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## Is Prevent a safe space?

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# IS PREVENT A SAFE SPACE?

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## Introduction

Universities UK entitles its website on the Prevent agenda 'Safe Campus Communities', and it urges universities to engage in 'knowledge sharing for a safe learning environment' (Universities UK, 2016). In presenting Prevent in this way, the universities are following the government's own emphasis. The Department of Education's advice to schools on compliance with the Prevent programme states that:

> 'Schools and childcare providers can also build pupils' resilience to radicalisation by promoting fundamental British values and enabling them to challenge extremist views. It is important to emphasise that the Prevent duty is not intended to stop pupils debating controversial issues. On the contrary, schools should provide a safe space in which children, young people and staff can understand the risks associated with terrorism and develop the knowledge and skills to be able to challenge extremist arguments.' (Department of Education, 2015)

The Department of Education's use of the term 'safe space' to describe the implementation of Prevent has in turn been adopted by many schools in their policy statements.

This official presentation of Prevent as seeking to provide a safe space or safe environment is disputed by some of the programme's critics. Christine Blower, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers, criticized Prevent precisely because it undermined schools as 'safe spaces where children and young people can

explore ideas' (quoted in Espinoza, 2015). By imposing a duty on teachers to report any suspicions that a child is vulnerable to radicalisation, Prevent tended to:

> 'close down these spaces in schools because [students] feel that if they say anything they will be targeted as being dangerous extremists, [pupils] may feel they say can't say anything because they don't want to put their teacher in a difficult position.' (Quoted in Espinoza, 2015)

Sarah Marsden, an academic expert in reintegrating people convicted of terrorism offences, also fears that the Prevent duty may undermine the 'relationship of trust between teacher and student', and have a counterproductive 'chilling effect on the willingness of students and teachers to debate difficult questions'. By contrast with the government's strategy, she argues that 'such work demands "safe spaces" in which to have risky conversations' (Marsden, 2015).

Both those who are responsible for implementing Prevent and their critics are attracted to the idea of safe space, regarding it as strengthening their case. The language of safe space is being used by both sides in this discussion at precisely the moment that the idea of safe spaces is beginning to influence discussions about education and student life generally in British universities. But who is right about Prevent? Does the implementation of the strategy in schools and universities create a safe space or undermine efforts to do so? That's the question I will try to address here.

On the face of it, Prevent and safe spaces seem very different in their origin and purpose. Prevent is one aspect of a wider government counterterrorism strategy called Contest that dates back to 2003. It is the aspect that is intended to respond to the 'ideological challenge' of terrorism and prevent individuals being 'drawn into terrorism' (Home Office, 2011: para 3.21). The idea of safe spaces, by contrast, emerged from the practice of the women's movement and sexual minorities over the past half a century (Roestone Collective ,2014), and was intended to create spaces free from oppressive practices and attitudes. However, if we compare and contrast the main features of safe spaces, as they have been discussed in relation to university education, with the main features of the Prevent strategy as it applies to universities, as I will do here, we will see that despite their apparent differences, the overall form

of the two strategies and the underlying beliefs that rationalize them share a great deal in common.

The purpose of making this comparison is to situate Prevent in its broader contemporary context. In particular my aim is to understand better the reasons why Prevent enjoys practical political legitimacy, by which I mean why, in a society that remains formally a democracy, a statutory programme that openly seeks to conscript all academics into working as agents of the state's internal security services is being implemented fairly smoothly and has generated relatively little controversy. I will argue that the comparison with safe spaces shows that although aspects of the 'safeguarding' and the coercion involved in Prevent are distinctive, Prevent should nevertheless be understood as one example of a much wider tendency to the surveillance and regulation of speech and of the exchange of opinions going well beyond the counterterrorism context. Moreover both Prevent and this wider tendency draw on the same assumptions about the vulnerability of students (and others) to being harmed by dangerous ideas. This has a significant implication for our understanding of Prevent, one that is particularly pertinent for the programme's critics.

The presence of common assumptions that rationalize both Prevent and safe spaces suggests that Prevent cannot simply be put down to official 'Islamophobia' or to a panicky overreaction to the threat of terrorist atrocities. That is not to say that hostility to Muslims and political overreaction play no part in the Prevent programme or its implementation. It is to say that this hostility and reaction are shaped by a wider scepticism about the value of independent normative judgment, political agency and democratic debate among students, a scepticism that is not only focused on Muslim students. The shared rationale for the two strategies indicates that Prevent draws its practical political legitimacy not from hostility to Muslims but from a much wider commitment to protecting vulnerable people from the potential ill-effects of others' dangerous or offensive opinions. This is the larger social context in which Prevent gains its political purchase, and it suggests that effective criticism of the programme will be hindered rather than assisted by relying on the idea of safe space.

**Comparing safe spaces and Prevent**

The Prevent programme is a very specific government initiative. Parliament has recently given it a statutory form in education by imposing a public law duty on schools and universities to have 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism' (Counter-Terrorism Act 2015, s26(1)), with government providing explicit guidance to institutions on how to comply with the duty (HM Government, 2015b). It is therefore easier to describe Prevent precisely than it is to give a precise account of the much more diverse movement for the creation of safe spaces in education which contains different understandings of the concept. The idea of the classroom as a safe space is not unfamiliar in educational circles but relatively little theorized (Barrett, 2010). At the same time, the idea that universities should become safe spaces has been a demand of diverse groups of student activists. Although the concept of safe space has no single or pre-eminent articulation, certain key features of the idea of education as a safe space can nevertheless be identified. However I need to make three distinctions at the outset.

