Proximity by design? Affective citizenship and the management of unease

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‘Community cohesion’ is the preferred framework for managing ‘race relations’ and ‘conflict’ in contemporary Britain. Initially adopted in government policy following civil disturbances in the summer of 2001, ‘community cohesion’ combined visions of shared belonging with strategies of managing diversity. More recent versions still place a strong emphasis on ideas of shared belonging but these are combined with strategies of managing migration and identity which are deployed in view of securing local communities against threats posed by extremism, deprivation, diversity and feelings of ‘white unease’. This article examines how the community cohesion agenda relies on strategies of governance that seek to design particular kinds of human behaviours such as ‘mixing’ and ‘meaningful interaction’, in view of ‘delivering’ cohesion in the community. I analyse the cohesion agenda as a form of governance that operates through mechanisms of subjectivation. However, instead of privileging the responsible, discerning, rational, autonomous ‘free subject’, I argue that community cohesion is a form of ‘governing through affect’ that draws on and targets the affective subject for certain strategies and regulations aimed at designing people’s behaviours and attitudes in the public domain.

Keywords: citizenship; affect; community cohesion; governance; white unease

Let me begin with a vignette.

How can we deliver more meaningful interaction?

There will already be a lot of meaningful interaction going on in your area. People chatting to their neighbours, at school gates or at work, at places of worship, people pursuing their hobbies and interests in clubs, people working with others, often on a voluntary basis, to improve their local area or the lot of others.

It may seem strange that government should be suggesting that local areas get involved in what comes naturally to people and where the outcomes seem quite fluffy or woolly. However, we know how suspicion, fear and distrust can stop people from mixing with those who are different too them, lead to them only mix [sic] with people who are like them and reinforce suspicion, fear and distrust. With this background, when a difficult situation arises, their responses may be more extreme and, without bridges between different groups, harder to calm down.

Meaningful interaction may sound simple or wishy-washy, but we believe it is a difficult issue on which to design effective initiatives, but one that can make a real difference to people’s everyday lives.

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So our first message on delivery is that encouraging interaction is about making it easier for people to do all the things they would do naturally, but feel unable to – whether that’s about the design of public space, supporting volunteering and clubs, or supporting people who bring others together. You don’t have to spend more money – interaction can be designed into what you or others are doing already; and where it is already taking place – this needs to be recognised, valued and improved if possible. (DCLG 2009a, p. 14)

This extract comes from a document published by the British Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) entitled Guidance on meaningful interaction: How encouraging positive relationships between people can help build community cohesion. The main aim of ‘meaningful interaction’ is to reduce the risks of people leading ‘parallel lives’ (Home Office 2001) or retreating into ‘comfort zones’ (Commission on Integration and Cohesion 2007b). In view of achieving this, the DCLG has produced reams of documents on how to best support and ‘design’ cohesive communities: guidance, consultations, summaries of consultations, revisions and further guidance, all aimed at local authorities and their partners in the business of promoting cohesion.

As the vignette suggests, one strategy to design interaction is to design public spaces in ways that would encourage positive and meaningful contact between people living in a given area. Drawing on a study conducted by Demos (Lownsbrough and Beunderman 2007), the Guidance proposes that policy makers should steer away from seductive yet inefficient ‘high tech’ designs and instead opt for ‘intelligent’, lower tech, ‘banal’ designs of everyday spaces and think about how to best encourage interactions – for example, ‘wider pavements, symbolic shelters, seating [arrangements], etc.’ (DCLG 2009a, p. 17). The Demos study is insistent that ‘design is increasingly important in terms of inter-ethnic integration and interaction’ (Lownsbrough and Beunderman 2007, p. 13) and cautions against ‘ethnicity-blindness in the assumption that a well designed public realm will benefit everyone equally’. (Lownsbrough and Beunderman 2007, p. 8) Taking these recommendations to heart, the DCLG Guidance seeks to address the ‘problems’ people might have in ‘mixing with those who are different from them’ (see above). What interests me here is not so much the design of spaces and products, but rather the ways in which the community cohesion agenda relies on strategies of governance that seek to design particular kinds of human behaviours such as ‘mixing’ and ‘meaningful interaction’, in view of ‘delivering’ cohesion in the community. The very notion of ‘delivering interaction’ indicates a conception that somehow human behaviours can be neatly packaged and dispensed if the right conditions are met for their production. It fits well within the marketing strategies put forward by the government as a necessary part of delivering cohesion: from branding to using the local media as PR for local authorities, to using banners or posters that would promote meaningful interaction as a ‘fun or cool, easy way to be popular, to be happy’ (DCLG 2009a, p. 35). The overall aim is to redress some of the negative feelings that residents might have and which might hinder cohesion. Thus what citizens suffer from here is not lack of political participation – which the designers in Touching the state were seeking to resolve, as Cynthia Weber shows in the introduction to this issue (Weber 2010) – but rather, from alienation from one another within the same neighbourhood. More specifically, the concern is about how ‘fear, suspicion, distrust can stop people from mixing with those who are different to them’ (DCLG 2009a, p. 14). The concern is that such fears might lead to the isolation of individuals from one another or even to depression (DCLG 2009a, p. 46).

