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'NEET' Believers? An analysis of 'belief' on an urban housing estate

Dr Chris Shannahan (2012)

Introduction

Since the late 1990s anti-social behaviour and social exclusion amongst urban youth have been placed at the centre of British government social policy. The cultural, spatial and political experience of urban youth has been theorised within youth studies, social geography and political sociology and within practical theology a focus has been placed on youth spiritualities. However, with the exception of a current research project in the UK (Olson et al)¹ little attention has been placed on the relationship between social exclusion and the nature of 'belief' amongst young adults who are 'NEET' – 'not in employment, education or training'. Within this article I respond to the disjunction between the prevalence of the 'NEET' acronym in public discourse and the apparent dearth of holistic analyses of the existential significance of such experience. I establish a dialogue between debates about youth social exclusion, the nature of discourses of meaning and analyses of 'belief' in a 'post-religious' urban context. This dialogue will be earthed in a series of short but provocative statements made by young men from the Bromford estate in east Birmingham in their conversations with me since November 2010. In light of their reflections I will ask whether 'belief' continues to provide an appropriate analytical concept within which to frame discourses of meaning expressed by socially excluded young men who have no engagement with any formal religious institutions.

Methodology

Since November 2010 I have spent two evenings every week on the Bromford estate as a participant observer (Dewalt and Dewalt, 2002) alongside detached youth workers and one evening each week simply being around on the estate.² My fieldwork has been shaped by three

methodological approaches: ethnography, participatory action research and grounded theory. Heath, Brooks, Cleaver and Ireland (Heath et al, 2009, 99) describe ethnography as, '...the study of people in naturally occurring settings by methods of data collection that capture their ordinary activities and the social meanings that are attached to these.' All of the phrases that are attributed to young men in this article have arisen during conversations on the street in Bromford, in small focus groups and five-a-side football matches between November 2010 and November 2011. These comments are not drawn from formalised interviews which I have discovered represent a format that many of the young men find alienating. Out of respect for this process of capturing naturally occurring discourses of meaning and for the young men alongside whom I have worked I do not present transcripts of conversations nor the names of the young men, only their ages and something of their 'stories'. At the outset of my research project I was speaking with two youth workers in Birmingham. One said to me, 'Chris, we're tired of being looked at and promised the earth only to find nothing's changed.' It was with this warning in my mind that I began my work, committed to see urban youth as fieldwork partners rather than research subjects. Finley and Gough (2003, 5) suggest that, 'Reflexivity in all its guises is...arguably, a defining feature of qualitative research.' As the Standpoint Theory that arose initially within Feminist sociological analysis (Harding, 2004, 1-11) reminds us we are never neutral for our research is always informed by the values that guide us, even if these are sometimes unacknowledged. In light of my own standpoint I echo West's (1999, 551) suggestion that, 'To be an intellectual means to speak a truth that allows suffering to speak [to]...create a vision of the world that puts into the limelight the social misery that is usually hidden or concealed by the dominant viewpoints of a society.' Consequently I have drawn upon participatory action research which Reason and Bradbury (2006, 1) suggest, '...bring[s] together action and reflection...in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people.' To minimise the danger of subverting the freedom of people to

define themselves I have drawn upon the hermeneutical approach developed by Pinn (1995) whose 'nitty-gritty hermeneutics' attempts to engage with the contradictions of urban life without consciously framing experience within any *a priori* theoretical or theological template. 'Nitty-gritty' hermeneutics seeks to engage with '...raw natural facts...irrespective of their ramifications... (enabling) a clear and unromanticized understanding of a hostile world.' (Pinn, 1991, 116) Such an approach to the discourse of socially excluded urban youth can help to limit the extent to which pre-defined meanings are imposed upon it. When combined with my own standpoint 'nitty-gritty' hermeneutics has the capacity to root my alignment with action research in the narratives articulated by young men in Bromford, rather than in my own unrevised presuppositions.

Bromford – A Picture of 'N.E.E.T' Life in an Excluded Community



The Bromford estate was built in the late 1960s and is four miles from Birmingham city centre. Excluded from waves of economic regeneration and from the mainstream of the city of Birmingham, it typifies the kind of post-industrial 'fourth world' community to which Castells (1996, 164) refers. Access onto the estate for those without a car is limited because the one bus serving the neighbourhood runs until only 6.00pm. One road leads onto the estate ending in a cul-de-sac at the M6 motorway. There are very few shops and community facilities on the estate and just one religious building, an independent evangelical Christian church whose congregation mostly commute to worship. Bromford is ½ mile from 'The Fort' shopping centre but three barriers make

easy access impossible: a railway, a river and the M6. In 2001 Bromford had a 'non-white' population of 10% but a dual-heritage population that is three times the city wide average of 2.9%.⁴ The number of people suffering from long-term illness is higher than the average for the city (Baker et al, 2008, 5 of 8) and more people die young in Bromford than the Birmingham average, mostly from illnesses related to substance abuse and poverty (Baker et al, 2008, 3 of 8).⁵ According to the 'English Indices of Deprivation 2010' the Bromford estate is one of the 5% most multiply deprived neighbourhoods in England.⁶ Young men in Bromford live in a community which exemplifies the characteristics of social exclusion identified by the Social Exclusion Unit which was established by the 'New Labour' government in the UK in 1998 called social exclusion, '...a short-hand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown.'⁷ Figure 1 maps youth social exclusion under four headings to indicate its multifaceted character. All of these markers are present to varying degrees on the Bromford estate.

Economic factors	Cultural/Political factors	Social factors	Moral factors
Unemployment	No political participation	Low skills/education	Family breakdown
Poverty	No civic engagement	Live in high crime area	Teenage pregnancy
Inequality	Racism/Religious prejudice	Isolation	Anti-social behaviour
Not in training	Perception of youth as problem	Poor health	Role models/Parenting
Poor housing	Gendered prejudice	Drugs/Alcohol	Existential alienation

Figure 1

The urban theologian Leech (1997, 90) speaks of the existential implications of deep seated exclusion, which, he suggests, fosters a sense of ‘...emptiness...and loss of meaning.’ During April 2011 the potential effects of such existential exclusion became apparent on the Bromford estate as the newly developed adventure play area in Comet Park was set on fire by a small group of young men one of whom claimed to me in conversation, ‘We had nothing to do when we were kids...’