First I am only really concerned here with Prevent as it is enforced in higher education. Although the comparison made here may have relevance to schools, many questions—such as those pertaining to the responsibilities of the educational institution, to academic freedom, freedom of expression, and the position of Muslim students—are not necessarily the same between schools and universities. The conclusions of this discussion are restricted to the latter.

The second distinction is between the idea of safe space as a space safe from physical violence and a broader idea of safe space. If universities are in fact *physically unsafe* places where violence and sexual assault are routine rather than exceptional then that would be a problem of a different order to the question I am addressing. There is some debate over that (Universities UK, 2016). However, I am seeking to compare Prevent to the wider sense of safe space that some of its supporters have summarized as:

'a place where anyone can relax and be able to fully express, without fear of being made to feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, or unsafe on account of biological sex, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, cultural background, religious affiliation, age, or physical or mental ability.' (Safe Spaces Network, 2016)

The third distinction I want to make is that between particular safe spaces *within* universities and university education *as* a safe space (ie, that safe space should extend to lectures, classes, seminars). To some extent, the first type of safe space has always existed in the form of social networks or clubs and societies that could set their own rules and codes of behaviour. It is the second idea that concerns me here. The comparison I am going to make is between Prevent, on the one hand, and the idea that the space of higher education itself should be a safe space, on the other.

Note that I am not claiming that the two strategies are equally well developed. Prevent is a government programme that imposes legal duties on educational institutions to carry it out. By contrast, safe spaces are at most an under-theorised everyday practice of some educators and a demand of small if vocal groups of students. In the form of activism around trigger warnings and microaggressions, there has been some movement in this direction in American universities. It has not proceeded very far in the UK as yet. However support for the idea of safe spaces is quite widespread among student unions and some student unions have enacted safe space policies to govern the activities of their affiliated clubs and societies. The reason for making the comparison is not because each is as institutionally well established as the other; it is because both government and universities are keen to deploy the language of safe environments, safe spaces and safeguarding to give legitimacy to the Prevent programme. The comparison being made is here is to test the validity of the government's claim in this respect and its implications. To do that I will therefore look at some of the policies adopted by some UK students unions and some of the ideas promoted in American universities to see what they share with and what differentiates them from Prevent.

In making this comparison I will initially try to take both strategies at face value and in their own terms. A persuasive case can be made that Prevent is entirely misconceived in its own terms, an exercise in 'bad faith' and a 'displacement activity'

in the absence of any effective policy (McCormack, 2016), and one that can only succeed in encouraging the very thing it aims to prevent (Rights Watch UK, 2016). But here I will not contest the claims made by supporters of either strategy about their empirical necessity or their wisdom from an instrumental point view. Only towards the end of the comparison will I turn to thinking critically about them, but even then my interest will not be in the instrumental question. I am not concerned here with whether either strategy is effective or necessary to achieve its proclaimed purposes. I am interested in what features and assumptions they share, what differentiates them on their own terms, and the implications of their shared features for higher education and for those who are critical of Prevent.

I will compare the two strategies from the standpoint of the harms they aim to prevent; the way they go about securing educational space from harm; their chilling effects on the expression of particular viewpoints; the source and type of the coercion they rely upon in order to prevent harm; the targets of that coercion; and, finally, the way they construct students as subjects of education.

**Harm prevention strategies**

At the most general level both Prevent and safe spaces are about harm prevention. As suggested by the Safe Spaces Network in the quotation above, a safe space is an environment that is safe from the harm of discriminatory harassment (Stengel, 2010), which is to say from annoying, alarming, threatening or abusive conduct that is addressed to some particular characteristic of the person (or in our case the student) harassed. The particular space made safe is made safe for those students who are thought to be particularly vulnerable to that harm.

The idea of the classroom as a safe space has been thought of as ensuring that students 'feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors' (Holley and Steiner, 2005: 50). Where some have suggested that this requires at least some degree of comfort (Hunter, 2008), others have contrasted this type of 'safety' with 'being comfortable' (Holley

and Steiner, 2005: 50). At any rate, the exclusion of the harm of discriminatory harassment would seem to be a necessary condition of such a space.

Prevent, in its own terms, aims to make the learning environment one that is safe from the harm of radicalisation and one which contributes to minimizing that harm for those students thought to be particularly vulnerable. The Home Office claims that: 'Safeguarding vulnerable people from radicalisation is no different from safeguarding them from other forms of harm.' (Home Office, 2011) As we shall see below, there is good reason to doubt this claim. Nevertheless, it is true that if we consider the strategy *in its own terms* for the moment, Prevent does involve both the identification of vulnerable or at-risk students and efforts to prevent them from suffering a harm. However, the nature of the harm that is the concern of Prevent is on the face of it quite different from those that are the concern of safe spaces.