Critical work on community cohesion has attended to how it is founded on neoliberal forms of governing that centre on individual agency rather than structures of inequality
as the primary mechanism for overcoming social problems (Flint and Robinson 2008, Kearns and Forrest 2000, Wetherell et al. 2003). Strategies deployed in view of achieving cohesion operate through mechanisms of subjectivation — that is, through the cultivation of responsible, discerning, rational, autonomous subjects who bear full responsibility for their lives. Studies of ‘affective citizenship’ for their part have revealed how intimate and familial relationships are the basis of differential conceptions of citizenship (Berlant 1997, Johnson 2008, Plummer 2003, Sommer 1991), or how governments and politicians draw on the register of emotions to define good citizenship — as loyalty and attachment to the nation (Fortier 2008, Jones 2005), or as compassionate or empathetic to others (Berlant 2004, Johnson 2008).

This article considers the ways that some ‘feelings’ are recognised more than others, but it focuses on the mechanisms of subjectivation that are integral to the design of affective citizenship in social policy. I suggest that governing strategies such as the Guidance cited above address the ‘affective subject’; that is, a subject whose conduct arises from desires, fears, anxieties, insecurities, affection, care, dis/trust, un/ease and so on. Drawing on contact theories in social psychology as well as theories of social capital in social and political studies (Putnam 2001), the government’s argument is that meaningful interaction will reduce prejudice ‘by changing how we feel about the other group, and its members’ (DCLG 2009a, p. 11; first emphasis mine), thus leading to greater integration.

It is not my aim to question the value of interaction and the principles of contact theory. What interests me here are the assumptions that inform such governing strategies — namely assumptions about what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘bad’ contact — and how they relate to racialised and (de-)politicised understandings and attempts at designing cohesion and integration.

It is worth clarifying at this stage that I look at social policy documents as part of the assemblage of processes, practices, techniques and artefacts of which governmentality is made, and in which policies are sites where conceptions of ‘social problems’ are laid out along with suggestions of governing strategies to resolve or manage them. Critics have warned against attributing to governmentality a coherence that it lacks: there are often different and contradictory agendas both between and within state agencies (Penna 2005, p. 151). Nor should we assume the ‘success’ of governmental projects in achieving the desired aims or in how they are translated in practices ‘on the ground’. However, if ‘the social’ is ‘more than the effect of governmentality’ (Clarke 2007, p. 840), governmentality remains part of ‘the social’ and its mechanisms and strategies are conceived through discursive formations that frame the debates within accepted understandings. ‘Community cohesion’, for example, provides an important trope to justify various reforms across different governmental sites — reforms offered by the present New Labour government but also by the opposition. What interests me here, then, is how ‘problems’ of ‘cohesion’ are framed. By going to the ‘ways of seeing’ that circulate in policy documents, I attend to the ways in which policy discourses ‘seek to figure social life [and subjects] in certain imaginary ways’ (Butler 2002, p. 28) that would exemplify the kind of coherence — such as ‘cultural’ or ‘racial’ coherence — that is expected from individuals in their daily lives.

It is not simply ‘that there is a “discourse” . . . that produces these effects, but rather that there is a limit to discourse that establishes the limits of human intelligibility.’ (Butler 2004, p. 35) Various complex and contradictory issues are contained within the community cohesion agenda — disadvantage, discrimination, crime, immigration — through a rather cosy spin on ‘good neighbourliness’ (c.f. Fortier 2008).3

This article begins with an account of the progression of ‘community cohesion’ since its institutionalisation in 2001, and identifies the main shifts of emphasis in framing the
kinds of ‘problems’ that cohesion is meant to address. I show that the cohesion agenda became gradually tied in with the criminal justice, immigration, and security agendas, while it also evolved into a form of ‘governing through affect’ that draws on and targets the affective subject for certain strategies and regulations aimed at designing people’s public behaviours and attitudes.\textsuperscript{4}

The second section attends to three interrelated issues that arise as a result of the shifts of emphasis in the cohesion agenda: a concern for ‘white Britons’ in what Didier Bigo (2002) names ‘the management of unease’, an ambivalence towards diversity as both asset and threat, and a decidedly anti-multiculturalist post-historical politics that registers a clear disdain for any kind of politics of identity. By making ‘integration’ an end in itself, I argue, the cohesion agenda privileges some forms of ‘cohesion’ over others – such as favouring ‘bridging’ activities rather than ‘bonding’ ones. The concluding section argues that affective citizenship is organised around an economy of feelings where some forms of interaction are given more value than others, and where the feel-good politics of cohesion discounts any form of adversarial politics or interaction.