The young men with whom I have been working are, without exception, ‘N.E.E.T’ (not in employment, education or training) and in February 2011 21.8% of men on the estate were registered unemployed.⁸ The term NEET is the inheritor of previous descriptors such as ‘underclass’ and ‘Status Zero’ which, arguably, became more moral judgement upon unemployed young adults than value neutral description of their employment status.⁹ The 2010 House of Commons Education Committee report notes, ‘...the term “NEET” is imperfect...its use as a noun to refer to a young person can be pejorative and stigmatising...’ (2010, 9). The Audit Commission notes that NEETs are four times more likely to remain unemployed for long periods of time, five times more likely to have a criminal record, three times more likely to have depression and six times less likely to have formal educational qualifications than other young adults (2010, 16).¹⁰ Much of the discourse around the NEET acronym objectifies the young men whom I have got to know in Bromford and, I suggest, robs them of their agency. In pragmatic terms they are NEET. However, like its predecessors, the term has increasingly resembled an ontological judgement rather than a

description of their current experience. In spite of this NEET terminology has become increasingly common within political and public discourse and NEETs have been depicted by sections of the British media as exemplars of what UK Prime Minister David Cameron has called 'broken Britain'.¹¹ Consequently it becomes easy to lose sight of the discourses of meaning articulated by these young, largely ignored, men and the ways in which their discourse of exclusion interacts with wider debates about the nature of 'belief' in. The young men of Bromford were amongst 1.1 million 'N.E.E.Ts' in the UK in late 2011.¹²

NEET discourse engages dialectically with a socially constructed urban space that is designed and governed by distant powerful adults (Lefebvre, 1991, 42ff and Soja, 2000, 11ff). Public space in Bromford has been planned with an exclusively residential purpose in mind but has been subverted. The five-a-side pitch, the space beneath the M6 and the overgrown border between the Bromford and neighbouring Castle Vale (known locally as 'the wasteland') are the crucible within which NEET discourses of meaning critique their objectification and vilification by wider society and de-contextualised or one dimensional analyses of 'belief'. Consequently in spite of its debilitating effect and imposition by adults with power, I have chosen to retain the term 'NEET'. I have made this decision in an attempt to subvert the stigmatising of the unemployed youth upon whom the term has been imposed in much the same way as theologies of liberation have sought to re-frame the objectifying term 'the poor' as a site of hermeneutical privilege. I do not claim any false parallelism between my limited work and the canon of liberation theology. However, in light of their marginalisation within a post-industrial 'fourth world' I do suggest that the 'NEET' discourses of meaning I have begun to discover might open new windows onto the nature of liberative spiritualities forged in the face of social exclusion in the arguably post-religious twenty-first century city. It is important, however, to ask if such a claim might be too bold for young men in Bromford elude romanticised idealising just as easily as they do academic labelling and tabloid stereotyping.

The lives of young men in Bromford are not predetermined. However they are significantly shaped by the isolation of their neighbourhood and by their own exclusion from employment, education and training which, in turn, are indicators of wider and deeper patterns of social exclusion.

Discourses of 'Meaning' and 'Belief'

Discourse plays a central role in identity formation. As Johnstone (2008, 33) notes it, '...both reflects and creates human beings' worldviews.' In my exploration of NEET discourses of meaning I draw in particular on Foucault's (2002, 201) suggestion that, 'Knowledge is...defined by the possibilities...offered by discourse.' For Foucault what we know is not the autonomous articulation of our inner life but an expression of relationships in which we share, the cultural practices in which we participate, the dominant socio-cultural discourse within society and the political and economic forces which shape the communities to which we belong: what he calls *episteme* (1972, 211). Foucault does not specifically interrogate the nature of 'belief' in his analysis of human knowledge. However, I suggest that 'belief' remains a central means by which people, even in post-religious settings, negotiate personal and social meaning. The word 'belief', however is weighed down by the baggage of history, systematic theology, formalised religion, sociological theory and anthropological observation. Given this array of assumptions and theories is the word still useful when considering the discourses of meaning articulated by socially excluded young men on contemporary urban housing estates?

In light of their disengagement from formalised religion do young men in Bromford exemplify the 'disenchantment' narrative that lies at the heart of the secularisation thesis that arose from Weber's (1964, 2002) sociology of religion? Do they reflect what Berger (1967, 107) referred to over forty years ago as the '...secularization of consciousness...'? Alternatively, whilst such discourse cannot reasonably be viewed as the resurgent religion spoken of by Berger (1999, 2-

3) might it be the case that their narratives of meaning reflect the 're-enchantment' referred to by Partridge (2004) and Lynch (2007) or the 'post-secularism' to which Habermas (2008 and 2009) points? On this fluid landscape how might NEET discourses of meaning be best framed and understood? Before focusing on the discourse of young men from Bromford in an attempt to answer these questions it is important to consider briefly four key approaches to the concept of 'believing' in order to ascertain whether the term continues to have traction in the lives of young unemployed men.

First, 'belief' can denote personal assent to formalised propositions about the purpose of life and involvement in religious communities: 'believing and belonging'. Although her analysis could have been broadened to engage with the role of the 'creed' within Roman Catholicism and the *shahadah* in Islam Day (2010, 9) emphasises the centrality of propositional belief within Protestant Christianity.¹³ Arising from a post-Reformation emphasis on the centrality of individual faith propositional 'belief' continues to characterise understandings of what it means to 'believe', as Day notes. Whilst the influence of propositional 'belief' lingers on amongst young men in Bromford theirs is not a discourse of meaning that is shaped (or limited) by creedal statements or doctrinal orthodoxy.

Second, the word 'belief' has been aligned with Davie's (1994) observation that people increasingly 'believe without belonging'. Individuals may assent to Judaeo-Christian theological themes but do not connect this 'private faith' with any need to publicly belong to a faith group. Davie (1994, 79) suggests that, 'Christian nominalism remains a more prevalent phenomenon than secularism...' (1994, 76) She points to the ongoing significance of unsystematised common religion, '...heterodox ideas (*about*)....healing, the paranormal, fortune telling, fate and destiny, life after death, ghosts...prayer and meditation and luck and superstition...' (1994, 83) in spite of an 'antipathy towards organized religion.' (1994, 77) Davie summarises a key shift in the nature of

religious life in the UK. The 'common religion' to which she points is evident in Bromford as conversations relating to the knocking down of two tower blocks on the estate in spring 2011 reveal. As I stood with two young men watching the wrecking ball eat into the blocks we spoke about the significance of what was happening:

- Youth A: 'I'm glad they're gone; can't you see the faces in the windows? There was a presence in the blocks.'
- Youth B: Yeah, there was badness in the blocks. My mum and dad have just moved to another house on the Bromford and want the Vicar to bless our new place.'
- Me: Why's that?
- Youth B: To wash the badness away.'

The blocks have assumed a semiotic significance in the lives of these young men. Life in poor quality housing was woven together with reference to drug dealing and prostitution in the blocks leading to not only physical isolation but a despair that led people to commit suicide by jumping off the blocks. This *episteme* has become the site within which unsystematised existential narratives have been forged. The physical space has become the container of an unspecified but negative 'presence', a sense that lingers even though the blocks have now been demolished.

Voas and Crockett (2005) critique the work of Davie: 'Believing without belonging' was an interesting idea but it is time for the slogan to enter honourable retirement.' (2005, 25) Seemingly echoing the 'disenchantment' narratives central to the secularisation thesis Voas and Crockett suggest that, 'Religious belief has declined at the same rate as religious affiliation...' (2005, 13). They further suggest that '...residual religiosity...often [has]...little personal, let alone, alone, social significance...' (2005, 14), but provide little evidence for such an assertion. Their proposition that formalised 'belief' is in decline resonates with NEET discourses of meaning, as I show below. This however does not mean as Voas and Crockett assert that 'residual religiosity' has little individual or

social significance as I have discovered in Bromford where post-religious but unsecularised discourses of meaning continue to frame NEET life. They have not replaced enchantment with rationalism for their disenchantment is not with the possibility of the spiritual but with disengaged and distant institutional religion.

