

## REFLECTIONS, LESSONS AND DIRECTIONS: RACE RELATIONS, CLASS AND POLITICS IN A NORTHERN ENGLISH TOWN

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*NOTE: The Independent Scholar Fellowship application form has been updated since this proposal was submitted.*

### **Abstract**

This entry is a request for support to carry out a systematic and substantial review and testing of the entrant's personal experience of working in a particular location in local government on conflicted, disputed and controversial issues.

It would thus 'capture' learning from front-line professional practice. The form of research will be a major writing project in which the entrant will collate, synthesise and develop reflections from working on race relations, community issues and local politics in Burnley; illustrate these with a detailed and unique account of social dynamics and issues covering a period of over twenty years in this specific location; use this material as a basis for wider critical considerations on themes relevant to the goals of the ISRF; and produce a publication-ready book as a vehicle for contributing to ongoing discussions and policy debates through inputs to conferences and meetings, writing short articles for publications etc.

The possibility of carrying out this project results from the entrant having been made redundant from local government in summer 2018, in the context of 'austerity' driven national funding cuts.

Financial support from ISRF is needed so as to cover part of the entrant's living costs, so that over the next year he is able to work part-time rather than full-time, and devote the bigger 'half' of his time to this project; and to cover research expenses. The entrant would spend three days each week researching, drafting and finalising a book-length text. This will involve reviewing, editing, collating and developing a mass of unorganised notes accumulated over the years; re-reading and reading a wide range of books, press cuttings and organisational papers; and conversations and interviews with a range of community activists, politicians, academics and members of research institutions, and others, both in Burnley and more widely.

## **The Research Idea** *The innovative thesis of the project*

The research would define and explore issues of national and international significance through detailed consideration of a local case study; Burnley, a town in northern England. There would be substantial consideration of the period 1995 to 2015, with a particular focus on the early 2000s, but in wider historical overview, and leading to consideration of recent, current and foreseeable issues.

One innovative thesis to be tested will develop and make use of the concept of 'political space', detailing specific developments which allowed the emergence of 'political space' for far-right political activists to have some electoral success from 2001, following serious racially motivated urban riots and disorder; the consequences of one-party dominance of local politics; geographical rivalries between different areas; issues to do with local government and democracy; the voluntary sector.

There would be exploration of local responses and understandings: myth busting; a lack of interest in the troubled field of race relations; beginning to engage, understand and respond: the success of the far right as an expression of social demoralisation.

There would be discussion of 'race relations and its discontents': a critical assessment of debates around multiculturalism; of understandings of the far right; of right wing populism.

Positive local initiatives in community relations would be assessed; activities through the arts; dialogue initiatives; interfaith work, and there would be wider consideration of how Burnley connected to national policy developments: the 'community cohesion agenda'; the trajectories of the far right organisation; the 'discovery' and problematisation of 'the white working class'; immigration debates.

## **Background** *Current research reference points and their limitations*

Though these issues have been the subject of a range of articles and some books, there are limitations in the current research which the proposed project would overcome.

Firstly, it would be directly grounded and based in the direct experience of the entrant, who was the local government officer responsible for leading on race relations in this conflicted context during the period. This use of subjective insight is often lacking in the literature.

Secondly, there would be a level of detail which is missing from overviews of the issues: the sustained focus on the particularities of a single place, matched to consideration of wider context, will generate more nuanced and insightful research than is currently available.

Thirdly, there would be a focus on the social realities for local Muslims though the period under consideration; the experience of being Muslim in Burnley; social issues and moral panics; Islamophobia; leadership issues in the Black and Minority Ethnic community. Remarkably, this dimension is missing from accounts of the rise of / social impact of the far right. It is as if narratives about the far right are only linked to discussion the so-called 'white working class'.

**The Focus** *How the research provides a fresh approach to real-life problems*

The proposed book will directly connect a concrete, subjectively grounded and extended account of issues in a particular northern town to the much wider current debates on populism, extremism and challenges facing democratic politics. It will explore issues about strengthening democratic accountability, looking at how problems – and positive steps – in race relations are linked to whether powerful institutions are responsive and accountable to civil society, and whether there are effective mechanisms which enable civil society and the general public, including marginalised groups, to engage appropriately and effectively with government policy making. It will also explore how to effectively promote rights and justice for minorities who face racism, and manage the risk of backlash and identity-based resentment around these issues.

