the case in a number of ways: from the attachment to left nationalism, to the embrace of liberal conceptions of Islamophobia and racism that obscure the role of the state, to the proliferation of Islamophobia within our own networks and organising spaces. Given the silences, disconnects, amnesia and intentional obfuscation that this book has sought to bring to attention, what might an abolitionist lens offer for thinking through and responding to Islamophobia from a position of radical anti-racism? This section reflects on the themes from preceding chapters to consider why analyses of Islamophobia and abolition remain so fragmented but, more importantly, how an anti-racist, leftist analysis and approach to Islamophobia would benefit from a heavy dose of abolitionist thinking.

The limits of hate crime

One of the areas of work around Islamophobia to which an abolitionist framework is most relevant is the punishment of ‘hate crime’, which – as I demonstrated in [Chapter 2](#) – has come to dominate attempts to resist Islamophobia in Britain today. As a reminder to the reader, ‘hate crime’ is an umbrella term that can refer to interpersonal violence relating to race, sexual orientation, religion or faith, disability, and gender identity. The popularisation of hate crime as a punishable category of crime has accompanied an increasing emphasis on ‘equalities’ and the concomitant ‘equalities agenda’ in British policymaking in recent years. But such claims to equal treatment under the law have long been critiqued by abolitionists adopting a queer lens, whose work marks an important contribution to thinking through more recent trends of how previously liberatory movements have been transformed into outspoken advocates for carceral responses to forms of oppression, as well as how some of these unholy alliances might begin to be disentangled. To be clear, queer abolitionist critiques of hate crime fundamentally diverge from the calls to ‘queer’ hate crime frameworks in their current form that some scholars working in the field of ‘hate crime studies’ have made (see Pickles [2019](#)) – arguments that we might usefully think of as reformist reforms. Rather, queer abolitionist critiques have highlighted how the category of hate crime and the requirement for punishment that it invokes help to sustain the very structures that perpetuate hetero-patriarchal violence. Prisons rely on and reproduce the gender binary within and beyond the prison walls; at the most

basic level they are segregated according to it, while all sexual relations are banned. They also violently enforce gender and sexual norms through the routine violence that takes place within prisons as well as in their role as ‘mythmaking institutions’ that sustain widespread representations of queer deviance and depravity (Stanley et al. 2012: 119).

The embrace of the concept of hate crime by LGBTQ activists across the USA and Europe is part of a broader pattern of ‘queer investments in punishment’ that has seen claims to sexual citizenship increasingly reliant on support for the carceral state (Lamble 2013: 230). Even more problematically, scholars have pointed to the ways in which discourses and the pursuit of prosecutions of homophobic hate crime have become deeply racialised, with Muslim populations and neighbourhoods targeted based on tropes of the illiberal Muslim ‘other’ (Haritaworn 2010–2011; Lamble 2013) that mirror and combine with discourses of Muslim difference produced by the ‘counter-terrorism’ state.

My argument here is that, first, queer abolitionist critiques can be usefully applied to the embrace of hate crime initiatives by anti-racist activists, and specifically those calling for an inclusion of Islamophobia within existing legal frameworks relating to the identification, policing and prosecution of hate crime. The notion of a category of Islamophobic hate crime has recently been incorporated into calls for a new ‘Index of Islamophobia’: a way of systematising different forms of Islamophobic hate crime in accordance with existing laws in order to better support the conviction and prosecution of perpetrators (Bi 2022). In its emphasis on the lived experiences of victims alongside claims to inclusion within existing hate crime frameworks, it is notable that the ‘Index of Islamophobia’ mirrors calls to ‘queer’ the study and prosecution of hate crime.

However, such an approach to interpersonal violence, whether rooted in ‘race’, religion, gender, sexuality or some combination of the above, is fundamentally at odds with a politics of abolition. As abolitionist scholar and activist Sarah Lamble (2013) underlines, there are some serious contradictions that must be reckoned with in the ongoing efforts by queer activists to decriminalise aspects of LGBTQ identities on the one hand, whilst advocating for an entrenchment of criminalisation elsewhere. Similarly, what contradictions are exposed in the intense focus on the classification and criminalisation of interpersonal harm through the hate crime agenda, against the backdrop of securitisation and criminalisation of Muslim populations? Is it possible to call for a dismantling of some carceral systems while working to make others more efficient? An abolitionist perspective not only highlights these contradictions but helps us to support principles of *decriminalisation* in *all* areas of social life, even when we are forced to confront and navigate real interpersonal violence. As we shall see, abolition means

a comprehensive process of decriminalisation that incorporates a range of actions, from the scrapping of Prevent to the difficult but necessary shift away from punitive responses to Islamophobic violence.

Of course an abolitionist critique not only exposes tensions in the claims activists make on the state (criminalise them/there, but decriminalise us/here) but also reveals the role of the state itself, which is obfuscated through and by the hegemonic place of hate crime. As I argued in [Chapter 2](#), the ready acceptance and quick ascendancy of the category of hate crime by successive governments are partly due to the fact that ‘tackling hate crime’ provides those in power with a kind of anti-racist alibi. The containment of racialised violence within the category of hate crime conceals the state’s complicity in the reproduction of harm and situates the state instead as an ally in the fight against racism, now conceived of as a problem of individual perpetrators requiring punishment. This sleight of hand can be viewed as part of a long tradition of consolatory offerings used to placate activists and movements (Burnett 2013; Shafi and Nagdee 2022). In more practical terms, and as we saw in accounts in [Chapter 2](#), hate crime initiatives have helped to justify the proximity of the police to racially minoritised communities, reframing the institution as a source of support – indeed the *only* source of support – in the face of increasing and very real everyday violence (Shafi and Nagdee 2022). Crucially, abolitionist critiques of hate crime help to recentre the role of the state in discussions of contemporary Islamophobia in Britain, offering a language and a conceptual framework to make better sense of some of these processes as they play out in the current moment.

Dismantling Prevent and the ‘counter-terrorism’ regime

In centring the role of the state, abolition offers a framework for shrinking the reach and power of Britain’s ‘counter-terrorism’ regime. The Prevent policy offers us a generative example to work through as part of this discussion (see the introduction for a more detailed discussion of the policy itself). Without rehashing the harms of Prevent, outlined in first-hand accounts and analysis throughout the previous chapters, I want to consider here what an abolitionist lens adds to our analysis of this strand of British Islamophobia and concurrent resistance to it.

Given its dismal reputation, it comes as no surprise that Prevent has been adapted, tweaked and apparently ‘improved’ since its inception. Aside from blatantly Islamophobic proposals to alter Prevent in the direction of targeting *more* Muslims, which was the focus of the Shawcross Review (discussed in more detail below), liberal reforms appear to fall into one of two

categories. Prevent is often presented as having been mismarketed, leading to a deep distrust of the policy that requires an exercise in rebranding and community outreach. Otherwise, Prevent is said to have been poorly designed, leading to unintentional discriminatory outcomes, as seen in the wildly disproportionate impact on Muslim individuals and communities, requiring ‘tweaks’ to the categories and concepts that shape the focus of the policy. In both instances, Prevent is framed as a fundamentally well-intentioned initiative gone awry, and one notable response to both diagnoses has been an increasing emphasis on ‘far-right extremism’ as a supposed counter-balance to decades of obsessive discourse around ‘Islamist extremism’. While no data are collected on the religion or ethnicity of those referred to Prevent, in 2017–2018, 44 per cent of cases referred were recorded as relating to so-called ‘Islamist extremism’ (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2022: 3). By 2021–2022, referrals in this category had dropped significantly, alongside marked increases in both the ‘mixed, unstable or unclear ideology’ category (now split into various subcategories) and the ‘extreme right-wing’ category. The report from the Home Office on those referred to Prevent from April 2021 to March 2022 notes that ‘for the second year running, the number of referrals for Extreme Right-Wing radicalisation concerns is greater than Islamist referrals’ (Home Office 2023b: n.p.). Nevertheless, Muslims remain disproportionately targeted, with ‘Islamist extremism’ making up 24 per cent of referrals as recently as 2019/2020 (Home Office 2020),² and 16 per cent two years later (Home Office 2023b), despite Muslims constituting just 5.7 per cent of the population (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2022). This is without accounting for Muslim individuals who may have been referred under one of the subcategories that now make up the ‘mixed, unstable or unclear ideology’ category, but whose religion is never recorded, or the fact that evidence points to differential treatment of cases referred under the ‘Islamist’ category compared to the ‘right-wing’ category (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2023).

