

Some dilemmas of Prevent

A London ESOL teacher *contributes to the discussion begun in PSE 84. The editors welcome further views on this topic.*

In January 2016 David Cameron made a surprise speech in which he linked lack of English both to oppression of Muslim women and to the radicalisation of young people. This speech and his promise of £20 million to help fund language classes for Muslim women was tremendously frustrating to ESOL teachers who have spent years fighting government cuts to provision. Since ESOL was suddenly in the news, teachers took to the media to try to counter misinformation and also use the moment to campaign for more funding.

We're still waiting for the other boot to drop: where is the money, how is it going to be used, and what does the Government have in store for ESOL, which has long been seen as a means of delivering government agendas? And, in a nutshell, will ESOL funding now be linked to Prevent?

The case against Prevent is being put forward elsewhere, for example by UCU. I think there's a good case, for these and other reasons: the danger of creating a suspect community and targeting individuals who are doing no harm; the outsourcing of the state's security role across civil society; the lack of definitions of – and confusion between – conservatism, 'non-violent extremism', and violence; the possibility of the closing down of debate when what's needed is critical thinking and discussion; the threat to workers who are legally bound to comply and to deliver the nebulous 'British values'; the threat to civil liberties, especially as posed by attempts to ban 'extremist' material and speakers.

However, the dilemma for me is that the growing campaign against Prevent is peddling misinformation, fear-mongering and promoting dubious alliances. Activists need to question the way they frame their activism.

Terminology

'Extremism', 'violent and non-violent extremism', 'radicalism', 'radicalisation': these aren't neutral terms. Many of us who oppose capitalism don't think that there is in fact a 'centre' that we all agree on, and that to stray from that is to be 'extreme'. But part of the reason we are stuck without better language with which to discuss what's going on might be the failure of the left to grapple with the issues. It has not adequately analysed either jihadism, the violent expression of Islamist movements, or religious fundamentalism, which refers to modern religious-political movements (from all the major religions) which seek to impose a single interpretation of religious texts on society.*

Myths of Prevent

Some people believe that Prevent is not really a counter-terrorism policy, rather that it's a conspiracy to demonise Muslims and to create an enemy 'other' so as to distract people from austerity and so forth.

This is now a commonly held view on the left, but one for which there's little evidence. My scepticism isn't intended to be a defence of the state. The British state is perfectly capable of gross violations of human rights, especially against migrants. The ever-increasing brutality of immigration controls, and the equally violent 'everyday bordering' that we are all now complicit in is very real. But these are not specifically anti-Muslim policies.

These are some of the things that anti-Prevent speakers have said at public meetings: Prevent

criminalises Islam; it targets people for wearing hijab or praying five times a day; it will target people who attend Friday prayers; Prevent officers can take children away from Muslim parents. I believe none of these are actually true. Sometimes teachers say these things, sometimes to students and young people, which is incredibly irresponsible.

Exaggerating the extent of police and Prevent involvement in referrals is common. For example, in the well publicised 'Terrorist House' case, the 'Eco Terrorist' case and the 'Palestine badge' case, the schools involved have all denied that these were straightforward Prevent referrals as reported. Yet these cases continue to be touted as examples of gross abuses, for example on the Prevent Watch website, even after they've been debunked.

In some areas, such as the Midlands, 50 per cent of Prevent referrals are for expressions of white supremacist or racist far-right sentiments. Yet colleagues have told me that, although Prevent training often emphasises white nationalist extremism, it's not 'really' about that, and this is just a fig leaf put there to hide the real purpose of demonising Muslims. They point to the large number of referrals of Muslims relative to the population to insist that this is Islamophobic.

However, more than 850 British and more than 5,000 European people have travelled to Syria or Iraq to fight with IS. There have been hundreds of attempted terrorism plots. It's striking that in my left circles this simple fact is rarely mentioned or discussed. There is nothing comparable on the far right (though this could – and probably will – change as the far right grows across Europe).

Conspiracy theories

Some people think that perhaps the Government is lying about the number of terrorist plots, inventing them to try to create an atmosphere of fear and hatred in the population. This is bizarre. The state cannot orchestrate grand global conspiracies involving tens of thousands of police, lawyers, judges, families and defendants.