The aim will be to positively inform ongoing thoughtful consideration, policy and practice in the areas of race relations, community development, local government, democratic systems and populism, through a book which will combine broad theoretical considerations with an extremely concrete, specific, practical, well-grounded and reflective narrative which makes full use of the insights gained through the entrant's work.

**Theoretical Novelty** *What conceptual innovation the research is aiming at*

The research will focus on the interaction of democratic life at local level, and its problems and degradation, with issues of race relations. These matters are often talked of separately.

The research project would traverse detailed empirical accounts of events, subjective reflections from the entrant and discussants, with a range of theoretical considerations. These would include linking the issues in the book to points on subalternity; populism; the way that social memory and local history generate spatial fictions; issues of belonging and place-making; the importance of democratic engagement.

A further 'novelty' is that the proposed book will be a distinctive contribution to the literature: very little has been written on the way that troubled race relations and the presence of the far right impacts on culture and management issues in local government and related democratic institutions – or about how problems and challenges in local governance can help create the space for problems in race relations. The entrant feels that they have a certain responsibility to define, record, and explore relevant experiences and the resulting insights: support from the ISRF will enable this to happen.

**Methodology** *How different disciplinary inputs will interact in empirical inquiry – specific methodological examples are often helpful for non-specialist readers*

In terms of methodology, the project will combine a memoirist's approach to reflection and recollection with a deep and extensive literature review covering the fields of political science, sociology, and critical theory; bring in notes which are effectively ethnographic fieldwork; and test emerging ideas and accounts and insights through regular meetings and discussions with participants in the events being considered. This would be a form of embedded, practice based and organic research, which is rarely seen, and which has never been applied to the town of Burnley.

The interactive process of researching and writing the book, including through interviews and meetings with a wide range of people, will itself help raise awareness of important issues and generate useful debate. There could be a couple of visits to other European towns in order to look at and compare the issues of race relations, local government and far right and populist politics there.

This research will connect to a range of ongoing and current issues, including the consequences of the failure on the part of policy makers and government to understand the rise of the right in its 'extreme' and populist forms; the need for skilful handling of racialised issues; the need for critique of the 'extremism' agenda; the way that political developments in Burnley can be seen as a precursor for the developments,

frustrations, and anxieties that led to the Brexit vote; and wider considerations the relationship of 'populism' and 'the mainstream'.

**Work Plan** *How the work will be organised over the award period and what outputs are intended*  
January 2019 to March 2019 – initial literature review and initial meetings.

April to June 2019 – first substantial draft of book.

July to August – ongoing meetings, reading, revisions to draft.

September – a series of focus groups each involving around a dozen participants to consider particular chapters, themes, arguments.

October to December 2019 – redrafts and beginning of preparation of book for publication.

Throughout the year of 2019, the entrant will meet regularly with their key academic contact, and other academics to test work in progress.

**Outcome** *What further steps and what longer-term outcome are envisaged*

From the beginning of 2019, I will seek a commercial publisher for the book, i.e. the costs of producing, marketing and promoting the book will be met separately from research for which the entrant is now seeking support. The intention would be to publish in summer or autumn 2020. The entrant is confident about both the process of writing and completing a book for publication, and about the likelihood of finding an appropriate commercial publisher. Over the years, they have contributed substantial articles and book reviews to a range of publications, including on race relations and community cohesion. Their first sole-authored book, on aspects of the history and theory of socialism and liberalism, came out in December 2017, and was published by Lawrence and Wishart as Mike Makin-Waite, *Communism and Democracy*. The book 'recovers and examines the democratic and liberal strands and counter-currents in twentieth-century Marxist political parties and movements'.

From the date of publication, the entrant would promote the book through proposing inputs to relevant conferences, organising meetings and discussion groups, and writing short articles for a range of publications on issues / themes arising from the book.

The resulting book will be of wide potential interest to all those working on issues to do with the health of democratic culture and practice; local governance; community politics; race relations; 'community cohesion'; 'integration'; and 'extremism', including

local government officers; elected politicians; voluntary sector and charitable organisations; 'think tanks'; and media commentators.