These shifts have, understandably, done little to quell the concerns of those who understand Prevent to be inherently discriminatory. But what they do point to is the various attempts to reoperationalise the dubious concept of ‘extremism’, with the introduction of new categories of ‘types of concern’ alongside the delivery of adapted guidance to ‘stakeholders’, both of which are likely to have an impact on the proportions of different populations targeted by the policy. Drawing on the work of abolitionist scholars and activists, such ‘tweaks’ to the functioning of Prevent can be usefully understood as ‘reformist reforms’. They certainly do not reduce the power of Prevent: overall referrals to Prevent have seen a sharp rise again following a drop during the peak years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, widening and nuancing the working definition of ‘extremism’ reflects both

an expansion and a legitimisation of Prevent and the assumptions underpinning it (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2023).

By contrast, the recommendations set out in the People's Review of Prevent mark a major departure from the cycle of reformist reforms sketched out above. Hailed as 'a historic watershed for Muslim self-organisation in Britain' (Shafi and Nagdee 2022: 142), the People's Review of Prevent was the outcome of a mass boycott of the Conservative government's 'independent' review of Prevent led by known Islamophobe Sir William Shawcross. The boycott and subsequent report was supported by over 500 Muslim-led organisations in Britain, and focused on not only the complete inadequacy of Prevent in minimising the harms it claims to, but its undermining of human rights and civil liberties, and in particular its deleterious impact on children and young people. Following the publication of the Shawcross Review, the authors of the People's Review set out a response underscoring how Shawcross' recommendations, if accepted, 'would further curtail civil liberties and human rights and exacerbate the documented harms of Prevent' (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2023: 15). While Shawcross' recommendations reflect a broader authoritarian shift under recent Conservative governments, they have particular implications for Muslims in Britain, including as they do a re-emphasis and expansion of so-called 'Islamist' extremism, including the designation of Muslim-led organisations and campaigns critical of Prevent as 'extremist' (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2023).

There is clearly a grave and urgent threat posed by the latest governmental plans for Prevent that the People's Review of Prevent has sought to respond to. But to what extent can the People's Review of Prevent be understood as abolitionist? Whilst the People's Review is, somewhat by necessity, couched in the liberal language of human rights, it does ultimately call for Prevent to be completely abolished. There are also what we might consider demands for smaller non-reformist reforms, such as a moratorium on Shawcross' recommendations.

Importantly, elsewhere the authors explicitly situate the People's Review of Prevent as part of a longer history of anti-racist grassroots inquiries independent of the state, including the 'unofficial' inquiry into the murder of Blair Peach by police in Southall, London, in 1979 (see Aitlhadj and Holmwood 2021). Similarly, in their critique of British anti-racism's shift from an anti-racism 'from below' to one 'from above', Shafi and Nagdee (2022) suggest that the People's Review of Prevent marks another change in direction: a pivoting away from the reformist approach of civil society organisations in collaborating with state institutions, seen also in the recent outspoken opposition by activists to contributing to yet another 'independent panel' led by the Independent Office for Police Conduct – this time reviewing the disproportionate use of

tasers against Black men and set to regurgitate the same reformist recommendations that campaigners have been met with for decades.

Situating the latest wave of organised resistance to Prevent as part of this longer history of struggle against the various forms of racialised violence meted out by the British state is certainly a step towards connecting seemingly atomised struggles under the remit of a wider abolitionist politics. Nevertheless, some ambivalence towards a fully abolitionist analysis bubbles beneath the surface of the impressively rigorous work of the People's Review of Prevent. On the one hand, the emphasis on withdrawing Prevent from specific sectors, namely the education and healthcare sectors, could be viewed as a non-reformist reform that aims to take advantage of the safeguarding infrastructures (and cultures) long existing within these sectors, and which could address 'vulnerabilities' outside the criminalising lens of Prevent (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2023). On the other hand, the comparatively scant attention paid to the role of Prevent in prisons and its impact on those Muslim men who make up 15 per cent of the UK's prison population (Maslaha 2020) risks reinforcing criminalising binaries. While the innocence and vulnerability of children and those seeking healthcare are easily foregrounded in discussing the harms of Prevent in these sectors, the presumed criminality of those in prison – and by extension the binaries of criminal/non-criminal individuals and spaces – is rarely critically reflected upon.

To be clear, this is not a criticism of the People's Review of Prevent, which is understandably constrained by the linguistic and conceptual terrain upon which it aims to make a meaningful intervention (i.e. the sphere of law, human rights and civil liberties). Equally, the intensifying threat (and, in the case of a recent Policy Exchange report, the reality)³ of being labelled 'extremist' for taking a position on Prevent that is even remotely close to an abolitionist one is sure to dilute the kinds of framings and demands that the initiative is able to invoke. As in the overall spirit of this book, the point here is to illuminate some points of connection; in this case, what an abolitionist perspective lends to ongoing debates around the focus and legitimacy of Prevent is a language for expanding and strengthening the claim that Prevent must be comprehensively abolished. It makes clear that, despite its promise of safety, Prevent is working exactly as intended as part of the wider police function: suppressing political dissent, dividing the working class in Britain, and justifying violent and extractive practices abroad (Manzoor-Khan 2022). An abolitionist approach to Prevent exposes the empty promises of (il)liberal reform, refusing the eternal calls for redesigning and remarketing that cross the political spectrum. Just as importantly, abolition connects the dismantling of Prevent to an array of other

non-reformist reforms to policing, prisons and borders, joining up experiences and struggles in a broad and transformative anti-racist movement.

Border abolition and the critique of left nationalism

In [Chapter 1](#), I argued that while civic and national identities featured strongly in activists' accounts of anti-racist work, they can never be the basis for an anti-racist, left response to Islamophobia in Britain. In particular, liberal articulations of nationalism have focused on the figure of the *illiberal* Muslim as the quintessential national outsider in recent decades, while left nationalisms have situated Muslim migrants as threats to the welfare of 'native' workers. Similarly, the counter-hegemonic properties of civic identities remain limited as long as the racialised content of present nationalisms and the racist horrors committed in the name of said nation states remain unreckoned with. However, the dominance of these ideas has made it increasingly difficult to articulate a radical anti-racist response to Islamophobia from the left, despite the efforts of Muslim activists. I also asked: what alternative frames of reference are available to those pursuing broadly left projects, beyond those promised by the nation state?

While the richest vein of abolitionist work has emerged from the USA, scholars and activists have long been concerned with how abolitionist principles can be applied to the carceral logics and infrastructures that sustain the global nation state system: in other words, the vast global network of immigration controls, from fences and walls, to detention centres and deportation measures, to the multiplying spaces used to house those who have managed to move. Scholars writing about what they term 'border abolition' have made explicit links to earlier theorising of the prison-industrial complex (PIC), noting that both prison and border abolitionists are fundamentally concerned with the same thing: the 'struggle over movement', which in the end determines 'the freedom to move, and to stay' (Bradley and de Noronha [2022b](#): 47). Border abolition points to the ways in which border regimes (consisting of both physical and conceptual 'bordering') can be radically unsettled through an abolitionist lens.

Helpfully, those advocating for border abolition from Britain have aimed their critiques towards those on the left, highlighting how borders function as a tool to control labour through territorialisation and racialised differentiation, both of which sustain racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya [2018](#); Walia [2021](#)). Borders are central to managing the 'edge' populations of globalised racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya [2018](#)) just as prisons function to manage surplus labour, land and capital (Gilmore [2007](#)). This means that both anti-racism and anti-capitalism necessitate a commitment to border abolition.