Safe spaces aim to eliminate or mitigate the effects of discriminatory harassment, Prevent aims to minimize the harm of radicalisation. These harms differ in numerous ways, but let's consider the two most important differences.

The harm of radicalisation is the harm that a person will be convinced to set themselves on a course of condoning, supporting or, worse, participating in threats of violence or acts of violence motivated by 'a political, religious or ideological cause' (Terrorism Act 2000, s1(1) (c)). Prevent therefore seeks to pre-empt the further harms that may result from any violence arising from a student's radicalisation, and it is these ulterior harms that are the programme's ultimate target. The vulnerable student of Prevent is, therefore, vulnerable to becoming a threat. This is different from the student who is vulnerable to discriminatory harassment. It is the student as potential threat that is the target of Prevent, and this creates the impression that the government is manipulating the language of vulnerability. I will return to this question below.

It might also be argued that the harms involved in Prevent are much more serious than those involved in discriminatory harassment, which are said to be harms to the feeling of security, the self-esteem or even the comfort of its victims. However, the harms involved in radicalisation are also much more unusual and extreme events, while the

harms involved in harassment are claimed to be quotidian, pervasive and to have subtle and long-lasting deleterious effects on those who suffer it.

However despite these obvious differences, the harms that both strategies aim to prevent share one common feature. Both harms are vaguely and expansively defined. I will return to this aspect of them after comparing the way in which the strategies go about securing educational spaces.

**Securing educational spaces**

The specific techniques that each strategy deploys to secure an environment from the threat of harm are also comparable. Safe spaces can be created in university settings using two techniques. One is the creation of physically separate spaces where vulnerable students are protected from their vulnerability to discriminatory harassment. In this space, the second technique is applied, consisting of rules that exclude the harassing conduct or any person engaging in it, and/or rules that mandate that any such conduct must be challenged (Safe Spaces Network, 2016).

A broader approach is simply to apply the second technique to the whole institution by prohibiting some conduct or mandating that it be challenged. An example would be the Manchester Student Union safe space policy. Although it does not apply to the classroom or lecture hall, it gives us a sense of what a safe space policy would be like if it were applied to the educational environment more broadly. Firstly it contains prohibitions on what the Student Union's affiliated societies may do. Societies and representatives of the Student Union must not allow visiting speakers at events they have organised or promoted to:

> 'say things that are likely to incite hatred against any individual or group based
> on age, disability, marital or maternity/paternity status, race, religious beliefs,
> sexual orientation or sexual activity, gender identity, trans status, socio-
> economic status, or ideology or culture;
> propose or promote punishment for anyone based on age, disability, marital or
> maternity/paternity status, race, religious beliefs, sexual orientation or sexual

activity, gender identity, trans status, socio-economic status, or ideology or culture promote or recruit to extremist ideologies or groups'

In some circumstances the policy also mandates that:

'Societies must actively challenge any speakers or students who:

say things that are likely to incite hatred against any individual or group propose or promote punishment for anyone based on age, disability, marital or maternity/paternity status, race, religious beliefs, sexual orientation or sexual activity, gender identity, trans status, socio-economic status, or ideology or culture.' (Manchester University Students Union, 2016)

The Prevent strategy also adopts both techniques: the separation of at-risk students and the application of rules combining prohibitions with mandatory challenge to the expression of views that are thought to increase the risk of the harms of radicalisation.

The separation element of the Prevent strategy lies in its relationship with another aspect of the broader counterterrorism strategy: the Channel programme. Prevent imposes a duty on universities and all higher education institutions (HEIs) to make training available to staff to ensure that they are 'able to recognise vulnerability to being drawn into terrorism, and be aware of what action to take in response. This will include an understanding of when to make referrals to the Channel programme…' (HM Government, 2015b: para 22). Channel is a programme of 'support' for anyone who is determined to be at risk (including people outside the education system). This 'support' might involve anything from measures to divert them from aspects of their current lifestyle, through drugs counseling to theological guidance (HM Government, 2015a). Drawing a student into the Channel programme is precisely drawing a student into a separate space where the student can be 'protected' from the effects of their vulnerability to radicalisation.

As well as allowing for the separation of the vulnerable student, Prevent also imposes a duty both to challenge and, if necessary, to prohibit the expression of certain views in circumstances where their expression would result in a risk of radicalisation. The Prevent strategy requires HEIs to make decisions with respect to whether or not

'extremist' speakers should be hosted on their premises. Such events are only to go ahead where the risk of people being drawn into terrorism is 'fully mitigated' by those speakers being required to speak in a forum in which their views will be adequately challenged (HM Government, 2015b: para11).

We can say that like a safe space, the Prevent programme does aim to secure the university and its students from the danger of the harm of radicalisation both by ensuring that at-risk students are identified and particular spaces secured in which to safeguard those particular students, and by securing the student body in general from the unchallenged expression of ideas that represent a risk of the harm of radicalisation.