The promise of cohesion and the affective citizen

The British government’s faith in community cohesion was formulated in the aftermath of violent uprisings in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford (Northern England) between May and July 2001 and was founded in concerns about separation and lack of contact between neighbouring communities within a given area. Widely reported as ‘race riots’, the 2001 ‘summer of violence’ shook the nation into self-examination about its track record in multicultural management. Local and national enquiries were set up to investigate the causes of the unrest, including the independent Review Team led by Ted Cantle (Home Office 2001). The Cantle Report marked the institutionalisation of ‘mixing’ as a key governing principle for the management of diversity in local communities across the country. ‘Mixing’ was widely hailed as the antidote to communities leading ‘parallel lives’ in Cantle’s words. The phrase ‘community cohesion’ was officially branded by the Local Government Association in 2002 (LGA 2002), where cohesive communities are defined as founded upon a shared sense of belonging, the celebration of diversity, equal life chances and positive inter-group contact. This definition of community cohesion informed local and national government initiatives until 2006.

Several events following the summer of 2001 lead the government to review its policy and guidelines on community cohesion, starting with the ongoing ‘war on terror’ triggered by the attacks in the US in September 2001 and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Then fears of ‘home-grown terrorism’ were heightened by the attacks of London’s transport system by British-born Muslim young men in July 2005, the arrest of a large group of suspected terrorists in 2006, and attempted attacks in London and at Glasgow airport in 2007. Another ‘event’ is the ‘new immigration’ from the eight eastern European accession countries since January 2004.\textsuperscript{5} Some ministers reportedly stated that this ‘new’ migration ‘had proved “a shock to the system”’ (Travis 2007). Together these events were at the basis for a call to revise the state’s approach to community cohesion as well as to multiculturalism.

In a bid to review the cohesion agenda, the government sponsored a Commission on Integration and Cohesion (CIC), which was launched in August 2006 and which reported in 2007 (CIC 2007a and 2007b). The government responded to the report and issued guidance to funders on the basis of some of the commission’s recommendations (DCLG 2008a–d). In addition, it dedicated £50 million over three years (2008–2011)
to implement some of the CIC’s recommendations — a significant increase from the £2m allocated in 2007–2008 (DCLG 2008a, p. 12). The CIC’s report, Our shared future, has become the main reference for current guidance on delivering community cohesion. The revised definition of community cohesion established by the CIC still places a strong emphasis on shared belonging and shared values, but these are combined with strategies for managing migration, identity and integration, which are deployed in view of securing local communities against threats posed by extremism — the government invested an additional £45m ‘to support local partnerships work to build resilience to violent extremism’ (DCLG 2008a, p. 13).

The link between the cohesion agenda, the criminal justice agenda and the immigration agenda was secured in a government policy review that resulted in the publication of six documents under the umbrella title Building on progress in early 2007. Of the six publications, Security, crime and justice is the only document in which ‘cohesion’ features. The location of cohesion in a policy review on security and crime signals an expansion of the remit of cohesion from the management of diversity to one where it is to serve in the fight against crime and security threats, namely those posed by extremism. In short, the policy review on Security, crime and justice identifies the main challenges to achieving community cohesion as coming from ‘increasing diversity; rising sympathy with extremist sentiments; and persistent differences in life chances (including perceptions of unfair access to public services)’ (Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit 2007, p. 13).

Immigration, diversity, fears of extremism and perceptions of unfair treatment have become key indicators through which government strategies define the current anxious, disaffected mood of the British public — a ‘neurotic public’, to paraphrase Engin Isin (2004). Indeed, this could constitute a good example of how Isin’s ‘neurotic citizen’ is in part affectively conditioned to fear the various risks brought about by immigration and diversity. For Isin, contemporary neoliberal governing strategies are not only aimed at the rational, calculating, responsible, autonomous subject, but they are also directed at the neurotic subject whose conduct arises from and responds to fears, anxieties and insecurities; for Isin, this is ‘governing through neurosis’. As such, ‘[T]he neurotic subject is one whose anxieties and insecurities are objects of government not in order to cure or eliminate such states but to manage them’ (2004, p. 225, emphasis in original).