Questions around migration and borders have long fractured the British left, however, and border abolitionists have sought to use the principles of border abolition to challenge the deep misconceptions pertaining to the relationship between labour power and migration, namely that migration drives down wages and depletes national resources and services. In contrast, border abolition recognises that immigration controls ensure migrants remain ‘especially pliable and exploitable’ whilst undermining labour power more broadly by dividing workers on a national and global scale (Bradley and de Noronha 2022b: 50).

Arguments for border abolition are therefore particularly relevant to contemporary discourses concerning the supposed ‘white working class’ and notions of belonging and legitimacy that have been folded into the revival of this category. In [Chapter 2](#) I explored the ways in which these lines of classed and racialised differentiation undergirded conversations with some left activists about how best to respond to Islamophobia. Not only did activists express the idea that immigration (within which the figure of the Muslim is central) posed a ‘legitimate concern’ for certain ‘communities’, but there was a distinct ambivalence around how to respond to perceived cultural difference brought about by the presence and proximity of Muslims, whether migrants or otherwise. Here and in the following section I want to expand on how an abolitionist perspective helps us to respond to these expressions of ambivalence (and the misdirected sense of dispossession and loss that activists themselves pointed to as a source of Islamophobia) in an active and generative way (again, focusing on the *presence* of abolition).

As I have already highlighted, calls for border abolition directly challenge the divisive and patently inaccurate category of the ‘white working class’, underscoring the precarious economic position of migrant labour and the ways in which immigration controls constrain rather than enable the agency and power of organised labour more widely. If we can understand the border as a colonial construct, one that has been and continues to be implicated in particular ways with Muslim populations, we denaturalise it. Concerns about ‘immigration’ and cultural difference are no longer ‘legitimate’ but understood as part of a much longer history of colonial domination that has come to shape the treatment of Muslims but also the psychic life of many non-Muslims in Britain (Gilroy 2004). Unsettling, even unlearning, these modes of thinking and relating to ourselves and others is just one dimension of abolition, however.

Border abolitionists in particular problematise the ‘territorialisation’ of labour – in which labour is tied to territory owned by the state via the concept of citizenship (Bradley and de Noronha 2022b: 58), and as we will see, abolition is a ‘worldmaking’ project that crosses and exceeds nation states as we know them. But this is not to say that abolitionists neglect the

importance of place or people's attachments to place. In fact, abolitionists emphasise how imprisonment damages communities and destabilises social networks; the disappearance of those imprisoned alongside the long-term stigma of post-imprisonment heaps emotional and financial strain on communities already facing the ravages of inequality (Gilmore 2007). Similarly, the overpolicing and securitisation of particular populations erodes community ties, producing cultures of fear, paranoia and distrust, not least *within* British Muslim communities (Abbas 2021). As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007: 17) makes clear, 'prisons wear out places by wearing out people'. We could easily include policing in this adage, as well as consider the direct environmental and ecological impact that the rapid expansion of prisons and other detention facilities can have on local areas (Gilmore 2007: 17). In stark contrast, and as we shall see in the following sections, abolitionist organising can bring together different constituencies impacted by the many arms of the carceral state in new and imaginative ways, in the process nurturing a much more radical attachment to place.

In these ways, border abolition – as part of a wider framework of abolitionist thinking – offers a way of unsettling attachments to national identities, and even ahistorical or naïve depictions of civic identities, without a wholesale rejection of the affective appeal of place (and people in place) as part of an anti-racist politics.

Abolition democracy for our time

Abolition takes seriously the wider material conditions that contribute to the reproduction of 'everyday' forms of Islamophobia. As well as refocusing our attention on the role of the state in the discursive construction of Muslim difference and the material impact of state policies on Muslim lives, abolition forces us to take stock of the conditions within which certain institutions and practices are understood to be necessary.

We can usefully think about this in relation to discussions with activists about the source of Islamophobia, which, as I argued in [Chapter 2](#), were underwritten by a narrative of 'legitimate concerns'. As we saw, such 'legitimate concerns' were variously related to questions concerning political violence and cultural practices, but also migration and its perceived impact on accessing welfare and public services. Of course 'the Muslim' – just like the 'Black mugger' of the 1970s (Hall et al. 2013 [1978]) or the 'immigrant' of today – is a figure upon which all manner of anxieties are projected. But in order to properly understand the authoritarian impulses that they engage, these anxieties must be properly situated in the social, political and economic conditions from which they arise. In this vein, in [Chapter 2](#) I suggested that

some framings of Islamophobia as arising from ‘legitimate concerns’ partly played into what Nadia Ali and Ben Whitham (2021) have described as ‘austerity Islamophobia’, in which a logic of disentitlement situates Muslims as the ‘undeserving poor’ (Shilliam 2018) in a zero-sum competition for public services and access to state welfare within the context of ongoing economic and political crisis. Incorporating an analysis of Islamophobia into the wider story of contemporary racial capitalism in Britain is a task that I have tried to take up at various points throughout this book in an attempt to facilitate a more materialist, anti-racist understanding of Islamophobia ‘from the left’. But critique is not the end goal. In a sense, blaming Muslims for any number of crises currently playing out in Britain is easily identified as *illegitimate*; the challenge comes in directly addressing and redirecting these energies.

This is where we return to the work of Du Bois, which, in centring the complex interplay of social and historical forces that led to radical reconstruction and its eventual failure, ‘challenges us to ask what abolition democracy means for our time and place’ (McQuade 2018: 11). As I have explained, Du Bois’ account underscored the necessity for a complete transformation of social conditions post-emancipation, without which the abolition of slavery would be (and was) incomplete. Similarly, the abolition of carceral systems – whether those in the USA that emerged from the remnants of slavery, or those in Britain that are entangled in their own colonial histories – must be accompanied by a building of radically different systems that address a multiplicity of feelings of insecurity and dispossession, sometimes muddled, divergent or contradictory but nevertheless felt, across variously racialised constituencies. In other words, an expansive politics of abolition takes seriously the wider conditions that shape (while not necessarily determining on their own) logics of fear and insecurity, scarcity and competition, and offers a path towards genuine safety, mutual care, abundance and cooperation. Gracie Mae Bradley and Luke de Noronha (2022a: 54) describe this in relation to border abolition:

Crucially, border abolition must take account of the phenomena to which borders are seen as a necessary response. Where those phenomena genuinely cause people harm, we need to figure out how we might transform the conditions that produce those harms. This is where abolition offers such a generative framework ... When we hear claims about migrants undercutting wages and putting pressure on public services, we need to build the power of migrant-inclusive labour unions and argue for greater social provision for all, regardless of whether these claims are empirically true.

What happens when we ask the same with regard to expressions of Islamophobia? How might we speak to ‘genuine fears’ and ‘legitimate

concerns' without reifying claims to (dis)entitlement? Take, for instance, Dan's account in [Chapter 2](#), in which he emphasised the challenges of responding to people's fears (however exaggerated or unrealistic) of a terrorist attack. In Manchester, political violence in the form of a suicide bombing has had very real and devastating impacts that continue to reverberate across the city. But what are the conditions that actually produce this form of harm? As extensive research has demonstrated, 'forms of political violence conventionally defined as "terrorism" are closely related to other forms of violence, particularly violent state repression and international or civil war' (Blakeley et al. 2019: 5). Moreover, the expansion of counter-terrorism powers in Britain has been counterproductive to the aims of reducing political violence (Kundnani 2009; Blakeley et al. 2019). Thus, an expansive abolitionist response would, first, call for the dismantling of current systems of 'counter-terrorism', which blight the lives of Muslims but which *also* do nothing to diminish the forms of political violence that currently fall under the rubric of 'Islamist terrorism'. In addition, an abolitionist response to Islamophobia would address the legacies and current role of British imperialism abroad, advocating for an unequivocally anti-imperialist vision: one that I flesh out in the final section of this chapter. Finally, an expansive abolitionist approach would address the wider economic conditions that underpin the scarcity logic that tends to tighten its grip in the midst of ongoing economic crises, advocating for the expansion of properly funded welfare, housing and healthcare for all.