Third, as Robbins (2007, 14ff) notes, 'belief' can signify relational believing rather than propositional assent: 'believing in' instead of 'believing that'. For Robbins to 'believe in' is to signify a trust that impacts on an individual at a deeper existential level than the more propositional 'believing that'. Although at a minimal level a number of NEETs in Bromford retain vestiges of propositional 'believing that' such as their knowledge of the Lords Prayer and a 'belief that' ghosts exist neither impacts significantly on their everyday lives or on their interpretation of their social exclusion. Robbins (2007, 16) suggests that 'believing in' statements move us beyond impersonal proposition. They are '...essence statements...' which pinpoint the values on which people base their lives. My fieldwork raises questions about Robbins' implication that 'essence statements' necessarily imply a 'believing in' framework which is used as a basis for living. Young men in Bromford articulate discourses of 'essential' meaning which hint at the contours of an unsystematised 'NEET spirituality' but these cannot credibly be viewed as foundational 'believing in' statements. They do however form the essence of a discourse of a material and existential solidarity which provides an anchor in the face of social exclusion.

Fourth, Day (2010, 17ff) suggests that 'belief' is a 'performative' process; a way of framing a social relationships - who 'I' am relative to 'you' here and now.' 'Belief' therefore is inherently contextual. For Day (2010, 14) it is more about one's relationship to a communal identity than individual existential questioning, 'Belief arises not as a ...creed but as a collective pragmatic means for the 'believer' to...achieve a sense of coherence.' If 'belief' is essentially about social belonging can it tell us anything about the moral values that guide individuals or is it effectively amoral? Day

suggests that the implication in the US based work of Smith and Denton (2005) that, ‘...young people’s midi-narratives are insufficient because true happiness requires a meta-narrative...’ (Day, 2009, 276) cannot be sustained in light of her own work with British teenagers; a perspective that resonates with my own work with young men in Bromford. Day (2009, 276) suggests there is, ‘...no reason to de-legitimise young people’s moral beliefs as insignificant simply because they are firmly grounded in the significance of the social and the emotional and not in a grander narrative.’

As I explore the contours of these NEET discourses below I will ask whether such models of believing can help to analyse the narratives hinted in the snatches of conversations I have had with young men from Bromford over the last twelve months. I draw on the voices of five young men whose discourse is representative of wider themes that have arisen during fieldwork to begin to identify the shape of the provisional discourse of meaning which arises from their experience of social exclusion. These ‘sound-bites’ signify a ‘disenchantment’ with formalised religion but does this mean that they are avowed secularists? My fieldwork suggests that this is not the case. Rather theirs is a ‘post-religious’ but unsecularised discourse of meaning. Drawing on my exploration of analyses of ‘belief’ I will consider whether it is credible to speak of these young men as ‘NEET believers’. In my analysis of the words of five young men from Bromford I draw on three approaches to linguistic analysis in an attempt to answer this question. First I draw upon critical discourse analysis. Second I utilise the discipline of semiotics (Holdcroft, 1991, Thwaites et al, 2000) to explore the process of signification at work within the reflective fragments exemplified by the Bromford sound-bites introduced above.¹⁴ Third, a use of ideological criticism makes it possible to interrogate the relationship between NEET discourses of meaning and wider power relations.

'I believe in God but He doesn't live round here.'¹⁵

The 19 year old who suggested this to me was brought up within a Roman Catholic family. One evening just before Easter 2011 he recited the Lord's Prayer and part of the Nicene Creed to me:

- Youth - 'But it's got nothing to with Bromford. It's for other people. Not me.'
- Me – 'Why do you think that?'
- Youth – 'Because religion's for other people not me.'
- Me – 'But you still remember the Creed and the Lords Prayer....'
- Youth – 'Yeah I sometimes say the Lord's Prayer.'
- Me – 'Why's that?'
- Youth – 'Because I believe in God. He just doesn't live round here.'

In the face of long-term unemployment this young man retains an almost unconscious 'Of course there's a God...' echoing strands of propositional 'belief', the 'common religion' to which Davie refers and Robbins' 'believing that'. However there is no sense that this has anything at all to do with the life he leads. In ideological terms his narrative can be seen to represent both a captivity within and a resistance to hegemonic cultural norms. His agency is diminished as a result of his social exclusion and he has become more an object of distant discourses of religion than a subject with the power to assert a contextualised discourse of meaning that has currency beyond his peers. And yet, whilst he remains captive to formalised religious discourse, he asserts a hermeneutic of suspicion towards the veracity of such discourse in his life and the life of the community in which he lives. This young man expresses a narrative within which he makes plain his recognition that the power of the discourse of formalised religion whilst retaining the capacity to mould attitude is absent from his experience. It is for other people and other places and fails to articulate his episteme although it retains the existential and cultural power to limit 'unorthodox' contextualised discourses of meaning.

From a semiotic perspective two phrases are of significance: 'believe in God' and 'doesn't live round here.' This young man uses the formalised religious category of 'belief' to signify the vestiges of a formulaic allegiance to the religion he 'learned' as a child at school and in the Mass. However, he presents Bromford as a 'forgotten place' signifying the role of formalised religious discourse in the lives of socially excluded young men in comparable 'fourth world' communities. In Foucault's terms he articulates a dialectical discourse that arises from the *episteme* of NEET experience. It is a contextually defined discourse of meaning which, from the perspective of ideological criticism, illuminates the hegemonic hold of the propositional belief taught by formal religious institutions whose values are not evidenced on the Bromford and are only of relevance for other (more powerful) people in other places. There is no sense of 'believing without belonging' (Davie, 1994) nor of the individualised 'essence statements' spoken of by Robbins. Equally although the communal life of the Bromford frames his perceptions 'belief' does not provide the framework within which he articulates a sense of social identity and belonging. From a 'nitty-gritty' hermeneutical perspective we can infer that he does not reject the notion of a 'God', but, as a result of his experience of social exclusion he implicitly expresses a hermeneutics of suspicion towards the relevance of the formal faith that he continues to internalise. Is it possible, however, that his graphic critique of the God of formal religion and the praxis of faith communities may pave the way for a clearer articulation of a contextualised counter-hegemonic discourse of meaning that affirms his experience of unemployment and exclusion as the basis for a discourse of empowerment? Just as Foucault (1972) notes the relational nature of human discourse so Fairclough (1992, 73ff) speaks of discourse as a three dimensional construct which is borne of the dialectical interrelation of 'text' (the words used), 'discursive practice' (the nature or context of the discourse) and 'social practice' (relationship with wider socio-cultural processes). When reflecting upon the discourses of meaning of young men in Bromford this approach can help to reflect the

dialectical and multifaceted nature of the narratives of meaning they articulate. Below I draw upon this approach to reflect the discourse of this 19 year old. However I suggest that it is useful to add a fourth layer to his discourse of meaning – the social exclusion of the Bromford estate – for his reflection is informed by the nature of social space and the physical, economic and political marginalisation of the community within which he lives.

This young man articulates a multifaceted dialectical discourse within which social practice, text and discursive practice interact and are influenced by the socio-economic context exemplified by the Bromford estate. The hegemonic but residual hold of the social practice of formalised religious discourse is expressed through his recitation of the Lord's Prayer and part of the Nicene Creed but is framed within a hermeneutic of suspicion which arises from his experience is of an absent God and the irrelevance of religion but also the implication that 'God' may still present within his neighbourhood beyond the boundaries of formal and settled religion.