Isin’s argument is useful because it points to the intertwined relationship between what he calls the ‘bionic citizen’, which is at the centre of biopolitics, and the ‘neurotic citizen’. Isin argues that the figure of the bionic citizen, while still relevant, no longer adequately accounts ‘for the relationship between technologies of the self and technologies of power’ of today’s control societies, where ‘the neurotic citizen . . . governs itself through responses to anxieties and uncertainties’ (2004, p. 223). He continues:

governing through neurosis [incites] the neurotic subject to make two adjustments in its conduct to render itself a citizen. While on the one hand the neurotic citizen is incited to make social and cultural investments to eliminate various dangers by calibrating its conduct on the basis of anxieties and insecurities rather than rationalities, it is also invited to consider itself as part of a neurological species and to understand itself as an affect structure. (2004, p. 223)

Isin’s primary focus in his article is the first calibration that the neurotic citizen is impelled to make. In contrast, I wish to focus on the second: that is, I am interested in how subjects of community cohesion policies are understood as affective subjects. Indeed, what I find most interesting in Isin’s argument is his suggestion that the ‘bionic’ subject is also an ‘affective’ subject. If for Isin ‘neuropolitics’ have developed only recently in the context of contemporary cultures of fear and the security industries that come with them,
we could also understand them as a particular form of ‘governing through affect’ which places the affective subject at its centre.6 This is not to say that the rational, autonomous subject is dead or separate from the ‘affective subject’. But for the purposes of argument, this article focuses on how the affective subject is understood, addressed and utilised as a resource in the cohesion agenda, and considers how affective dispositions are seen as supporting citizens’ reasons for action (c.f. Mookherjee 2005).

‘Governing through affect’ is twofold. First, it consists of creating opportunities for certain conducts, such as designing ‘meaningful interactions’. Governmentality is not about negating the individual’s capacities or simply manufacturing them to its own ends, but it is about both shaping and utilising human beings as subjects (Rose 1996, p. 151). It does so ‘by encouraging, inculcating, and suggesting certain ways of conduct that increase the health, wealth and happiness’ (Isin 2004, p. 220) of the subject and the collectivity. Second, governing through affect also consists of putting in order the possible outcomes of various conducts, such as assessing individual attitudes or actions in terms of their positive or negative influence on cohesion. This kind of information is gathered in several tables compiled in the Cohesion delivery framework (DCLG 2009b), which informs us that individuals in favour of migration, who do volunteer work or who feel they can influence decisions have a positive influence on cohesion (DCLG 2009b, p. 18), while individuals who feel unsafe after dark, fear a racist attack or feel council housing discrimination will have a negative influence on cohesion (DCLG 2009b, p. 25). This type of information-gathering is telling of how the cohesion agenda relies on polling and other forms of data about people’s perceptions and attitudes about the world they inhabit – ‘how do you feel?’7 Feelings are favoured over considering the economic, social and historical forces that structure inequalities and tensions: information such as age, ‘background’ (a euphemism for ‘race’ or ‘ethnicity’), gender, class, disability/illness, places of birth and residence, etc., is rather used as part of the initial stage of ‘mapping’ (DCLG 2009b) the local area and identifying the target groups for delivering cohesion, rather than being used as social factors that might impact on people’s access to, and uses of, resources. Emotive responses are the subject of polls, and affect becomes a mode of categorising, classifying and coding responses that then define what needs attention from the government.

The cohesion agenda is founded on the recognition of the social character of individual’s feelings – that is, the recognition that they are both the result of social interaction and an influence on a ‘community’ that is more than the simple accumulation of individual bodies but, rather, the result of what Foucault called a ‘global mass’, which is affected by collective processes. For Foucault, the birth of biopolitics signalled the superimposition of two modes of power: a mode of power over the human body that operated through individualisation – what Foucault called ‘anatomo-politics’ (1997, p. 216) – and a mode of power that operates through the collectivisation of the human as a species whose life ‘events’ such as death, birth and illness are the business of the ‘population’. In the cohesion agenda, it is the affective potential of the human as species that is the centre of attention. All recent guidance on cohesion alludes in one way or other to the ‘human need to connect with others’ (DCLG 2009a, p. 3) or wanting to belong (DCLG 2009c, p. 6). The affective subject is part of a human affective species with desires and needs. Governing strategies operate on a mode of power that functions on the collectivisation of the human not only as biological but also as affective. The ‘affective subject’ becomes ‘affective citizen’ when its membership to the ‘community’ is contingent on personal feelings and acts that extend beyond the individual self as well as beyond the ‘private’ realm of family and kin, but which are also directed towards the community. Thus the subject’s ill-feelings are something to be ‘broken down’
(DCLG 2009a, p. 11) through various strategies that design interactions between people. What we observe here is the recovery of the citizen (more on this below) as a ‘feeling subject’, an ‘affective subject’, and attempts to draw on her capacity for positive feelings and mobilise them in the public space.

In short, the affective citizen is both subject and agent of community cohesion. However, governing through affect operates differently on different bodies – that is, that affect is differently distributed between different kinds of group formations, and some affects are favoured over others as desirable bases or outcomes of meaningful interaction.

