

Manchester & the rise of Identity Politicis: How did the left radicalism of my Manchester youth give way to Islamism?

Wednesday 31 May 2017, by [MALIK Kenan](#) (Date first published: 28 May 2017).

After the atrocity, we recall a past when to be young and Muslim was to be engaged in class politics.

Were I 20 today, would I be attracted to Islamism or desire to become a soldier of Islamic State? It seems shocking, even insulting, especially to those who lost their lives in the Manchester Arena on Monday night, just to ask that question. It seems more shocking still not simply to give a resounding “no” as an answer and then move on.

It is not, however, such a deranged question. True, I have spent most of my adult life pushing back against Islamism. I have described jihadis as degenerate and barbarous. I would find it unimaginable to don a suicide vest under any circumstances, let alone at a teenage concert.

Yet when I was in my late teens and early 20s, I was as angry as many young Muslims are now. So were many of my peers. Why did we not end up like Salman Abedi, the suicide bomber at the Manchester Arena, or Mohammad Sidique Khan, the ringleader of the 7/7 bombings in London?

One answer may be that, as an individual, I possess a moral compass that Abedi or Khan did not, which guides me away from such ideologies and from committing such barbarous acts. That may be a comforting thought for me, but the problem cannot be dismissed so simply. The difference is not just one of individual morality – it is generational too. Mine was a generation in which anger and disaffection was expressed very differently to that of today’s generation. My story, and the contrast it presents with the stories of today’s generation, may help reveal some of the reasons that Salman Abedi or Mohammad Sidique Khan could act as they did.

I grew up in south Manchester, just as Salman Abedi did. But my Manchester was very different from Abedi’s. Racism in the 1970s was woven into the fabric of British society in a way unimaginable now. “Paki bashing” was a national sport. Stabbings were common, firebombings of Asian houses almost weekly events, murders not uncommon.

I attended largely white schools. My main memory is of being involved almost daily in fights with racists and of how normal it seemed to come home with a bruised lip or a black eye. And if you reported a racist attack to the police, they were as likely to arrest you as they were the racist. From union leaders conspiring with management to keep out black and Asian workers to immigration officers conducting “virginity tests” on Asian women, racism was open, vicious and raw.

I felt real fury at a society that would not embrace me as an equal, legitimate citizen. But it was a very different kind of anger to that which many young Muslims feel now and the ways of expressing it were even more distinct. My fury towards Britain was not expressed through the prism of being “Muslim”. Partly this was because I was not religious. But partly, also, because few adopted

“Muslim” as a public identity. We thought of ourselves as “Asian” or “black”, but these were political, not ethnic or cultural, labels.

The institutions that shaped what are now called “Muslim communities” were not mosques, but secular and political organisations such as the Indian Workers’ Association and the Asian Youth Movements. The struggles of Asian communities were intimately bound up with wider working-class struggles. Migrant workers were at the forefront of industrial action, from the first significant postwar “immigrant strike” at Red Scar Mill, near Preston, Lancashire, when Asian workers took action against the practice of forcing non-white workers to work more machines for less pay, to Grunwick, in London, where in 1976 black and Asian women went on strike for more than a year, demanding union recognition. In these struggles, union officials often backed management against black and Asian workers; Grunwick was the first dispute of black workers that attracted mass support from the trade union movement.

This history provided the grounding for the struggles of my generation. We recognised the commonality of values, hopes and aspirations that bound together Asians, blacks and whites. Organisations of the left and of the labour movement provided us with the vehicles to give grievance a political form and the mechanisms for turning disaffection into the fuel of social change.

I was drawn towards politics by my experience of racism and politics made me see beyond the narrow confines of racism. I came to learn that there was more to social justice than the injustices done to me and that a person’s skin colour, ethnicity or culture weren’t guides to the validity of his or her political beliefs. Through politics, I was introduced to the Enlightenment and to concepts of a common humanity and universal rights. I discovered the writings of Marx and Mill, Kant and Locke, Paine and Condorcet, Frantz Fanon and CLR James.