Conspiracy theories have also been voiced in my classrooms. From the belief that 4,000 Jews were instructed to stay home on 9/11 to the recent suggestion that the three Bethnal Green girls didn't really travel to Syria, these dangerous conspiracy theories are heard from time to time. Teachers should be confronting these claims, ideally by creating spaces where they can be challenged by other students, rather than by using the teacher's authority to silence them. They should not be reinforcing them by encouraging students to think that Islamophobic governments are inventing plots to

discredit Muslims. The Islamist victim narrative endangers Muslims. It would be a real shame if ESOL teachers, who do so much to impart a sense of belonging to our migrant students, began to echo the voices that say Muslims cannot live in the west.

The many thousands of people, mostly Muslim, who are under threat of jihadist violence around the world are also not well served by such nonsense, and nor are the British Muslim families who suffer the very real – and devastating – consequences of having family members caught up in the war on terror. Deflection and denial of the violence committed by jihadist groups is not helping Muslims or fighting Islamophobia; it's making it worse.

Othering

Many of us teachers are very worried by the rise both of state targeting of migrants and of racist violence against migrants and Muslims on the streets. Some are concerned that Prevent targets Muslim students and involves us in 'othering' them.

Maybe. But there are other issues here. First, let's not forget that ISIS does its own 'othering'. The nearly 1,000 people who have travelled from Britain to Syria aren't for the most part involved in fighting the butcher Assad. They are there committing mass murder, torture, rape and sexual slavery, colonialisation and ethnic cleansing. This is very serious. Just because Britain exports most of its jihadis and we don't see on our streets the damage they do doesn't mean it's not our problem.

Is it odd to suggest that it's not counter-terrorism but the terrorism itself, carried out in the name of Islam, which is doing more to tarnish the image of Muslims and Islam? The gulf between my Muslim ESOL students and the jihadis engaged in slaughtering civilians is enormous. So far as I know, none of my ESOL students have supported the ideology of Salafi-Jihadism. Yet the jihadis claim to act on behalf of Muslims, to provoke both anti-Muslim bigotry and state clampdown. They aim to create the conditions for attacks on Muslims and bring about the state of irreducible conflict that they seek. This strategy has been quite successful. Responses to anti-Muslim bigotry that don't recognise this are just not credible.

It's also really important to remember that our students are more diverse than we think. They have commonality as migrants and minorities but not always everything else.

Earlier this year there were two brutal hate crimes, murders of Muslims by other Muslims. Asad Shah, from the minority Ahmadiyya community, was killed for blasphemy in Glasgow. Jalal Uddin, a Rochdale Imam, was killed for practising a

traditional syncretic form of Islam such as is practised by many ESOL students. Intolerance of pluralism and different interpretations of religious texts is one of the hallmarks of fundamentalism. The state has no monopoly on 'othering'.

Excuses

There are those who don't deny the reality but make excuses for jihadism. In these arguments, made by Islamists, some left groups (such as UCU Left) and, increasingly, NUS, Muslims are driven to violence by the Islamophobia inherent in western society or foreign policy or poverty and deprivation. This insults the vast majority of Muslims, and indeed other oppressed people, who don't engage in indiscriminate violence. It also displays a Eurocentric ignorance of the global reach of Islamit violence.

Racism, foreign policy, deprivation, alienations, identity, mental health and criminality may all be factors in radicalisation. There is no single cause and this is in fact recognised under the Prevent strategy. There are no easy answers, but the habit of making excuses for people committing atrocities shames the left and will not fight anti-Muslim racism.

Safeguarding and securitisation

ESOL teachers aren't counter-terrorism officers and never should be. We don't want to be part of the security services, any more than we want to be immigration officers. But we may encounter safeguarding issues.

I was asked for help by some of the adult women I teach, following the news of local 'jihadi brides'. Some learners told me they weren't able to do what they knew was important, such as monitor their children's internet use. One told me, 'We cannot keep our children safe'. These students may not be typical and for most others it may not be a pressing issue. But the need for safeguarding is not a myth. Indeed, I've been told by someone working on Preventing Violent Extremism in schools that they have never had objections to their work from Muslim parents. This may come as a surprise to many of the white activists who want to 'fight Islamophobia' by opposing Prevent, but then it's unlikely to be their children who attempt to travel to Syria.