Similarly, abolition also offers a way of holding together multiple historical struggles and contemporary experiences of loss associated with place. We cannot hope to dislodge or unsettle the uncritical attachments to civic and national identities of the kind that activists recounted in [Chapter 1](#) without addressing the sense of *classed* dispossession that has come to be expressed in narratives of the 'colonisation' of Scotland or of Southeast hegemony, and which makes the 'purity' of such identities so appealing. If we want to facilitate a critical reckoning with colonial histories whilst highlighting the multiplicity of place, then abolition might offer a useful framework, allowing us to talk about cities such as Glasgow and Manchester as fundamentally entangled with the horrors of slavery, as sites of both racialised and classed oppression today, but *also* as meaningful markers of belonging and counter-hegemonic struggle.

In all of the above ways, abolition reveals the connections between experiences of dispossession, exploitation and domination, and in doing so directs collective energies against the 'organised abandonment' (Bhandar 2022: n.p.) of Britain's always multiethnic, multicultural working class, calling forth an expansive and radical vision of abolition democracy sensitive to the specificities of contemporary Britain.

Enriching abolition

I have so far focused on how a radical, anti-racist response to Islamophobia would benefit from an engagement with currents of abolitionist thinking. Working in another direction, however, we can ask what a burgeoning abolitionist movement in Britain might gain from incorporating an analysis of Islamophobia.

In [Chapter 3](#), I focused on the failures of parts of the anti-racist left to ‘get to grips’ with Islamophobia and, more specifically, its relationship to race and racism. Furthermore, I highlighted how these failures have contributed to the reproduction of particular forms of Islamophobia, rendering Muslim activists ‘racialised outsiders’ on the British left. In particular, questions of policing, securitisation and migration marked key faultlines in activists’ conceptualisations of Islamophobia, hence why abolition emerges as a critical resource. In this sense, the work of police and prison abolitionists cannot be collapsed into other strands of leftist organising or discourse. If anything, the latest wave of abolitionist politics in Britain has happened *in spite of* the reactionary position of much of the labour movement on these questions (Bhattacharyya et al. [2021](#)), and in this sense abolitionist currents have probably tempered the authoritarian impulses of other parts of the left. Nevertheless, abolitionist organising remains uneven against the broader fragmentation of the British left, so that even where political interests are closely aligned they often remain siloed. The point here, then, is not to launch a critique of nascent abolitionist formations, but rather to find ways of reconnecting struggles from multiple directions.

Race has been a central question in abolitionist thinking and organising, and the racialisation of Muslim populations tells us a great deal about the operation of race, both generally and in the specific context of contemporary Britain. As I have argued throughout the preceding chapters, the process of racialisation as it applies to Muslims reveals the motility, adaptability and contingency of race (Lentin [2016](#)), in other words its ability to move and adapt to particular social conditions, but also the relationality of attendant racisms (Goldberg [2009](#)). In doing so, the concept of racialisation connects Islamophobia to other modalities of racism.

Part of the limitation of the Eurocentric, liberal conceptualisation of racism that has become hegemonic across the political spectrum in Britain (as discussed in [Chapter 2](#)) is precisely this lack of relationality, so that racism becomes ‘frozen’ in time and place. The ‘concealment’ (Hesse [2004](#)) of colonial domination through the emphasis on aberrant fascism (which frames the Holocaust) through this hegemonic definition marks the struggles to conceptualise Islamophobia as anything but the work of individual bigots or a conspiracy against legitimate criticism of religious practice (Sayyid [2010](#)).

As I describe in more detail in the introduction, some scholars have sought to rectify these silos by placing theories and histories of Islamophobia in dialogue with those of antisemitism, noting shared articulations of racialisation across the two (Meer 2013a, b; Renton and Gidley 2017). Others have noted the enduring conceptual disconnects between Islamophobia and anti-Black racism. As Jas Nijjar (2022) highlights in an account of the policing of both Black and Muslim populations in Britain, much of this undertheorisation concerns the ways in which particular groups are understood to be subject to the perils of ‘race’, while others are not. And yet, as Nijjar (2022: 9) argues, the racialisation of Muslims as fundamentally incompatible with and antithetical to ‘western civilisation’ resembles the association of Blackness with criminality, incivility and disorder, with *both* Islamophobia *and* anti-Black racism helping to sustain conditions of ‘racialised police warfare’ (see also Taylor 2016; Goldberg 2015). Clearly, then, recognising the relationality of state racisms in the current moment is not simply an academic exercise in revealing the inadequacies of a liberal analysis; it has serious implications for anti-racist, and specifically abolitionist, organising.

As we saw in activist accounts in earlier chapters, a liberal conception of racism often shaped and constrained the praxis that activists pursued on the ground when it came to challenging Islamophobia. The popularity of initiatives that focused on tackling hate crime and facilitating interfaith dialogue, alongside struggles around the boundaries of ‘legitimate’ claims and distinctions between racist/non-racist individuals, revealed the limited frameworks available to many activists in making sense of Islamophobia and its imbrication with race and racism. But more generally than this, contemporary expressions of anti-racism are often dominated by hermetically sealed, essentialist accounts of race.

Bhattacharyya et al. (2021) caution against the ways in which such accounts are sustained by the mechanics (and economics) of social media, limiting the scope for nuanced debate around race and racism. This is not to say that interactions on X (formerly Twitter) are representative of the abolitionist work happening on the ground, however. In fact, scholars and activists have often pointed to how the latter necessarily offers a more complex insight into questions of race, racism and anti-racist solidarity. For instance, what Luke de Noronha (2022: 171–172) calls ‘convivial impulses’ can be found in accounts of those at the sharp end of (over)policing, detention and deportation, representing a kind of ‘anti-raceism’. This refusal to invest in racialised categories even when faced with the racialising force of the British state can be witnessed in more organised forms of resistance, too. The United Families and Friends Campaign brings together the loved ones of those killed by the British state – including in police custody and in prisons, psychiatric hospitals and immigration detention – to campaign for justice and accountability, and has

been one of the most durable coalitions in recent decades. As Adam Elliott-Cooper (2021) highlights, the multiethnic composition of such a campaign emerges by necessity when those affected by state violence themselves exceed and unsettle established racialised categories.

Nevertheless, as both scholars and activists have observed, received wisdom around race and racism that foregrounds ‘the purity of experience’ filters down to affect anti-racist practices and the possibilities for coalition-building (Bhattacharyya et al. 2021: 98). The increasing influence of Afro-pessimism on both sides of the Atlantic has been a particularly controversial influence in this regard, with critics arguing that it both naturalises ‘race’ (in particular Blackness) and, in its exceptionalising of anti-Blackness, presents a major challenge to a relational understanding of racisms (Olaloku-Teriba 2018). The take-up of Afro-pessimism within abolitionist organising has emerged as a faultline in the USA in particular. Afro-pessimism’s insistence on the totalising nature of anti-Blackness – the idea that anti-Blackness is *the* historical structuring force, situating Black people as outside the category of the Human in a kind of ontological ‘death’, renders abolition ‘not as a process of systemic transformation but [as] a call to destroy an irredeemable world’ (McQuade 2018: 13). Furthermore, the Afro-pessimist contention that all non-Black people (including non-Black people of colour) are inescapably anti-Black has serious implications for who is included in any abolitionist project. As Brendan McQuade argues, this is a theoretical and political position that is not easily reconciled with a Du Boisian conception of abolition as ‘a tendency immanent in all global struggles for emancipation’, albeit ‘fragmentary, suppressed, and not fully aware of itself’ (McQuade 2018: 18), and – in the case of Black Reconstruction – as a radical but highly contingent project that relied on the complex, historically situated interplay of raced and classed relations, including the participation of various non-Black populations.

