The new geographies of racism: Stoke-on-Trent

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Acknowledgements

This publication is part of a project, *Solidarity and the new geographies of racism*, supported by the Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust. The IRR's research on racial violence is also supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

This report has greatly benefited from those people who we spoke to about racial violence in Stoke and we would like to express our gratitude. We would also like to thank Danny Reilly for the research that he conducted and his advice. ■

The IRR's report: *The new geographies of racism: Plymouth* can be donwloaded at: http://www.irr.org.uk/pdf2/New_geographies_racism_Plymouth.pdf (pdf file, 198kb).

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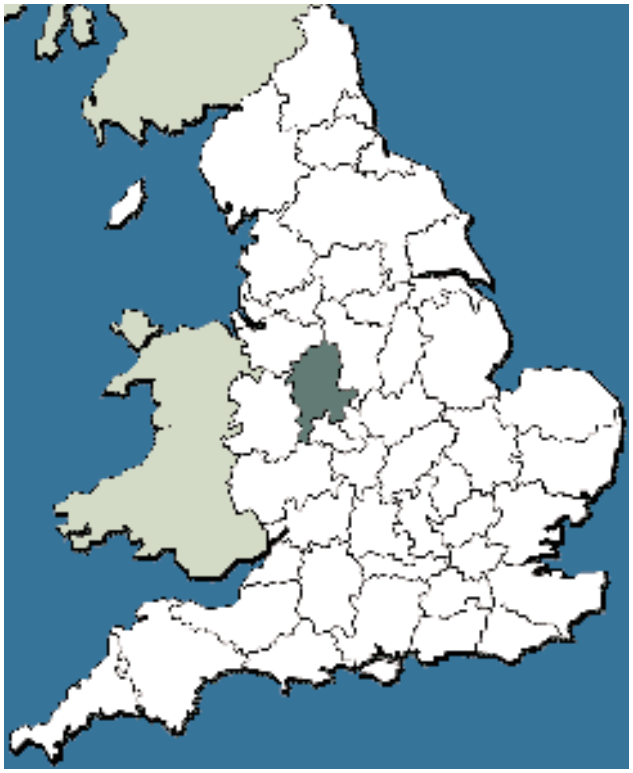
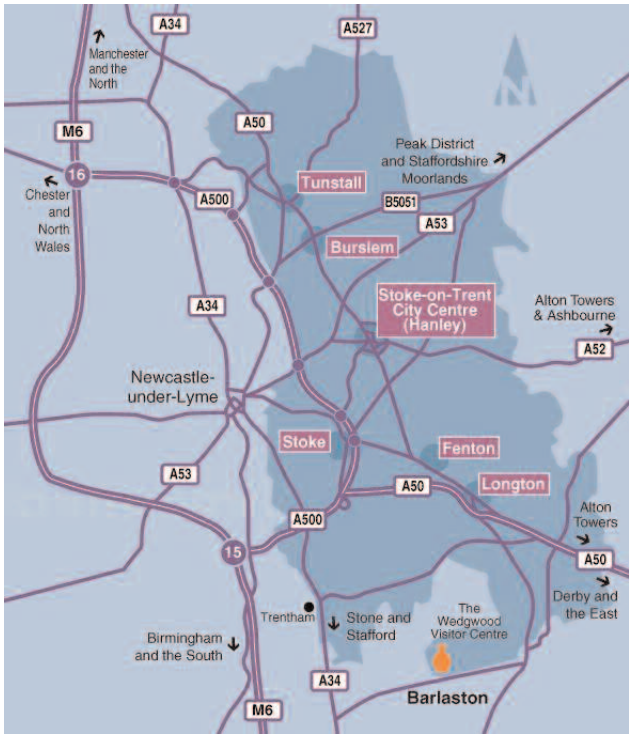
The county of Staffordshire[1]



The six towns of Stoke-on Trent[2]



Introduction

In 2010 the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) published *Racial violence: the buried issue*, a report analysing 660 racist attacks which took place throughout the UK in 2009.[3] The findings indicated that patterns of racial violence in the UK are shifting. Whereas previously, attacks were frequently concentrated in impoverished inner and outer areas in large conurbations, there is now a marked increase in racist incidents in rural areas, towns and smaller cities. Such is the extent of violence in some of these areas that it appears almost routine.

Over the last decade, the demography of the UK has altered significantly and, put simply, as patterns of migration and settlement have changed, so too have patterns of racial violence. According to successive governments, this is symptomatic of breakdowns in community cohesion, unsuccessful integration and even a failure of multiculturalism. However, such explanations ignore and downplay the role of state policies and actions which set the tone for popular racism and the context within which such attacks take place. Vicious attacks against asylum seekers and migrant workers have become a regular occurrence in some areas. Radical transformations in local economies, relying on deregulated, unprotected and flexible labour forces, have pushed workers into jobs where they are isolated, vulnerable and exposed to a risk of violence. As particular forms of popular racism have formed nationally – such as anti-Muslim racism generated through the war on terror – localised racisms have gathered pace and manifested themselves in abuse, harassment and brutality. Far-right organisations, in such climates, have been able to capitalise on emerging hostilities.

