A firestorm of controversy erupted last year in the run-up to the release of British music group Fun^Da^Mental’s album, *All Is War: The Benefits of G-Had*. Originally scheduled to be released on July 17, 2006 by Nation Records, which is run by Fun^Da^Mental’s unofficial leader, British Asian Muslim Aki Nawaz, the album’s production was held up when two directors of Nation Records threatened to resign if the label put it out. Meanwhile, as the album was sent out for pre-release reviews, Aki Nawaz and the group were subjected to withering media attacks, especially from Britain’s tabloid press. A headline in the *The Sun* declared, “The jihad rap.” The first line of the article read, “Album’s sick suicide bomb and [Bin] Laden rants,” and it went on to state that the album “promotes the ‘benefits’ of jihad, or holy war” (Rollings 2006). A headline in the *Evening Standard* proclaimed, “Muslim rapper defends his suicide bomber lyrics,” but the article in fact contained no defense by Aki and instead simply quoted lines from the song “Cookbook DIY” that clearly refer to the events of 7/7: “I’m strapped up, cross my chest bomb belt attached/Deeply satisfied with the plan I hatched/Electrodes connected to a gas cooker lighter” (Singh 2006). Labour MP Andrew Dismore called for police to investigate Fun^Da^Mental and to consider prosecuting them under Britain’s new anti-terrorism laws (Bhattacharyya 2006). Passed in December 2005, these laws make it an offense to “glorify” an “act of terrorism” that has occurred anywhere in the word, if this encourages others to emulate the act. The commotion forced Fun^Da^Mental to create a new company to put out *All Is War* and to have the CD pressed at a “secret location” outside Europe.

The controversy had subsided by late August--after the appearance of some serious reviews (for instance, Campion 2006) that discussed the actual content of the album, and after the media moved on to other matters. The uproar however is symptomatic of larger fears in Britain surrounding British Muslims. Here I want first to investigate those anxiet-
and then return to Fun^-Da^-Mental’s particular interventions within this fear and terror filled atmosphere.

Britain today is home to about 1.6 million Muslims, one million are of whom are of South Asian origin, mostly from Pakistan and Bangladesh. They are the products of Britain’s post-World War II decision to import immigrants from its colonies to man industrial sectors that were in decline. South Asian Muslims entered, and have mostly remained at, the bottom tier of the British labor market. Living mostly in de-industrializing mill towns in the North, as well as London, British Asian Muslims are the most economically marginal of all ethnic minorities in the country, with unemployment rates for British Asian Muslim males nearly three times that of white men and high rates of residential segregation, in the country’s most dilapidated housing (Kundnani 2001:107).

British Asians and especially Asian Muslim working class communities were for decades a somewhat invisible ethnic minority. Only in the wake of the so-called Rushdie Affair in 1989, when working-class Asian Muslims organized demonstrations and in some cases, book burnings, to protest what they considered the blasphemous character of Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*, did Muslim communities really become visible in England. Prior to this, blacks or Afro-Caribbeans were considered the “problem” minority, bearing the brunt of racist and anti-immigrant antipathy. During the nineties, “Muslims” (always seen as synonymous with South Asians), who were previously regarded as largely passive and law-abiding, if possessing an exotic and alien culture, increasingly came to replace Afro-Caribbeans as the “problem” minority. South Asian Muslim males have become Britain’s new “folk devil,” (Cohen 1972) as the media and police highlight the “dangers” posed by young inner-city Asian Muslim males, who are figured as gang members, and pathologized, stigmatized, racialized, and held responsible for (ostensibly) rising rates of inner-city violence, crime, and illegal drug usage and dealing. Alternatively, they are depicted as dangerous and criminal “fundamentalists” (Alexander 2005: 258, 266).

These trends came into sharper relief in July 2001, when a series of so-called “riots” broke out in several northern mill towns with large concentrations of South Asian Muslims. These mostly involved battles between Muslim youths and police, prompted by provocations of extreme-right hooligans, and the police responses that came too late, and targeted Muslims rather than the white perpetrators. Media and government commentary tended to blame the Muslims for these events and to ignore racist structures and racist violence. In particular, Muslims were held to be at fault for their failure to integrate, for self-segregation, for refusing to adopt basic English values, and for endemic gang violence and drug use (Alexander 2005: 266).