The management of (white) unease and ‘coping’ with difference

At the launch of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion, the then Communities Secretary Ruth Kelly expressed her sympathy for

white Britons who do not feel comfortable with change. They see the shops and restaurants changing. They see their town and neighbourhoods becoming more diverse. Detached from the benefits of those changes, they begin to believe stories about ethnic minorities getting special treatment, and to develop a resentment, a sense of grievance… I believe this is why we have moved from a period of uniform consensus on the value of multiculturalism and where we can encourage a debate by questioning whether it is encouraging separateness… In our attempt to avoid imposing a single British identity and culture, have we ended up with some communities living in isolation of each other? (Kelly 2006)

The Commission on Integration and Cohesion followed suit in its interim report:

Our consultation has highlighted a question about re-balancing our perspective. We may need to challenge what can be interpreted by some as an obsession with a narrow focus on minorities and think more ‘broadband’. 39% of the population live in the 86 most deprived areas – that is 19.1m people. Although 65% of people from ethnic minority groups live in these areas, the majority – over 16m – are white. Is it time that we created a clear and explicit strategy to connect and respond with more longer term established communities as well as dealing with the most vulnerable of the new and emerging groups? (CIC 2007a, p. 3)

The re-balancing proposed by the CIC comes with one of its key recommendations – subsequently endorsed by the government – that suggests a re-scaling of the cohesion policy in favour of a locally customised approach rather than a national one-size-fits-all approach. In so doing, the CIC neglects the fact that 65% of people from ethnic minority groups live in the 86 most deprived areas in the country. Focusing exclusively on ‘local specificity’ clears a space for the local (and national) majorities – the white Britons – to be put on the radar of concerns.

Evoking the unease of white Britons establishes a distinction between the uneasy white Briton and the upsetting non-white, and situates the origins of discomfort on the non-white other – the non (quite) white non-citizen. In this sense, citizenship and race come together in a conception of Britishness that is becoming ‘whiter than white’ – based on a fantasy of whiteness – insofar as it has little to do with anatomy and skin colour, but rather with fantasies of change and uncertainty that the presence of white-bodied migrants from Eastern Europe, among others, bring.

The simultaneous racialisations of white Britons and de-racialisation of ‘immigrants’ in social policy discourses serves to suture Britishness with fantasies of whiteness further while it casts all ‘migrants’ against the white-bodied British citizen. In the framework on cohesion and integration, it is not always clear who the ‘immigrants’ are: they could be permanent or temporary; they could be asylum seekers, Eastern Europeans workers, or other immigrants from various third world countries. But it is clear what they are: ‘immigrants’ are all those who disturb, who endanger the nation; as Didier Bigo puts it:
Migrant, as a term, is the way to designate someone as a threat to the core values of a country, a state, and has nothing to do with the legal terminology of foreigners... Immigrants are now problematised in Western countries in a way that is very different from the distinction between citizen and foreigner. It is not a legal status that is under discussion but a social image, concerning, to quote Erikson, the 'social distribution of bad'. (2002, p. 71; emphasis in original)

For example, the Cohesion delivery framework indicates that the lower the level of 'new migrants', the more positive the effect will be on cohesion (DCLG 2009b, p. 17). Furthermore, the shifts toward the de-racialisation of diversity and the re-racialisation of class and nation are part of a wider ambivalence towards diversity. No longer an asset to be celebrated, as it was in earlier definitions of community cohesion, diversity is now more ambivalently recognised as inevitable, desirable and valuable, while it is also seen as a disturbing sign of change and a potential threat to stability, peaceful cohabitation, cohesion or safe living. The Commission on Integration and Cohesion concludes that cohesion must be thought of in new ways that address the 'super-diversity' brought about by the globalised world (CIC 2007b, p. 35) and the 'negative impact' that diversity may have in areas that are just starting to experience diversity resulting from 'new migration', such as urban areas like 'outer London Boroughs and Southern commuter towns' or 'rural areas' (CIC 2007b, p. 9). With this context in mind, diversity has shifted from an asset to a potential source of conflict and is the basis of a new identity crisis and question about what binds the nation together.

Enter integration. Community cohesion is now resolutely associated with integration, which is decidedly cast in opposition to multiculturalism and its association with a separatist and anachronistic politics of difference (c.f. Ruth Kelly above). The final report from the Commission on Integration and Cohesion opens with a vignette of a utopian 'open community' in 2020, which ends with this advice: 'if we take integration and cohesion seriously as institutions and individuals, together we can move from making difference important, towards making an important difference.' (CIC 2007b, p. 2) In his foreword to the same report, the Commission chair Darra Singh opens his statement with this sentence: 'A past built on difference, a future which is shared.' (CIC 2007b, p. 3) Paired as it is with cohesion, integration is conceived as the pathway towards an oversimplified sense of shared belonging that is cast in an anti-multiculturalist, post-historical future where there is no 'broad civic value in the ability to live with difference' (Gilroy 2002) or to claim a difference. Rather, the matter at hand is how communities 'can cope with difference' (DCLG 2009b, p. 11; my emphasis).

