

## Some Dilemmas of Prevent

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Adult ESOL (English for Speakers of other Languages) provision is often understood to be more than language teaching, though the UK government and ESOL teachers often have different understandings of what that means. The government has seen ESOL provision as carrying a shifting package of agendas including citizenship, integration, employability, community cohesion and perhaps, counter-terrorism. ESOL teachers also know that our classrooms are more than places for learning English, often seeing our classroom praxis as encouraging confidence, resilience, social mixing, sense of belonging, friendships, empowerment, and resistance.

In January 2016, David Cameron gave a surprise speech in which he linked lack of English both to the oppression of Muslim women and to the radicalisation of young people (see Staufenberg, 2016). 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 savage government cuts to provision - estimated at 55% since 2009 (Refugee Action, 2017). Since then, there have been further vague links asserted between learning English language and fighting radicalisation, for example in the Casey Report (Casey, 2016) and the Integrated Communities Strategies Green Paper (HM Government, 2018).

Teachers tend to be suspicious of new government agendas influencing our work and Prevent is predictably controversial amongst teachers,



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especially in the Further Education sector where staff have a statutory duty to promote ‘fundamental British values’ (HM Government, 2016).

The case against Prevent is being put forward elsewhere, for example by my union University and College Union (University and College Union, 2015) whose Congress voted for a boycott, though this was found to be unlawful (see Greer, 2016). I think it is a reasonable 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 is 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 campaign against Prevent has peddled misinformation, engaged in fear mongering, and promoted dubious alliances. At a recent ESOL conference I attended, many teachers were preoccupied with what they believed to be the draconian effect of Prevent in our workplaces, some arguing it was the most important issue facing us as practitioners, even though most of these were themselves working for third-sector organisations that are not bound by the Prevent Duty. I’m concerned about the way much anti-racist activism in this area is being framed.

### **Terminology**

‘Extremism’, ‘violent and non-violent extremism’, ‘radicalism’, ‘radicalisation’: these are not neutral terms. Many who oppose capitalism do not think that there is in fact a ‘centre’ that we all agree on, and that to stray from that is to be ‘extreme’. Further, many are used to thinking of ourselves as radicals and recall the experiences which ‘radicalised’ us in an entirely different framework than the current meaning of involvement

with Islamist or far-right terrorism. I have had many conversations with people that did not get beyond complaints about this terminology.

However, part of the reason we are stuck without better language with which to discuss the current situation might be the failure of the left to engage with the issues. The left (or at least, not the activist left) 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 (Dhaliwal and Yuval Davis, 2014). This contributes to the poor quality of debate and encourages a simplistic understanding of complex issues.

### **Myths of Prevent**

Some activist teachers believe that Prevent is not really part of a counter-terrorism policy, rather, that it is a conspiracy to demonise Muslims and to create an enemy 'other' so as to distract people from austerity. This is now a commonly held view on the left, but one for which there is little evidence. My scepticism is not 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' (see Wemyss, Cassidy and Yuval Davis 2017) that we are all now complicit in is very real. But some of the claims about Prevent are myths and they do need to be debunked.

These are some of the things that I have heard anti-Prevent speakers saying 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. None of these are actually true. I have heard teachers say these

things to a room full of 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 all denied that these were straightforward Prevent referrals as widely reported by the media and activist circles (see *BBC News*, 2016; Independent Press Complaints Organisation, 2016; Parris-Long, 2016). Yet these cases continue to be touted as examples of gross abuses, for example on the *Prevent Watch* website, even after they have been debunked.

Increasing numbers of Prevent referrals relate to expressions of white supremacist or racist far-right sentiments. Yet colleagues tell me that, although Prevent training often emphasises white nationalist extremism, it is not ‘really’ about that, and that this is just a fig leaf put there to hide the real purpose which, according to them, is to demonise Muslims. They point to the large number of referrals of Muslims relative to the population to insist that this is proof of anti-Muslim bias. However, 850 British people have travelled to Syria or Iraq to fight with IS (Guardian 2018). There have been dozens of attempted terrorism plots. It's striking that in my left circles, this simple fact is rarely mentioned or discussed. There has been nothing comparable on the white nationalist far right, though this situation is worsening dramatically.

### **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 did not really travel to Syria, these dangerous conspiracies 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. 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, 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 are not helping Muslims or fighting anti Muslim bigotry; they are 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 IS and al Qaeda do their own 'othering'. The hundreds of people who have travelled from Britain to Syria were not for the most part involved in fighting the butcher Assad. They were there committing mass murder, torture, rape

and sexual slavery, colonisation and ethnic cleansing. Just because Britain exports most of its jihadis and we do not see on our streets the damage they do, does not mean it is not a problem for the left.