Unfortunately, the abolitionist ‘canon’ is dominated by this US context, with scant attention paid to the specific colonial histories of other parts of the world that have witnessed a resurgence in abolitionist organising in recent years. Against this backdrop, it is easy to transpose the politics of US abolition into Britain, yet the extent to which the nascent movement for police and prison abolition in Britain has been influenced by Afro-pessimism, and indeed its specific genealogies, deserves much more academic attention. In this potentially more dynamic, less entrenched context, opportunities for reconfiguring what abolition means (and whom it includes) may yet be available. While on the one hand the varying degrees of attachment to naturalised racial categories (whether an essentialised Blackness or, as discussed elsewhere, the notion of the ‘white working class’) does not appear to bode well for the incorporation of an analysis of Islamophobia into a politics of

abolition, attending to the complexities and realities of Islamophobia can nuance and expand the horizons of abolition. A fuller account of racialisation as it pertains to the diversity of Muslim populations, which connects Islamophobia to other modalities of racism – an account that I have tried to lay out throughout this book – can work as a bulwark against the temptations of essentialist accounts of race, which are so often presented under a guise of radicality.

Furthermore, incorporating the question of Islamophobia into discussions of abolition reveals critical resources for thinking through the specificities of the carceral state in Britain. For instance, a structural, historically rooted analysis of British Islamophobia (again, of the kind I have argued for throughout the preceding chapters) attends to not only domestic forms of oppression, but also the ways in which these are imbricated in Britain's imperial past and present. More specifically, the 'war on terror' is not only concerned with the so-called 'enemy within', but was – and is – also a war against parts of the Global South, with militarism an integral part of the global functioning of Islamophobia. Despite the tendencies outlined above, there *are* internationalist currents of abolition in motion today that are capacious enough to include this kind of analysis. As Angela Davis (2005) argues, militarism and war, including the global 'war on terror', should be central to any contemporary conversation about abolition; indeed, abolitionists' intentional choice of the term 'prison–industrial complex' marks the ways in which the PIC and military–industrial complex not only bear a resemblance but are mutually reinforcing. Thus, in a British context, anti-imperialist currents – whether the anti-war movement of the early 2000s; British Black Power; or, as I go on to argue, activism around Palestine – offer resources for thinking through Islamophobia in the current moment, for connecting differently racialised communities *and* for considering (even expanding) the parameters of what an abolitionist future would look like as viewed from Britain. In more practical terms, Muslims (and Muslim leftists in particular) have been leading fights against criminalisation on multiple fronts over the past few decades, with state Islamophobia offering a 'blueprint' for recent expansions of police power (Manzoor-Khan 2022). If Muslim activists represent a cohort of 'racialised outsiders' on the British left (and as I argued in the previous chapter, this includes the unique perspectives that Muslim leftists bring to their participation in left struggles), then we might also consider how Muslim activists could play a role in sustaining a decisively *anti-imperialist* abolitionist politics, helping to expand the parameters of abolition as it is thought of and practised in Britain today.

I want to return us, momentarily, to Britain in the current moment. Now that we have a sense of a broader abolitionist politics, along with what

abolition might bring to an analysis of Islamophobia and, vice versa, what an account of Islamophobia might contribute to a capacious movement for abolition, how can we begin to think more concretely about connecting anti-racist work already taking place?

One of the most obvious areas of overlap in terms of Islamophobia and contemporary abolitionist politics is in relation to the harmful impact of current systems on children and young people. The experiences of children and young people have arguably been central to some of the most sustained critiques of Prevent, underlined in the recent People's Review of Prevent (Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2022) but also in accounts that have sought to highlight the targeting of family life by other arms of the 'counter-terrorist' state. Kapoor (2018), for example, reveals the ways in which social care services have been wielded unjustly to remove children from families under the guise of protecting them from 'radicalisation', often when Muslim men in families have been targeted under counter-terrorism legislation and mothers consequently treated as guilty by association.

The targeting of children and young people has elsewhere been the focus of sustained abolitionist work in relation to the British school system. At times this work has concentrated on preventing increases in, and calling for the removal of, police officers stationed in schools, as in the Manchester-based No Police in Schools campaign (Connelly et al. 2020), while the No More Exclusions coalition has campaigned to end school exclusions, which disproportionately affect young racially minoritised people and Black boys in particular (No More Exclusions 2022). Such campaigns have been influenced by the concept of the school-to-prison pipeline; that is, the constellation of disciplinary mechanisms in the school system (including detentions, exclusions, 'zero tolerance' policies and 'alternative provision') that disproportionately affect Black and brown young people, mirroring the racism of – and preparing young people for – the criminal justice system (Graham 2016; Perera 2020). The pipeline metaphor 'provides a visual representation of the ways in which education and criminal justice policies interact with each other to exclude, marginalise and ultimately criminalise young black people' (Perrera 2020: 17). Importantly, such campaigns have achieved modest but significant victories in recent years. Manchester City Council withdrew all school-based police officers in the city following the No Police in Schools campaign and the support for it from local National Education Union (NEU) branches (King 2021), while a motion calling for an end to police in all schools following the 'Child Q' case won overwhelming support at the 2022 NEU national conference (Adams 2022).⁴

The connections between Prevent and the school-to-prison pipeline are more than analogous, however. Recent years have seen a dramatic rise in

the number of Muslim people (and especially young Muslim men) in British prisons, with Muslims making up 15 per cent of Britain's prison population but only 5 per cent of the general population (Lammy 2017). Additional research has revealed the extent of Islamophobia across the criminal justice system, from encounters with the police to the experiences of Muslims in prison (Maslaha 2016, 2020). Notwithstanding the fact that the Prevent Duty applies within prisons themselves, it is difficult to determine, through the very limited data, the trajectories of those now in prison: in other words, to what extent the wider 'counter-terrorism' agenda has contributed to the criminalisation of those in prison. Nevertheless, even a recognition of the disproportionate growth in numbers of Muslims in prison pushes us to consider the relationship between state Islamophobia and the 'school-to-prison pipeline', including the 'entanglement of SBPOs [school-based police officers] with Prevent' (Connelly et al. 2020: 28).

Elsewhere, the policing of Muslims in Britain over the last two decades, and in particular the policing of political dissent through Prevent (Rights and Security International 2022), has provided a blueprint for the now ratified Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Bill (now the PCSC Act 2022), which has been the focus of much of the recent abolitionist organising in Britain, including the recent KTB mobilisations. While much of the criticism of the bill focused on its crackdown on the right to protest, anti-racist organisations have emphasised the disproportionate impact of the sweeping legislation on racially minoritised communities, including enhanced stop-and-search powers; harsher sentencing laws; and the criminalising of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller sites. Many also viewed the Bill as an extension and expansion of the COVID-19-related police powers that were rushed through parliament with little scrutiny and which had a specific and disproportionate impact on racially minoritised communities (Harris et al. 2021). The KTB mobilisations, and the subsequent and ongoing KTB coalition, sought to recognise the potential impact of the Bill across a whole range of communities already at the sharp end of police violence. In doing so, activists argued that the movement 'revitalised radical solidarity, the notion that an injury to one is an injury to all' (McBean 2022: n.p.). But there may still be opportunities to expand this particular strand of anti-racist, abolitionist organising as we face the realities of the now-ratified PCSC Act coming into effect across England and Wales.

As Manzoor-Khan argues, the 'extraordinarily draconian' proposals set out in the then Bill 'grow out of the expansion of policing dissent that has been justified by Islamophobia for two decades' (Manzoor-Khan 2022: 98). More specifically, the language and mechanisms of Prevent and its deleterious impact on civil liberties are mirrored in a new statutory duty 'to prevent and tackle serious violence' included in the Bill, which resonates

just as much with the racialised profiling of ‘at risk’ individuals targeted by the gangs matrix (Liberty 2021: 9). This genealogy of the policing of dissent in Britain, along with the intersections of the policing of differently racially minoritised communities, is an obvious but underrecognised fact, obscured by some of the colour-blind arguments that focus on the impact of the Bill/Act on protests as well as the broader disconnects in anti-racist work. The radical, abolitionist solidarity that powered the KTB movement might be strengthened even further, then, by the experiences and expertise of those who have been at the forefront of resistance to state Islamophobia in recent years.

