

# **Islam and the New Political Landscape: Faith Communities, Political Participation and Social Change**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we consider the forms of democratic participation that revolve around issues of religious faith and Islam. The context of such work is one in which a concern with the levels of participation in the political institutions of Western Europe and North America feature prominently in both journalistic and academic debate. The paper speaks to debates that are concerned with the efficacy of specific forms of participation. In doing so we argue that we need to think carefully about the forms of social action that constitute participation in the democratic process. We also need to think precisely about definitions of the political with which people engage. If we take *the political* as a domain in which the ethical settlement of society is contestable the sorts of mobilisation around faith communities that this paper describes are clearly a form of political participation. Yet the paper argues that the reasons many become involved in these forms of social organisation in contemporary East London is precisely because they are seen as less complicit with mainstream political institutions of the British state.

**Keywords:** Political participation; Islam; faith communities; religion; the political; community

## **Introduction**

In the wake of the attack on the World Trade Centre on 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2001 and the Madrid and London bombing of 2004 and 2005 a literature that addresses the forms and modalities of religious expression – particularly Islamic religious expression – has flourished in the penumbral regions that link mainstream social science to social policy design, think tanks and journalism. Much of the work has attempted to define attitudes or predispositions of a Muslim population in a particular site of tension such as London or the UK (Barnes, 2006; GFK, 2006; GLA, 2006; Ethnos, 2005; Populus, 2006) or critiqued particular forms of social policy intervention (Bright, 2006; Mirza et al, 2007)

Studies of Islamism and Jihadism have created a particular focus on the syncretic and complex links between Islamic religious faith and forms of social movement and political mobilisation (Husain, 2007; Kepel, 2004; Kepel, 2006; McRoy, A. 2006; Neville-Jones, P. et al 2006, 2007; Phillips, 2006; Roy, O., 2004, 2006). Conventionally, the analytical focus has spotlighted *the culture* of Islam, the *belief systems* of the faithful and the historical and geographical trajectories of Muslim populations across the world in general and in ‘the west’ in particular (Abbas, 2005; Ansari, 2002; Eade and Garbin, 2002; Hussein, 2006; Modood, 2005; Ramadan, 1999, 2005).

In this article the emphasis is different. We argue that studies of Islamic political participation need to be contextualised carefully without recourse grand generalities about culture and faith. They are both structured by and structuring the cultural, institutional and deliberative landscapes through which they are articulated. In the case of the British experience, the hidden traces of Christianity in the formation of the welfare state in the last century, the rapidly changing cartography of spaces of the political and the role of 'faith organisations' in the restructuring of welfare provision generate the material social context determining the opportunities and the outlines of new forms of political participation.

Instead the paper argues that we need to synthesise a sophisticated understanding of political power in conventional democratic institutions with a more generational understanding of ethnic mobilisation than the literatures on the local state or ethnic minority political participation normally imply (Adamson, 2006; Garbaye, 2005; Phillips, 2003; Rogers and Tillie, 2001; Verba, 1978). The reconfiguration of central state / local state relations in the UK since 2000 and the reframing of the balance between participatory and representative democracy has pluralized the institutions and sites where political power is contested. A more complex cartography of political power has invoked consumer 'choice' and cultivated more participatory engagement in deliberative sites such as school governing bodies, health trusts and partnership structures of governance in regeneration programmes, welfare reforms and

neighbourhood renewal. As with all such emergent institutional forms of deliberation these may be subject to influence or 'capture' by interest groups that can map the new landscape of political power better than competing interests.

Alongside the conventional arena of city hall representative local government, the permeable boundary between state and civil society describes a territory characterised by relations between community interests, the voluntary sector and regimes of funding, service provision and lobbying. It is this complex and mutating cartography of local power that defines the opportunity structures for new associations to organise and influence everyday lives.

Here we attempt to examine some of the tensions in such situations; where political subjects emerge through the collective actions of faith communities. We do this in Part 1 of the paper by outlining the construction processes of political subjectivity that we believe are particularly germane and by considering parallel influences in today's East London and the ways in which these forms of mobilisation need to be contextualised in both local and global terms. We consider the hidden narratives of religious influence in past processes of political participation that help to contextualise the present configuration of racialised democratic participation. In Part 2 we focus on characterising contemporary forms of Islamic mobilisation in east London and attempt to provide a framework for understanding them. In the conclusion we suggest that both the notion of an alternative public sphere and also a reconsideration of the nature of bureaucratic

rationality might be helpful in understanding the interplay between networks of faith communities and more liberally conceptualised understanding of processes of democratic participation.

The article is based on a sustained ethnographic engagement in community activism and local politics in East London, focusing in particular on a set of ethnographic interviews that took place in the summer immediately before events in New York on 9/11 and the subsequent armed conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Other work on related faith based participation in democratic politics continued in the period from 9/11 through until the spring of 2003. Whilst the interviews took place over one summer, ethnographic engagement with the same set of individuals continued over several years before and since the material quoted here. The comments in this article attempt to reflect on conversations held over almost eight years, as well as on one specific set of depth interviews. Over the duration of the work east London itself was bombed by both a right wing nail bomber on Brick Lane in 2002 and was the site of both the Aldgate bomb on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005 and the attempted bus bombing on Hackney Road two weeks later.