Against this backdrop, the IRR is conducting detailed investigations into three of the areas which *Racial violence: the buried issue* identified as experiencing particularly high levels of racist attacks. The first of these investigations focused on Plymouth, in the south-west of England.[4] The second is on Stoke-on-Trent: a city where racist violence has intensified over the last decade. Stoke, when compared to many other cities of similar size, has a comparatively high proportion of Muslim residents and there has been a campaign of vicious harassment of this community including attacks on mosques, serious physical assaults and sustained abuse. Asylum seekers have been targeted to such an extent that some children have been forced to leave school for their own safety. Some long-standing residents from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities have had CCTV fitted on their homes in a desperate attempt to track the identity of those who vandalise their property and graffiti their walls.

What follows draws from interviews and conversations conducted with people on community politics, anti-racist and anti-fascist campaigning, and education in Stoke. Statistical information was gathered from local and national government documents, organisations working towards combating

racial violence and other research. The cases that are highlighted are mainly from the IRR's database on racial violence which records attacks reported by local and national media.

This document examines the patterns of racial violence which have begun to emerge in Stoke by analysing them in the context of the specific trajectory which anti-terrorism, criminal justice, immigration and asylum, and 'race relations' policies have taken in recent years. By exploring the impact of these in the city, as well as the impact of the economic changes which have radically transformed the locality, it provides an insight into the changing dynamics of racism in the UK.

Economic and demographic changes in Stoke-on-Trent

Stoke-on-Trent, in the county of Staffordshire, has been described as the most 'working class city in England'.[5] Once a hub of industry, replete with highly-skilled workers, the city has been devastated by post-industrial decline; leaving in its wake concentrated unemployment, entrenched inequalities and a seething sense of anger.

The city is made up of six once separate towns (Stoke-upon-Trent, Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Fenton and Longton), linked through proximity and shared industry and drawn together as one unitary authority in 1910. In reference to its long industrial heritage it is referred to colloquially as 'the Potteries': a manufacturing industry ideally suited to rural surroundings with a readily available supply of raw minerals. In the nineteenth century, more than half of those employed in Stoke worked in pottery manufacture with the region accounting for 70 per cent of global ceramic exports.[6] Mining was thriving and there was a robust steel and iron industry. For much of the twentieth century the region remained one of the UK's industrial centres.

Like many other industrial towns and cities, this manufacturing base, historically, relied on migrant labour as a highly skilled but highly exploitable sub-section of the workforce. And although many BME communities arriving to work in the city in the 1950s and 1960s chose to live in nearby towns and cities, those who did remain have shaped its contemporary demographic make-up.[7] In large part, those who settled in Stoke were from Pakistan and Bangladesh, and these communities now make up the largest proportion (over 50 per cent) of the city's BME population. According to Ludi Simpson and Vasilis Gavalas of the University of Manchester, the combined Pakistani and Bangladeshi population in Stoke has risen from 4,800 in 1991 (the first year when ethnicity was recorded), to 6,900 in 2001 and an estimated 9,050 in 2011.[8] Similarly (albeit in relation to much smaller numbers of people), the number of Indian residents has risen from 1,100 in 2001 to an estimated 1,150 in 2011. These increases contrast with population changes in other groups and, whilst there were 240,700 white people in the city in 1991 for example, this had reduced to (an estimated) 214,700 in 2011. The number of black people reduced from 1,650 to 950 in the same time period.[9]

As such, the overall population in Stoke is decreasing; but this is offset, to a limited extent, by an increase in the number of people from certain BME groups. Whereas three per cent of the population were from BME communities in 1991, this had risen to five per cent in 2001 and (an estimated) seven per cent in 2009.[10] Although this, in part, is tied to recent inward migration (including, for example, that of asylum seekers and migrant workers), it is also largely related to younger populations and, as such, 'natural growth'. These factors, combined with the out-migration of white communities, have contributed to the BME population in Stoke *proportionally* more than doubling in the last two decades.