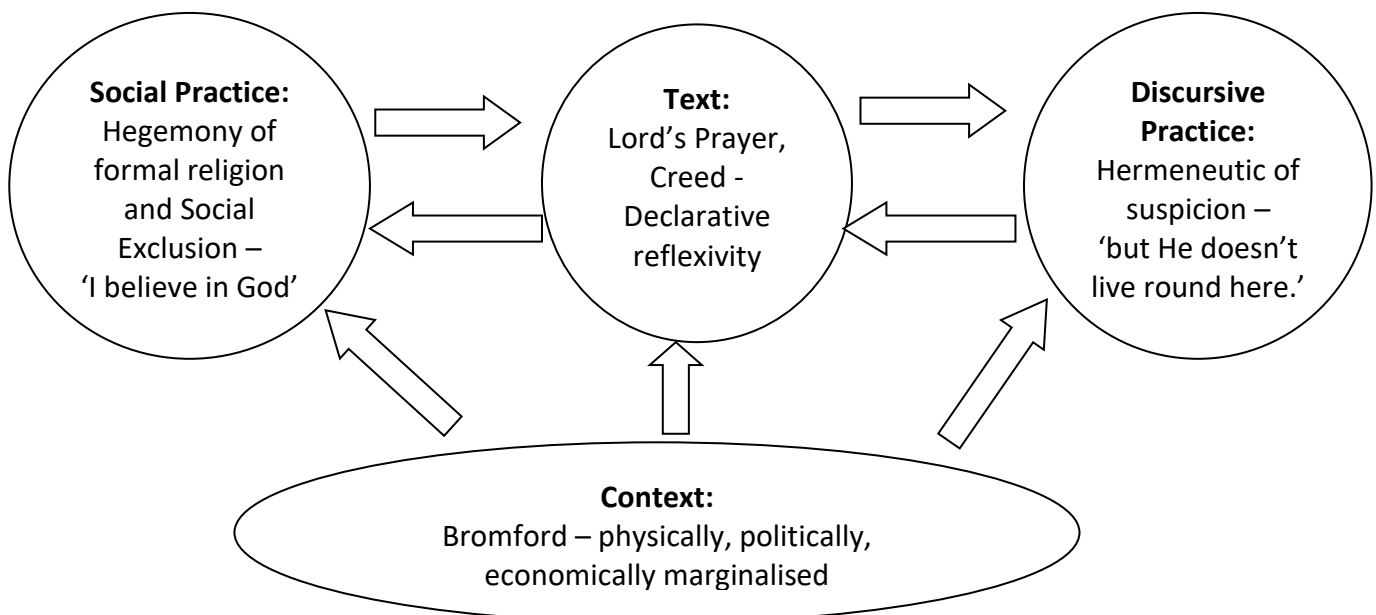


Figure 2

'Bromford's shit and God's a Bastard'

For this 16 year old young man there is no future. He left school with very few qualifications and believes he has no chance of finding a job. He remembers his dad, who recently left the family home, beating his mum up for years. One afternoon, whilst we were playing 5-a-side football, he told me that he had recently scrawled English Defence League graffiti on a boarded up pub on the estate. When I asked him why he had done that he said 'Because Bromford's shit and God's a Bastard.' From a semiotic perspective his reflection exemplifies a double text: spoken word and rudimentary graffiti. His brief reflection, which arises from his personal experience, is a deceptively simple declarative, almost confessional statement which should be understood as a part of a purposive dual discourse of representation and self-assertion. His words interact with his writing of EDL graffiti on a local pub and an *episteme* of educational disaffection, painful family life and ongoing unemployment. As Kress (2001, 74) notes , '...when we represent an object or event we never represent all its features but only ever represent it partially in relation to our interest at the moment of representation.' This young man's words graphically signify his own selectivity and interpretation of the nature and cause of his socio-political and existential alienation: the community he lives in is 'shit' and the God people talk about doesn't care – He's a 'bastard'.

In discursive terms his words reflect an *episteme* moulded by personal suffering and social exclusion. This young man rails against God: he 'believes that' God exists but doesn't care about his pain. In unlikely language he arguably reflects a religious discourse which has been a central part of Judaism and Christianity: How can we make sense of God in the face of human suffering? Within the Judaeo-Christian tradition there have been three broad responses to human suffering. First, suffering is a punishment for sinfulness. Second, unmerited suffering can enable people to develop spiritually or redeem unjust social situations. Third, suffering is the consequence of human free will and the social structures that human beings choose to create to govern society. This young man

does not attempt to answer the problem of the suffering but the uncaring nature of God is clearly juxtaposed with the reality of social exclusion. However from the perspective of ideological criticism this fragmentary discourse when allied with his EDL graffiti can be seen as the attempt of one powerless young man to explain his suffering by scapegoating the Somalian community on the estate. Scapegoating heaps blame upon another in an act of existential atonement. Here it is a purposive act of projection which depicts a whole social group as the primary cause for suffering – the tiny Muslim community in Bromford.

Since its emergence in 2009 the English Defence League has become a powerful street-level social movement which, according to its informal leader Stephen Lennon, seeks to protect England from ‘Islam in its barbaric seventh century form...’ (B.B.C 2, Newsnight, 1 February 2011). Whilst the EDL claims only to oppose ‘radical Islam’ it has increasingly articulated a less nuanced Islamophobic discourse which implicitly blames the Muslim community for apparent social disintegration.¹⁶ In his frustration this socially excluded young man has vented his rage in three letters: EDL. The act might be described as vandalism or Islamophobia but it could also be viewed as a raw post-religious ‘fourth world’ theodicy: ‘You are the cause of my suffering!’ Is this an act of vandalism, raciological scapegoating or a moment of disturbing and divisive fluency in the face of numbing social exclusion?¹⁷

This young man’s ‘text’ draws upon a ‘discursive practice’ characterised by impotence, rage and scapegoating and interweaves with both existential alienation and social exclusion. I suggest it can be viewed as a nascent discourse of meaning. However the nature of ‘belief’ here is not personal or propositional but communal and performative. It is an expression of social identity. Day (2010, 21) notes, ‘Belief in social relationships is performed both through belonging and excluding.’ For this young man the experience of deep-seated social exclusion feeds a rage-soaked existential discourse whereby his own sense of marginalisation becomes the raw material from which he

builds a contextualised discourse of exclusion. His graffiti can conceivably be seen as what Robbins refers to as an 'essence statement' and whilst his discourse may not be either a propositional 'believing that' or a foundational 'believing in' statement his residual religiosity carries both individual and social significance.