Having started with an investigation which was about the participation of minority groups in mainstream British politics the ethnography demonstrated rapidly that both the actions that qualified as *participation* and the arenas that qualified as *the political* were over time being rapidly changed. Simultaneously, the formations of

institutions, local government and organisations that controlled power and resources in the city were being restructured by new models of governance. They were being reshaped over the last ten years through modernisation of both central and local state. Consequently, the cartographies of power were being changed by this modernisation at the same time as groups were organising themselves through networks that mapped themselves asymmetrically onto governance institutions and the sites of political deliberation.

This article draws on ethnography to locate the techniques through which new *spaces of the political* are both created and navigated through groups of young people whose main organising principle is determined by Islamic perspectives that are in part about the emergence of forms of consciously political Islam but are equally about what it means to act as a good citizen within contemporary society. Both reflect the traces of migrant history, diasporic sensibility and transnational Islam. This becomes important because of the ways in which we reflect on the forms of identification appropriate in a 21<sup>st</sup> century multicultural society. In the wake of Britain's 7/7, then chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips, suggested that British society is sleepwalking into segregation, Gordon Brown has emphasised the importance of generating new senses of Britishness and the Department of Communities and Local Government conducted a national commission considering the potential to create new forms of community cohesion and integration (2007).

In part responding to the tenor of these debates, this article argues that the ethnographic worlds described do not square easily with appeals to participate in the unitary world of the nation state. A world regulated by a singular sense of national belonging, framed by sets of rights and responsibilities that calculate citizenship on a purely national basis will not necessarily be adequate either to describe the plural political imaginaries that structure forms of contemporary political participation based on religious faith or understand the forms of political mobilisation that are evolving at the boundaries of state and civil society in contemporary Britain.

In the context of this paper we argue that spaces of these forms of participation appeals at geographical scales both above and below those of the nation state. *Transnationally*, the geopolitics of Islamic networks link the work of Saudi influenced Wahaabi Islam and the Gulf rooted networks of the Muslim Brotherhood link through London's mediation to the South Asian Islamism of Jamaat i Islam. *Subnationally*, civic participation in known neighbourhoods at a local level appeal to a strong sense of communitarian engagement at smaller geographical scales, frequently on an interfaith basis that either is openly opposed to conventional party politics or else confounds it through new forms of collective action in governing bodies, voluntary organisations and third sector agencies that focus on welfare provision of youth services, substance abuse work and extra curricular education.

## **The new political landscape and faith based mobilisations**

Two assertions lie at the heart of the argument developed here. The first of these is that we need to think carefully about the frames that elide ethnic difference or religious faith through languages of social mobilisation structured and the second is that we need to understand the recursive relationship between governmentality and cultural formation. Over the duration of our work the dynamics of participation of Bangladeshi individuals and organisations in local politics was inflected by the growing significance of individual actors and groups who stressed more their religious affiliation to Islam than their ethnic identification. Groups of people that share a migrant history or a geographical commonality may be regarded as collective entities but not in ways that should be taken for granted or considered as natural. Communities are invariably imagined, invented, remembered, performed and invoked. They are subject to struggles and processes of making alongside forces of tension, fragmentation and forgetting.

In this sense analyses of ethnicity and its descriptive use in tandem with the notion of community need to be qualified by a consideration of the fragility of the processes of construction of collective identity. Ethnicity in the metropolises of the contemporary west is neither a reactionary localising negation of the global – as it at times appears in the prose of Wiewiorka (2000), Touraine (2000) and Castells (1997) – nor a primordial form of community differentiation. Instead, as other

scholars have suggested, ethnoscaples of the city may be characterised by particularly globalised networks of kinship and diaspora that demonstrate the glocalisation of collective and religious identities (Appadurai, 1996; Bhatt, 1997). Analytically a focus on *the processes* of community making and remaking and the boundary creation and dissolution of markers of ethnic difference must take equal precedence alongside the study of objects that are communities or subjects that are ethnicities.

In the context of contemporary debates around emerging Islamic identities and forms of political Islam in today's Europe it is always necessary to consider the dynamics and (diachronic) processes of becoming and the performance of particular forms of politics alongside any (synchronic) notion of identity and being. This means thinking about the ways and moments through which specific forms of participation are thought of as Islamic rather than (*or as well as*) being Bangladeshi, Mirpuri, Somali or Gujerati. In the east end of London in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Islamic politics is dominated by the juxtaposition of diasporic Bangladeshi identity, and the transnational cultural traffic between the Gulf and the Indian subcontinent mediated by the European metropolis. But the interface of ethnic and religious identity is also complicated further by the growing presence of Somali and refugee communities of Islamic faith in overlapping social and political spaces of the city whose diasporic co-ordinates are different again.