Those who have remained now reside in a city where most of the once busy factories lie derelict. In the 1970s the potteries employed 50,000 people. Now they only employ 7,000. In the 1950s the coalfields lost nearly 13,000 jobs. Now they employ no-one. The steelworks are unused. The by-products factories closed.[11] Echoes of these industries reside in an emerging tourism sector, with museums enticing visitors to reminisce over bygone industrial days. The legacies of their collapse though reside in dilapidated, boarded up buildings, unemployment and inequality, and the long-term impacts on people with chronic work-related health conditions such as respiratory tuberculosis and lung cancer. In 1989 Stoke was given the moniker 'sick city': a label that it has been difficult to shake off.[12]

According to the Department of Health, over 50 per cent of the population of the city were classed as living in the 'most deprived quintile' in England in 2011:[13] areas which can be demarked by, among other things, some of the lowest employment and educational prospects, most acute concerns in relation to substandard housing, and highest proportions of people with insufficient income levels in the country. About one fifth of the working-age adults are unable to find work within a local economy which has been radically restructured and, of those who can, about one in five are employed in the service sector in conditions which are frequently temporary and insecure. Of the city's council wards, 80 per cent are classed as having some of

the most severe levels of child poverty in the country and close to one out of every five city dwellings are uninhabitable. Five per cent of its buildings are derelict.[14] Concentrations of poverty and inequality have left particular areas of the city stagnating, with a retreat of services and provisions and local infrastructures either close to or recovering from collapse.

Burslem, in the north of the city is one such example. With almost 30 per cent of the residents from a BME community, it is one of the most ethnically diverse areas in the locality. It is also an area with significant health problems, particularly high levels of financial poverty and low quality – in many cases uninhabitable – housing. Bentilee, in the south of Stoke, is another. Once one of the biggest housing estates in Europe, its decline has only partly been masked by a plethora of regeneration projects. Nearly half of the local residents were unemployed in 2010, with many unable to work for health reasons.[15] Bentilee is an area where the vast majority of the residents are white, but when the local authority fails to provide them with housing, rumours abound that the small number of local BME residents are responsible.[16] It is exactly the sort of area seen as providing a fertile base of support for the British National Party (BNP): and until only recently it was a far-right stronghold in a city described by the party as the 'jewel in the crown'.[17]

The politics and presence of the far Right

The rise of the BNP in Stoke was rapid and it indicates how a particular set of political conditions have been opportunistically exploited in an area which, previously, has not had such a historical connection with far-right movements. This is not to say that there has never been any far-right activity at all. In the 1930s, Oswald Mosley invested considerable effort establishing the British Union of Fascists (BUF) as a political force within the locality, with tacit support from the local press, and such was the success of this strategy that within a few years the city was described as 'Ripe for Fascism'.[18] There was a resurgence of activity in the 1970s, when the National Front (NF) mobilised, regularly standing in council elections and holding routine demonstrations and politically organising.[19] Yet, particularly in the decades prior to the early 21st century, the far Right did not have a base in the city to such an extent that there was a credible threat of political power.

This changed when the BNP began systematically campaigning in the locality in the late 1990s. In 2001, the organisation distributed leaflets to families around two schools in the city, one of them with a large number of Asian pupils, claiming that within them was a 'low-intensity race war'.[20] The following year the city elected its first BNP councillor and by 2003 the organisation had established itself as the main opposition to the Labour Party, averaging between 25-30 per cent of the votes in the wards that it was contesting. By 2008, the BNP was the joint-second largest party, with nine councillors, and Stoke faced a real possibility of becoming the first city controlled by the far Right.[21]

The reason that it did not is most commonly explained by a narrative which places the Labour Party at the centre of its focus. In 2011 the BNP was wiped out, losing all of its council seats despite having the confidence to launch its national manifesto from the locality, and the Labour Party clawed back some of its longstanding support. A renascent joint campaign by anti-fascist activists and Labour involved the former persuading voters of the realities of the BNP's policies and the latter assuaging their fears that Labour did not prioritise their concerns. Stoke had historically been a 'safe' Labour seat until the early 21st century, when there was an exodus of local support. According to this narrative what had underpinned this turn away from the party was a centrist set of strategies by Blair and Brown, resulting in the neglect of white working-class voters and their interests and, as such, a sense of betrayal amongst large sections of the population. This, combined with a failure of local politicians to address these anxieties and set against the collapse of the potteries, made for a potent reactionary mix: creating a vacuum which the BNP had been able to fill through a facade of community based politics.[22]

There are, of course, certain elements of this version which ring true. Yet what it constructs is a sequence of events which, ultimately, suggest that far-right activity in the city emerged from a lacuna created by the failures of mainstream politics. In so doing, it bypasses the extent to which the politics of the mainstream actively shifted to the right at the beginning of the 21st century – in part as a conscious attempt to accommodate some of the far-right's messages (ostensibly to reassure voters that they did not have to turn to these movements) – and as such institutionalised facets of its agendas.