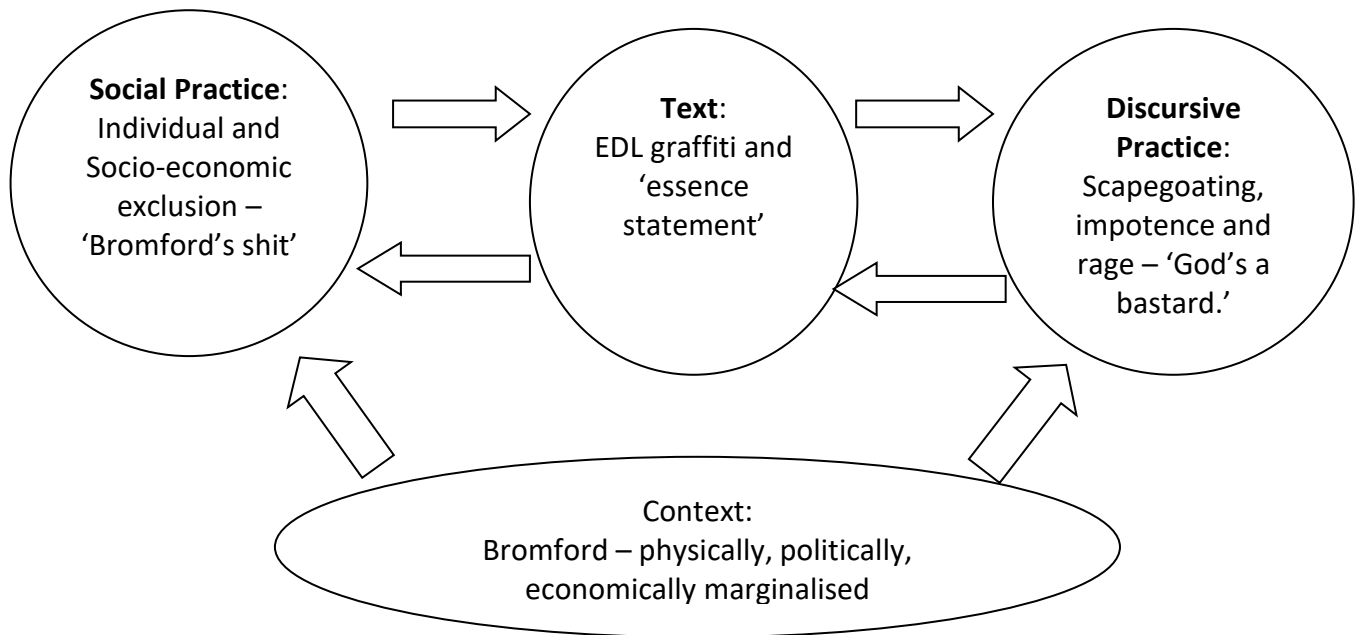


Figure 3

'There were devil faces in the dust.'

They have been empty for a couple of years but it was only in March 2011 that two huge tower blocks on the Bromford estate were pulled down with a wrecking ball. As we were walking on the estate one 17 year old said to me, 'People used to jump off the top of the blocks because they were full of bag-heads. There were always condoms on the stairs.'¹⁸ Another local 16 year old said that when they tower blocks were pulled down, 'There were devil faces in the dust.'

In Foucault's terms this fragmentary discourse arises from an *episteme* shaped by life in poor quality housing initially reserved for so called 'problem families' and an unsystematised fascination with the supernatural and , in particular, what Patridge (2004, 62ff) calls 'occulture'.

Another young man suggested to me that there was ‘a presence’ in the blocks and ‘faces in the windows’. Such discourse should not however be viewed as clear evidence of the forms of ‘belief’ discussed above. It is not reasonable to shoe-horn them into these existing templates, even though they do offer echoes of the heterodox common religion to which Davie (1994) refers. This fascination with the supernatural does not appear to have any significant impact on the choices, ethics or everyday lives of young men on the Bromford. What I do suggest is that such fascination subverts still further suggestions that urban estates like the Bromford are secular spaces.

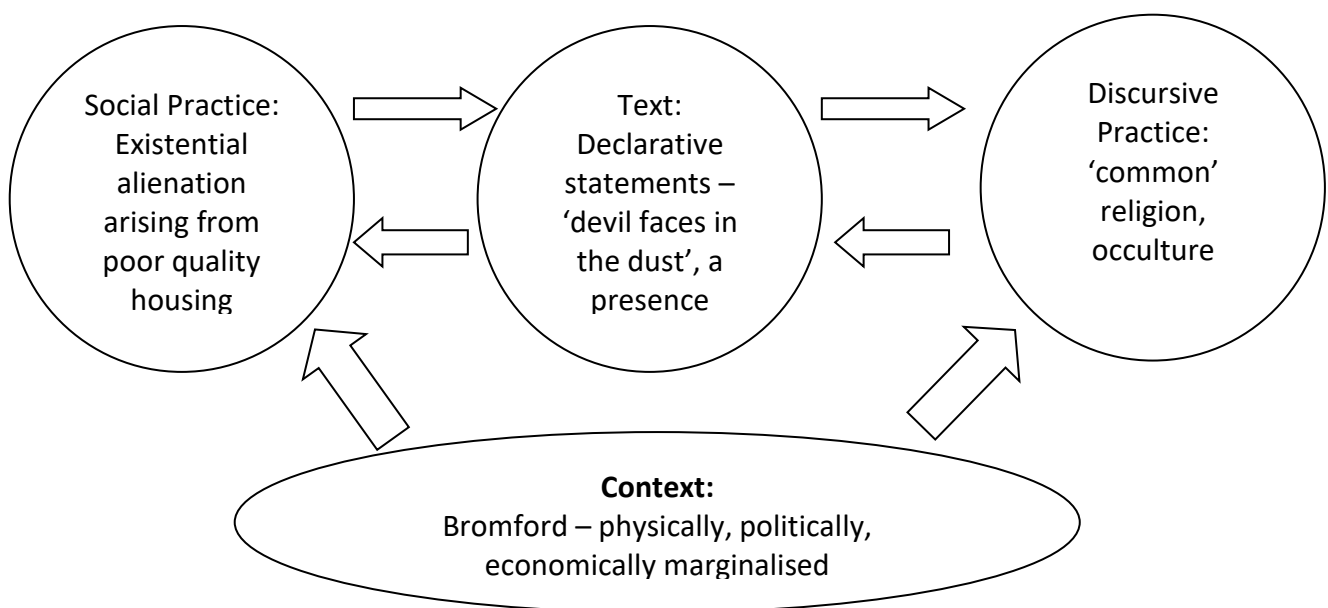


Figure 4

‘I believe in the Bromford. In my music I’m trying to lay down our story’

It was in one of the tower blocks that dominate the Bromford that two young men recently talked to me about life on the estate, the children’s parties they went to when they were little, the friendship and value they find on the street with their mates and their hopes for the future. And then they played music...not someone else’s track but their own. Their sense of place, rootedness and hope is tied to the tower blocks and alleyways of the Bromford and so is their use of ‘grime’ as a means of exploring and expressing their story and a possible future.¹⁹