The range of behaviours that might be catalogued as political participation based on religious faith describes a spectrum rather than a typology of characters, separated by degree and biography. The separation of religious observation through what Roy (2004) has described as degrees of religiosity to forms of faith based politics more and on to extreme moments of action is marked by biography and varying degrees of affinity more than by categoric boundaries (see also Husain, 2006). But such shades, degrees and contradictions of sentimental affiliation sit uneasily with more Manichean characterisations of the faithful that come from an Islamophobic cadre, a hostile media and even more sympathetic liberal voices and the mosques themselves

Several of the informants that were interviewed in the work for this paper have also subsequently suggested knowledge of individuals that had left the country to fight against American and British troops. Contemporary British media representations of Islamic terror are starkly domesticated through the multinational nature of the population at American prison Camp x-Ray in Guantanamo Bay, the appearance of the first British suicide bombers<sup>1</sup> and the first domestic outrages in the bombing of London in July 2005. Part urban myth, part grim reality the Islamic terrorist reconfigures the frame through which politicised Islam is seen in the United Kingdom. Yet if the boys

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<sup>1</sup> On April 30<sup>th</sup> 2003 Asif Muhammad Hanif (aged 21) and Omar Khan Sharif (aged 27), two young men and British from relatively privileged backgrounds were involved in the suicide bombing and deaths of three people at Mike's Place, a bar in Tel Aviv. Hanif died but Sharif remains on the run from police in Israel and the United Kingdom  
(<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/homeaffairs/story/0,11026,949728,00.html>).

coming home from the war to the East End today may have been fighting for either side such a frame might dangerously oversimplify how we come to conceptualise the interface of the political and the religious in British cities.

The second assertion is that forms of ethnic, religious or racialised identity become visible in particular institutional cartographies of structures of governance. The forms of Islamic political mobilisation that are described in this article at times were set within regimes of resource and power that structured their self definition by emphasising variously their youth, their ethnicity or their religious faith. In part such an assertion rests on the debate and an established literature that suggests that we move beyond an analytical focus on the state and think instead more about how particular regimes of governmentality create specific subjects and objects of government (Rose and Miller, 1992, Rose, 1999). And if collective subjectivities that articulate race, place, ethnicity and faith through a vocabulary of 'community' are always situated within regimes of governmentality then attention is directed towards two moments of absence.<sup>2</sup>

Firstly, within the mobilisations of civil society there is cause to search for the invisible imprint of the imperatives of governance. Put simply there are no forms of political movement or democratic participation

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<sup>2</sup> Social movements articulated through 'faith communities' have to be set within the social relations that narrate an identity that is shared and an adversary or 'outside' against which they are cast. In this sense it is possible to suggest historically that 'the constitutive outside' of the mobilizations of ethnic movements is located within the institutions that make rules about migration law, welfare rights and employment sanctions and the social context that may simultaneously recognize histories of difference and foster cultures of intolerance (after Laclau, 1990).

that emerge independently of the institutional articulations of power and government. Conversely, an analysis of the institutional cartography of the state – from the macro structures of global interests and transnational organisations to the micro technologies of rules and protocols – must always acknowledge the movements and mobilisations of civil society. The structures of the political are inhabited by traces of the social, invariably culturally mediated. Put crudely, it is both possible and imperative to identify the ghosts of community in the institutional forms of the contemporary state.

Looking at the context of London in this light, the spectacular characterisation and sometimes wilful misrepresentation of the engagement between contemporary Islam and the range of institutions that constitute the British state one might be forgiven for thinking that there is something exceptional about this specific encounter between a particularistic religious faith and a universalist structure of governance. In this section of the paper we attempt straightforwardly to make such a familiar story appear strange and implausible.

Crises and concerns about the social world have periodically focused on East London. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century fears about sanitation, social and community health generated a focus on both the physical and moral welfare of the people living East of Tower Bridge that is traced in the roots of sociological observation (Osborne and Rose, 2000). The streets of the East End at the turn of the Century were mapped diagnostically by Charles Booth but were also evangelised by William

Booth's Christian Mission, subsequently the Salvation Army. The University Settlements of Oxford House, Toynbee Hall and St Hilda's have a similar civilising mission at the heart of their origin. The history of welfare provision and the gradual changes in the proper scope of state action and interference in the realm of the social in London and nationally demonstrates in part the tensions between self help and philanthropy in the Christian tradition and the political demands and struggles that fed into the notions of a welfare state from below. In this manner, specific quarters of the city become sites for social reform as well as catalysts of national change and the parameters of this reform process were frequently religiously marked.

In more recent times the activity of numerous social reform movements and voluntary sector organisations in the East End around housing, around health, around alcohol and substance abuse have been influenced by a church presence or a faith based root to their activity. The argument here is not that all reform movements and political lobbies are innately religious. A number of critiques of the current Labour government have focused on the valorisation of religious faith within the political realm as problematic (e.g. Bright, 2006; Mirza *et al* 2007). It is instead the case that in thinking through the mobilisations of even the early 21<sup>st</sup> century East End it is not possible to describe a civil society that has not at any point in the last 200 years been in any meaningful sense universally secular.

Secondly, the conventional forms of religious identification have historically fed directly into an understanding of political participation in East London as in other British cities (Waller, 1981). Significantly, the tacit, often unspoken whiteness that lies at the heart of many discussions of race and migration rapidly fragments on closer examination of east London. Both the histories and the settlement patterns of Jewish and Irish migrations to London in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are well documented. Translated into the minute but locally symbolic cartographies that divide Catholic Wapping from Jewish Stepney, the political mobilisation of a Jewish East End has been explored historically in the work of Bill Fishman (Fishman, 1978). The Jewish East End became both a site for mobilising people and also an arena in which debates about the relationship between global and local forms of identification were hotly contested (Gidley, 1999).