The attacks of September 11, 2001, and more recently, of 7/7/04, intensified public fears that Muslims in Britain not only possessed an alien culture, but also posed a security threat. More than ever, Muslims are subject to racial profiling and community repression, with police employing measures from the newly-passed anti-terror legislation—whose very legitimacy among the general public has been enabled by the “moral panics” surrounding Muslims (of which the furor over Fun^-Da^-Mental is just one example), which have fueled
a general panic about social order (cf. Hall et al 1978: 221-224). Far-right extremist organizations, in particular the British Nation Party (BNP), have made Muslims their special targets, distinguishing them from other ethnic/religious minorities, such as Afro-Caribbeans and Hindus, who they now consider legitimate British citizens and as assimilable. Although about half of British Asian Muslims are by now born in England, such discourses still typically describe them as “immigrants.”

Meanwhile such Islamophobic positions, previously mostly identified with the far right, have come to be considered respectable and mainstream, as Muslims are vilified across the political spectrum. A range of journalists and commentators from left to right asserts with growing fervor that Islam is essentially incompatible with European values, and that Muslims are inherently hostile to those “tolerant” values the English hold so dearly, such as free speech, equal rights for women, and tolerance for gays and lesbians (see Meer 2006). Muslims, it is claimed, self-segregate, refuse to assimilate, insist on arranging marriages for their sons with young brides imported from Pakistan, fail to learn English (Kundnani 2001: 110) and cling tenaciously to “intolerant” and backward values. One of the most fundamental complaints is that because Islam is a politicized religious identity, Muslims are incapable of maintaining the distinctions between politics as a public matter and religion as private affair in the manner expected in a liberal, secular society (Modood 2005a: 141, 167). The veil, a term used rather loosely to refer to any kind of Islamic head-covering worn by women, functions as a symbolic condensation of the “problems” posed by Britain’s Muslims, and commentators interpret it as symptomatic of Muslims’ illiberal values (that is, as an instance of the oppression of women), of Muslims’ refusal to keep religion a “private” matter by insisting on inserting this religious symbol into the public sphere, and of their assertion of separateness. Last October, the Leader of the House of Commons, Jack Straw (Labor) wrote an article announcing that when Muslim women constituents wearing a niqab (a full veil with a slit for the eyes) visit his office for consultations, he asks them to raise the veil so that he can see their eyes. The veil, Straw went on to state, is a “visible statement of separation and difference.” The claim raised protests from many Muslims, but both then-Prime Minister Tony Blair and his successor Gordon Brown chimed in to support their colleague. Much of the British public appears to agree. An opinion poll conducted shortly after Straw made his remarks found that just 22 percent of Britons surveyed thought Muslims had done enough to integrate, and 57 percent thought that Muslims should do more to fit in (Cowell 2006). Many commentators now assert that Britain’s multicultural policies have been a failure, that they have given Muslims too much cultural freedom, and that if Muslims need to integrate with British society and embrace its values rather than insisting on cultural difference if they are to be accepted as legitimate British subjects. However, the policies and attacks have instead exacerbated Muslims’ feelings of being besieged and reinforced trends toward self-segregation (Sivanandan 2006:3).

To some extent, these processes are a product of the ways in which race has been constructed and understood in Britain over the last three decades. Understandings of race in Britain have been informed by hegemonic US analyses, which see race as a matter of skin
color that revolves around differences between black and white. This model does not account for cultural racism and is unable to explain why racial prejudice is higher and sometimes much higher against South Asians than against Afro-Caribbeans—especially of late (Modood 2005b: 67). Due to the hegemony of the color racism model, when anti-racism legislation was passed in Britain, it did not include protections against physical attacks, discrimination or libel against Muslims based on their religion, although it did offer legal protection against racist actions visited upon them as South Asians. (The anti-terrorism act passed after 9/11 now gives Muslims some protection against physical harassment based on religion but not against incitement to religious hatred [Modood 2005a: 130].)

Somewhat paradoxically, increased antipathy toward South Asian Muslims has occurred at the same time that things “Asian”—food, fashion, film—suddenly became cool in Britain in the mid to late nineties. One of the British Asian music groups to gain recognition during the moment of “Asian Cool,” and the only one with a Muslim identity, was Fun^Da^Mental.