Would Prevent help my students? In my local authority I know that at least some of the safeguarding officers in that authority are skilled, thoughtful people with a background in community work and a commitment to supporting, not

criminalising, vulnerable people. If they were another type of Prevent officer – a private contractor with minimal training and in it for the money – probably not.

Strange bedfellows

Apart from the misinformation and hyperbole spread by the campaign, there is a big problem of alliances. The Students Not Suspects campaign, for example, is amplifying the voices of reactionary groups and individuals, sometimes deliberately and sometimes entirely unwittingly. The NUS is now campaigning alongside CAGE, a group that combines advocating for the civil rights of terrorism suspects (a good thing) and advocating for the ultra-reactionary politics of these suspects (a bad thing). A crude anti-imperialism has led many to believe that those who have been targeted (and in many cases abused) by the US are therefore sound advocates for progressive values and human rights. If CAGE, Mend, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Islamic Human Rights Commission, Mpack, 5pillars and others were ever challenged politically by the students for their Islamic Right views there might be more of a case for sharing platforms and forming strategic alliances, but they are not. Instead they are given a completely free pass by young people whose instincts towards anti-racism and anti-imperialism lead them to be exploited by groups keen to increase their legitimacy and authority.

These groups are given platforms and allowed to speak on behalf of Muslims. They paint Prevent as just the latest example of endless state persecution of Muslims. As an aside, this completely misrepresents the nature of the British state's relationship with Islamism, which at times it has cultivated and funded. But worse, it's defining Muslims as reactionaries, just as Trump and the EDL do.

Some white leftists are now even repeating the Islamist line that the Prevent strategy is really about attacking politically active Muslims, as if all of the latter were Islamists. My Muslim ESOL students hold a variety of political positions, across the spectrum, like everybody else. In the lively discussions we have in class, on all manner of political topics, there is rarely consensus, and never a 'Muslim' position. The imposition of a monolithic identity for Muslims is to be resisted, whether it's constructed by the state or by Islamist groups.*

And at the same time that reactionary voices are being amplified, secular ones are being silenced. At the moment, everyone has to line up for or against Prevent. People who raise concerns like those referred to in this article will be called Islamophobic

and part of the Government's anti-Muslim drive. There is little room for discussion. This is smearing the name of many anti-racist groups and individuals, including Black feminist activists and secular Muslims. The spectacle of white leftists berating secular Muslims for their 'Islamophobia' is something I have seen too many times. The erasure from anti-Prevent discourse of secular and anti-fundamentalist ESOL learners, as well as learners from minority Muslim communities and those practising diverse forms of Islam is also a worry.

Conclusions

This article has attempted to raise some issues for ESOL activists who are seeking involvement in the campaign against Prevent. The misrepresentation of referrals and fear-mongering about Prevent powers is encouraging an environment of hysteria, not critical debate. The denial of the reality of jihadi violence, and making excuses for it in a way that would never be attempted for the white far right, does not 'fight Islamophobia'. It may create the conditions for more

prejudice against Muslims in the wider population. The willingness to form uncritical alliances with fundamentalists and supporters of Salafi Jihadism amplifies reactionary voices and silences the voices of those Muslims actually fighting fundamentalism and violence carried out in the name of Islam.

Taking these points into consideration, an ESOL activist position on Prevent could point its critique in two directions: against the surveillance state and its targeting of minorities, and against far right political mobilisations of the white nationalist or Islamist variety. I have no answers as to the practical way forward, but I hope that the rich traditions of radical pedagogy in ESOL classrooms and our ESOL activism alongside our migrant students will help with these dilemmas.

*These issues are explored more fully in Cowden, S. (2016) 'The Poverty of Apologism: The British Left, Feminism and the Islamic Right.' *Feminist Dissent*, (1), 67-80. Retrieved from: <http://journals.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/feministdissent/article/view/13>