Less readily acknowledged is the attenuated but still influential traces of such communal routes in the mainstream politics of East London well into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The borough of Tower Hamlets continues to have more Roman Catholic schools per head than any other part of London and the links between Jewish and Irish settlement and the informal networks of political control persisted well into the 1960s and 1970s. In the words of Albert Jacob, a local Jewish councillor for over fifty years between the 1940s and 1990s in an interview for this work, “What is all the fuss. The Jews sorted out for the Jews and the Catholics for the Catholics. They have all taken over the Labour Party

in their turn. First the Jews then the Catholics then the Bengalis. Everyone knows even in the 1960s what SBC (Stepney Borough Council) stood for. Sons, brothers and cousins.”

So it would be mistaken to characterise Islam as uniquely problematic in regard to the tensions between state secularism and faith based community mobilisation. Institutional forms at both local and national levels within regimes of governmentality are traced with the outcomes of debates that question both the theological ethical prerogatives of moments of governance and the faith based nature of forms of mobilisation. Contemporary Islamic mobilisation in the UK at both national and local levels must be set within that context.

And in this context at least three different narratives of political subjectivity structure ‘Islamic mobilisation’ in the East End of the last decade: the glocalisation of diasporic relations between Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat politics in the foundation narrative of the nation of Bangladesh in the 1970s; the plurality of contemporary Islam and the success of Bangladeshi ‘machine’ politics in entering the formal public sphere of democratic politics.

The first such narrative focuses on the nationalist struggle for independence of the former East Pakistan. Stated crudely, western Pakistan elites were for several decades able to control the main institutions of power in a nation divided by 1, 500 kilometres but united by the sectarian logic and the idiosyncratic cartographies of

Lord Ismay and V. P. Menon (Ali, 2002; Keay, 2001).<sup>3</sup> The rise to power in East Pakistan of Mujib ur Rahman and the consequent violent suppression of democratic Bengali nationalism by the Pakistani army in the 1971 war led to large scale and putatively genocidal slaughter in East Pakistan.

Subsequent to the establishment of the new nation of Bangladesh the Nirmul Committee has campaigned both inside and outside of the country around the victims of the independence struggle. It alleges that Jammāt i Islam in particular were actively involved in mass murder and in the wake of Indian intervention in 1971 and international recognition of the new nation of Bangladesh many implicated in the losing side of the nationalist struggle fled abroad, some inevitably to London.

In 1995 Channel 4 broadcast a documentary accusing three high profile Bangladeshi residents in London of war crimes<sup>4</sup>, suggesting that recent British legislation that controversially allowed retrospective prosecution of war criminals – targeted at World War Two suspects resident on British passports – should be applied to individuals guilty of genocide in the Bangladesh liberation struggle. Two of the three individuals named in the Channel 4 film were and remain active in east London and one in particular was a prominent member of the management committee of East London Mosque. It is in this context that throughout the 1980s and 1990s a characteristic subplot of

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<sup>3</sup> Ismay and Menon were responsible for drawing the international borderlines in the partition of India in 1948.

Bangladeshi politics in London was the presence in the community of alleged war criminals and a debate promoted by the Nirmul Committee's sister organisation in London about the role of Jamaat in the Bangladeshi struggle for independence.

The British Nirmul Committee has regularly published newsletters over recent years that have developed a strong critique of the relationship between Islam and the political institutions of contemporary Bangladesh, rooted in a secular left nationalism and consciously addressing the young people of contemporary East London:

Even in today's independent Bangladesh the same group of unruly monsters are involved in activities against the sovereignty of our country. They continue with their savagery, intimidation and vagabond way of life in a country they wish had not been born. They must be stopped. They must be lawfully tried very urgently similarly to the war criminals of the Second World War, Bosnia, Rwanda and Kosovo.<sup>5</sup>

The postcolonial nature of the global local suggests that just as Mujib Rahman developed networks of Bangladeshi nationalism in North London in the 1960s, his political heirs make sense of a political world in a vocabulary that is structured by legacies of Bangladeshi nation building in 1971 but *translates* the events of the Rushdie affair,

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<sup>4</sup> Channel 4, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1995. *The War Crimes File* London: Twenty Twenty Television.

<sup>5</sup> *Public Informer: Defenders of Bangladesh*, Issue 13 September 1999. Published by the UK Committee for Resisting War Criminals and Collaborators of Bangladesh War of 1971. Nirmul publications commonly contain a trenchant critique of the Bangladeshi politics of Jammaati Islam.

British racism and British Islamophobia, the Gulf War, 9/11, 7/7, the invasion of Iraq and the Palestinian intifada and creates a specifically London Bengali political vernacular. The discursive spaces of political debate in the streets, mosques and schools of East London become the sites through which such cultures of here and elsewhere are mediated and articulated in a specifically British Bengali politics.

The second and third influences on political subjectivity are more easily narrated. The nuanced complexity of contemporary Islam in London multiplies strands of religious practice in the Islamic tradition. Whilst the Bangladeshi community in East London draws on a broadly common theological basis of belief it is also the case that the fundamentally egalitarian nature of Islamic debate lends itself to some differences in religious practice and significant differences in social profile of distinctive congregations of particular mosques.