'Integration and cohesion' is now Britain's official multicultural policy insofar as it is cast as the preferred replacement for a particular version of multiculturalism that is viewed as confusing at best, divisive at worst (CIC 2007a, p. 13, CIC 2007b, p. 39). Enter citizenship.

In the past, when notions of how to behave were shared across divides such as class and generations, there was less need to define what we meant by citizenship or to think about how different people could interact and adjust to each other. But as new distinctions emerge — for instance between those who are technologically literate and those who are not, or between those who subscribe to the values of a faith and those who do not — as society is becoming more individualistic, there is a greater need for us to define what needs to be shared in order for us to live together. Our highly inter-connected society makes this both necessary and possible. (DCLG 2008a, p. 11)

Used as a substitute for culture, 'citizenship' becomes that which connects individuals in a multicultural world. But citizenship is not a given, not a naturalised status — it is something to be learned (as in the National Curriculum on citizenship for primary and
secondary schools in England and Wales) or to be earned (for applicants to British nationality). Individuals need to learn to think of themselves as citizens, not only in terms of being involved in the political process (Weber 2010, this issue), but also in terms of considering themselves as connected to others and as part of a community. The project of community cohesion both relies on the ‘affective subject’ and seeks to shape ‘affective citizens’ whose personal membership to community is contingent on personal acts and feelings but which extend beyond the family and the individual, and which are rather directed toward their shared, public, locally integrated lives. In other words, the version of citizenship that is privileged in the cohesion agenda is one where the value of personhood is based not only on individual’s behaviours in their private lives – what Ken Plummer (2003) would call ‘intimate citizenship’ and Lauren Berlant (1997) would refer to as the ‘privatisation of citizenship’ and the ‘intimate public sphere’ – nor is it only about how they behave in public. It is rather how, as citizens, they direct their feelings towards the public.

The DCLG states that ‘cohesion is about trying to influence attitudes and behaviours’ (2009b, p. 13) by directing individuals towards recognising what they share rather than what distinguishes them.

Some parts of identity are fixed (e.g. place of birth or ethnicity) and others are flexible (e.g. values and interests). So building an inclusive local sense of belonging means helping people to move away from understandings of belonging that are based on fixed elements to an understanding that is more about what people have in common such as civic values and the local facilities they share. (DCLG 2009c, p. 9)

As Omar Khan suggests, this interpretation of identity ‘gains plausibility when multiculturalism and “identity politics” are heavily censured’ (2007, p. 44). I discuss elsewhere how community cohesion requires migrants’ detachment from roots as a necessary condition to the process of establishing strong local ties (Fortier 2008). In a similar vein, dis-identification of oneself as ‘ethnic’ – which in Britain refers to minoritised subjects, usually blacks, Asians, and Muslims9 – is prescribed as the privileged route towards greater cohesion and belonging. Community cohesion is figured in localised, inter-personal relationships, and conceived in terms of how people have to make decisions and choices about their identities/identifications. The latter are cast as choices that one can make, choices that masquerade the opposition between being British or ethnic, that is, between being British or ‘black’ (c.f. Alexander 2007, p. 117).

What is inflexible here is not ‘ethnicity’ but rather the understanding of community where ‘the integration of all individuals and communities are the ultimate aim of policy measures’ (Khan 2007, p. 42). By making integration an end in itself, the government enables the prioritisation of some forms of cohesion over others. In short, what is conceived as cause for concern (and this since 2001) is ethnic cohesion (‘racial’ or ‘religious’; see Fortier 2008, p. 73 inter alia). Hence the CIC recommended the prioritisation of bridging activities rather than bonding.

There are two types of social capital: bonding social capital is about networks of similar people such as family members and friends from similar backgrounds; and bridging social capital refers to relations between people from different backgrounds. Both forms of social capital benefit a community and its members, but only bridging capital is about people from different groups getting on (key to our measure of cohesion) – although we have found that bonding capital can give people the confidence they need in order to bridge. (CIC 2007b, p. 111)

Although this distinction was subsequently heavily criticised, leading to revisions of the guidance on cohesion (DCLG 2008d), bridging remains the type of activity most favoured by the DCLG. For example it recommends that
rather than holding a festival focusing on one ethnic group, a festival should be of interest to all local groups. In particular, cohesion should not just be about minority groups – it needs to engage with the majority and recognise that within that majority there will be groups which need to be addressed, in particular white working class people are often discussed in this context. (2009b, p. 37)

In line with its ‘balanced’ approach that privileges the white majority and that registers a disdain for any politics of difference, the government views bonding activities (inferring strengthening ties within groups) as potentially problematic for community cohesion and consequently steers local authorities towards supporting bridging forms of interactions that would yield more favourable attitudes and feelings about community. The fear is that bonding is between the same, or that it fosters sameness, and that consequently differences within become invisible, and thus unmanageable. That is that sameness may conceal tensions and ill feelings about difference, thus concealing a fragile cohesion. ‘This sameness on the surface’, writes the DCLG, ‘might appear to be cohesive, but unless the community can cope with difference, outsiders and change, it may fall apart when it is tested.’ (2009b, p. 11) More fearsome is that bonding is a connection that cannot be broken, such as extremism (Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit 2007, CIC 2007b).

