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UK counter-extremism agenda:
'Safeguarding' as routine punishment and collective self-policing

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The Home Office programme 'Prevent Violent Extremism' has had mounting criticism and overt opposition, especially in the run-up to becoming statutory last year (NUS, NUT, UCU, all 2015). In people's experience, the key term 'extremist' has been triggered by a wide, racist range of indicators. Frequently targeted are Muslims who criticise UK foreign policy (Kundnani, 2009; Mohammed and Siddiqui, 2014), especially Israel (e.g. Hooper, 2015, Tickle, 2014; OSJI, 2016: 86-89).

The trigger has been widened to potentially any protest, thus highlighting the extremist, anti-democratic role of 'prevent' measures. A local authority has unintentionally parodied the programme as follows: 'The Counter Terrorism Local Profile for York and North Yorkshire highlights the key risks to York as evidence of activity relating to Syria, presence of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), anti-Israeli/pro-Palestinian activity, hunt saboteurs, animal rights, anti-fracking and extreme right wing activity' (BBC, 2016). As it further explained, 'since 2010, local authorities monitor any activities where there is potential for community tension'. The 'potential' readily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy through preventive measures.

Driving the agenda

Despite the growing opposition to the Prevent programme, its surveillance and 'deradicalisation' practices are being expanded, supposedly to safeguard vulnerable individuals. Why? What drives the agenda?

This question has remained marginal to the debate for versus against the programme. For example, the shadow home secretary Diane Abbott recently criticised the Prevent programme as follows: 'The whole scheme is simply unworkable' (cited in Travis, 2016). If only it were so… By unworkable, such critics mean unfair, e.g. by making families fear that their children will be taken away, frightening children, targeting entire Muslim communities, undermining potential cooperation against terrorism and therefore counter-productive.

Statistics about the programme's operation have contrary interpretations. Amongst individuals reported for suspected extremism, 80% have no follow-up action by the police. This indicates a 5-fold over-reporting, according to critics. In response, the problem is inverted into a solution: those statistics demonstrate that the system screens out those who were wrongly identified and so works well, according to the Home Office (cited in Travis, 2016). Lost in such arguments is the enormous damage done (OSJI, 2016), e.g. inflicting child abuse, stigmatising individuals and generating distrust of professional staff.

Regardless of whether anyone is rightly identified as potential 'extremists', why are so many 'wrongly' identified? Namely, because the Prevent programme creates fear among professional staff, especially their managers, who expect a regular flow of reporting and referrals. These practices become a bureaucratic performance indicator, necessary to demonstrate that an institution is truly implementing the programme and so safeguarding those vulnerable to extremist influence. Potentially everyone becomes police or policed or both.

The programme's operation depends on collective self-policing through fear of punishment, e.g. that inadequate compliance may jeopardise professional careers or an institution's standing with its funders, especially through Ofsted inspections. Based on a vague definition of extremism, the reporting draw on and reinforce Islamophobic stereotypes. And the entire procedure generates fear -- that individuals may be reported for anything they say, that students may be disciplined for refusing 'deradicalisation', that people may be stigmatised, that parents may lose their children, etc. Given that many students feel intimidated, there is a danger that 'people do not seek help when they are struggling with their mental health (making them more unwell), or that those who do seek help are made vulnerable to surveillance and punishment' (NUS, 2015: 39). Indeed, punishing people makes them more vulnerable.

Punishing 'non-violent extremism'

Such punishment has affinities with the entire counter-terror agenda. A decade ago the Prevent programme was established within the wider Contest programme to protect national security. This has sought to counter the ideology of 'violent extremism' and the grievances which make it attractive (Cabinet Office, 2008). In effect, this targets those who promote such grievances, i.e. threats to the state from political dissent.

From the start, Contest linked three crucial aspects: mass surveillance to identify an ambiguous 'extremism' which warrants various preventive and punitive measures. In 2009 this rationale was explained by the Home Office chief of Counter-Terrorism, Charles Farr: namely, the government has targeted a large group of non-violent people who 'create an environment in which terrorists can operate'. This criterion was later incorporated into the Prevent strategy and statutory duty (HM Government, 2015: para 77).

On this rationale of pre-empting violence, 'non-violent extremism' warrants not only surveillance but also deterrence and prevention. Anti-terror legislation encompass a broad range of executive powers, euphemistically called 'non-prosecution civil executive actions' (HM Government, 2009). Such punishments without due process include: withdrawing passports, imposing travel bans, even revoking citizenship – a step towards drone assassination in many cases (Woods and Ross, 2014).

With all its ambiguity, 'non-violent extremism' better describes the target of all anti-terror legislation since the Terrorism Act 2000. Given that violent acts and threats were already illegal, new laws stigmatised and even criminalised non-violent ones, as a basis to authorise punishments without trial. Such measures include: longer detention without trial, harassment for displaying symbols of banned organisations, long detentions at ports under Schedule 7, etc. Under its own statutory duty, the Charities Commission likewise has been imposing punishments – e.g. disqualifying individuals from being a charity officer, suspending an organisation's activities during long investigations -- in turn making organisations more vulnerable to the denial or termination of bank accounts.