In East London the numbers of mosques have multiplied in recent years. In built form they range from the almost clichéd emblematic beauty of the former Huguenot church and former synagogue that is now the heritage listed mosque on Brick Lane, to the spectacular minaret of East London Mosque on Whitechapel. There is one mosque in prefab buildings on the corner of rail lands in Stepney, one in the rail arches of Shadwell and another in an old rag trade factory on Canon St Road. Numbers grow almost monthly and the use of many community facilities for prayer rooms and mother tongue educational sites defies any ready distinction between religious and secular sites

(Back and Keith, 1999). In this way there is a sense in which it is more apt to consider a plurality of practices in today's London that is commensurable with the diversity of the Islamic tradition itself than to talk about a singular Islam in either the capital in general or the East End in particular.

Thirdly, in order to understand Islamic mobilisation in the East End it is necessary to place it alongside a narrative of the participation of the Bengali community in mainstream electoral politics. Such a story is clearly complex and demands a more nuanced and detailed account than can be provided in the space available here<sup>6</sup>. But in general out of communal opposition to racist attacks and murders in the 1970s a Bangladeshi political machine evolved, closely linked to a secular left oriented youth movement, that was extremely successful for a particular generation that emerged from that movement in penetrating the formal public sphere. Almost entirely made up of men born between 1950 and 1960 this group's success in controlling the local council was not mirrored in successful national or regional representation. However, Bangladeshis had become a majority of the ruling Labour Group by 2002 and a majority of the local council by 2006. Yet in the ethnographic work it was this secular, left of centre, municipalist politics; closely linked to a machine that could mobilise particular villages and regional groupings from the diasporic subdivisions of Bangladeshi Sylhet, that was opposed by a new

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<sup>6</sup> In other parts of the ESRC project on which this piece of work is based we are examining in greater detail the forms of ethnic minority participation in the politics of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

generation of idealistic activists that were much younger and frequently had become engaged in the public realm through civic engagement in the mosques or the Young Muslim Organisation. They were as likely to articulate both a global take on geopolitics of Palestine and Iraq and a sense of welfare needs in London as they were concerned (as or knowledgeable) about events in Bangladesh in the 1970s.

In short, it might be suggested that participation within the conventional structures of local politics have demonstrated both the success of the ethnic mobilisation process in capturing a particular kind of power and the limits within which such mobilisation is constrained. As one interviewee suggested

I have spent my lifetime fighting *against* the state. Now that I am a councillor and we control the council I do not feel happy about running the damn thing.

### **Characterising Islamic mobilisation in East London**

In this section of this paper we want to point to some of the contours of Islamic political mobilisation in contemporary East London. The picture we want to paint is necessarily schematic but it in many ways provides a template to address further key problematics at the heart of any conceptualisation of the notion of democratic participation. We want to suggest two dynamics are working simultaneously to shape a rapidly changing political landscape in London, a landscape that is characterised by the emergence of new sites of contestation in which

Islam begins to provide one ongoing organising principle of collective action. The first dynamic is driven by the reconstitution of state form which in the British setting is dominated at a local level by rhetorics of partnership governance. The second dynamic is a shift in the ways in which it is appropriate to think about political participation. Islam in east London becomes firstly a key organising feature of single issue mobilisation, secondly shapes new forms of engagement with the local state and thirdly the basis of interfaith based mobilisation framed by a problematic rhetoric of community power.

*i) Modernisation and the racial state*

The changing nature of structures of governance at the local level is not the principal focus of this paper but it does provide an important backdrop to the trends we are identifying here. In the United Kingdom a perceived crisis of legitimacy in local government led to a systematic programme of modernisation in the last decade that predates the current government and crosses party affiliation. This modernising project has three diagnostic features. It involves attempts to reform the institutions of local government themselves (through the split between executive and scrutiny functions of elected local councillors); secondly a problematisation of the democratic deficit that opens up assorted non elected bodies to partial democratic control through local councillor participation (through both representation and local authority led community planning of public sector agencies such as Health and Policing) and thirdly the attempt to widen

participation of local people in the democratic process by forms of statutory processes of community representation (in planning decisions, in new models of social housing and in the community planning process). What unites these three drivers of institutional change is a language of partnership government through which democratic election sits alongside community power and other stakeholder interests in redefining the institutional forms of deliberative democracy<sup>7</sup>.

Perhaps more contentiously we want to suggest in this paper that the British modernisation agenda can be set within a more international trend in changing state form. Following Foucault's identification of the boundary between state and civil society as fundamentally transactionary rather than fixed, Donzelot drew attention to the changing role of the relationship between government and wellbeing of society (Gordon, 1991; Donzelot, 1991). He suggests that across the globe there is an emerging trend for states within a globalising world to minimise their responsibilities for progress and to promote various institutional forms of self-government; whereby increasingly small territorial units assume progressively greater responsibilities all the way down to newly defined individual responsibilities for employment (redefining the career), for opportunities (through skilling), personal

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<sup>7</sup> Such a model is in some senses both identified as 'modern' and consequently accidentally legitimized as normal within strands of 'new pluralist' theorizations of local government that are most readily identified with the work of Gerry Stoker (1998) and the ESRC's Local Governance Programme (see [www.elgnce.org.uk](http://www.elgnce.org.uk)).

health (through insurance) and for long term comfort (through personal pensions).

In all British cities in the first decade of the new century the cartography of power reflects new regimes of governmentality through the transformation of institutions of governance that are beginning to look very different today from twenty years ago. Notions of increasing or diminishing ethnic participation in the political system over recent years must consequently understand that the institutional map into which ethnic minorities are putatively integrated has changed radically and the key through which this new map might be understood is written in the language of partnership government.