Today, the picture is very different. The kind of raw racism that defined Britain 30 or 40 years ago is barely visible. Racism exists, of course, and Muslims are often the targets of such bigotry, but the visceral racism of the Britain of my youth is rarely seen.

Equally important has been the transformation in what it means to be disaffected. The kinds of campaigns and organisations with which I was involved have either disintegrated or seem out of touch. It is not progressive politics that gives shape to contemporary disaffection but the politics of identity, which, over the past three decades, has encouraged people to define themselves in increasingly narrow ethnic or cultural terms.

Seeing myself as “black” provided for me the entry to a wider set of struggles and to a broader vision of the world. For today’s “radicals”, Muslim identity has become a cage of separation from other peoples, even from other Muslims.

In the case of Salman Abedi, much has been made of the role of Didsbury mosque, where he prayed. The full story of his relationship with the mosque is yet to be understood. Most homegrown jihadis are, however, as estranged from Muslim communities as they are from wider society. Most detest the mores and traditions of their parents, have little time for mainstream forms of Islam and cut themselves off from traditional community institutions. It is in Salafism, the fanatically intolerant form of Islam, promoted primarily through Saudi riches, that jihadis find their identity. It is an outlook that leads a believer to look at a group of teenage girls and see a “gathering of Crusaders”, as the IS statement boasting of the Manchester Arena bombing described the audience at the Ariana Grande concert.

As the character of identity has changed, so has the meaning of solidarity. For my generation, “solidarity” was inextricably bound up with working-class struggles. Today, those struggles have

disappeared, the influence of trade unions has eroded, as has the power of the left.

Today's angry young Islamists are not interested in the fight against austerity, the defence of the NHS or even in the struggle against racism. They are obsessed, rather, in showing solidarity with the peoples of Palestine and Chechnya and Syria. In an age in which anti-imperialist movements have faded and belief in alternatives to capitalism dissolved, radical Islam provides the illusion of being part of a global movement for change.

But even here, Muslim radicals are not interested in the actual freedom struggles. The people of Palestine or Chechnya or Syria are seen merely as symbols of oppression. Jihadis are outraged at western intervention in Muslim countries while also bombing schools, mosques and markets in those same countries. The "internationalism" of radical Islam is itself a means of creating an intensely narrow vision, of cutting itself off from broader struggles.

A generation ago, today's "radicalised" Muslims would probably have been far more secular in their outlook and their radicalism would have expressed itself through political organisations. They would have regarded their faith as simply one strand in a complex tapestry of self-identity. Most Muslims still do. There is, however, a growing number who see themselves as Muslims in a deeply tribal sense, for whom the richness of the tapestry of self has given way to an all-encompassing monochrome cloak of faith.

Perhaps the question to ask is not: "Were I 20 today, would I be attracted to Islamism?" but, rather: "Had Salman Abedi or Mohammad Sidique Khan been born a generation earlier, would they have rejected Islamism?" It is impossible to answer, but in asking that question, we can begin to tease out some of the social reasons for the Abedis and the Khans of this world becoming as they are.

I am not suggesting that anyone apart from Salman Abedi (and his co-conspirators, if there are any) bears responsibility for the carnage at the Manchester Arena. The reflex response to anyone digging deeper into the motives of jihadis is to denounce them as "apologists". Witness the Tory onslaught against Jeremy Corbyn for what was a largely innocuous speech on Friday. What I am saying, however, is that while individuals bear responsibility for their acts, they also act within particular social contexts. If we are serious about combating the scourge of homegrown jihadism, we need not just to denounce jihadis as evil, but also to look at how the shifting social landscape has given them space to act as they do - and at how we can remake that landscape.

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P.S.

* The Guardian. Sunday 28 May 2017 09.00 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/28/islamism-separation-other-peoples-even-muslims>