**Chilling effects**

A third point of comparison is the vagueness and expansiveness of the definitions of the harms involved and of the conduct that will cause those harms. As we saw above, the Manchester Student Union safe space policy sets out from the relatively narrow and familiar legal category of inciting hatred but expands to include the expressions of views that 'promote punishment' of any person on any of these grounds. It is an interesting question whether expressing the view that, say, homosexuality is wrong amounts to the promotion of punishment, since punishment is one obvious response to the commission of the wrong, although forgiveness is another. Perhaps if the speaker added that it was appropriate to 'hate the sin but love the sinner' then that might be enough to avoid the charge of promoting punishment. The very vagueness of this boundary makes the chilling effect of the expansive definition clear enough.

Other Student Union Safe Space Policies take the logic of protecting students from discriminatory harassment further. Bristol University Students Union has a policy that is rather terse, but further guidance is offered in a *Safe Space Best Practice Guide* written by Jamie Cross, its Equality, Liberation and Access Officer. The emphasis is not on prohibiting speech:

'It's important to note that safe space does not mean "no debate" instead it means thinking about the way we discuss issues so that people don't feel threatened or unsafe.'

The emphasis is on controlling the form of expression. The key advice Cross has for students is to 'Listen to your peers—if they say they don't like a particular term then don't use it…'. And he reassures readers that 'the English language is absolutely vast, there is sure to be a term you can use instead!' (Cross, 2014). His point is that those who are vulnerable to the harms of feeling threatened or unsafe should be the ones to determine the way that others express themselves, if not necessarily the opinions they express. Indeed, since it is the *feeling* of being threatened or unsafe that is the harm a safe space is being secured against then it is necessarily the potential victim's perceptions of others' conduct or words that are key to whether or not they will risk causing the harm. This subjectivity and context-dependency in the definition of the harmful conduct is intrinsic to the idea of harassment, and characteristic of the legal controls on it (Infield and Platford, 2000: 216). It creates an obligation to be aware of what will cause others to feel unsafe or unwelcome, and that might not always be obvious. As Cross puts it, 'since being made aware I have worked hard to alter my language' (Cross, 2014).

However, once this subjective approach to harmful conduct and speech is adopted, it can lead to the identification of a huge range of conduct that is experienced as potentially threatening or at least unwelcoming, a range of conduct now referred to as microaggressions (Wing Sue, 2010). Although the idea of microaggressions has not made much impact in UK universities so far, its influence is being felt in American universities (see, for example, University of Santa Cruz, 2016; Suárez-Orozco and Solorzano, 2015). The key point is that where the purpose of a policy is to protect students' *feelings* of security or self-esteem then there is an inherent tendency to vagueness and expansiveness in any definition of the conduct that will need to be policed.

The potentially extreme results of this subjective definition of the harmfulness of speech were in evidence when Islamist students at Goldsmiths College London barracked Maryam Namazie, a feminist and self-declared ex-Muslim, who was trying

to speak on blasphemy and apostasy, with shouts of 'safe space' (National Secular Society, 2015). It is not obvious that the students were abusing the idea of safe space. Her views are apostasy to them, and for that reason are no doubt deeply alarming to at least some of those who regard themselves as devout. Certainly the Goldsmiths student Islamic society thought so, denouncing her views as 'Islamophobic' and insisting that 'The university should be a safe space for all our students' (quoted in Ali, 2015).

It is not clear how far this subjective idea of safety has penetrated into students' perception of the classroom itself. In one study of student attitudes, the characteristic that was most often identified as creating an unsafe learning environment was that the teacher was perceived by students to be 'critical towards students…biased, opinionated, or judgmental'. Similarly 'biased' or 'judgmental' responses from other students were thought to create an unsafe environment (Holley and Steiner, 2005: 58). These terms are not without ambiguity although one possible interpretation of this would be that for these students a safe classroom is one where their own views are not judged or subjected to criticisms that they disapproved of, did not understand or were not persuaded by.

Like safe spaces, the Prevent strategy also incorporates a vague definition of the harm that it is trying to protect the vulnerable from and, therefore, an expansive definition of the conduct that is likely to cause that harm and which needs to be policed. The harm from which students are to be 'safeguarded' is that of being 'drawn into terrorism'. That process of being 'drawn into' is referred to as 'radicalisation', and radicalisation is very broadly conceived. Complying with their duty to have due regard to preventing it requires HEIs to assess the risk of radicalisation not just in terms of the influence of actual terrorist organisations or organisations that support violence, 'but also non-violent extremism, which can create an atmosphere conducive to terrorism and can popularise views which terrorists exploit' (HM Government, 2015b: para 19). The risk assessment that HEI's will have to carry out when determining what measures are necessary to challenge a speaker and to mitigate the risk of someone being drawn into terrorism therefore applies to non-violent extremism as well as violent extremism. But what is non-violent extremism? It is defined by the government as:

'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.' (Department of Education, 2015: 5)

The definition is vague because the 'fundamental British values' that are explicitly included are concepts whose meaning is hugely controversial and can be 'opposed' in many different ways about which there is little agreement. The definition is literally expansive in the sense that it is non-exhaustive: it specifies some particular 'values', but these are on a list of what British values 'include', suggesting that there may be other unspecified 'fundamental British values'. This creates a huge scope for the initial identification of potential extremism that will in practice depend on the views and prejudices of the staff member involved in the surveillance of students' conduct and speech.