These political shifts have been well documented elsewhere. A gamut of human rights organisations and academic commentators have repeatedly made clear how a concerted attack on the rights, protections and ultimately the presence of asylum seekers was fostered through the policies of the Labour government in a series of moves which went on to include (among other things) drastic reductions in legal aid, a rapidly increasing detention

estate and the enforced destitution of potentially hundreds of thousands of people.[23] Concerns about the treatment of asylum seekers have been echoed by the Joint Committee on Human Rights and the United Nations.[24] At the same time, the policies enacted as part of the domestic front of the war on terror systematically stigmatised entire Muslim communities as potential terrorists in the public mind, whilst constructing a parallel criminal justice system for them which was based on this same premise.[25] Underpinning these pincer-type movements (and linked to both) was a debate on integration and the demand to establish a common set of core British values and mores, which asserted that ethnic and cultural diversity threatened community cohesion if left unchecked.[26]

Within Stoke, these processes had incendiary ramifications. In effect, at the same time as the government legitimised aspects of the agenda of the far Right, it abandoned those communities which the far Right frequently targets to garner support. Of course, there is little doubt that the thirteen years during which the New Labour government was in power were marked by a withering away of welfare, deregulation and an abandonment of entire communities. And there is also little doubt that local policies and politics in Stoke contributed to a widespread sense of disillusionment. The imposition of a mayoral system in 2002, for example, proved disastrous, concentrating significant amounts of local power in a small cabal and almost instantly proving deeply unpopular with the electorate; and this deep unpopularity was only entrenched further when the Labour mayor, as well as a Conservative Party councillor, was later arrested by the police as part of an investigation into corruption (although these charges were eventually dropped).[27]

But to suggest that it was the 'apparent breakdown of conventional politics in the City' and 'the fragmentation of the main parties' which led to the 'consequential rise in extremist politics', as did a governance commission called in to investigate the failing local authority in 2007,[28] fails to acknowledge the part which these conventional politics played in authenticating the core messages of the 'extremist' politics in the first place. It is a failure of understanding which is crucial. For instead of recognising the relationship between the careful execution of state policies and the development of racism and fascism, it sees racism and fascism as developing out of a failure of the state to effectively deliver these policies. Instead of seeing the role that the state has in setting the context within which racism emerges, it sees the state as a benign, neutral arbitrator of its effects.

Patterns of racial violence

Recognising the factors above and their interplay with far-right politics in Stoke is essential for an analysis of the patterns of racial violence which have been experienced in the city; not because individual members of far-right movements are necessarily responsible for these attacks (in many cases, they are not), but because the conditions which have enabled the intensification of specific manifestations of racism and racial violence in Stoke are the same conditions which have been exploited by the far Right.

At the beginning of the 21st century there was an upsurge of racial violence in the city.[29] Between April and September 2001 recorded attacks increased by 214 per cent, and in the three months following 11 September 2001 they increased by another 319 per cent.[30] Moreover, this violence showed little sign of abating in the years which followed. By 2005, research suggested that a third of all of those from BME communities in the city had experienced some form of racial harassment in the previous three years and one in twenty, in the same period, had been attacked. In a series of focus groups with perpetrators of racial violence in the city, participants explained in grim detail their hostility towards Asians, Muslims and asylum seekers, competing with each other to conjure up increasingly lethal methods of deporting people and decrying the presence of 'scroungers'. When asked about life in Stoke, members of focus groups lamented how its industries had been shattered and it had subsequently been reduced to 'wastelands'. People paraphrased the messages of mainstream politicians that there was a crisis of integration and a 'swamping' of public services.[31] As the authors of the research for which the focus groups were a part observed '... many of those whose racism appears blatant... see themselves as doing no more than echoing the anti-immigrant discourses of mainstream politicians and media commentators'.[32]

Attacks against asylum seekers, migrant workers and students

Given the pervasiveness of these 'discourses', such perceptions were hardly surprising. Stoke was designated a 'dispersal' city (a policy whereby asylum seekers in need of housing are moved to a town or city of the government's choosing, initially put in place to reduce their numbers in the south-east) in 1999. And in 2001 it was estimated that there were between 1,200 and 1,650 asylum seekers living there:[33] a number which subsequently declined

in tandem with the number of people seeking protection in the UK (in 2010 there were 515 asylum seekers excluding dependants).[34] It did not take long before local councillors began both drawing on the wider hostility against them and utilising this for their own purposes. One councillor actively campaigned against plans to convert a building into a hostel for asylum seekers. Others, in the years which followed, began publicly blaming them for taking up resources belonging to 'local' people as the city council struggled to provide services for residents.[35] Their claims followed a case, widely reported in the tabloids, in which it was alleged that a GP in Stoke had been forced to remove several patients, including an 88-year-old widow, from his list in order to accommodate asylum seekers (notwithstanding statements by the local Primary Care Trust refuting these allegations, and suggesting that he was having to reduce his number of patients as a result of a shortage of doctors).[36] One independent councillor, who later joined the BNP, described asylum seekers as 'foreign parasites'.[37]