The preference for bridging is about favouring networks on the ground. It is about guaranteeing that ethnic citizens integrate (assimilate) in the local community through interaction and ‘bridging’ on the ground, rather than, say, connecting to transnational networks and ‘identities’ that can be prioritised over national one. The fear is that minoritised subjects will self-segregate and radicalise if they are not integrated within the local community. All in all, the expectation is that ethnic minorities and migrants transform their belonging into allegiance and attachment to the local community – and by extension to the nation and the territorial state.

Guidance on cohesion sees some forms of sameness (within ethnically minoritised groups) as undesirable and unnecessary, if not ‘hostile’ to ‘meaningful interaction’, thus neglecting the numerous reasons that might justify the support of some ‘specialised’ organisations or events. For example, in April 2008, the council for the London Borough of Ealing (West London) announced that it would cut its annual £100,000 funding to the Southall Black Sisters (SBS). SBS is a not-for-profit organisation supporting black women (Asian and African-Caribbean) facing domestic and gender violence. Ealing Council’s argument was that ‘there is no need for specialist services for black and minority women and that services to abused women in the borough need to be streamlined.’ Louise Whitfield, the solicitor who represented SBS, argued that the move left no safety net for vulnerable women whose cases were made more complex by language difficulties and cultural pressures, as well as immigration and asylum difficulties (Salman 2008). The decision was challenged by SBS and brought to the High Court in July 2008, resulting in Ealing Council’s withdrawal of their case after only one and a half days of hearings.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this case in more detail, but the SBS example points to how it is easy to interpret the government guidelines as against ethnic minority organisations: one Tory councillor was reported as defending the decision by pleading that ‘the government is telling us to curb our funding to ethnic groups’. With integration and cohesion cast as the ultimate aim, members of minority groups are being discouraged from having feelings of solidarity that might lead them to argue for targeted services that meet their own specific needs, while the significance of such organisations in providing important emotional support to their users is downplayed and problematised as incompatible with ‘community cohesion’.
Conclusion: Designing ‘good feelings’ and depoliticising the social

The cohesion agenda fails to recognise any claims to difference. Not ‘difference’ in terms of ‘identity’ but ‘difference’ as political: that is, ‘difference’ in terms of the relational, material, symbolic and cultural variations and power relations that position people and groups differentially in terms of access to, and uses of, resources. Recognising ‘difference’ means accepting ‘difference’ as a space of identification that is not fixed or based on ontological claims, but one that recognises that the social formation of ‘difference’ informs people’s sense of themselves; working with rather than against difference could be a way towards making it ‘the basis of affinity rather than antagonism’ (Brah 2007, p. 136). Following Monica Mookherjee (2005, p. 37), a more critical and transformative conception of affective citizenship would accept that citizens’ autonomy ‘is formed not through one set of affective bonds, but rather through their commitments to multiple, intersecting communities’.

Furthermore, the design of meaningful interaction is framed in a ‘post-political’ perspective that sees no value in adversarial politics (Mouffe 2005). For example, ‘civic participation’ such as ‘taking part in a public meeting, rally, public demonstration or protest, or signing a petition’ (DCLG 2009b, 24n4) are negatively associated with community cohesion. Similarly, ‘tackling racism’ is characterised as a ‘negative activity’ that would discourage people from joining and that could ultimately create new divisions (DCLG 2009a, p. 29). Against the prescription that meaningful interaction should be fun, cool and easy (DCLG 2009a, p. 35), oppositional politics are cast as inappropriate bases for alliance. In this context, affective citizenship is cast within a political economy of interaction where some forms of cohesive communities are given more value than others; where some are encouraged, sustained, achieved, while others are discouraged, dismantled or excised. It is good to meet with people from ‘different backgrounds’; it is bad to meet with ‘the same’ (usually the ethnically minoritized ‘same’).

Community cohesion is a form of governing through affect that both designs and utilises the ‘affective subject’ whose conduct arises from her feelings about the world she lives in and the people that inhabit it. The theory is that her conduct (and feelings) could be changed if her interactions change. The aim is to cleanse the public domain of ‘negative feelings’ that might be at the heart of political contestation, conflict and debate. Affect is organised around an economy of feelings: the design, circulation and distribution of legitimate feelings for and within the community delineate the codes of conduct of the good affective citizen and establishes a differential value in the currency of feelings: it is good to have fun, cool, easy and meaningful interactions, it is bad to tackle racism. And their exchange value is political: if autonomy, fulfilment, choice and responsibility will confer high political value to the rational free subject-citizen, then meaningful interaction, empathy and friendliness (rather than anger, mistrust, anxiety, fear or even detachment or indifference) will bestow high political value for the affective subject-citizen who governs itself through calibrating its feelings. The paradox is that in this economy of feelings, some ‘bad feelings’ (such as white unease) are recognised and given political value as they are the explicit driver of the anti-multiculturalist strategy set up with the CIC. The ‘neglect’ of the majority population has made them feel unwanted and the cohesion agenda – as well as other policies – are driven by the aim to address these feelings (or at least to be seen to do so).