Abolitionist horizons: Islamophobia, anti-imperialism and ‘worldmaking’

An abolitionist anti-racism demands much more from us than simply recognising that one modality of racialised state violence is a precursor to another. Tracing the co-constitution of racisms through policing and carcerality moves us towards a more global analysis and, as such, a more internationalist approach to ‘abolishing’ Islamophobia in Britain. Indeed, an approach that understands racisms as relational is necessarily global in scope, offering as it does an alternative to the comparative ‘method’ (Goldberg 2009), which sees racisms analogised but ultimately bounded by their national contexts. Social movements, too, cross and unsettle national borders, in terms of both those who participate and their political demands. And yet scholars and activists have reflected on an ‘eviction of anti-imperialism from the anti-racist register’ (Shafi and Nagdee 2022: 34) in recent decades (see also Olaloku-Teriba 2018; Salhab 2023). In this final part of the discussion, I ask: how might an analysis of Islamophobia and abolition be expanded in scope? And how might this play a role in reinvigorating anti-imperialism on the left in Britain?

The first task is to return briefly to the events and processes that have contributed to an increasingly insular outlook when it comes to British anti-racism. In addition to the major shifts that saw the militant, grassroots anti-racism of the late 1960s and 1970s contained by the state and redirected into an institutionalised anti-racism ‘from above’ (see [Chapter 3](#) for a more detailed account of this), more recent political conditions have further quelled a long tradition of radical internationalism on the British left. Whilst Jeremy Corbyn’s vocal support for anti-imperialist struggles and outspoken opposition to wars in the Middle East marked a rupture for the Labour Party and galvanised parts of the left who had long abandoned the party, his internationalism also ultimately made him a target for the British

press and a pariah of the British establishment. Following the 2019 election, and under the leadership of Keir Starmer, the Labour Party quickly distanced itself from anti-imperialist causes, not least of which was support for Palestine (Salhab 2023).

Support for the Palestinian struggle has long been considered a ‘litmus test’ on the British left; a measure of internationalist, anti-imperialist commitment and credentials (Olaloku-Teriba 2020; Shafi and Nagdee 2022). But more widely, Palestine has occupied a unique place in the radical imagination. As Edward Said (1992: 125) described:

Resistance gets content and muscle from Palestine; more usefully, resistance gets detail and a positively new approach to the microphysics of oppression from Palestine. If we think of Palestine as having the function of both a place to be returned to and of an entirely new place, a vision partially of a restored past and of a novel future, perhaps even a historical disaster transformed into hope for a different future, we will understand the word’s meaning better.

While Said was not writing from an explicitly abolitionist position, his words help to elucidate the role of Palestine in abolitionist thinking. Indeed, it is not only the material realities of carcerality in occupied Palestine that have attracted the attention of contemporary abolitionists, but also the promise of renewal – an ‘entirely new place’, a ‘novel future’ – that the Palestinian struggle represents. This radical vision has resonated globally, leading to some of the most extraordinary examples of solidarity across cultural, national and racialised difference. For instance, the historic solidarity between Irish and Palestinian political prisoners saw detained Palestinians smuggle out messages of solidarity for Irish hunger strikers following the death of Bobby Sands in 1981 (Aljamal 2021), while Angela Davis reports being sustained by letters of support from Palestinian political prisoners during her own period of incarceration in the 1970s (Bailey 2015). More recently, we can trace the ‘multidirectional solidarity’ (Bailey 2015: 1018) to emerge from BLM uprisings and the ongoing Palestinian struggle, with activists not only offering mutual statements of solidarity and support but organising international delegations and sharing practical strategies of resistance across borders (Goldberg 2015; Davis 2016; Roediger 2017; Olaloku-Teriba 2020). Palestinians even took to Twitter (as was) to share ‘practical advice on how to deal with tear gas inhalation’ (Bailey 2015: 1018): an antidote, if there ever was one, to the reductionist effects of social media on anti-racist movement building.

It comes as no surprise, then, that some police and prison abolitionists have sought actively to build on these internationalist impulses in their work. As Angela Davis writes, abolitionist activists in the USA have ‘been trying to find ways to talk about Palestine so that people who are attracted to a

campaign to dismantle prisons in the US will also think about the need to end the occupation in Palestine'. This is, for Davis, part of '[insisting] on the intersectionality of movements' (Davis 2016: 21). However, vocal support for Palestine from Black activists has also elicited mixed responses on both sides of the Atlantic, with various political camps insisting on the incommensurability of different struggles (Kelley 2019; Olaloku-Teriba 2020). Robin D. G. Kelley (2019: 84) treats these disagreements as instructive, situating more recent expressions of solidarity within a much longer history of Black–Palestinian transnational solidarity, the emergence of which in the late 1960s and 1970s represented 'an expression of revolutionary global insurgency'. Crucially, he argues that the forms of solidarity that have resurfaced in recent abolitionist formations are held together by a vision of 'worldmaking' rather than a politics of analogy. While racist practices and ideas might circulate globally, albeit with particular local impacts and expressions,⁵ anti-racist internationalism is sustained not through claims to having the *same* experiences, but through a commitment to remaking the world as we know it: 'it is not the condition of captivity that is the basis of solidarity but the critique of captivity from a place of confinement, the shared dreams of liberation, and the mobilizing and planning to fulfill that dream' (Kelley 2019: 85; see also Ghabin 2022). In this sense, invocations of 'Palestinian Lives Matter' or even 'Muslim Lives Matter' – both slogans that have taken on new significance in the context of the genocide in Gaza – should invite connection rather than competition or comparativism (see Kelley 2019; Olaloku-Teriba 2020).

Let us return momentarily to Britain. Why is the question of Palestine in particular relevant to thinking through Islamophobia 'from the left' in this context? First of all, there is the obvious point to be made that British colonial rule in Palestine during the British Mandate tied the fate of Palestinians indelibly to the actions of the British state. Britain's role in the horrors meted out to Palestinians continues in so many ways, not just in the vocal support of Israel as a key 'ally' from politicians across the spectrum, but in the manufacturing and sale of weapons, in the trade of food and other goods, and in the realm of academic and cultural exchange – all of which are addressed by the now global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. Of course, these connections have become acutely pertinent in Israel's most recent genocidal assault on Gaza, which I speak to in the concluding chapter.

Furthermore, support for Palestine is often where different strands of anti-racist work in Britain have tended to, and do still, intersect. In the introductory chapter, I reflected on how the Palestinian struggle was my own entry point into thinking critically about Islamophobia, as well as the British left's relationship to nationalism, colonialism and British imperialism. Student

activism around Palestine was also my first taste of grassroots organising, connecting me to a wider network of young, left activists working across a range of issues in the early 2010s, from public sector cuts and tuition fee hikes to nascent questions of climate justice. This experience, of Palestine serving as an entry point into broader questions of power and structural inequality, was shared by others I spoke to. A number of my interlocutors had been introduced to the politics of Palestine by older generations, or noted alignments or trajectories between pro-Palestine activism and other causes that they had been involved in, from Kashmir to the anti-war movement to anti-fascist organising.⁶ Alisha, whose insights in [Chapter 3](#) pointed to the exclusion of Muslim activists on the wider British left, also suggested that Palestine was the one issue that brought together different leftist groups otherwise working in silos.

If support for Palestine informs the parameters of a global abolitionist project, then it also offers a conceptual and practical channel for incorporating the issue of Islamophobia into a radical vision of ‘worldmaking’. The movement for a free Palestine already represents a point of connection between multiple terrains of struggle, and promises a model for thinking through the knotty entanglements of Islamophobia, anti-Arab racism, militarism, carcerality, policing, securitisation, nationalism and (settler-)colonialism, and for connecting these questions across time and space. As such, the ‘question of Palestine’, as Edward Said (1992) put it, is not one that the British left can afford to avoid.

Conclusion

As long as law-and-order authoritarianism continues to be proffered as the solution to Britain’s multiplying crises, movements for police and prison abolition will respond with alternative visions of radical interdependence, care and solidarity. While the swells of protests seen in 2020 have eased off, the work of abolition continues daily. The notion of police, prison and border abolition is sometimes maligned, but most often the principles that guide such work are misunderstood. So, part of this chapter has aimed to demystify the practical implications and ideological roots that make up abolition for those less familiar with them.