But the truth was that many seeking asylum in the city ended up in desperate poverty and as a target for a campaign of violence. Soran Karim, for example, a 23-year-old man who had fled from Iraq and was dispersed to Stoke, soon found himself in the grip of gangmasters. He was one of three people who died in 2003 when, on the way back from a job picking leeks, the minibus they were in collided with a train near Birmingham.[38] Others were caught up in a series of spiralling attacks. According to the manager of the Stoke Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB), asylum seekers began reporting that their windows were being smashed in the aftermath of 9/11.[39] Incidences of graffiti and verbal abuse increased, young people were frequently harassed, and a petition signed by local residents stating that asylum seekers were not welcome, bluntly indicated the level of enmity.[40] In one school in the city, five newly arrived Czech Roma pupils, whose parents were seeking asylum, all dropped out in the space of a term after a campaign of racist abuse. The assistant head later explained how this 'hostile reception' came from 'just about everybody, fuelled by the local paper'.[41] Some years later the threats which Abrar Faheem, an asylum seeker from Pakistan, experienced were of such severity that the Home Office advised him to leave, soon after he had been made to live there as a result of the government's dispersal polices.[42]

What was emerging was a specific pattern of violence targeting those from BME communities who had recently arrived in the city. In 2010, a swastika and a series of racist messages were sprayed on several Staffordshire University buildings located in Stoke and students explained the hostility they faced: with one person expressing her desire to leave and others claiming they would recommend their friends to study elsewhere.[43] A few years prior to this the *Sentinel* (the local paper in Stoke) reported fears that migrant workers faced particular risks of violence:[44] fears that were echoed by one person interviewed for this research who stated that:

> There has been an undercurrent of anger against migrant workers. People might be out of work. They see migrant workers in a job which they haven't got and then they read the papers telling them about migrant workers keeping 'locals' out of employment. They hear politicians saying something similar. I am sure that is at least part of the reason why people have been attacked.

Ongoing attacks on settled BME communities in Stoke

However, if the above patterns of violence were directed at those new to Stoke, a further series of attacks emerged against those from BME communities who are long-standing residents. According to the organisation 'Partnership Approach to Racial Incidents in North Staffordshire' (PARINS), ninety-four separate racist incidents (some of which may have been by the same person) were reported by Gypsies or Travellers – communities with long histories in the city – in twelve months between 2004 and 2005: an average of almost two each week.[45] The same organisation, year after year, has recorded repeated attacks against black communities including damage to property, verbal abuse and assault.

Many of these incidences of violence against long standing Stoke residents have been directed at people working in the night-time economy. For example, in 2010, Turkish staff in a takeaway were subjected to a series of attacks which included having a paving slab thrown through the window of the business, one person being cut by a knife and, effectively, protection money demanded by their attackers.[46] In the year prior to this, a man shouted racial abuse at an Asian cab driver in Blurton before smashing the car's windows and punching him in the face. People who had never experienced such overt racism before in the city began to comment on what they believed to be an increasingly dangerous climate. Zahid Zanan, a delivery driver who was trapped inside his own vehicle by a group of people shouting racist abuse and throwing bottles was one such person. As he explained, as a

result of the attack he was left wary of going out, feeling like a prisoner in his own home.[47]

Anti-Muslim racism, the 'war on terror' and the role of the far Right

Given the disproportionate number of Asians working in the night-time economy, this, in turn, increased their proximity to racial violence fuelled by alcohol. But what underpinned many of the attacks against these communities was a rising threat of violence exacerbated by an emerging anti-Muslim racism. The uncle of a soldier who had been killed in Afghanistan, for instance, was arrested in the city after racially abusing two men on Remembrance Sunday. And in another incident an Asian taxi-driver feared for his life when he picked up a group of men asking to be taken to a local army barracks who went on to punch him repeatedly, and brutally, in the head.[48]

But it was exactly such violence, exacerbated by the UK's ongoing war-footing and its concurrent climate of hostility towards Muslims, which was exploited by the far Right. One such incident was the killing of the BNP activist Keith Brown by his neighbour, a Muslim man, Habib Khan, in 2007. Khan had been subjected to a long-running campaign of racist abuse by Brown, including one incident which had left him hospitalised, and his defence barrister explained in court that despite the police being called on several occasions about the disputes, their investigations 'came to nothing' because of 'generous failures by the system'. In the moments before the killing, Brown had hold of Khan's son and, during a violent row which followed, Khan stabbed Brown with a kitchen knife. In the ensuing trial the court heard that Khan was a 'mild and calm-mannered family man' and had acted in the 'honest belief that he needed to protect [his child]'. He was convicted of two charges: manslaughter by lack of intent and wounding, and was sentenced to eight years in prison.[49]