Guidance on delivering meaningful interaction risks encouraging ‘a form of self government by some citizens’, as Carol Johnson (2008) rightly points out, who will learn to perform the right feelings in public. Following Ann Cvetkovich, it appears that the
programmatic vision of cohesion and integration relies on simple visions of good feelings that drive out and even censure ‘alternative forms of public discourses that combine anger, sadness, apathy, ambivalence and confusion’ (2007, p. 464) that could be the basis of political solidarity and action. Consequently, the cohesion agenda ends up privatising and individualising negative feelings and isolating them from the historical and structural contexts that shape them and that shape the violence to which they might give rise. De-legitimising an event on anti-racism disallows any space for exploring the affective legacies ‘of racialised histories of genocide, slavery, colonisation and migration’ (Cvetkovich 2007, p. 464). With the post-historical, post-political framework of the ‘shared future vision’ of cohesive communities (DCLG 2009b, p. 9, CIC 2007b), the agenda fails to attend to the past and to the histories that shape the way we imagine and inhabit present day Britain. How this can be achieved will be the subject of future research, but we can find some useful insights in Monica Mookherjee’s (2005) call for a critical and transformative politics of affective citizenship that seeks a fuller engagement with cultural difference without reifying it – one that recognises people’s multiple attachments and their significance in supporting individuals’ autonomy (for example considering the role of ‘faith communities’ in mediating governance, affect and community). Thus I am not denying that meaningful interaction is an important part of strategies aimed at addressing tensions, conflict, resentment, hurt and pain. But the narrow vision put forward by the British government precisely fails to embrace the more difficult issues that make politics a ‘scene of emotional contestation’ (Berlant in Johnson 2008).

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Notes
1. Demos is an independent think tank and research institute believed to have influenced the policies of Tony Blair’s government, and is considered a centre of ‘Third Way politics’.
2. For a critical overview of research practices and assumptions of contact theory, see Dixon et al. (2005).
3. Many thanks to Sue Penna for drawing my attention to this point.
4. Community cohesion is not the first New Labour strategy of governing through affect. Earlier examples include Blair’s ‘Respect’ agenda or the focus on the ‘fear of crime’ in the criminal justice agenda, which has become as significant a policy issue as crime itself.
5. The Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia.
6. Where I depart from Isin is that I consider the subject’s ‘affective structure’ as not always already contained within the Freudian psychic structure that Isin draws on, where neurosis is an inescapable state of being whereby the human psyche is perpetually caught up in the conflicting demands of its three agencies: the id, the ego and the superego. Anxiety is the foundational affect of the neurotic subject who never fulfills her desires and never attains the ideals of wholesomeness that are posited as ‘normalcy’ (Isin 2004, p. 223). Isin argues that in the context of risk societies and cultures of fear, the neurotic subject acts in response to insecurities it faces in its pursuit of absolute tranquillity, security, safety, and so on. However, my concern is that the emphasis on neuropolitics risks reproducing Freud’s totalising tendency to situate our psychic structure on the neurosis-psychosis continuum. In addition, by reading the economy, the body, the environment, the network, the home, the border, human rights as all neuroticised, I fear that Isin is emptying neurosis of its meaning.
7. I am not suggesting that this is new. The ways in which individuals conduct themselves and manage their feelings in their private lives were subject to governance strategies in the nineteenth century European state (c.f. Foucault 1990), as well as colonising states (Stoler 2002). Stoler documents how personal relationships can impact of people’s national attachment. But, as I show below, the cohesion agenda addresses individual’s feelings and behaviour in and about the public, shared world they inhabit, rather than being concerned with individuals’ behaviours in the private domain.

8. Up until 2006, a cohesive community was one where, among other things, ‘The diversity of people’s backgrounds and circumstances are [sic] appreciated and positively valued.’ (CIC 2007b, p. 40)

9. It is unclear how Eastern Europeans figure here, and if they are conceived as ‘ethnics’ or not. To be sure, their presence troubles the historically racialised definition of ethnicity used in British public policy. It remains to be seen how that will pan out. In addition, how faith communities figure in the governance of affect is beyond the scope of this article. But the point that I wish to emphasise here is how the affective citizens is conceived in generic terms that disregard any forms of attachment or investment to ‘ethnic’ or religious communities.

10. For more information on the case and on SBS, see http://www.southallblackssisters.org.uk/ [Accessed 17 July 2008].


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