More specifically any attempt to understand political participation in contemporary East London needs to consider carefully the definition of the boundaries of the political within this changing cartography of the racial state (Butler *et al*, 2000; Goldberg, 2001). For the purposes of this paper we are identifying the political in terms of sites of contestation of meanings, rights, resources and powers and attempting to suggest that relationship between identification and mobilisation is highly contingent on the sites through which conventional power relations are contested.

*ii) Islam, faith and issue based mobilisation in the new spaces of the political*

A politics of 'recognition' that acknowledges Islamic cultural needs differs conceptually from a sense of Islamic political mobilisation. In the words of one Bengali youth activist interviewee:

When the East London Mosque wanted support for their extension on a basis I made many donations from my own wages. When almost any mosque comes to the Council for planning permission I support them. I am a good Muslim. But when people from the mosques themselves want to use Islam as part of politics that is just a place I do not want to go.

Indeed there is considerable *a priori* evidence that would suggest that the dominant strands of Islamophobia within British society (Runnymede Trust, 1997; Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, 2000) would prompt a more common reaction inside and outside the Bengali community to protect and respect the rights of the Islamic faith from a spectrum of people that would range from mainstream liberals through interdenominational empathy to those who share an Islamic culture but not necessarily an Islamic faith (Ali, 2002) as well as believers that identify themselves as practicing Muslims.

A key legal principle in Britain is supposed to be that local and central government do not fund religious activity. However, local government is responsible for funding cultural activity and under Section 71 of the 1976 Race Relations Act for promoting good community relations. Consequently the scope for any faith group to become involved in

struggles for resources within any governmental funding regime is commonly taken up through the development of *cultural associations*.

For most, if not all ethnic minority communities in Britain *cultural* association can commonly stand as a surrogate for *faith based* participation. This is compounded in situations where at the most prosaic levels the boundary lines between religious and secular activity is at best blurred. On many estates in East London racial segregation is so pronounced that tenants associations in many wards are 100% Bengali and the use of a particular room or small resource for tenants rights, a prayer room, for mother tongue classes and for teaching the Koran mocks any straightforward refusal of state funded provision for religious activity. These micro-geographies are important in the everyday lives of the city. As pointed out elsewhere (Back and Keith, 1999) the refusal of a ready split between the secular and the religious within Islamic tradition undermines the hard typological distinction between a small community centre, a prayer room and a mosque. Indeed such typologies may instead focus the minds of white (and other non Islamic communities) at the local neighbourhood level of the contested city, either legitimately or in invocations of white rights and white unfairness discourses (Hewitt, 1996).

It is also clearly the case that alongside longstanding observance of the Islamic faith a growing number of Bengali led organisations characterise themselves principally in terms of their faith. In particular through the work of the Young Muslim Organisation but

also more prominently through the campaigning work of East London Mosque a younger Bengali community has become involved in a range of debates and struggles for resources, recognition and power that is clearly a form of democratic participation in mainstream British institutions but is equally not directly commensurable with mainstream party based participation and more commonly contests the ethical settlement at the level of both the micro geographies of everyday life and the new welfare state. Through ethnographic material it was clearly possible to trace the conscious navigation these new spaces of the political as an alternative strategy for the new generation that consciously avoided engagement in the formal public sphere of representative politics.

In 1999 (and annually since then) East London Mosque established a community radio station that broadcast throughout the fasting period of Ramadan and focused attention on a range of debates of relevance to the local community. Of particular significance for the mosque was the need to raise funds to expand the mosque westwards into a derelict land site, a development proposal that would cost upwards of £4 million. In Kensington and Chelsea the local City Challenge regeneration programme was involved in funding a major mosque development and the radio station at one point considered a debate about the possible use of Single Regeneration Budget resources for the mosque extension.

Subsequently, in 2000 a consortium of black and ethnic minority led third sector organisations came together to bid for SRB resources. Principally Bengali, though also involving African, Afro-Caribbean and Chinese groups the consortium eventually split between a self consciously Islamic led bid (which failed to gain resources) and a second consortium (backed by Ken Livingstone's regeneration advisor at the time) that under the collective title 'New Beginnings, New Settlements' won £5 million to establish ethnic minority led equivalents to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century university settlements in East London. The split was symptomatic of a series of struggles that have characterised Bengali community politics in the recent past.

John Eade has described elsewhere the links between networks of community activists, campaigning third sector organisations and political power locally (Eade, 1989; 1998; Eade et al, 2002). The religious politics that contested the new spaces of the political articulated suspicion of mainstream local political institutions, coupled with a suspicion of the putative co-option of Bangladeshi community politics. In the words of one activist who bases his political contribution largely around a mosque:

Our mainstream politicians have let us down. They are too concerned with the events of thirty years ago in Bangladesh. We do not look to Bangladesh, we look to east London and to Muslims across the world.

This register of voice is important. Again and again in interview material a critique of mainstream Bangladeshi community politics of the 1980s and 1990s was contrasted with a set of geopolitical issues that were of relevance to Muslim communities across the world; Palestine, American foreign policy and overwhelmingly the invasion of Iraq. A sense of the putative parochialism and irrelevance of the events of Bangladeshi independence struggles of the 1970s was reflexively contrasted with a sense of internationalism at the heart of transnational Islamic sentiment.