More importantly, though, in this chapter I have asked how abolition might help us to approach the issue of Islamophobia more effectively from the left, and how abolitionist work – broadly conceived – might benefit from an account of Islamophobia and its relationship to ‘race’. Abolition exposes the limits of tinkering with structures as they currently exist, from

strengthening hate crime legislation to expanding the definition of ‘extremism’. Abolition offers a language for more radical responses to Islamophobia that moves us beyond the civic conceits or nationalisms that can percolate on the left. And in its holistic approach to transforming society, abolition offers a blueprint for incorporating discussions of Islamophobia into a wider, Du Boisian democratic vision. Equally, the essentialist tendencies that have troubled abolitionist organising in the USA in particular – and that have reared their head at key moments in a British context – might be usefully pushed back upon with a careful account of the relationality of Islamophobia and anti-Blackness, particularly when it comes to policing and carcerality. The benefits of cultivating conceptual connections between Islamophobia and a politics of abolition are multiple.

In more practical terms, such a dialogue offers new and renewed ground for solidarity-building. Activists have already begun to make such connections, for instance in situating the treatment of Muslims by the British state as a precursor to the draconian policies of the PCSC Act, or considering the most recent forms of organised resistance to Prevent as part of a much longer history of resistance to state racism. Nevertheless, a close engagement with the rich literature and history of abolition suggests there are many more resources to ‘mine’ for solidarity-building at the current conjuncture. These resources also force us to look outwards; to consider our relationships with the rest of the world. In other words, abolition reanimates questions of internationalism and anti-imperialism. As in many radical traditions, the Palestinian struggle has occupied a special place in the abolitionist imaginary, capturing a shared vision of ‘worldmaking’ that cuts across time and space. Palestine has also been, and continues to be, a key issue on the British left. While often cited as a litmus test for anti-imperialist commitments, solidarity with Palestine continues to bring together different (and differently racialised) constituencies in powerful ways, and as such offers a terrain upon which the connections between domestic Islamophobia, British imperialism, global policing and carcerality become visible. Put differently, Palestine illustrates the relevance of Islamophobia to abolition, and vice versa, in the starkest of ways.

To be clear, this chapter has not advocated for a rehabilitation of the conceptual language or organisational infrastructure of previous eras of British anti-racism. Engaging with the anti-imperialism of British Black Power or the anti-war coalitions of the early 2000s is an important part of reconfiguring a critique of Islamophobia from the left, but much has also changed in the intervening years – not least the increasing politicisation of Muslimness. This requires an openness to new vocabularies and ways of organising that can translate some of the same ideas but in ways

that speak to the unique challenges of the current conjuncture. This is the potential and promise of abolition for those on the anti-racist left: abolition as an internationalist critique of state racism fit for the present. An anti-racism for our times.

Notes

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- 1 There are two significant flashpoints in this regard. First, the abduction, rape and murder of Sarah Everard by Wayne Couzens, a serving Metropolitan police officer, in the spring of 2021, and the brutal police treatment of protestors at her vigil. Importantly, COVID-19-specific police powers were used by Couzens to justify Sarah's initial false arrest and subsequent abduction. COVID-19-related police powers were once again wielded to violently shut down the vigil later held for Sarah in a public park in south London. Second, the investigation and prosecution of serial sexual abuser David Carrick, a police officer who had served in the same parliamentary unit as Couzens, raping and assaulting twelve different women during his time in the force and using his position to intimidate his victims into silence.
- 2 In 2020/2021 data were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3 See Jenkins et al. (2022).
- 4 The 'Child Q' case refers to the traumatic strip-search of a Black teenage girl by the Metropolitan police at a secondary school in London (see Gamble and McCallum 2022).
- 5 See the report by RAI and Jewish Voice for Peace (2018) for an example of how policing practices, counter-insurgency tactics and surveillance technologies are shared between Israel and the USA. Goldberg (2009, 2015) offers a more sociological account of this.
- 6 Narzanin Massoumi (2015) notes how the broad anti-war coalitions that mobilised millions against the war on Iraq were born out of Muslim and leftist organisations coming together to protest an Israeli military assault on a Palestinian refugee camp.

Conclusion

Approach of the book

Much of this book has been preoccupied with offering a sympathetic, ‘internal’ critique of the conceptualisations and approaches of some of those on the British left to the problem of contemporary Islamophobia. ‘Internal’ because the seeds of this book have been my own – admittedly irregular – experiences of organising on the left in various British cities over the last decade-and-a-half, and because these political commitments have driven the empirical research in this book from the very beginning. Throughout the book, then, I have approached ‘the left’ not as a static object of study but as a living, moving force that ‘we’ make up. Elsewhere, my approach has been more concerned with revealing the limitations of mainstream approaches to Islamophobia, particularly in the area of third-sector work, where those involved may not necessarily or straightforwardly identify as ‘on the left’. Therefore, the thrust of the arguments throughout the book speak to a wide range of actors whose views and experiences should be considered as part of any broad-based left-wing project.

But critique has not been the only or even end goal of these discussions. Along with offering a critical analysis of that which already exists, each chapter has pointed to resources for approaching Islamophobia from a more radical, more expansive and ultimately more anti-racist place. In other words, I have advocated for the production of theory and practice that more adequately addresses the complexities of Islamophobia as one modality of racism amongst others; as having unique characteristics of its own but as functioning relationally with other racisms, variously cultural or ‘colour-coded’ in their expressions. Key to such an understanding of Islamophobia is the process of racialisation, which ensures that meanings are attached to Muslim bodies (producing *the* Muslim body in its homogenising effect) even where actual Muslims unsettle traditional phenotypical categorisations of ‘race’. The centrality of cultural discourses of difference to this process of racialisation as it pertains to Islamophobia is one contributing factor to

the articulation of Islamophobia across the political spectrum, and – significantly – through liberal registers of belonging and non-belonging.

Additionally, I have sought to ask not just what Islamophobia *is* but what it *does*. What is the function of Islamophobia? Why is this question important for the left, and what does it mean for our organised responses to Islamophobia? To this end, each chapter has addressed different dimensions of Islamophobia's relationship to power, namely to the British state and its entanglements with a wider system of global racial capitalism. While such a framework offers us a broad, structural perspective on the functioning of Islamophobia, it simultaneously helps to make sense of the 'everyday' experiences of Islamophobia and other forms of subjugation, exploitation and dispossession that my interlocutors shared stories of. Thus, the discussion in each chapter also takes in the interactional and the affective, but always connecting these back out to wider structures of power and control, offering a reminder of the multiple scales at which Islamophobia operates, as well as the promise of a specifically sociological account of Islamophobia. Anchoring this movement from the ordinary to the structural, and from the contemporary to the historical, are accounts from actors themselves. In engaging with the thinking and practices of those 'on the ground' throughout the first three substantive chapters, this book has sought to offer an empirical grounding for – and perhaps just as importantly an accessible and stimulating 'way in' to – ongoing debates around the problem of Islamophobia.

Lessons for the left

What lessons might we glean from the discussions in this book? First of all, place clearly plays an important role in popular articulations of anti-racist thought and practice. It can help to bind constituencies through a shared sense of identity and at times offer a vector for counter-hegemonic claims. But, as the discussion in [Chapter 1](#) made clear, attachments to place offer no panacea when it comes to the complexities and force of racism. More than this, uncritical appeals to place-based identities can obscure the realities of state-sanctioned and interpersonal racisms, including and *especially* Islamophobia, which can be comfortably accommodated within postracial impulses articulated through place, whether that is accounts of populations with 'natural' capacities for anti-racism, of racism always happening elsewhere, or of the embrace of left nationalism in recent years. I have advocated not for a wholesale dismissal of the role of place in affective registers of anti-racism, but for a critical attentiveness to its easy temptations and limitations. A reliance on essentialising, sometimes even mythical,

narratives of place can close off our more radical imaginative and practical capacities in responding to Islamophobia and other modalities of racism.

