GETTING MORE MINORITY ETHNIC PEOPLE INTO THE ARTS SECTOR

STORYTELLING FROM BEHIND BARS

REFUGEES: HOW CAN WE CHANGE THE PERCEPTION OF THE PRESS?
WELCOME to the delayed Spring 2011 edition of the online Runnymede Bulletin, and thank you for your patience if you’ve been waiting to receive it.

To make up for its overdue arrival, we’ve got a packed 32-page magazine for you, with a particularly sizeable reviews section (from page 21), as is befitting of this season’s theme: arts and culture.

First among the features is Gabriela Quevedo’s analysis of the UK media’s often rancorous and inaccurate representation of refugees and asylum seekers (page 4).

On page 20, our vox poppers - three professionals with vast experience working within the arts - tell us what they think can be done to encourage or enable more black and minority ethnic people to get involved in their sector.

We turn our attention to the holistic capacity of storytelling on page 6 and, in particular, how it can be harnessed to aid the rehabilitation of the tens of thousands locked inside British prisons, including of course a large number of minority ethnic people.

Meanwhile, there is lots to be learned from this issue’s Q&A with Jacques Rangasamy, who, among his many achievements, was this year made an MBE for his contribution to multicultural arts education.

As for Runnymede’s arts projects, our director Rob Berkeley introduces the first Runnymede documentary Number Games, which takes heed of the American experience to explore how racial justice can have a place in that all-important Big Society.

Speaking of the Big Society, the objective of Runnymede’s Fair’s Fair project is to learn what ordinary people of diverse backgrounds about it. Kamaljeet Gill tells us more about Fair’s Fair, and how its findings could influence policy, on page 14.

And it would be highly unusual for us to neglect the ongoing debate on multiculturalism and what it means for modern Britain, so we haven’t.

Professor Ali Rattansi, whose book on the topic is out this year, gives his perspective on page 8.

Before I sign off, another important Runnymede focus to mention is our drive to remain independent and sustainable as the organisation you have, I hope, come to know well and rely on for thoughtful analysis and robust research. Our policy reports and networks keep race equality on the agenda of those with the power to improve things for the disadvantaged in our society. We cannot do this without support, so if you feel that our work matters, please help us to continue it by donating via the webpage below.

Lastly, a huge thank you. To both writers and readers, thank you for engaging with us and contributing to our future.

Nina Kelly, Editor
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Cover image from the EHRC’s Young Brits at Art scheme 2006: http://bit.ly/YBatA
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Negative attitudes towards RASM are a reality. In the European Union, 58 per cent of people think that immigration is a collective threat, according to the European Social Survey. In the UK, a significant proportion of people in this country express intolerant attitudes towards migrants, as shown by the British Social Attitudes Survey’s 27th Report. Common majority sentiments include: that there are too many, that they get too much help and that migration is out of control.

These sentiments can surely be read within the broader context of racism towards ethnic minorities: almost two thirds of people in England (64 per cent) - representing 25 million adults across the country - can name at least one minority group towards whom they feel less positive. The most frequently cited are Travellers and Gypsies (35 per cent), followed by refugees and asylum seekers (34 per cent), according to a study by Stonewall in 2003.

It is clear that all these messages are reflected, delivered and reinforced by the media, but to what extent is the media responsible for reproducing these beliefs? And how do these ‘reproduction’ mechanisms work?

Media representation

A number of (mainly negative) categories of representation prevail in the media, and research has shown that the use of nonsensical terms such as ‘illegal refugee’, ‘refugee’ is a legal status) is widespread. Likewise, media confusion and conflation of definitions is not uncommon. Media discourse has also framed RASM as ‘an economic threat’, ‘a threat to national and local integrity’, ‘a criminal element’, ‘social deviants’ or as ‘illegal aliens’. Needless to say, none of these claims has any basis in fact.

On the other hand, research on the effectiveness of the Press Complaints Commission on the reporting of asylum issues found that while asylum continued to receive a lot of coverage, most of it was not hostile to RASM. This report, conducted by the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR) found that national, regional and minority faith newspapers all portrayed RASM as actually or potentially educated, professional, skilled contributors to society, far more often than they expressed the most commonly hostile views. However, the analysis showed a marked difference in reporting between the different categories of papers. The authors also highlighted and questioned the effectiveness of the current system of self regulation in the media. It was also found that most political reporting of RASM policy was tired, repetitive and unquestioning.

Only one perspective

Many stories reflected the obsession with chaos and failed to offer alternative perspectives. This was reinforced by the choice of sources, which were mostly political with few legal references. Statistics were used in unspecific, including lots of generalised terms such as hundreds or thousands.