Is it odd to suggest that it is not counter-terrorism but the terrorism itself, carried out in the name of Islam, which has done more to tarnish the image of Muslims and Islam? The gulf between my Muslim ESOL students and the jihadists 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 jihadists claim to act on behalf of Muslims. This is what makes me scared for my students. In the West, the very aim of jihadist attacks is to drive a wedge between Muslims and non-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.

It is 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. My ESOL students are mostly Muslim or Muslim-heritage women, but these simple labels do not express the diversity that exists within what is often simplistically referred to as the Muslim community.

In 2016, there were two brutal hate crimes – both were murders of Muslims by other Muslims. Asad Shah, from the minority Ahmadiyya community, was killed for blasphemy in Glasgow (Carell, 2016). Jalal Uddin, a Rochdale Imam, was killed for practicing a traditional, syncretic form of Islam such as is practiced by many of the ESOL students in my classes (Pilling, 2016). Intolerance of pluralism, diversity, and of 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. Some left parties and campaign groups commonly share social media posts or give platforms to speakers from CAGE, a group which makes no secret of its support for the Taliban and Al Qaeda (Bhatt, 2017). In their arguments, Muslims are driven to violence by the Islamophobia inherent in western society or foreign policy or poverty and deprivation (see Ali, 2016). This insults the vast majority of Muslims and, indeed, other oppressed people, who do not engage in indiscriminate violence. It also displays a Eurocentric ignorance of the global reach of Islamist violence and erases the existence of those Muslims on the frontline fighting fundamentalism and Islamist violence (Bennoune and Kandiyoti, 2015).

Racism, foreign policy, deprivation, alienation, identity, mental health, and criminality may all be factors in radicalisation. There is no single cause and this is in fact recognised by 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. These excuses are not generally made by the Left for far-right nationalism and racist violence.

## **Safeguarding and Securitisation**

ESOL teachers are not counter-terrorism officers and never should be. We do not 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 were not 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. I have been told by someone doing Prevent work in schools that he has rarely 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 is unlikely to be their children who attempt to travel abroad to join a Salafi-Jihadist group.

Would Prevent help my students? In my local authority, I know that at least some of the safeguarding officers 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 – perhaps they would not be. The questionable quality of much Prevent training and delivery is a different issue.

### **Strange Bedfellows**

Apart from the misinformation and hyperbole spread by the campaign, there is a big problem of alliances. In 2015, over 200 academics signed a letter against Prevent alongside CAGE, a group that manipulates the language of human rights in relation to Salafi-Jihadist prisoners, but say nothing of the gross human rights violations those individuals commit (Tax 2013, Gupta, 2017). The NUS 'Students not Suspects' campaign has amplified the voices of reactionary groups and individuals, including CAGE. An NUS President who objected to this alliance was accused of Islamophobia in another letter signed by over 100 NUS officers and activists (Students not Suspects, 2015).

Other organisations involved in anti-Prevent campaigning include 5Pillars – a website and Facebook page which rails against secularists and carries sexist, homophobic, and sectarian content. The editor, Dilly Hussain, peddles conspiracies about the government, 'zionists', and Muslim minorities as well as attacks secular Muslim women (see 5Pillars, 2013; Sergeant 2014) while trying to associate his organisation with the student

campaigns against Prevent. Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND), a conservative group which targets secular Muslim women for their activism (Rehman 2017), has been welcomed by Students not Suspects. A group actually banned by NUS for its anti-Semitism, MPACUK, was nevertheless able to use its association with campaigns opposing Prevent to rehabilitate its image in liberal/left circles to a certain extent (see Whitton 2015).

A crude anti-imperialism has led many to believe that those who are victims of racism or have been targeted (and in many cases abused) by the US must inevitably be sound advocates for progressive values and human rights (Tax 2013). There might be a case sharing platforms and forming strategic alliances if the politics of the Islamic Right groups and individuals opposing Prevent were ever challenged by students activists, but they tend not to be. 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.

Groups such as CAGE claim to speak for Muslims and, more recently, have tried to position themselves as part of radical grassroots anti-racist movements (Qureshi 2017). They tend to paint Prevent as just the latest example of the State's endless 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 is 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 (Cowden, 2016). 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. In fact, it is my

experience in ESOL that has taught me that 'Muslim' is only one aspect of my students' identity and should not be privileged over everything else. The imposition of a monolithic identity for Muslims is to be resisted, whether it is constructed by the state, Islamist groups, the right, or the left.

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 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.

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