Where a student has been identified as vulnerable, a referral to the Channel programme may be made on the basis of a long, non-exhaustive and vaguely stated list of criteria that concern the engagement with extremist groups, the apparent intention of a student to do harm and any capability they may have to do so (HM Government, 2015a).

Assuming that many people will wish to avoid the kinds of challenge, regulation and intervention that both Prevent and safe spaces require, the vagueness in the definition of the forms and content of expression that will lead to intervention will tend, therefore, to have a chilling effect on the expression of certain ideas. People may avoid risking a challenge or intervention by avoiding the expression of ideas that either fall clearly within the definitions or could possibly be open to challenge or prohibition given the fuzzy expansiveness of the definitions. In the case of Prevent, it is expression of the ideas of those who are opposed to, or even critical of, what the government claims as 'fundamental British values', especially democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths, that will be chilled. In the case of safe spaces it will be the expression of ideas that lead to certain feelings that might be or are in fact experienced by members of vulnerable groups. The chilling effect of the two strategies may overlap in so far as they both target the

ideas of those who believe that it is wrong to hold particular religious beliefs and therefore do not respect those faiths (usually, but not necessarily, people of a different religious faith themselves), and those who are opposed to individual liberty in spheres such as sexuality or gender identification.

Both strategies therefore actively seek to regulate the form in which certain ideas are expressed (either by giving control of the language used to someone other than the speaker or by permitting certain ideas to be expressed only in a context in which they will be effectively challenged). Moreover in both, if regulating the form of expression is inadequate to mitigating the risk of harm, then they rule out the expression of the idea. Nevertheless there is an important difference in the way that the two strategies chill free expression of students' thoughts, opinions and questions. Each relies on quite different sources and types of coercion to back up the strategies' regulative techniques.

**Sources of coercion**

Safe spaces have generally been campaigned for by those who claim to be vulnerable to the effects of harassment. These campaigners are rarely representative in any formal democratic sense. They do, however, very often identify, in the sense of share an identity, with the sufferers of this harassment.

Prevent by contrast is a government programme. It has not arisen from any demand from communities whose young people might be vulnerable to radicalisation. On the contrary, Prevent arises from a perceived need for the state's counterterrorism bureaucracy to 'engage' with the community in order to better prevent the radicalisation of future terrorists (Briggs, 2010: 974-76). Prevent aspires to be one aspect of a 'partnership' between state agencies and local communities in the surveillance and preemption of threat (Home Office, 2009: 84).

This contrast in the sources of the two strategies maps on to an important difference in the way in which the strategies regulate conduct and speech. In so far as a university is conceived as a safe space there will be a set of guidelines about how to ensure that

those students who are vulnerable to the effects of discriminatory harassment are to be protected. In educational circles it seems that the maintenance of a classroom as a safe space is thought of as primarily the responsibility of the teacher (Barrett, 2010). At most, failure to abide by those guidelines is going to lead to disciplinary action against staff or students.

As we have seen Prevent imposes a legal duty on universities to have 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism' and the guidance on complying with that duty requires the university to train staff in identifying students at risk, maintain an infrastructure that permits the reporting of concerns, referrals to Channel and the control of public events involving 'extremist' speakers. Although the Channel programme includes a series of measures intended to 'support' vulnerable students and to prevent their radicalisation, both identification as being at-risk and, even more, any failure to cooperate with these interventions is going to bring the attention of the state's security bureaucracy.

We noted that both strategies would tend to chill expression of ideas because of the threat of some kind of regulatory action that both contain. However the elements of coercion in each strategy are quite different. Ultimately the threat in Prevent is intervention by various arms of the state, an intervention that will be coordinated by the police. The imposition of the duty draws the educational apparatus of the university into partnership with the state's security bureaucracy in the exercise of its policing function (Thomas, 2016: 180-81). Safe spaces, on the other hand, are policed by students, by members of staff and, in so far as safe space policies are formally incorporated into university life, by the institution's disciplinary regulation.

For its critics, a key problem with the Prevent duty is that its effect is to subordinate all discussion of 'extremist' ideas (and, by implication, of the political, religious and cultural issues that relate to extremist ideas) to the police imperatives of the security state (Thomas, 2016). In the process, Prevent seeks to conscript university lecturers as frontline agents of the state's surveillance bureaucracy (University and College Union, 2015: 4)

In itself, however, the reliance on state coercion does not fundamentally differentiate Prevent from safe spaces. It is true that safe spaces do not generally rely on police intervention (although some of their supporters may support tougher harassment laws with more vigorous enforcement). However nor are safe spaces normally directed at protecting the vulnerable *from the state*. They are intended to protect the vulnerable from harmful expressions of the beliefs of *other students and of staff*. It is civil liberties that are traditionally the source of 'safe spaces' from *state* coercion. The freedom of expression, for example, prevents the state from coercing a person on the basis of the content of her speech or the way she expresses it. However, from the point of view of the safe spaces currently campaigned for in universities, that civil liberty is precisely part of the problem. Safe spaces aim to limit the scope of freedom of expression, at least by means of informal or institutional disciplinary measures. It is not obvious, therefore, that the principle of the safe space could not be maintained by state coercion.