More recently the emergence of new third sector networks that relate directly to religious based organisation has contrasted with older networks from previous decades. In the late 1990s this has been translated into a series of open debates about the control of a range of young people's organisations in particular. In voluntary youth projects, in the student's union of Tower Hamlets College (see Husain, 2006) and in and in a locally funded major drugs project disputes between different Bengali interests were defined by opposition between more demonstrably Islamic networks and others that might be characterised as working within a more conventional youth work or drugs workers frame of reference.

Again any description needs to acknowledge the complexity of the forces and tensions at work here. There has been press and some academic coverage of the work of groups such as Al Muhajiroun (and its successor body Al-Ghurabaa) and Hiz b't Taheer that are

themselves active in East London. However, they are less influential at a more general level and in the terms of one of the activists from East London Mosque:

Just because we are working in youth work or in schools as Muslims people confuse us with groups like Al Muhajiroun. People confuse us with those people. They are fundamentalists. We are not. We work with other faith groups; Jews, Christians and others.

In part this shift might be seen as structured by the changing forms of social movement that characterises East London. But in a straightforward sense it is also the changing institutional forms of the state that condition the changing nature of political participation. It is possible to suggest that Islamic mobilisation in East London maps onto this new configuration. Importantly it invariably conjures up the uncertain boundaries between state and civil society and normally generates a new institutional cartography of contested sites.

The move in the UK towards local management of schools (LMS) created a resource control at the level of the individual school rather than at the formal representative level of the Local Education Authority. Unsurprisingly this has generated a series of contested elections and contentious struggles for control of governing bodies. Many of the youth groups locally are voluntary aided but receive state funds. Over long periods of time the management committees and membership become stages through which the organisation of

community life are contested. As one interviewee suggested the youth service logically becomes the site for involvement for committed Muslims because it is 'Muslim youth that are at risk'. Between 1998 and the present day several youth organisations have witnessed struggles for power between those Bengali organisations that consciously mobilise through an Islamic framing and those that do not. New organisations (such as the youth organisation BLYDA) were created by individuals interviewed for this paper that linked explicitly the ethical stance of Islamic practice, welfare provision and the competition for revenue support. Likewise the prevalence of substance abuse problems locally<sup>8</sup> has led to state funding of third sector activity designed to intervene through specifically Islamic forms of organisation and service provision.

In short what we claim is that the very reshaping of state forms in contemporary Britain alters the axes of political participation. The increasing complexity of the local state<sup>9</sup> multiplies the sites in which power, rights and resources are determined. Whilst local government and access to this through *the party* remain an important site of power and resources it is not the only site. Whilst ethnic minority<sup>10</sup> mobilisation in East London was organised principally in racialised

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<sup>8</sup> The Shadwell area of East London was identified by Carlton Television as the cheapest source of crack cocaine and heroin in London and in 1998, 1999 and 2000 numerous stories have appeared in local and national press about the problems of drug addiction amongst young Bengali men in Tower Hamlets.

<sup>9</sup> Certain readings of this configuration of power would suggest that the proliferation of institutional forms through which 'the conduct of conduct' is exercised points to an end of the 'state problematic' entirely (Rose and Miller, 1992). The position here is that it is instead always necessary to examine the construction of both subjects and objects of state power; both the institutional objects through which state power is exercised and the collective subjects (of class, identity, territory, gender, race, stakeholder) that such configurations endorse and operate upon (Keith, 1994).

terms through the Labour Party (and to a lesser extent today in the Liberal Democratic Party), mobilisation that takes Islam as its organising principle became increasingly significant in the new sites of power in the interstices between state and civil society. The strength of this emergent network was to be seen when for the first time the largely Islamic forms of political mobilisation entered representative politics, allied with the Socialist Workers Party in the Respect Coalition support for George Galloway's general election victory in 2005 in Bethnal Green and Bow. Its institutional weakness was likewise witnessed in the momentary triumph and subsequent collapse of the Respect Party as an electoral force between 2006 and 2008.

The withdrawal of the state from the control of schools, the direct employment of youth workers and the provision of drugs services had created new sites of contestation on school governing bodies, youth organisations and substance abuse agencies. Perhaps more significantly still the manner in which such an Islamic mobilisation is characterised needs to address carefully the problems of category error addressed earlier in this paper. As one member of a youth group suggested the Islamic framing of participation in struggles for power is also in part about an attempt to invoke a clear ground for debates around not only the good life but also the contest of 'ethics in public'.

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<sup>10</sup> The term ethnic minority throughout this paper is of moot validity. Over 50% of the school population in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets is currently of Bengali origin.

In discussing a particular dispute within a youth movement he suggested:

People always argue. To resolve arguments you have to have a place where people can talk to each other with trust. After all the arguments over PYO<sup>11</sup> we sat down for a whole day away from everybody else. Everybody knew the rules of sorting even if they did not know each other. Within an Islamic setting differences can be resolved, they can be sorted.

This notion of argumentation (in Sylheti referred to as ‘bisar’) has deep cultural roots but crosses various strands of Bangladeshi and Islamic politics, structuring debate, including that between different strands of what has become referred to as Islamist political debate. When people talk of an arena in which strangers can sort disputes within a shared frame of work it is tempting to begin to think more carefully about the staging of this particular alternative public sphere.

