

**EMPIRE'S ENDGAME**

**RACISM AND THE  
BRITISH STATE**

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## CHAPTER TWO

*'Knife Crime':  
Prevention and Order*

[There are] definitely more younger people involved ... more knives involved with the serious violence on the streets ... This, for my officers, in 2016/17/18, felt like the extra use of extraordinary force by groups on other young people to be a new phenomenon.

– Cressida Dick, Met Police Commissioner, 2019<sup>1</sup>

I want criminals to feel terror.

– Conservative Home Secretary Priti Patel, 2019<sup>2</sup>

Debates about crime in the second decade of the twenty-first century have been dominated by moral panic about 'knife crime'. This panic has been based partly on a real problem of violence in lower-income communities. Figures released in 2019 indicated that police-recorded violent crime had risen by almost a fifth in England and Wales. In the same year, crimes involving blades rose by 12 per cent and almost 40,000 such offences were reported to police (although the 2019 figures fell short of the 2006 peak for injuries involving knives).<sup>3</sup>

However, crime statistics are always slippery, reflecting policing practices and the uneven enforcement of the law as much as some discrete and measurable thing called

'crime'. 'Knife crime' is not a criminal offence in itself, but an amalgam of already existing offences (carrying a bladed article, robbery, burglary, grievous bodily harm, murder, etc.). By grouping together a number of existing offences, the police, politicians and the press can convey the idea that 'knife crime' is new, or is at least worse than anything Britain has seen before. This begs the question of why the category of 'knife crime' has risen to such prominence in national politics. Like new categories of crime from earlier periods, such as 'mugging', the problem of 'knife crime' is seen to have been introduced to Britain by racialised outsiders, therefore requiring new forms of policing and penalisation. Such moral panics are effective because they promise that the expansion of violent policing will be reserved for racialised outsiders, from whom the nation needs protecting.

The racism that associates violent crime with black youth in Britain has been well-documented.<sup>4</sup> For example, Tony Blair declared in 2007 that the problem of violent crime would not be solved 'by pretending it isn't young black kids doing it';<sup>5</sup> paving the way for the racialised policing of the 'gang' which we unpack in the next chapter. More recently, the Metropolitan Police's response to the evidence of racial disproportionality in stop and searches has been to suggest that young people of 'African-Caribbean heritage' are more likely than white people to be perpetrators and victims of 'knife crime'.<sup>6</sup> Quite how police officers are able to distinguish people of 'African-Caribbean heritage' from other people racialised as black is unclear, but the police assure us that stop and search offers a crucial way to apprehend criminals and keep young people safe.

Similarly, in March 2019, in a TV debate on 'knife crime' with the rapper and writer Akala, Piers Morgan stated: 'statistically, it looks like in London, right now ... the perpetrators and the victims appear to be almost exclusively young black men.' Morgan went on to ask Akala, 'do you think there is a racial element to that in terms of any cultural issues, racial issues?' The statistic, it turned out, was a fabrication, but Akala's response to Morgan was instructive. He said, 'clearly throughout human history, black people have not remotely had anything resembling a monopoly on violence. Over the last few years [in] some of the most horrendous knife attacks, both the victims and the perpetrators have been white and they've not been from London.'

The local geographies of violence and policing are therefore worth remarking on here. In areas coded as 'black' – like Brixton, Tottenham and Ladbrooke Grove in London, Moss Side in Manchester, Chapeltown in Leeds, and Handsworth in Birmingham – stabbing incidents are less newsworthy, unless the victim is especially young. 'Knife crime' in these areas is considered notable in news and political discourse less because the victims deserve our sympathies but more as a quantitative confirmation of the association between race and criminality ('black on black crime'). Not coincidentally, these are the areas that are most heavily policed and in which there have been historic confrontations between the police and young black people.

On the other hand, when stabbing victims are seen to be innocent – which often means white and from less urban areas – offences tend to be especially newsworthy.

When 17-year-old Jodie Chesney was murdered in a park in Romford, a part of London that is almost in Essex, the story was on the front pages for some time. The suspected attackers were reported to be black males. Two young men, aged 17 and 19, were later convicted after admitting to killing Jodie in a case of mistaken identity. Peter Chesney, Jodie's father, featured regularly in London and national newspapers, in the aftermath of the murder and during the trial, invited to offer his opinion on how the government should better tackle 'knife crime' – the moral authority and demands of the victim have long been at the centre of Britain's carceral culture. Peter Chesney went on to found the Jodie Chesney Foundation, which 'aims to set up a hotline, staffed by youth workers and ex-gang members, that parents, siblings and friends of at-risk children can call with their concerns about knives and county lines drug gangs.'