Similarly, the reduction of Islamophobia to the terrain of the interactional reveals the limitations of such a formulation. As notions of fear and ignorance drive the conceptualisations of Islamophobia that many activists are working with, there is an easy slippage between cultural difference as solution and problem, while the depth and breadth of Islamophobia (its structural dimensions, its articulation through multiple, interacting political registers) becomes difficult to see. Through this process, grievances that might otherwise be directed towards the state are easily framed as 'legitimate concerns' around perceived cultural incompatibility, while 'real' racism is attributed to a deviant fringe. Such understandings in turn constrain the types of organised responses to Islamophobia that activists and community workers tend towards. Of course, these practices – which range from attempts to 'challenge stereotypes', to the punishing of Islamophobic 'hate crimes' – are also shaped by wider social, economic and political conditions that have played out over the course of the last two decades, yet paradoxically struggle to speak to or account for them. In short: liberal conceptualisations of Islamophobia produce liberal responses, whilst concealing the complicity of the liberal in the reproduction of the problem.

Islamophobia is a complex form of racism that is often difficult to identify and name as such. Accounts from activists suggest that sections of the left have struggled to get to grips with these complexities, resulting in an ambivalence, or even outright avoidance, around how to approach Islamophobia from a committed left-wing perspective. Sadly, as the experiences of Muslim activists (and Muslim women activists in particular) reveal, the ambivalence and omission surrounding Islamophobia on the left produce the conditions for the reproduction of it within left networks and spaces. In this sense, Muslim activists occupy a position as 'racialised outsider' (Virdee 2014) on the British left at the current conjuncture. But more than a position of exclusion, the 'racialised outsider' constitutes an agentic role, with political education combining with first-hand encounters with Islamophobia to grant Muslim leftists a unique perspective. To think through the specific relationship between Muslim activists and the British left reveals both historical and present resources for rethinking Islamophobia and the left's approach to it; it is, therefore, less an exercise in self-flagellation and more an opportunity for reflection and rearticulation.

Moreover, the emergence of resurgent anti-racist formations in recent years, most notably around policing, prisons and borders, offers fresh insights and alternative visions for tackling Islamophobia. In this way, an abolitionist politics, however fleeting its moment in mainstream discourse was, is more than worthy of the sustained attention of the broader left.

Abolition speaks directly to the limitations raised through much of the book, offering as it does a framework for disinvesting in state discourses and practices, and for remaining critically vigilant against the ways in which state violence is justified in the name of marginalised populations. More specifically, abolition offers a conceptual framework and vocabulary that help to circumvent the narrow confines established by liberal approaches to Islamophobia, including punitive ‘hate crime’ and reformist ‘counter-extremism’ agendas, but also uncritical appeals to left nationalisms. And in its emphasis on *presence* as well as absence, abolition speaks to the experiences of all those suffering under racial capitalism, offering an expansive, anti-imperialist anti-racism for our times.

The view from 2024: Gaza and futures of resistance for the British left

Palestine is, to quote Azfar Shafi and Ilyas Nagdee (2022: 121), ‘where the many competing internationalisms come to nest, and where the contradictions between them come to a head’. This became more apparent than ever in the final quarter of 2023 and into 2024, as Israel’s genocide of Palestinians in Gaza intensified. The purging of pro-Palestinian internationalists from the Labour Party following Jeremy Corbyn’s defeat in 2019 – a disproportionate number of whom were Jewish anti-Zionists accused of antisemitism (Jewish Voice for Labour 2023) – severely limited the ability of many on the left to speak to Palestinian liberation beyond the confines of British party politics, never mind offer the kind of relational analysis that was so desperately needed and which could connect Islamophobia with antisemitism alongside other racisms (see Meer 2013a, b; Renton and Gidley 2017 for recent examples of scholarship attempting to do this).

However, as horrifying as recent months have been, there appears to have taken place a sea change in popular understandings of Israel and Palestine. With debate no longer constrained by the internal wrangling of party politics, a more radical, more global terrain of struggle has re-emerged. In early 2024, talk of Israeli apartheid, settler-colonialism and the Nakba fills my Instagram feed, and not just from the usual suspects. Always more exciting is what appears to be happening offline. In Manchester and other cities, people have marched every weekend for months now. Not handfuls, but hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands. In London, hundreds of thousands. The combination of participants on the streets is familiar but the scale feels entirely new. The conditions for resistance have changed; the policing of solidarity has undoubtedly intensified; but so too have the parameters for real, radical and widespread change.

Circumstances for those living in Gaza, as well as the global political situation, will have inevitably changed by the time this book is published. So how can it usefully connect to wider discussions of Islamophobia, anti-racism and left organising in Britain? The genocidal assault on Gaza has blown apart the western liberal consensus on ‘human rights’. In the violent excesses of Israel’s ‘right to defend herself’,¹ we see the hollowness of claims of ‘saving’ Muslim women from their own culture, of defending ‘gay rights’ through military intervention and of discourses insisting on the violent proclivities of certain populations. Furthermore, in standing with Palestine, our anti-racist frames are moved beyond the civic and the national. Just as the anti-war movement revealed the connections between Muslims ‘over there’ and Muslims ‘at home’, we can’t help but witness the relationality of Islamophobia as it plays out in Gaza with help from British arms factories, institutions and politicians.

And as the streets continue to be filled with diverse crowds identifying as workers, as parents, as Muslims, as Jews, as Queers – all coalescing around the cause of a Free Palestine – the temptations of a narrow, nationalist vision for the left begin to wane. Just as importantly, this is a site for the production and refinement of sociological analyses; as Ali Meghji (2024: 120) has recently argued, far from academic scholars having a ‘monopoly on the sociological’, concepts and theories are generated by wider publics, especially through social movements themselves. The kinds of insights generated by Muslim activists in [Chapter 3](#) were in part shaped by their exposure to and participation in particular struggles, from radical Black activism to the anti-war movement. Time will tell as to whether the ongoing movement for a free Palestine will be a politicising moment for young Muslims as much as the onset of the ‘war on terror’ was for the previous generation, but the youthful leadership of recent protests suggests that young Muslims are already playing an integral role in a re-energised anti-imperialist politics of the street.

The challenge of expanding these energies to connect with other ongoing struggles around racist policing, carcerality in education, prisons, war and militarism, and many others, requires new vocabularies and frameworks that speak to the current conjuncture. Police and prison abolitionists have long been concerned with questions that are also integral to the struggle for a liberated Palestine and – as I argued in [Chapter 4](#) – there is a reason that Palestine has occupied a special place in abolitionist theory and practice. We can think of this in terms of how Palestine offers a microcosmic study of the global military–industrial complex, of the relationship between capitalism and carcerality, of racism as – to use Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (2007: 28) formulation – ‘the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death’. But Palestine also

calls forth the ‘imaginative querying’ (Perry 2022: 553) integral to an abolitionist worldview. To imagine a radically different reality for Palestinians as the horrors in Gaza continue to unfold requires an abolitionist imaginary, even if we do not call it such. Rich traditions of Black–Palestinian transnational solidarity have already laid the groundwork for visions of ‘world-making’ that cross borders and generations (Kelley 2019).

Out of the wreckage of the current moment, might the British left return to an anti-imperialist internationalism that more closely resembles that which flourished during the anti-war movement of the early 2000s, or even that which exploded under the banner of Black Power and its peculiarly British iteration? Or will we seek solace in narrow visions of place and punishment, anodyne approaches to difference and defensive posturing? This book on its own does not provide adequate answers to such questions, but such questions must be asked because, more than ever, they have profound implications for the challenging of Islamophobia by and from the anti-racist left. My hope is that, during times that feel in turn horrifying and strange, this book might make a small contribution to our direction of travel.

Note

- 1 This was a phrase repeatedly used by Labour Party leader Keir Starmer, in both TV and radio interviews, as well as in his statement to the House of Commons in October 2023 (see, for example, McShane 2023 and Labour Party 2023).

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