## **Conclusion**

We argue that a more nuanced understanding of community power demands a focus on the relationship between state formation and the generation of political subjects through processes of democratic participation. Studies of the local state have tended to be colour blind and insensitive to notions of cultural difference, whilst analysis of community power and ethnic communities can at times reify the objects of study. We want to argue for an approach that resists both

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<sup>11</sup> Progressive Youth Organisation

the temptation either to ignore or to essentialise the importance of cultural and religious difference (see Back 2007 Chapter 5).

We suggest that a more relational approach that highlights the connections between state forms and racialised political subjects points alternatively to a reformulation of our understanding of democratic participation. In particular we suggest that such a focus highlights two sets of key relationships, the first between power and deliberative democratic practice and the second between religious activism and community formation within the alternative public sphere.

Turning to the first of these, the institutional focus of our work highlights the manner in which communities mobilise to access political power. The changing nature of both state formations (Stoker, 2001; Jessop 2003) and the changing understanding of political power (Rose, 1999) both point towards a focus on the arenas through which the contestation of decision making occurs.<sup>12</sup> Put crudely we might consider that the transactional boundary between state and civil society is necessarily articulated through a continuum that runs from government organised bureaucracies under some form of (local or national) democratic control through to the norms and forms of community power, tradition and practice that are part and parcel of the processes of social reproduction. In a racialised context such a continuum suggests an understanding of political contestation that

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to suggest that the notion of deliberative democracy is without analytical problems generated through the manner in which 'the political' is conceptualised (Mouffe, 2000).

spans a spectrum from electoral politics at one conventional end point, through to a ubiquitous normative debate about the nature of identity, lived ethnicity, faith, lifestyle, sexuality and body politics at the end of community power and contested ways of being.

New spaces of the political are defined by those moments at which the boundary lines between bureaucratic and community power become most complex, most dynamic and sketch a landscape which facilitates the emergence of new political subjects based on collective identity..

Perhaps of most interest of all are the points on this continuum where community subjects are represented within the institutional structures of the state – through widening democratic participation, niche marketed franchise demographics, through attempts to strengthen social capital and to build capacity, through processes of state funding and the acknowledgement of difference in regimes of governmentality.

A direct corollary of this analysis is the need to focus attention on what Bryan Turner has described in his work on Max Weber as the dialectical relationship between democratic power and bureaucratic rationality (Turner 1998). Turner's argument is that as Weber himself points out bureaucratic *normalisation* of objective judgements always sit in a tense relationship with the control of bureaucracies by democratic interests. A further corollary might suggest that just as democratic power and bureaucracy create one particular dynamic the juxtaposition of community power (the will of the people) and democratic change (in terms of cultural norms, liberal rights and

networks of informal power and patronage) occupy a similarly historically complex tension and restructure the tension between the bureaucratically rational and the ethnographically sentimental definitions of the good life.

The argument in the first section of this paper suggested that migrant communities in late capitalist economies across the globe generally create a sense of community through the performance of collective struggles for recognition and rights that were conducted against the multifarious forms, practices and institutions of the state. By defining the constitutive outside – the force *against* which such social movements are cast – the state becomes a defining part of those movements and their struggles. In this logic processes of democratic participation in the mainstream political apparatus potentially deliver simultaneously a particular form of social inclusion in forms of institutional power and the assimilationist seed of destruction of the defining force at the heart of the mobilisations in the first place.

We are advocating a conceptualisation of democratic participation that is premised on a staged rather than a logocentric understanding of the public sphere<sup>13</sup>. Religion provides both a performative articulation and an organising principle through which community interests can be represented and staged. Religion – even in an apparently secular world – is strengthened by the manner in which collective identity consequently relates both to reflexive debates on the nature of

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<sup>13</sup> See Sennett (2000) for the characterization of 'logocentric' and 'staged' public life and the significance of verbal and other sensual knowledges.

community interest and mobilised networks of influence and decision making. The arenas in which such political subjects of difference are performed and created have been characterised both here and elsewhere in the vocabulary of an alternative public sphere (after Negt and Kluge 1993); a rule bound space in which collective identity may be negotiated by strangers in situations where the parameters of debate are well defined. In the settings of today's hyper diverse cities, engagement in the highly localised worlds of community activism in the local civic world of youth work, drugs agencies and school governing bodies sits alongside a debate around contemporary Islam that crosses the globe. Attempts by central government to foster an entirely new sense of national belonging miss and misunderstand the geographical scaling of public life, affinity, mobilisation and belonging.

Religious mobilisation in the contemporary East End - by both Christian and Islamic networks - provides an exemplary case of how the dynamic tension between collective political subjectivity and democratic participation is changing rapidly; structured by a representational politics that is premised on the performance of identity on specific politically defined stages. Both a more nuanced notion of community power that problematises the rationality of particular power dynamics and an examination of the arenas through which such political subjects are created are essential to a more complex reading of democratic participation and a more robust understanding of the interplay between race, faith and ethnicity in contemporary cities like London. The world of political action through

commonalities of religious faith paradoxically offers a clear cut example of both resurgent engagement with *political values* whilst exemplifying a sense of disillusionment with mainstream *political institutions* of the local and central state.

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