The inclusion of county lines drug gangs is telling, referring to concerns about urban gangs expanding their supply chains into towns and rural areas. This is about familiar crimes (read: urban, black) occurring in new places (read: non-urban, white). Despite the language of 'protecting young people from grooming' within government talk on county lines, the real fear is that black criminality is migrating out of black urban enclaves and spreading, virus-like, into unsuspecting parts of the country. In short, where crime happens matters, and contested geographies of policing, racism and belonging get mobilised in debates about the 'knife-crime epidemic' and 'county lines drug gangs.' Part of the fear is that the

police will lose the ability to contain if not to control such instances of (black) violence and criminality.

The circulation of a discourse around the so-called 'knife-crime epidemic' is therefore significant not simply for the ideological association of race and crime. Just as with the 'mugging crisis' of the early 1970s, today's moral panic has also led, unsurprisingly, to calls for an increase in police powers, particularly stop and search. The Conservative Party manifesto of November 2019 confirmed their core commitment to tougher policing of 'knife crime':

Police will be empowered by a new court order to target known knife carriers, making it easier for officers to stop and search those convicted of knife crime. Anyone charged with knife possession will appear before magistrates within days not weeks. Those who use a knife as a weapon should go to prison.<sup>7</sup>

The police, politicians and much of the press have repeatedly ignored research indicating the failure of stop and search to yield crime prevention and detection outcomes. Available statistics suggest that disproportionality in the use of stop-and-search powers has increased in the context of the 'knife-crime epidemic', with black people being 4.3 times more likely to be stopped than white people in 2018, compared with 2.6 times in 2014.<sup>8</sup> However, in our view the variable scale factor here only tells us so much. Whether black people are two times, five times, eight times, or 26 times more likely to be stopped by the police, the number is always too high, and the

number itself feels unreal. What actually changes in our understanding when we modify the multiplier?

What is clear is that young black boys and men in particular neighbourhoods are intensely over-policed, repeatedly stopped and searched, often humiliated and treated with disrespect by the police. During most searches, the police do not find anything, and when they do it tends to be small amounts of cannabis.<sup>9</sup> In this context, the discourse surrounding 'knife crime' seems only to fuel the disproportionate and racist policing practices that already deny working-class young black men rights to freedom of association, free movement in public space and the presumption of innocence.

And yet, documenting the racial disproportionality and ineffectiveness of policing practices risks taking the police at their word, assuming that there could be a rational and proportionate way of enforcing racially conceived laws. The racism surrounding 'knife crime' is about more than the *uneven implementation* of the law, it is about the very conception and formulation of 'crime'. If racism forms the definition of criminal problems from the outset, then 'fact-checking' the police only gets us so far. When a particular 'criminal problem' (i.e. knife crime) is fixed onto a particular 'criminal population' (i.e. young black men), policing is racial and racist by definition. In this instance, aggressive stop-and-search policies, apparently targeting 'knife crime', but in practice primarily identifying 'drugs offences', are enforced against young people long familiar with heavy-handed, racist policing. None of this is likely to have any positive impact in reducing youth violence. But if the primary motivation for heavier

policing is not preventing harm, but the symbolic demonstration of authority, order and discipline, then this is hardly surprising.

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The response to 'knife crime' has not only been to conduct more stop and searches, but also to criminalise young people who are suspected of carrying knives. During the time we were writing this book, the government was legislating 'knife-crime prevention orders' (via the Offensive Weapons Act 2019), which like ASBOs before them operate without the due process protections of criminal law. Under these prevention orders, the police need only to convince a magistrate that an individual is 'more likely than not' to have carried a blade on at least two occasions. That is, the individual subject to a knife-crime prevention order does not need to have been convicted of carrying a knife, caught by police while carrying a knife, or even seen by a member of the public carrying a knife. Thus, the offences do not have to have been proven beyond reasonable doubt, only evidenced on a 'balance of probabilities', as more likely than not to have been committed, a much lower standard of proof.

These prevention orders can be used against individuals as young as twelve – enforcing curfews and placing restrictions on where they can go, who they can associate with, and even imposing limitations on social media use, apparently to stop gang rivalries escalating online.<sup>10</sup> Young people merely suspected of knife carrying will thus be subject to limitations on their movements and associ-

ations, and any breach of the order is a criminal offence that can result in up to two years in prison. A twelve year old might be accused of knife carrying based on police intelligence, receive a knife crime prevention order, and then risk incarceration if they travel to a certain area, meet with a particular friend or relative, or access Instagram or Snapchat. A moral panic centred on 'knife crime', a new category of crime, creates a new problem that is then subject to prevention and order.

However, referring to these processes as criminalisation largely misses the point. These forms of control are pre-criminal, post-criminal or extra-criminal. Indeed, knife-crime prevention orders present obvious links with counter-terror policing (which involves intense online surveillance and the criminalisation of associations and sympathies) and immigration policy (which sees people deported because their removal is deemed 'conducive to the public good', or denied citizenship because they are deemed 'more likely than not' to be of 'bad character'). The connection here between knife-crime prevention orders, counter-terror policing and immigration policy is that they all rely on expelling racialised people from the albeit limited protections of criminal law. Processes of racialisation are both cause and effect of this pre-criminalisation.