For many of Prevent's critics, however, the problem is not simply that Prevent brings state coercion into the educational space but that it does so by seeking to identify 'at risk' students and draw them into spaces ultimately coordinated by the security services. The problem is that the state's coercion is targeted at those who are officially constructed as being vulnerable themselves, at the very people whom Prevent claims to 'safeguard'.

**Targets of coercion**

On the face of it, safe spaces are aimed at regulating the speech and conduct of those who, it is claimed, cause the harms that the safe space aims to mitigate. It is expression and conduct that causes harassment to others that is coerced. Prevent's coercion is also aimed at people who could be said to cause harm in so far as it regulates and if necessary prohibits the speech of 'extremists'. However Prevent's coercion is also aimed at those who are themselves said to be vulnerable to the harm. Although the prohibition of 'extremist' speakers is one technique of the strategy, its other element is the identification students who are at risk of radicalisation and their referral to Channel. The consequence is that it is the very students who are

'vulnerable to radicalisation' who are likely to be most cautious about the expression of their ideas in any environment in which the Prevent duty is complied with.

It is this targeting of Prevent's coercion at the very people whom the programme claims to safeguard that is a major source of criticism of the programme. In the first place, this is thought to be ineffective. In an educational environment led by Prevent-trained academic staff, the implicit coercion of those students who are vulnerable to radicalisation is likely to force them to avoid raising any sympathies they may have for 'extremist' ideas or even the questions they may have about those ideas (Marsden, 2015). Those interested in extremist ideas will become careful to keep their interest undetectable in spaces subject to surveillance, including the seminar room. More significant, for our purposes, however, is that for its critics this ineffectiveness arises from Prevent's failure to create a truly *safe* learning environment for students.

Targeting official coercion at students who are vulnerable to radicalisation is in practice targeting coercion at Muslim students because, although Prevent can be used in respect of those at risk of being influenced by right-wing, Irish republican or any other type of 'extremism', Islamist terrorism has been the primary focus of recent counter-terrorism policy. However, Muslims are a religious minority who are themselves regarded as vulnerable to discriminatory harassment, and so the practical coercion of Muslim students in the expression of their views seems to be subjecting them to the very harms of feeling unsafe or unwelcome that safe spaces are supposed to guard against. Some critics, therefore, explicitly contrast Prevent to the alternative safe environment that might actually be more effective. As teacher and educational consultant Bill Bolloten put it of Prevent in schools:

> 'Prevent is making discussion of sensitive and controversial issues much more difficult in schools….If the safe space that schools provide for discussion is restricted, and pupils feel that they can't share their opinions without being reported, there is a risk that they may seek out spaces that are less safe.' (Bolloten, 2015)

Bolloten's view seems to reflect the views of educators for whom the purpose of an educational safe space is precisely that students can feel secure enough to voice their

individual opinions (Hunter, 2008). However, what is apparent from the comparison made here is that this alternative educational space imagined by Bolloten and some other critics of Prevent (see, for example, Thomas, 2016, Marsden, 2015) is exactly *not* what student activists imagine safe spaces to be in general. For in the safe spaces of student activism 'open sharing' of 'abhorrent' views is ruled out where this would make other students feel unwelcome or uncomfortable. The views of at least some Islamists and, for that matter, extreme nationalists, regarding women, sexual minorities and particular religious faiths, if honestly expressed, would certainly fail to reassure many students who seek for an education that is a safe space for women, sexual minorities or followers of those particular religious faiths. The problem is that encouraging some students to feel sufficiently secure to take the risk of being honest will in some contexts lead them to say things that other students will plausibly claim makes them feel insecure.

The tension arises because those who are constructed by Prevent as 'at risk' of the harm that the strategy is aimed at will include those whose expression would be the subject of coercion by at least some of the safe space policies currently being promoted—the same students are both at risk of radicalisation and themselves pose a risk of harassment. And this draws attention to another fundamental aspect of Prevent. The students who are at risk of the harm of radicalisation are also implicitly themselves 'risky', because what they are at risk of is being drawn into terrorism by way of 'extremist' ideas. Thinking about this relationship a little more closely reveals a deeper similarity between Prevent and safe spaces.

**Vulnerable subjects**

Prevent's coercion of precisely those students who are claimed to be vulnerable does seem to suggest that the Home Office is not entirely accurate when it claims that 'Safeguarding vulnerable people from radicalisation is no different from safeguarding them from other forms of harm' (Home Office, 2011). For some of Prevent's critics, this coercion of the vulnerable belies the claim to be protecting them. Charlotte Heath-Kelly, for example, suggests that Prevent's 'blurring of vulnerability into presumed riskiness' is 'paradoxical' and 'bizarre' (Heath-Kelly, 2013: 406). It is not

clear why this is paradoxical. Once it is the vulnerability of a person that is the focus of attention, then one of the problems that they may be vulnerable to is becoming a perpetrator of harms against others. This 'pre-emptive' approach is widespread in crime prevention and in child and family welfare policy (Coppock & McGovern, 2014: 252; Early Intervention Foundation, 2016).