Within a few months of the sentence, the BNP had made plans to launch a nationwide anti-Muslim campaign from Stoke and present Brown as a 'white martyr'. According to a journalist who had filmed the party covertly, a 'new era of hostility' was envisaged and on 8 September 2008 about 70,000 leaflets were given out calling for 'justice for Brown'.[50] Members of the party travelled round the city on the back of a truck with loudspeakers on board, and hundreds attended a rally in the afternoon with the leader of the BNP, Nick Griffin, as one of the speakers. One later aspect of this anti-Muslim campaign was a move by Michael Coleman, a BNP member who was also the chair of the city's Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee, to ban halal meat in schools. That he was in a position to do so was the result of a strategy to establish the party within the city's educational sector. By 2010, seven BNP members were school governors in the city and Coleman held a position in one of the schools he had previously described as harbouring a 'low-intensity race war'.[51]

Yet if such campaigns indicate the manner in which wider climates of racism in Stoke ultimately gave fillip to the far Right, the beneficiaries were not just the BNP. In 2010 such was the strength of belief that campaigns against Islam would be welcomed that the English Defence League (EDL) chose Stoke as a location to stage a major demonstration. A 1,300 person strong march was organised with EDL members, reportedly joined by certain BNP members, protesting against the near completion of a mosque and against 'Islamic fundamentalism'.[52] And what followed was a swathe of destruction. As a signal of what was to come, a mosque was daubed in EDL graffiti in the run up to the march.[53] The night before it was to take place threatening phone calls – and death threats according to some sources – were made to Asian taxi drivers, and on the advice of the police certain cab firms suspended their services. The police were criticised in some quarters for allowing EDL supporters to gather in a pub before the march and the event itself quickly descended into widespread violence. During the march, the EDL reportedly ripped wood from buildings and threw bricks and bottles at anti-fascist campaigners; and afterwards groups of EDL supporters roamed through predominantly Asian areas of the city attacking residential properties. In the immediate aftermath, seventeen people were arrested: the majority for racially or religiously aggravated offences.[54] More long-term though, the event fostered a continuation of racist violence. Later that year four teenagers – one of whom was a serving soldier and reportedly a member of the EDL – set fire to a newly built mosque (the construction of which had been publicly opposed by the BNP) in an arson attack.[55]

Football hooliganism, racism and the far Right

Both the BNP rally in 2008 and the EDL march in 2010 reportedly involved groups of football hooligans. And fans of Stoke City FC and Port Vale FC, the two football clubs in the city, have been responsible for several racist attacks, subjecting players and opposing fans to significant levels of abuse. Following a match between Stoke City and Birmingham City in 2006, for example, several people in Stoke were arrested by police investigating violence and racist chanting.[56] And in 2009, a Stoke

fan was ejected from the ground for abusing a black footballer playing for Blackpool.[57] The Football Association (FA), at one point, threatened to fine Port Vale after its supporters harassed a Burton Albion player.

Both of these football clubs have publicly backed initiatives aiming to stamp out racism in football. Yet, as the Stoke EDL demonstration in 2010 emphasised, the prevalence of racism linked to football hooliganism in the city has been bolstered by a network of fans from other clubs. An undercover investigation, filming demonstrators drinking in a pub before they took to the streets, showed how fans from a plethora of different teams would sporadically fight each other, but nevertheless unite around the slogan 'we all hate Muslims'.[58] And the rationale for this forging of alliances was made clear by 'Casuals United', a collection of football fans and groups attached to the EDL, which explained how anti-Muslim sentiment has such depth that it is able to unite football firms (gangs associated with a particular club, formed to fight other clubs' 'firms') with long, violent and antagonistic histories. In Casuals United's own words:

> Casuals United message is that fighting over football rivalry is a waste of time and that the networks and organisational skills the Casuals have formulated over years and years of travelling the country can be used to amazing effect in countering the enemies of our nation, those who wish to enslave and or murder us.[59]

Casuals United explain in the most direct terms how the pervasiveness of racism can forge seemingly unlikely alliances. But such alliances are by no means new. Loose coalitions of football hooligans were a key factor, according to certain investigations, underpinning a racist rampage in Oldham, 2001. On 28 April 2001 the 'Naughty Forty' (N40) – Stoke's most notorious firm – travelled to Oldham for a football match intent on causing damage.[60] After initially being confronted by hooligans in Oldham, the rival supporters joined forces and marched to the match together, putting aside their differences so as to rampage through the city. On their way, they travelled through a predominantly Bangladeshi area shouting racist abuse, making threats to local business owners and, according to some reports, dragging Asians out of their cars and attacking them. Yet despite this violence, and the fact that they proceeded to chant racist abuse throughout the game, a police escort allowed them to march through the same streets after the game, again shouting racist slogans. After these events police turned on Asian protesters by using batons and dogs.[61] The Stoke fans, meanwhile, travelled out of the town and became involved in a further series of clashes with Asians when they arrived back home.[62]