Founded in 1991 by Aki Nawaz, son of working class Pakistani immigrants, Fun^Da^Mental released its first album, *Seize the Time*, in 1994. Aki and Fun^Da^Mental, as well as other progressive Asian bands, were heavily involved in the anti-racist campaigns of the early- to mid-nineties, performing and delivering speeches at anti-racist benefits, carnivals, and rallies. Fun^Da^Mental’s *Seize the Time*, mostly a rap album, integrates the musical sounds and beats of the Asian subcontinent with the funk of the Black Atlantic, while its lyrics promote militant anti-racism and community self-defense, pride in (South Asian-based) Islam, anti-imperialist sentiments, connections between black and Asian struggles, and the teachings of the Nation of Islam (including references to the “white devil”), all with a strong dose of punk provocation. Dave Watts, an Afro-Caribbean, joined in 1993 and has served as Fun^Da^Mental’s co-leader ever since, and the band continue to perform and release records with a revolving personnel that includes Sikh, Afro-Caribbean and white Britons as well as British Asian Muslims. The band is not, as is frequently claimed, simply a “Muslim rap band,” but rather a political/cultural coalition, united, according to Aki, by a “hatred of inequality” rather than a common religious faith (Chu 2001).

Recordings subsequent to *Seize the Time* Fun^Da^Mental mostly abandoned rap music, and variously included tracks that set vocals from Pakistani qawwali singers to hip-hop beats (Qawwali is the celebrated Sufi devotional music of the subcontinent), screamingly explosive and abrasive metal/industrial tracks reminiscent of Nine Inch Nails, and collaborations with the South African Zulu choir, Zamo Mbuto and Comrades. All the while Fun^Da^Mental has maintained a focus on anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-Islamophobic politics, while forging new global musical connections and solidarities, producing a genre of music that Aki terms “global chaos,” and Dave Watts, “political folk” (Hyder 2004: 111).

Let me return now to the album that stirred up the outrage, *All Is War* whose title refers to the post 9/11 global environment. Everywhere one looks, it’s war—the war on terror, the invasion of Afghanistan, Israeli offensives against Palestinians, the occupation
of Iraq, Russia’s continuing repression of Chechnya, the heavy policing, surveillance and crackdowns on Muslim minority communities in Europe, and so on. The album’s political sensibility is shared by many Muslims in the West and in the Middle East, as well as residents of the Third World more generally. And it runs directly against widespread feelings in the West, orchestrated by agencies of public meaning, that Europeans and North Americans are the victims, threatened by a global network of Islamic terrorism based abroad as well as inside Western minority communities.

Fun^Da^Mental intervenes in characteristically complicated and multi-dimensional ways. All Is War makes no effort to “reassure” the Western listener. It declines to adopt the posture of “moderate” Islam that mainstream commentators so insistently demand of Britain’s Muslims (Meer 2006: 50-51), and instead responds aggressively, hurling accusations, with punk bravado. I will only survey a few of the most interesting and effective tracks. First, the number that sparked much of the furor last summer: “Cookbook DIY (do it yourself).” Attacks on “Cookbook DIY” only mentioned part one of a three-part song, which presents a suicide bomber who makes his device on the cheap with everyday materials, with the aim of “hitting back at the vice.” Part two concerns a PhD holder who produces a dirty bomb with black market materials. Part three presents a “legitimate” bomb-maker, a US government employee, working on a neutron bomb that will kill people but leave buildings intact. He has all the resources he needs at his disposal, paid for by US citizens. This song is designed to be inflammatory, especially given that it so clearly evokes the 7/7/04 bombings that killed 52 London commuters and four backpack terrorists. Its purpose, to relativize the 7/7 attackers, is arguably more subversive than what the British press charged Fun^Da^Mental with. Should we regard the actions of the 7/7 terrorists as pure evil, the song suggests, while considering innocent the work of state-supported bomb makers--whose handiwork can be seen in the deaths of several thousand civilians in Afghanistan, over a thousand in Lebanon in summer 2006, the manifold casualties in Iraq, Palestine, and so on?