There is nothing intrinsically incoherent about thinking of particular subjects as *both* vulnerable and a threat. But for that reason Heath-Kelly is right when she observes that, in the Prevent construction, the 'at-risk' student is already implicitly being treated as a 'risky' student, and for that reason in need of the surveillance of Prevent. What is problematic is not the idea that the vulnerable can also be a threat. What is problematic for higher education is the focus on vulnerability itself. As Heath-Kelly puts it, the vulnerability of students that the Prevent strategy is concerned to regulate is their 'vulnerability to dangerous ideas' (Heath-Kelly, 2013: 402). To be vulnerable to ideas might be said to define the condition of being a student in higher education— or perhaps, more precisely, the condition of a student who is fully engaged in the educational process. However, the official concern is with certain extremist ideas. What characterizes these dangerous ideas that must be policed?

Beyond the vague definition of extremism discussed above, the specific content of these dangerous ideas, and how that content might influence a person towards violence, is not openly discussed in the government's guidance materials. The Channel guidance offers the following factors that are thought to create vulnerability:

> 'Factors that may have a bearing on someone becoming vulnerable may include: peer pressure, influence from other people or via the internet, bullying, crime against them or their involvement in crime, anti-social behaviour, family tensions, race/hate crime, lack of self esteem or identity and personal or political grievances.' (HM Government, 2015a: 10)

Staff are then advised to look out for any of a long list of changes in personal behaviour that might indicate either increased 'engagement' with a group or ideology, 'intent' to cause harm or 'capability' to do so (HM Government, 2015a: 11). It is striking that the actual content of religious or political ideas does not appear here.

Rather 'political grievances' are just one of a number of social or psychological factors that might lead someone to consider violence. This is characteristic of the official understanding of 'radicalisation' as a 'theological-psychological' process in which a student exposed to certain theological ideas may become drawn into supporting violence if their personal situation and particular social network provide the right environment (Kundnani, 2012). In this understanding, dangerous ideas are something like an infectious disease (Sederberg, 2003: 272) that students catch and might pass on to others where the particular circumstances of individuals are hospitable.

By constructing students as vulnerable to infection by dangerous ideas, the Prevent strategy discounts the political agency of students in general and of Muslim students in particular (Coppock and McGovern, 2014: 253). Prevent does not construct Muslim students as rational political actors or citizens who are moved to evaluate their circumstances and those of others with whom they identify in the broad context of the available social and political alternatives, and then to make decisions about whether or not to engage in violence (Richards, 2011: 150-51). It treats them as a vulnerable population who may be infected with dangerous ideas and may require disinfection. Prevent depoliticizes the encounter between students and 'extremist' ideas and in the process discounts students' ability to make reasoned judgements and to pursue them. Treating students in this way is antithetical to the aims and practices of higher education.

However, this same discounting of political agency underlies the safe space concept. Students are constructed as psychologically vulnerable to various harms that are introduced by critical, hostile, contemptuous or offensive words or behaviour directed at them or at some characteristic with which they identify. Safe spaces precisely seek to protect students from the expression of those ideas by determining how those ideas may be expressed or preventing their expression. In other words, the student subjects of safe spaces are also constructed as being vulnerable to dangerous ideas. The concept of safe space if applied to education as a whole also discounts students' capacity and willingness to evaluate and to criticize ideas that they find insulting or denigrating. It removes from students the opportunity to draw strength from successfully undermining the ideas of their opponents, perhaps even from mocking

them, and from widening and deepening the collective solidarity with others that would arise from such critical engagement. Safe spaces discount the possibility that the students' own rational agency could not only protect them from any psychological harm that might result from exposure to hostile ideas but actually strengthen them and undermine the credibility of those ideas.

At this point the distinction drawn earlier between particular private and semi-public safe spaces, on the one hand, and education as a safe space, on the other, needs to be reiterated. Naturally those who endure the political hostility or criticism of others need spaces to retreat from the argument and draw strength among those of like mind. That is one of the things that civil liberties such as the freedom of association and rights to privacy are intended to guarantee. However, in so far as the safe space concept is imposed on the associative activities of others in student unions or on the education process itself then it discounts the rational political agency of students just as much as Prevent does.

This is why the proposition that the classroom should be a safe space—in the sense of a comfortable space where students will not find their own opinions criticized—is educationally misconceived. It underestimates the inherent expansiveness of the pursuit of security (Zedner, 2009: 20). In practice, if implemented seriously, it would make the discussion of some topics almost impossible. For example, some students will regard gay marriage as a sinful blasphemy, while, for others, opposition to gay marriage is homophobia. The subject cannot be honestly discussed without offending and risking distress to at least some students. In its basic characteristics, therefore, the educational safe space tends to preclude a key moment of learning. As Betty Barrett argues, if students are really to learn, then they will have to risk the criticism and judgement of others, and 'civility' rather than 'safety' might be a better way of understanding the preconditions of an effective learning environment (Barrett, 2010).