The siege of Oldham's Asian communities, combined with the response of the police, was a trigger for a series of uprisings which went on to erupt throughout the summer of 2001. Described as the most serious urban disorders in the UK in twenty years, these uprisings swept through (predominantly northern) towns and cities, with Asian youths fighting pitched battles with the police and white people.[63] In July, rumours spread through Stoke of an impending march by the BNP; people claiming to be from the NF gathered in the city and a car owned by an Asian business owner was attacked. When Asian youths gathered to protect their communities they were met by police in riot gear who, in the clashes which followed, were attacked with rocks, stones and concrete paving slabs.[64]

With the criminal justice system responding aggressively to communities forced to defend themselves against attacks, perceptions were reinforced that perpetrators of racist violence could act with impunity. And these perceptions were reinforced yet further still in the years which followed. In a football match in 2002 between Port Vale and Oldham Athletic, for example, about 100 Port Vale supports chanted 'you are just a town full of Pakis' at opposing fans. Yet a district judge in Stoke-on-Trent magistrate's court acquitted one of the perpetrators, arguing that the chant was 'mere doggerel' and the term 'Paki' was not insulting.[65] In 2011, Exodus Geohaghon, a Port Vale midfielder, was subjected to a barrage of racist abuse by his own supporters during a game and later received death threats, as well as being told that fans were waiting for him after the match. Such was the severity of these threats that he was advised not to train with the team anymore but, because he had confronted fans when they were abusing him, he was later told that the FA was launching an investigation into his behaviour.[66]

Fighting back

This surge of racial violence has not been without response. The city was one of the first in the UK to form a Community Relations Council in the 1970s (later to become a Racial Equality Council), and this quasi-governmental body undertook a variety of functions such as individual casework and community based programmes. Around that same time, the North Staffordshire Campaign Against Racism and Fascism (NorSCARF) was created to campaign against the NF, oppose racism and encourage community relations.[67] Supported by various unions,

faith groups and anti-fascist organisations, NorSCARF has consistently and successfully fought to oppose the threat of the far Right: at times facing a threat of violence in doing so.[68]

More recently, a network has built up which encourages victims to report abuse as well as offering (among other activities) dedicated one-to-one support. The Stoke Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) began carrying out racial harassment case work in 1995 and, with the REC (which was to shut down in 2009), later formed PARINS: a multi-agency partnership incorporating the police and working in conjunction with the local authority.[69] In turn, PARINS later merged with 'Challenge North Staffs'.[70]

As part of its work, PARINS/Challenge North Staffs has been able to highlight how a commitment by certain agencies to anti-racist practices on paper, has not been borne out in reality. In 2007, for instance, it noted that of 236 reporting centres for racist incidents – that is, 236 places where staff had been trained to respond to someone wishing to report abuse – the majority were no longer 'live'.[71] Moreover, drawing on its strong relationships with the criminal justice system, it has subsequently been able to advocate on behalf of victims of racial violence. When two Pakistani brothers were brutally set upon by local youths with knives and criminal justice agencies failed to keep them informed of the progress of this case, it used its statutory links to ensure that their interests were upheld and they were aware of the rights to which they were entitled.

Notwithstanding this undoubtedly significant work, as part of this research we were told that certain parts of the local authority with a duty to promote good community relations have actively discouraged staff from taking a stand against racism. These allegations appear to reinforce claims that, prior to a rally in 2008 against the growing threat of the BNP, the council reportedly sent an email to the city's head teachers telling them not to attend. A similar email was said to have been sent to many of the city's youth workers. And, according to one activist, the council further discouraged handing out anti-racist leaflets in a youth club on the grounds that such actions were 'political'.[72] Pre-empting signs of protest in this way, sanitising activism in the process, may ensure that a public image of community cohesion and well-being is maintained. It may dissipate potential threats to public order. But it only masks the concerns which this activism seeks to address. And these, as articulated by some sections of BME communities, include the fact that criminal justice agencies have exacerbated the threat of racial violence through a combination of aggressive policing on the one hand, and indifference on the other.