The discourse of meaning hinted at within these words is multifaceted. It is a purposive discourse. These two young men do more than articulate their own narrative. They offer an interpretation of life for young unemployed men in Bromford and are motivated to share this story through their music. It is important, however, to recognise that the discourse they express is neither avowedly secular nor obviously 'religious'. It can however be seen as an expression of what Sandercock (1998, 212–13) refers to as the 'city of spirit'. Sandercock does not write of 'the Spirit' in any identifiably theological sense but of what she suggests is an important human need for existential nourishment and the development of 'sacred sites' that meet this hunger. The story of solidarity that these two men articulate and its expression through their own rap music on mix tapes that are shared across the estate can, I suggest, be seen as an example not of a 'sacred site' but perhaps of a sacred action. From a semiotic perspective, an ethic of belonging ('I believe in the Bromford') and the capacity of popular culture to articulate individualised and communal discourses of meaning ('in my music I'm trying to lay down our story') are powerfully signified (Beaudoin 1998; Lynch 2005). A double discourse of meaning is alluded to. Through the technology made available in their laptop computer and the glocal capacity of rap music to articulate a shared urban story they are able to move beyond the geographical isolation and social exclusion of their estate to share a Bromford discourse of meaning with others in comparable urban communities. At a core level, there is an organic discourse that emphasises the existential importance of place and rootedness. Here is a purposive narrative that arises from common experience and weaves a non-dogmatic discourse of meaning characterised by an ethic of community building and the individualised 'Generation X' spiritualities of an older generation (Lynch 2002, 54ff.). A second discourse exemplifies aspects of what Day (2010, 13ff.) refers to as performative belief. Arising from their organic engagement with Bromford life, these two young NEETs could possibly be viewed in Gramsci's (1971, 10ff, 418) terms as organic intellectuals, weaving a narrative of

performed communal meaning through their music: sharing and interpreting the NEET experience on this Birmingham estate. In Gramsci's (191, 10) words, they participate in the life of the Bromford as 'organiser[s], permanent persuader[s] and not just as ... simple orator[s]'. In Foucault's terms, they articulate an episteme that they know intimately and, as Gramsci (1971, 418) argues, feel the 'elemental passions of the people'.

We cannot speak of theirs as an implicit religious discourse. However, these two men do not articulate an avowedly secular narrative wherein notions of the spiritual are explicitly bracketed out of the search for meaning. In this Bromford sound-bite, perhaps what is hinted at is not only a post-religious but also a post-secular discourse of meaning.

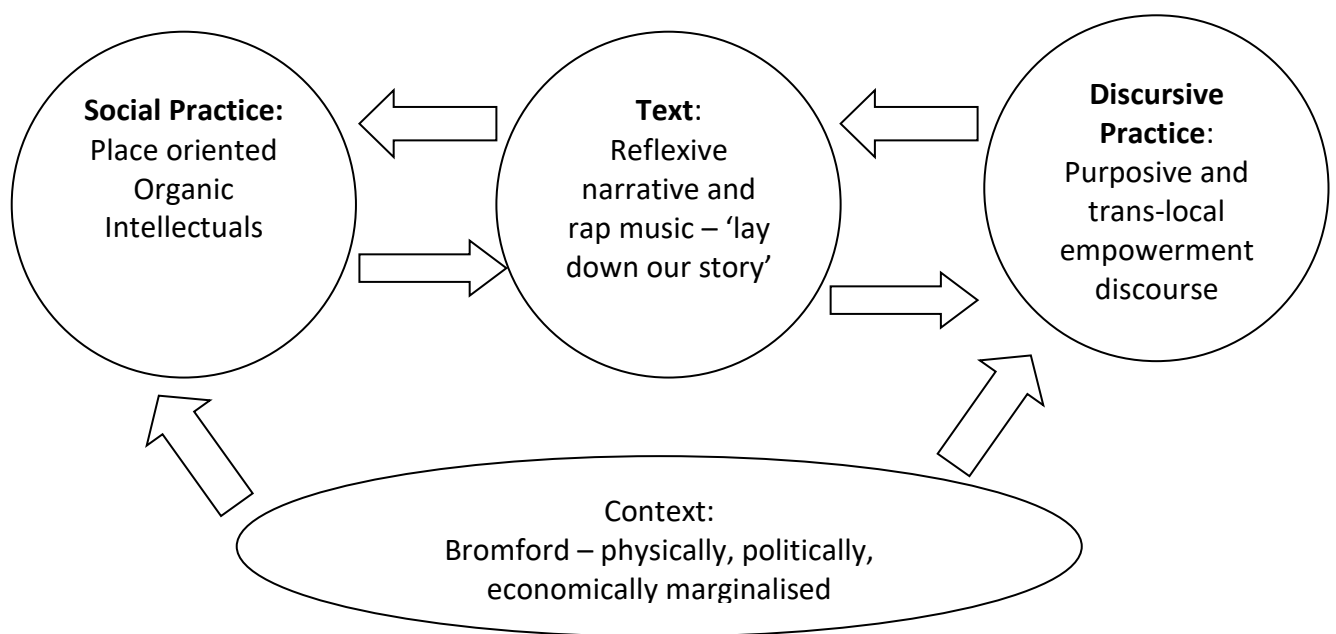


Figure 5

'If you don't get killed you get locked away but there's always a different path to take.'

I first got to know 'Tek9' (the pseudonym this young rap musician chose for himself) in late 2010 when he was 20 years old, 4 years after his brother was sent to prison. 'Tek9' felt lost and angry but his talent for lyrics gave him a way of expressing his feelings and the life of the Bromford. Although

rap music and wider hip-hop culture first emerged within the African–American community in the Bronx during the early 1970s, Rose (1994, 21ff.) suggests that the discourse it enabled was not confined within any single geographic or ethnic location but was, instead, an urban language that transcended fixed boundaries. It is a third space discourse (Baker 2009; Bhabha 1994). Rose (1994, 21) writes, ‘Situating at the crossroads of lack and desire, Hip-Hop emerges from the de-industrialization meltdown where social alienation, prophetic imagination and yearning intersect’. Rap music, I suggest has become a counter-hegemonic and glocal ‘mother tongue’ amongst socially excluded urban youth, even though it has been partially transformed by what Adorno (1991) called the ‘culture industry’ into apolitical pop music’. ‘

Tek9’ draws upon the ‘discursive practice’ of rap music to articulate a multifaceted and self-consciously NEET discourse of meaning. In the track ‘What’s Going On These Days?’ he raps about violence, hopelessness, fear, drugs and gang culture. From a textual perspective, ‘Tek9’ utilises popular culture and the Internet to adopt a multifaceted approach. The ‘text’ upon which his discourse of meaning is based is that of his own narrative-based rap, combined with a video on YouTube shot by himself and his brother on the Bromford estate. The ‘social practice’ that forms the basis of his track is one of social exclusion (both of the Bromford estate and of broader attitudes to young men living on urban housing estates) and of critical awareness of the causes and cost of such marginalisation. In discursive terms, he adopts a hermeneutic of suspicion to the depiction of communities such as Bromford as ‘the slum’, to the stigmatising of unemployed young men, to self-destructive behavioural patterns amongst his peers and to the possibility of cultural and existential emancipation.