There is worse yet to come. In May 2015 (and again May 2016) the government announced plans for a Counter-Extremism and Safeguarding Bill, which would strengthen executive powers to counter any 'extremist' views or behaviours, in the name of protecting vulnerable individuals or groups. There would be three new types of civil orders: Banning Orders (to ban extremist groups), Extremism Disruption Orders (to stop individuals engaging in extremist behaviour), and Closure Orders (to close down premises used to support extremism). Any breach would be a criminal offence; thus the CPS would not need to present evidence to the requisite standard for a criminal trial.

The draft Bill also proposed more executive measures: A new Extremism Trigger would guarantee that complaints about local extremism are fully reviewed by the police and local authorities. The Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) will be expanded so that employers identify extremists and stop them working with vulnerable groups. The DBS will notify employers of any new information about extremism relevant to an employee, especially barring anyone with a criminal conviction or civil order for extremist activity.

In the updated Contest strategy, moreover, the government will counter online 'extremist ideology' by monitoring websites and removing 'propaganda'. It will set up alternative platforms to challenge extremism using a network of credible commentators and groups to maintain appropriate content. There will be robust intervention in all institutions -- schools, further education colleges, universities,

hospitals, prisons -- to root out extremism along the same lines as the Prevent strategy (HM Government, 2013).

All these disciplinary and punishment procedures lack due process or testable evidence, thus extending similar measures from all anti-terror legislation since 2000. In practice, suspect extremists are now treated as suspect terrorists. By targeting 'pre-criminality', special measures punish potential crime as if it were already crime. Such powers have been hardly challenged as political agenda, despite some criticism in the margins (e.g. JCHR, 2016).

Constructing 'extremist' threats

All these measures intensify the close linkage between an ambiguously defined 'extremism', mass surveillance, executive powers and punishment without due process. Potentially everyone is drawn into monitoring and policing each other, e.g. by avoiding any discussions or events that might 'trigger' suspicion.

When Prime Minister Tony Blair was announcing new counter-terror legislation in 2005, an MP shouted out 'police state' -- true. A more accurate description would be: collective self-policing to impose routine punishment (or to avoid it), thus undermining citizens' mutual trust and democratic rights. This damage is no incidental by-product; rather, it is integral to the political agenda. Indeed, this explains why the Prevent programme will be strengthened, even complemented by more punishment powers, thus intensifying the fear regime.

The large-scale reporting on suspected 'extremists' generates its own evidence base, in turn justifying the programme. This circular logic is integral to the entire 'war on terror'. When journalists questioned whether President George W. Bush was always targeting real terrorist threats, his advisor responded: You journalists are living in 'the reality-based community'. By contrast, 'We're an empire now. And when we act, we create our own reality' (quoted in Suskind, 2004). This self-fulfilling agenda bypasses sceptical questions about whether counter-extremism measures are 'workable' or truly target extremism – a flexibly expandable category.

The UK strategy also has analogies with a wider shift in the neoliberal project towards routine punishment of vulnerable groups or entire countries. Consider these examples: When the Troika imposed heavy conditions for refinancing Greece's debt, supposedly in order to bring economic recovery, the Finance Minister denounced the Troika's demands as 'fiscal waterboarding', thus making the link to torture. During the UK's ConDem Coalition government, austerity measures likewise were officially meant to bring prosperity, despite warnings to the contrary. And benefits sanctions were expanded to tens of thousands, officially to encourage their return to work, yet sanctions often undermined any weak prospects that such people did have. Across all these policy areas, state representatives lack the will or capacity to justify the punitive measures, much less how they achieve the official aims; there has been scant response to counter-evidence.

As William Davies (2016) argues, those punitive measures have 'a relentless form that acts in place of reasoned discourse, thus replacing the need for hegemonic consensus formation'. Empty affirmations of good intent are repeated ritualistically: 'power now seeks to circumvent the public sphere, in order to avoid the constraints of critical reason'.

Why? The state espouses different aims than its real agenda – namely, punishing people or countries into submission -- which cannot be explicitly acknowledged or justified. The counter-extremism agenda conveniently undermines democratic rights, suppresses popular debate on UK foreign policy and diverts blame elsewhere. For truly preventing terrorism and safeguarding vulnerable individuals, many critics ask for an alternative means. These have been developed by many Muslim groups, but their efforts are undermined by the state's agenda. Official 'counter-extremism' incorporates just a few groups (e.g. Quilliam Foundation) which provide an echo chamber for government policy, while excluding others.

Safeguarding resistance

For a counter-strategy, we should emphasise the following problem: An ambiguously defined 'extremism' serves the state's anti-democratic agenda of collective self-policing, mass surveillance, routine punishment and fear. All this complements a wider punishment

regime of neoliberalism, lacking any defensible linkage between punishments, individuals' actions and societal benefits. As always, ethnic minorities become a test case for measures which can then be applied more widely.

In the Prevent programme, routine punishment (and threat thereof) will intensify until professional staff build greater self-confidence to defy the fear of punishment, to refuse their police role, to challenge its Islamophobic assumptions and thus make the programme unworkable. Since the government announced plans for making it statutory, opposition campaigns have raised slogans such as 'Educators, not informants', and 'Students, not suspects'. They aim to build support for individuals who refuse complicity and contest the procedures. This resistance needs safeguarding through visible, consistent solidarity. This effort can also contest the routine punishment which drives the entire 'counter-terror' regime.

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Note: This article draws on discussions within CAMPACC and beyond over several years.

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