Then there is “Che Bin” Parts one and two. Part one features a speech by Che Guevara (in Guevara 1998), set to the subdued backing of a flute and acoustic guitar. Che discusses the uses of sabotage and terrorism in the revolutionary struggle, and calls sabotage a “revolutionary” and “highly effective method of warfare” while describing terrorism as generally “ineffective and indiscriminate in its results, since it often makes victims of innocent people.” But, Che adds, terrorism may sometimes be useful for the insurgency when it involves killing an oppressive leader. Part two features an oration by Osama Bin Laden over an intense musical track with electric guitar and feedback, set to a sharp, martial beat. Bin Laden asks rhetorically, “Who said that our children and civilians are not innocent and that shedding their blood is justified? That it is lesser in degree? When we kill their innocents, the entire world from east to west screams at us, and America rallies its allies, agents, and the sons of its agents. Who said that our blood is not blood, but theirs is?...More than 1 million children died in Iraq and others are still dying. They react only if we kill American civilians, and every day we are being killed, children are being killed in Palestine.” He
concludes: “We kill the kings of the infidels, kings of the crusaders, and civilian infidels in exchange for those of our children they kill. This is permissible in law and intellectually.”

According to Fun^Da^Mental, the purpose of these two numbers is to provoke discussion. “What,” they ask, “makes one a symbol of resistance and the other a terrorist? What do they have, if anything, in common? ... Did they pervert the message or are they just part and parcel of resistance to the injustice?” (www.fun-da-mental.co.uk/). It’s very, very hip to wear Che t-shirts in the West, Aki Nawaz has suggested, whereas Bin Laden is “vilified as a monster” (Dalton 2006). But doesn’t Che have blood on his hands? And is Bin Laden wrong to say that Americans care very little about the shedding of Iraqi and Palestinian blood and only mourn the American dead?

“786: All Is War” is a rap track over a slamming musical mix. “786” is an important Islamic symbol, the numerical total of the Qur’an’s opening words in the abjad numeral system. The song is a sci-fi revenge fantasy, in which the war on terror ends with Muslims liberating the US, the Statue of Liberty prostrating before Allah, and “the citizens build[ing]...a mosque on Ground Zero.” Futuristic, counter-Hollywood images of Islamic warriors and weapons abound: “Sufi surfing on boards of steel,” “Jihadi jetskis Hudson River,” “Deen machines replicant Sufis,” Sunnah troopers, Ibrahim tanks, cyborg mujahids, and AI imams, all part of the Dream Team Salahuddin (or Saladin, the Muslim hero in the struggle against the Crusaders). These mujahideen liberate the citizens from the oppressors: the “riba” (usury or usurers), the bank elite, the moneylenders, the Pharaoh’s sons, in a futuristic jihadist fantasy that puts an end to a United States held guilty of genocide, theft and mass murder.

“Electro G-Had (Punjabi Style),” a Punjabi folk song put to electronic beats, is part of a British Asian tradition of “‘revolutionary’ poetry recitation[s],” held periodically to commemorate heroes of India’s anti-colonial struggle (Brah 2005: 61). Among the celebrated martyrs heralded by “Electro-G-Had” is Udam Singh, an eyewitness to the notorious 1919 Amritsar massacre when British soldiers killed over 1000 civilians. In London in 1940 Singh tracked down and assassinated Michael O’Dwyer, former Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab and purported architect of the massacre. When arrested by police, Singh reportedly signed his name Ram Mohammed Singh Azad, signifying a Muslim-Sikh-Hindu alliance in the freedom struggle. Singh was subsequently hanged for his crime (Hutnyk 2005: 85; Kalra 2000: 93).

The anti-colonial traditions celebrated by “Electro G-Had” are very far from Gandhianism, instead recalling instances where violence and terror were deployed against British officials and their native collaborators. Such traditions have strong roots in the British Asian community, especially among the organized working class and the left, and also evoke a history of inter-sectarian solidarity in the anti-colonial struggle, the jihad if you will, before partition.