**Threats from without and within**

Prevent is a strategy that conscripts staff in universities into the surveillance bureaucracy of the security state. It tasks universities with identifying students who

may be interested in 'extremist' ideas and referring them to spaces controlled by the police and security services. It chills free expression of ideas and discounts the rational political agency of students. As such it represents a very obvious subversion of the educational mission. It is not simply that laying a duty on educational institutions to spy on their students undermines trust in the classroom—although that is bad enough. Still more fundamentally, Prevent casts doubt on the worth of higher education's core enterprise—the drawing out of students' ability to think for themselves about the accumulated stock of ideas and evidence concerning any particular area of concern, and doing that through rational and critical debate about the worth of those ideas and that evidence. Under the Prevent regime, both teachers' capacity to educate and students' capacity to be educated is sidelined as the debate over ideas is coerced and chilled.

In other words, in its application to higher education Prevent is blatant subversion of the academic freedom of students and teachers to engage in rational debate; subversion by the executive branch that has been sanctioned by our political representatives. Prevent's surveillance of students' political and religious views, and its recruitment of educational institutions into the state's surveillance efforts looks very like what the executive branch of government does in a state of emergency.  But, as many have commented, the war on terror knows no end and, like so many other aspects of contemporary public policy, in higher education it would seem that 'emergency is the new normal' (Neocleous, 2016: 15).

The campaigns for safe spaces are, on the face of it, a far less powerful and far less institutionalized group of diverse campaigns usually led by students themselves for educational environments to be more respectful of their feelings, particularly their sense of injury. However, in so far as the demand for this respect extends into the classroom and the lecture hall, the safe space concept will, like Prevent, tend to chill the honest expression of ideas and, in the process, its implementation also casts doubt on students' capacity for rational agency and critical debate about the stock of ideas and evidence concerning many aspects of human existence.

Safe spaces, in so far as their concept is applied to education itself, are also a subversion of academic freedom. In safe spaces the fundamental lack of confidence in

students' capacity for rational intellectual judgment and political agency, a lack of confidence that is characteristic of Prevent's emergency regime, is articulated by students themselves, many of whom would not be particularly sympathetic to government efforts like Prevent. With safe spaces, the same distrust found in Prevent's regime of normalized political emergency is much more subtly established. It is institutionalized not by statute and state bureaucracy but by student campaigners relying on a widespread normative commitment among students that all should show 'respect' for others' sensibilities and psychological vulnerabilities.

What this suggests is that Universities UK and the Department of Education are not entirely unjustified in adopting the slogans of safe space to describe the aspiration of the Prevent programme. Prevent aims to convert higher education into a safe space in the general sense of a space that is safe from the independent normative judgments and arguments of students and their teachers. Although there are significant differences between the two strategies in their political content, techniques and institutional origins, the underlying assumptions about students and the educational process, especially in higher education, are the same. This profound similarity between the two strategies has an important further implication.

On the face of it, Prevent, by effectively identifying Muslim students as members of a risky or suspect community, might appear to be the consequence of official hostility to Muslims, of institutional Islamophobia (Bonino, 2013; Qureshi, 2015). Prevent's discriminatory surveillance of the opinions and behaviour of Muslim students cannot be doubted. Nevertheless it would be a mistake to attribute the strategy to nothing more than demonization of Muslims. Its technique of seeking to 'support' the 'vulnerable' in order to pre-empt downstream harms is characteristic of a wide range of contemporary interventions unrelated to either terrorism or Muslims. Moreover, as we have seen, Prevent's commitment to protecting students from the effects of their vulnerability to the expression of dangerous ideas invokes an assumption that is much more widely shared, and held by many people who would not normally be thought of as hostile to Islam or Muslims (for an extreme example, see National Secular Society, 2015).

Even if hostility to Islam plays a part in the implementation of Prevent, the underlying assumptions behind the Prevent duty do not themselves arise from hostility to Muslims or their religion. They arise from the widespread conviction that the subjects of higher education are essentially vulnerable to others' expression of their opinions, vulnerable to being harmed by others' ideas in one way or another. The particular way in which Prevent's emergency political regime is being normalized depends upon this wider skepticism about citizens' exercise of independent political judgment. The proposition that vulnerability to others is the defining characteristic of human individuals upon which state policy should be grounded is an idea whose contemporary influence extends far beyond both the education and counterterrorism contexts (see generally Fineman and Grear, 2013). Indeed in criminal justice policy generally, going beyond counterterrorism, the citizen who is vulnerable to criminal victimization is assumed to be the norm (Simon, 2007: 89-110; Ramsay, 2012).

The form of Prevent and its relatively smooth implementation, despite its obviously repressive intent and function cannot be understood properly without grasping that the contemporary reaction to the threat of terrorism is shaped by this wider skepticism about the independence of individual judgement, the same skepticism that underpins the call for education to be a safe space. This deep connection does not seem to be grasped by those responsible for the Prevent programme. Prime Minister Theresa May, herself a former long-serving Home Secretary with direct responsibility for counter-terrorism strategy, recently criticized student campaigns for safe spaces, declaring that:

> 'We want our universities not just to be places of learning but to be places where there can be open debate which is challenged and people can get involved in that.' (Quoted in Mason, 2016)

Perhaps May genuinely believes that Prevent does not stifle 'open debate', or perhaps she never thought much about the way that Prevent and Channel affect higher education, or perhaps she is simply a hypocrite. Be that as it may, critics of Prevent would be wise to avoid the reverse error. Calls for education to be a safe space are more likely to reinforce the Prevent agenda than they are to undermine it.

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