An array of signifiers is deployed to signify a four-pronged discourse of contextualised meaning. First, in relation to socio-economic exclusion, he roots himself in his own community whilst recognising the depths of its economic exclusion and the scourge of low pay: ‘I’m from

Bromford. They call it the slum ...' and 'working for minimum wage'. Second, with reference to teenage life on the street and existential youth exclusion, he illustrates an awareness of the pressures of life as a teenage parent, the violent street culture of his community and the disparaging attitude of outsiders to young adults in Bromford: 'Every day is a struggle for a teenager trying to raise a kid when you live in the slum', 'People look at us and treat like slaves ...' and '... age of eleven they call you a thug, age of twelve you walk in the slum, at thirteen you're dead and gone'. Third, in relation to social analysis and resistance to a repeating cycle of alienation, 'Tek9' speaks to his peers of violence and self-destructive behaviour. He further signifies a possible route out of a self-fulfilling pattern of exclusion through the progressive use of talent and creativity: 'You're destroying the city. It's about time you showed some pity ... It's about time you change what you're doing. If you got talent then use it. Don't sell drugs sell music. You only have one life so don't lose it.' Finally, possible existential emancipation is signified: 'So what's going on these days if you don't get killed you get locked away but there's always a different path to take.'

Tek9 articulates youth experience on the raw underside of the city. Like the young men who spoke about telling the Bromford story in their music, 'Tek9' can arguably be viewed as an emergent organic intellectual. However, I would argue it is possible to go a step further and suggest that the discourse of meaning that Tek9 expresses bears some of the characteristics that West (1997, 551) relates to public/political intellectuals. He '... speak[s] a truth that allows suffering to speak [to] ... create a vision of the world that puts into the limelight the social misery that is usually hidden'. Duncombe (2002, 8), like Gilroy (1987, 1993) and Hall (2001), comments on the potential for 'cultural resistance' within popular culture. The act of creation can enable marginalised communities to forge a free existential space from which a new liberative 'nitty-gritty' discourse can emerge. Through his lyrics, his creative foregrounding of the estate in the video he has posted on YouTube, the respect with which other young men in Bromford treat him and his involvement in

'The Hub' youth project on the estate, 'Tek9's musical discourse can be seen as both a response to social exclusion and an act of creative resistance to the marginalisation of his community and his generation. He does not explicitly (or implicitly) speak of 'belief', even though in conversation he speaks of Martin Luther King as one of his heroes. His is not an obviously 'religious' discourse of meaning. However through his use of popular culture, 'Tek9' has begun to fashion a thoughtful hermeneutics of suspicion towards existing patterns of socio-economic and existential NEET social exclusion. This has enabled him to begin to articulate a discourse of existential resistance and 'performative' hope that may bear the seeds of the kind of life-enhancing humanistic urban spirituality to which Sandercock (1998) refers.

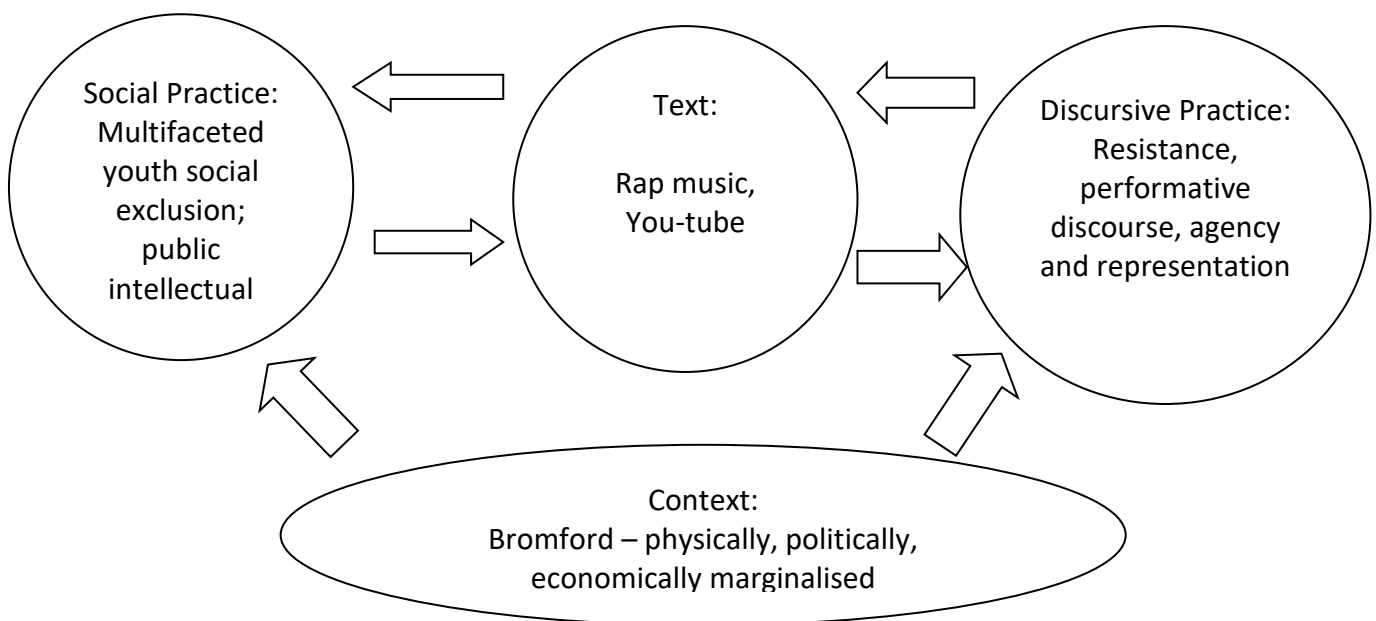


Figure 6

Bromford Believers?

As the analysis above has shown, unemployed young men in Bromford exhibit a hermeneutic of suspicion towards formalised religion, which is viewed as irrelevant and distant – God 'doesn't live round here'. The lives of Bromford's NEETs are not irresistibly determined by unemployment, but they are significantly shaped by the episteme of multifaceted social exclusion, by the stigmatising of

NEET experience and by the marginalisation of the Bromford estate. This experience of apparent powerlessness has engendered an existential alienation amongst some young men, which has fed a discourse of rage, railing against God and scapegoating local Muslims. For others, a fascination with 'occulture' has been used as means of interpreting the multifaceted social exclusion apparent in the blocks and their destruction into dust. However, as the discourse of hope and resistance articulated by 'Tek9' and the use of rap music as a critical narrative form by the two young musicians in the tower block demonstrate, where young men become conscious of the processes that exclude and judge them and refuse to be robbed of their agency, an alternative discourse of meaning becomes possible.

Is it credible therefore to speak of 'NEET believers'? Within my fieldwork, I have not witnessed a new 'religious' form emerging on the streets of the Bromford estate. I suggest that even the term 'believing' is problematic carrying, as it does the unexamined weight of theological assumptions and conflicting sociological analyses. In this sense, my fieldwork leads me to suggest that we cannot reasonably speak of 'NEET believers'. However, neither would it be reasonable to depict young men in Bromford as avowed secularists. It is formalised religion that have rejected, not the possibility of 'God' or spiritual discourses of meaning. For some of the young men whose reflections I have considered, the reality of a spiritual dimension to life is asserted. In conversation, these young men articulate clear 'essence statements' (Robbins 2007), even though they are not aligned with either a 'believing in' framework or an integrated system of 'belief'. 'God' exists but is either uncaring or irrelevant and absent. The blocks that have been demolished housed an unspecified malevolent spiritual presence that arose from social exclusion and was exemplified by 'devil faces in the dust'. However, it is also the case that other young men in Bromford articulate a discourse of meaning within which traditional understandings of 'religion' and 'spirituality' are absent. The young musicians from the tower block and 'Tek9' exemplify a holistic and integrated