In relation to 'knife crime', police and politicians have also turned, again, to the problem of 'black culture' – and this time the culprit is drill music (a subgenre of rap). The police have defined drill music as an apparent driver of the purported increase in 'knife crime', and then, borrowing from anti-gang initiatives used by the LAPD, have

convinced judges to pass injunctions that prevent artists from referring to specific names, places or events in their lyrics, arguing that their mere mention would constitute an incitement of violence. Suspended sentences have been handed out to musicians with no criminal record, while the media have stoked moral panic around the genre, reproducing similar panics to those around rock and roll, reggae and grime music.<sup>11</sup>

For example, Valentini, a rapper from Thurrock in Essex, had an injunction imposed that prevented him from wearing hoodies or face coverings and stipulated that he could not produce 'any audio or video online that is threatening, abusive, insulting, incites violence, promotes criminal activity, shows weapons or makes reference to gang affiliations'.<sup>12</sup> In late 2019, using a 'rap translator' (a native informer perhaps?), the police were able to convince a court that Valentini had rapped about weapons in a newly released song. Valentini was then jailed for 19 weeks as a result. What is important here is that the police were not able to present evidence of Valentini committing violent crime or selling drugs, but successfully argued that his music depicting these themes constituted guilt and demonstrated his involvement in 'gang crime'. In another example, two drill rappers from Brixton, Skengdo and AM, were targeted by police and sections of the media. Following violence in south London, the rappers were banned from referring to any specific people, places or events. Detective Inspector Luke Williams of the Lambeth and Southwark Gang's Unit confirmed: 'The court found that violence in drill music can, and did in this case, amount to gang-related violence.'<sup>13</sup> Some months later,

after performing their song, 'Attempted 1.0', at a London concert in December 2018, the Metropolitan Police handed both rappers a two-year suspended sentence (meaning that if they were to offend during those two years, they would be incarcerated for nine months).

In the policing of drill, we see again the evasion of due process protections and the extension of police powers through injunctions and pre-criminal modes of social control. The policing of sympathies and incitements, involving online surveillance and data capture, echoes the policing and (pre-)criminalisation of 'terror suspects'. Indeed, the police reached for new powers precisely by labelling drill artists as terrorists.<sup>14</sup> Like the anti-terror powers used in the UK's anti-radicalisation policy, Prevent, these restrictions did not target violence or unlawful behaviour itself, but the alleged 'promotion' of such behaviour, in this case through artistic expression. Most pressingly for our argument, these authoritarian moves to control and police racialised threats, whether of the 'black gang' or the 'Muslim terrorist', are not distinct phenomena, but implicate and refer to one another. Counter-terror powers can be employed against drill artists, just as ideas about dangerous 'gangs' prove mutable in the context of widespread racial threat. We develop these points in the next chapter.

By constructing 'knife crime' as both new and 'on the rise', the problem becomes something alien, something which descends on the respectable and law-abiding people of Britain from outside. And yet, these offences occur in British cities, committed by young men raised in Britain. In this way, 'knife crime' is both alien – unlike other kinds

of street crime and violence – and yet cultivated in those uncontrolled spaces in the heart of the national territory, in urban centres, housing estates and black families. In this way ‘knife crime’ induces panic because it reminds ‘decent’ and ‘hard-working’ Britons that their country is not their own and is not safe for their children. Criminal youth subcultures offer a dystopian vision of where the nation is headed. These fears invariably play on wider concerns about immigration – past and future – and fuel alarm surrounding demographic shifts and moral decline. These feelings of existential threat explain why ‘knife crime’ becomes the main news story at a particular moment: not because of concern about young black men at risk of violence, but because the spectacle of that uncontrolled violence mobilises widespread anxieties over national identity, cultural difference and insecurity in ways that prove politically useful.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Gang Land*

Commander Jim Stokley, Scotland Yard’s most senior officer responding to gang crime, told *The Times* ‘there isn’t specific legislation’ for gangs, adding: ‘Clearly we can’t use terrorism legislation [but] in consultation with the CPS, we have found some existing legislation which we are going to use.’

– ‘Police to treat gangs like terror suspects with tough new laws’, *Telegraph*, 30 May 2018<sup>1</sup>

As a cop I always used to stop and search, but now police live in fear of being called racist.

– Andrew O’Hagan, *Telegraph*, 13 November 2018<sup>2</sup>

The spectre of the ‘gang’ has a long history in Britain. While it was long used to denote groups of outlaws in various forms, in the twentieth century the term became racialised through a number of interconnected problems, including Irish migration to the British mainland early in the century and later the policing of ‘gangs’ of dissidents in British colonies including Kenya and Malaya.<sup>3</sup> In post-war Britain, the influence of American frames on race and racism bolstered concerns about ‘gangs’ of ‘coloured’ criminals. By the twenty-first century, dispersal orders introduced by New Labour gave the police the power to

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### 3. GANG LAND

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