Three other songs (with mostly female voices) also express Fun^Da^Mental’s diverse global concerns. “Bark like a Dog” is recorded with a South African Zulu choir, the Mighty Zulu Nation. It is probably the most joyful dance track on the album, and opens
with a guitar riff from the Sex Pistols’ punk anthem, “Anarchy in the UK,” played over breakbeats. “5 Prayers of Afghani Women,” is a mournful narration in English, over classical Afghani music and the whir of helicopters, that raises the entirely overlooked issue of Afghani civilian casualties at the hands of US and NATO forces (BBC News 2002). “Srebrenica Massacre” is a dirge sung in Serbo-Croatian, lamenting the 1995 massacre of over 8000 Bosnian Muslims by Bosnian Serb forces, the largest mass murder to occur in Europe since World War II, ruled an act of genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

The last two songs, like “Che Bin Part 2” raise the question: Why in the West do we imagine that 9/11 “changed everything”? And 8000 dead Muslims in a massacre on European soil and half million dead Iraqi children as a result of UN sanctions regime (according to UNICEF estimates) changed nothing? Why do we in the West feel under siege, when so many Muslims have been dying?

Finally there is “I Reject,” the album’s opening number. Here are some lines, out of order:

Reject your polluting oil guzzling cars
Reject your morality that’s fallen down
Reject your flag it’s a crusader cross
Reject your army that murders civilians
I reject your pork I reject your beer
Reject your wealth as a sign of status
Reject your mini skirt liberation
Reject your racists and the ones who hate us
Reject your concept of integration
Reject your beauty and Barbie doll figure
Reject your thieving foreign polices
Reject war on terror it’s a war on Islam
Reject your democracy it’s all a big sham
Reject your proof and American pie

“I Reject” refuses things which many left-liberal secularists might also agree are worthy of rejection, such as lack of proof for Iraqi WMDs or pollution caused by gas-guzzling SUV’s. Such sorts of agreement was manifested in late 2002 and early 2003, when the Muslim Association of Britain served as one of three organizers of demonstrations held in London in opposition to the impending invasion of Iraq, including one in February that was the largest ever mounted in the city (Modood 2005a: 205).

But perhaps it’s more important to recognize discomforting potential differences. For “I Reject” also manifests a profound skepticism toward the notion that modernity and the progress it heralds represent a straightforward destiny for everyone. It articulates hostility to the idea that the “freedom” to expose lots of skin represents the liberation of women. It levels a critique of the so-called tolerance that is said to be an inherent value of liberalism,
arguing that British liberalism is very intolerant when it comes to Muslims, and reminding us that Muslimophobia is not the exclusive property of the far right. It levels a criticism against secularism which demands that religious expression be limited to the private sphere, when the Union Jack includes a crusader cross (the St. George’s Cross was worn by English crusaders in the 11th-13th centuries and made the flag of England in 1277). “I Reject” suggests that foreign policy “failings” (murder of civilians, pillaging, and attacks on Islam) are inherent to Western liberalism, which regards its values as universal, not culturally specific, and attempts to impose these so-called universal values on Muslims at home and abroad.

Is there room in Britain, we might ask, for a collective way of life as represented by Muslim communities, or is the liberal vision only about “individual” lifestyles and “tolerance” for difference as long as it’s kept private and only periodically displayed as folkloric exotica? Tariq Modood asks, “Is the Enlightenment big enough to tolerate the existence of pre-Enlightenment religious enthusiasm, or can it only exist by suffocating all who fail to be overawed by its intellectual brilliance and vision of Man?” (2005a: 112).

These and many other questions are raised by the music of Fun\’Da\’Mental. If they have helped us to grapple seriously with such questions, they’ve done their work.

Notes

1. It should be made clear that Aki doesn’t express support for any kind of terrorism, including state terrorism (Damien 2006).
2. From an interview Bin Laden gave to al-Jazeera in October 2001, and broadcast on January 31, 2002. It is available online at archives.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/south/02/05/binladen.transcript/.
4. The others are Bhagat Singh, Tipu Sultan and the Babbar Akali movement.

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From the album “Seize the Time,” the song “Wrath of the Blackman”: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9ItSEF7jzM&feature=related

“Dogtribe”: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vubGW3bzaE&feature=related

An example of Fun’Da’Mental’s “industrial” sound: “God Evil” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olWDXjfd5ak&feature=related

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