understanding of the wider processes of social exclusion, which influence life of young men in Bromford. Through their use of musical narrative, they exemplify the characteristics of organic and public intellectuals (Gramsci 1971; West 1997) and demonstrate a resilient agency that belies their relative powerlessness. As I have spoken with them, they have, through their utilisation of the capacity of popular culture to express existential narratives (Duncombe 2002; Gilroy 1987, 1993), begun to forge a discourse of meaning that resembles the humanistic urban spiritualities advocated by Sandercock (1998). It is an organic spirituality that emphasises solidarity, immanence, agency, resistance to hegemony and what they perceive to be the stigmatising of unemployed urban youth. 'Belief' for these young men is performed, not proclaimed, communal rather than individual (Day 2010). It is in this sense that I suggest that it is possible to speak of a 'post-religious but unsecularised' NEET discourse of meaning that may point beyond Bromford to wider patterns of concurrent 'disenchantment' with formalised religion and a diffuse 're-enchantment' narrative that, for some, resembles the 'heterodox common religion' referred to by Davie (1994), and for others a humanistic turn towards a spiritual discourse of solidarity, immanence and resistance.

Conclusion

In this article, I have drawn upon the NEET discourses of meaning identified during my ethnographic fieldwork on a large urban housing estate to establish a dialogue between analyses of social exclusion amongst unemployed young men, understandings of human discourse as a vehicle for the expression of meaning and recent debates about the nature of 'belief'. Previous analyses of social exclusion and NEET experience have rarely engaged with the discourses of meaning that have arisen from this experience, and contemporary debates about 'belief' in contemporary urban societies have paid insufficient attention to the impact that social exclusion has on the resultant discourse. In this article, I have sought to bridge this gap with reference to an often-overlooked

social group, unemployed young white men.

I have suggested that the discourses of meaning being articulated by these young men cannot credibly be aligned with existing analyses of 'belief'. Equally, the suggestion that these young men inhabit a secular landscape and that their 'residual religiosity' has little personal or social significance does not take account of the post-religious but unsecularised discourses of meaning that these young men have expressed. This is not a new religious discourse and these young men cannot reasonably be described as 'NEET believers'. Theirs is a messy, contradictory and provisional discourse of meaning that nevertheless provides a focus for solidarity in the face of alienating social exclusion. It is a neglected urban discourse that presents a vision of meaning to those with power that is barely recognised beyond the world of the much maligned but rarely understood NEETs of popular political discourse. Unemployed young men in Bromford may be socially excluded but where impotence is displaced by agency and raging despair by resistance, there is more to their story than marginalisation. The discourse of meaning that I have encountered as I have worked alongside NEETs in Bromford may offer an image of the future of 'believing' and 'spirituality' on sprawling urban housing estates across the UK and beyond. It is a discourse that subverts reductionist depictions of NEETs and demands to be heard.

Endnotes

¹ Elizabeth Olson, Giselle Vincett (both Edinburgh University), Peter Hopkins (Newcastle University and Rachel Pain (Durham University), 'Marginalized Spiritualities: faith and religion among young people in socially deprived Britain' 2009-2010 AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society project in Glasgow and Manchester.

² In the second phase of my research participant observation will be supplemented by focus group sessions and semi-structured interviews, leading to a day-long graffiti-art project in summer 2011 when local youth will work alongside a Birmingham based graffiti artist to paint their spirituality onto a large wall at the centre of the estate.

³ All of the images in this article are photographs taken by myself on the Bromford estate between December 2010 and June 2011.

⁴ These 2001 figures are likely to have changed considerably over the last decade. Detailed change will only be seen when the findings of the 2011 National Census are published in 2012.

⁵ The diseases highlighted by the paper include chronic liver disease including cirrhosis, coronary heart disease, breast cancer and lung cancer.

⁶ Web site

<http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/LeadTableView.do?a=7&b=293447&c=B36+8SL&d=141&e=10&g=371324&i=1001x1003x1004&m=0&r=0&s=1302878794984&enc=1&dsFamilyId=2307> accessed 15 April 2011.

⁷ Web site <http://www.archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/seu> accessed 10 April 2011.

⁸ Web site: <http://ebriefing.bgfl.org/content/resources/resource.cfm?id=8153&key=&zz=20110322115248679&zs=n> Birmingham City Council, *Unemployment Briefing*, March 2011, accessed 18 April 2011. The Bromford estate forms part of the Hodge Hill local government ward. The Indices of Deprivation are published by the UK government department of Communities and Local Government.

⁹ The term 'Status Zero' was probably first used in 1993 as part of a study in South Glamorgan, Wales led by the sociologist and specialist in 'youth studies' Howard Williamson.

¹⁰ Web site, <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STR/d000987/osr05-2011.pdf>, Department for Education quarterly labour force survey for the 4th quarter of 2010, (published 24 February 2011), accessed 17 April 2011. In February 2011 15.6% (938,000) of 16-24 year olds in the UK were NEET.

¹¹ The term 'broken Britain' has characterised the social policy of the British Conservative party since its use by David Cameron in the Glasgow East by-election in July 2008 and the publication of Conservative social policy initiatives in June 2008. It has more recently been contrasted by Cameron's idea of an active 'big society'. Web site:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7471370.stm. See too Philip Blond, *Red Tory: How Left and Right have Broken Britain and How we can Fix It*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010. For examples of media representation of NEETs see the following web sites <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-389799/Teen-drifters-cost-taxpayers-20billion.html#ixzz1JngFz67E>, (9 June 2006), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/6439923/Quarter-of-care-children-end-up-as-neets.html>, (26 October 2009),

[http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/news/local/localbrad/8875186.Alarm over Bradford district s 11 000 Neets](http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/news/local/localbrad/8875186.Alarm%20over%20Bradford%20district's%2011%2000%20Neets) (25 February 2011) and <http://www.bedfordshire-news.co.uk/News/Nursery-neets-struggle-at-school-13829.xnf?BodyFormat>, all accessed 17 April 2011.

¹² Web site <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/nov/24/neets-number-climbs-record-high> accessed 4 January 2012.

¹³ The *shahadah* (the declaration of faith) is one of the Five Pillars of Islam and is a key expression of a person's Muslim identity: 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet.'

¹⁴ Semiotics has its roots in the linguistic structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure and revolves around a process of signification which constructs connections between signs or signifiers within a text and the experience or idea which the signifier illuminates, the signified.

¹⁵ These short quotations were all drawn from conversations with young men on the Bromford estate between December 2010 and June 2011, with the exception of the final quotation which is taken from a 'grime' rap track 'So What's Going On These Days?' by Tek9 which he wrote and uploaded himself onto You Tube during 2010. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACN7mlyRlZ0>.

¹⁶ Web site <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/9385015.stm> accessed 3 May 2011.

¹⁷ In Jamaican patois the word 'rahtid' can be used as a swear word or an expression of disgust. However it can also signify a deep-seated and morally justifiable rage.

¹⁸ The word 'bag-head' is a reference to people who are addicted to crack cocaine.

¹⁹ 'Grime' is an indigenous UK form of rap music which emerged out of British housing estates and the UK Garage and dance music scene in the early 21st century.

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