As PARINS itself noted, in a series of consultations about racial violence with young people, refugees, over 25s and owners of local businesses in 2007, a significant number of people stated that they would not report incidents to the police as they felt that they 'were part of the problem'.[73] The experiences of a man in 2005, who claimed that he had been beaten by a police officer in a racially motivated attack which was later investigated by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), appeared to give credence to such perceptions.[74] And in a different scenario, Max Khan, a BBC reporter who, whilst covering a story on the closure of a post office, was forced to his knees and held face down by police officers who suspected he was a terrorist, remarked that 'It seems somewhat basic to be treated in that way just because of the colour of your skin'.[75]

In this context, with faith in the criminal justice system eroded and wariness about the motivations of the police, some BME communities have taken matters into their own hands. The signs were there in 2001, when the violence in Oldham was followed by a series of uprisings (discussed above). But there are more recent examples of self-defence. Habib Khan, as already discussed, suffered a sustained campaign of racist abuse, consistently calling on the police for help, before stabbing to death his neighbour. And in 2010, a 41-year-old Asian post office manager and his niece finally erupted after three years of unrelenting racial harassment and violence. Having a piece of fencing thrown at them and being forced to hide in a friend's house was, it appears, the final straw; and later that day the man smashed a shop window with a sword whilst his niece struck a bull terrier dog, belonging to one of the assailants, with a hammer. 'Acting in anger and a feeling of helplessness, as nothing was being done about the harassment, they decided to take the law into their own hands', their lawyer, in court explained. '[The niece] could no longer tolerate the abuse and racism from the local community'.[76] She nonetheless received a suspended sentence and her uncle was sentenced to 16 months in prison.

Sporadically, slowly, what is beginning to emerge in Stoke is piecemeal and impromptu responses to racial violence by those experiencing its brutal impacts. As one interviewee put it:

> People look around them in this city and they see what is happening. They see their parents out of work. They see their friends' parents out of work. They see racism, they hear about people getting

> attacked, they worry about themselves getting attacked and they worry that nobody will do anything about it. That no one will help. They see all of this and, in the end, they think we will do something ourselves.

These actions, at the moment, are as much the product of fear as they are of anger. They are neither structured nor organised. But they signal the stirrings of voices which demand to be heard, for despite the constant and successful efforts to undermine the far Right in Stoke, the conditions for intensifying racial violence remain.

Conclusion

Over the last few decades, the demography of Stoke has changed fairly rapidly. In part this is down to inward migration, particularly throughout the 21st century, with 'new' BME residents such as students, asylum seekers and migrant workers arriving. In part it is down to the fact that the UK's white population is an ageing population and, as such, has a slower rate of 'natural growth' than many of the UK's BME communities. But it is also down to the unforeseen consequences of deindustrialisation. As the city's industries have been shattered, and skills and crafts developed over centuries have along with the workers been made redundant, as every statistical indicator of poverty and deprivation spirals, many of those white families with the financial resources have moved away, leaving the poorest behind.

That is not to say that there are not pockets of wealth in Stoke; but it is to say that these pockets of wealth only serve to point up the stark inequalities. And it is in this context, with professional white families leaving the city and many white people left behind facing a future of unemployment, that the BME population has proportionally increased.

Against this backdrop, the impact of far-right politics in the city is usually explained in terms of a vacuum left by Labour. This narrative argues that the BNP exploited a sense of abandonment and disillusionment which emerged as a result of the failures, both nationally and locally, of the Labour Party. In turn, the very real threat of a BNP-led council was finally overcome by the Labour Party as it belatedly responded to the concerns of disheartened white voters, eradicating the BNP's grip on the city in the process. This explanation contorts the understanding of the role of the previous government in fostering hostilities and legitimising the far-right's agenda. It is an explanation which, ultimately, acts as cheerleader for a government which, by demonising entire communities, laid the framework for new and emerging forms of popular racism.

As this report has shown, the conditions which the far Right has exploited in Stoke are not simply a result of a *failure* of mainstream political parties to provide a modicum of hope for those white communities cast aside in the same way as the industries they worked in, but also the result of the parties' *success* in themselves actively moving the debate rightward. For these are the conditions under which particular campaigns of racist violence have intensified – which have seen asylum seekers hounded from the city, Muslims assaulted, mosques defaced, cab-drivers and takeaway workers attacked in the course of their work, students intimidated and long-standing residents harassed and abused.

Both the racial violence which has erupted in the city and the resurgence of far-right movements are, in some senses, by-products of New Labour's racist policies. But the change of government does not indicate that either racist attacks or support for far-right movements will necessarily abate. On the contrary, the commitment to dismantling multiculturalism, the sustained condemnation of human rights legislation, the concerted attempts to drive down the number of migrants from outside the EU (and consequent damning of their presence in the country) and the ruthless austerity measures signal an exacerbation of the corrosive conditions under which racist violence and support for the far Right thrive.

Stoke puts paid to the popular notion that groups like the EDL have arisen as a natural 'tit-for-tat' response to a perceived 'Islamification' of English cities.[77] It shows the opposite. It is the presence of the far Right which has been the factor forcing Asians and Muslims to resort to self-defence, of themselves and their communities. This self-defence comes at a time when the local authority has allegedly tried to dissuade anti-racist protest and activism. It indicates that, beneath the surface of a carefully cultivated image of thriving community relations, those, whose confidence in the criminal justice system has been eroded, are in their desperation turning to their own forms of resistance against ongoing racist violence. ■

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