Much less frequent is the research on ‘positive’ or counter-representation – one for instance showed the rise of the ‘health’ paradigm for understanding the conditions of refugees. These accounts portray refugees as ‘victims’ and are inspired by compassion. However the trauma framework implies less capacity and ability to take charge of one’s life, which in the case of refugees can, arguably, compromise their rights.

Moreover, discourses depicting refugees as ‘invaders’, or as ‘water’ (as in ‘a flood of refugees’) and lexical choices like ‘failed’ versus ‘rejected’ are not only found in newspapers but also in the UN’s High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR) texts, showing the pervasiveness of dominant discourses.

How the press works

Accounts about the poorly sourced and largely biased (mis)information about asylum and migration is the bread and butter of our work within the race equality sector. But how to move on the debate and offer an assertive response to the challenges posed by this situation?

In my view, the complex discourses and narratives about asylum and migration need to be explored, understood and changed if we are to see real differences in the effects of media coverage about RASM. I would attempt to start doing this by asking different questions: Who benefits when and if RASM are portrayed negatively? Why does it matter?

The media plays a key role in perpetuating the ‘otherness’ of refugees and asylum seekers. RASM often live very separate lives from those of host populations, both spatially and socially. As a result of this distance, a large proportion of people would have predominantly negative media accounts of RASM as their only source of information. Dissenting voices or ‘counter’ discourses do exist, but they are very much a minority, and this is how the media plays a role in reproducing social inequalities.

Much of the negative media coverage focuses on marginal issues, rather than systemic ones. Also, the recurrence of a hegemonic discourse...
that constructs immigration as a threat is not a coincidence. Critical anti-racist discourse analysts have argued that there is a clear connection between ethnically unequal power relations in society and racist ideologies which are reproduced through mainstream media. If we also acknowledge the role of elites (especially news corporations and government officials) in setting and controlling the agenda for public issues, we begin to understand the linkages between current definitions of newsworthiness and the socio-economic interests of specific dominant groups.

Deserving or not?

Demonising certain sections of the poor through media discourse is not a new practice and it has been widely investigated. A classic example relates to media images of the welfare state. It has been argued that welfare issues do not make it into the news unless they are connected with crime, fraud or sex. Indeed, the extent to which the media emphasises welfare fraud is considerable, and this has contributed greatly towards legitimising welfare cutbacks. A key related point is that the poor are constructed in a media context as either deserving or undeserving. ‘Deserving’ refugees are those who are not only ‘genuine’ but likely to be educated and skilled, and therefore valuable contributors to society. Meanwhile ‘undeserving’ refugees are those who are - allegedly - likely to be ‘fake’ or ‘bogus’ and who will be, as the argument goes, a ‘burden’ to the (already overstretched) welfare state. This rhetoric turns supported asylum seekers into likely ‘benefit fraudsters’, blurring the picture.

What can we do?

Given the lack of media content of a more critical nature – owing in no small part to the growing concentration and conglomerisation of media ownership into the hands of a few – our responsibility goes well beyond moaning about this or that appalling piece of misinformed media coverage. Instead, we must clearly send out the message to those in such elitist media circles that some of the views propagated by their news outlets are not merely misinformed, but straightforwardly racist and xenophobic.

To assert this, however, is to attract immediate criticism for ‘political correctness gone mad’. The facts can, however, easily be demonstrated by relatively simple discourse analysis, and a large body of literature has already been built up on the subject. The problem then becomes one of communication and media influencing.

Though there is no easy answer to this challenge, a start would be to focus not only on influencing those who are powerful within the media who control public discourses, but also to spend time reflecting on the ways in which non-dominant forms of anti-racism are disseminated.

Anti-racist discourse should focus not so much on the population at large, but on those who claim to need it less: the elite class of people who have power over the media. If the most influential forms of racism are at the top, it is also there where change has to begin. Such analysis is not only helpful in analysing the racist structure of discourses, but also gives us a deeper insight into the ways that discourses express and manage our minds.
Escaping with words

It is a fact that those serving short prison sentences in the UK are likely to re-offend. Clive Hopwood of the Writers in Prison Network (WIPN) believes arts schemes can help to buck this trend; here, he explains how.

In many prison systems worldwide, ethnic minority people of the relevant country are over-represented. In the UK, 25 per cent of prisoners are from a black and ethnic minority (BME) background. More British black Caribbean people are in prison now than are at UK universities.

The Writers in Prison Network (WIPN) delivers 16 residencies, as well as additional special projects. Our writers in residence (WIR) practise an all-inclusive policy; no matter what the level of educational or cultural background of a prisoner, we engage with them. We offer creative writing, oral storytelling, theatre, video, radio, music, journalism; all creative doors are open and everyone is welcome.

All writers in residence contribute to Black History Month and other ‘diversity days’. But our involvement with the BME community spreads throughout the year; after all, this community is part of the prison population 365 days of the year.

Amanda Wait, currently WIR at HMP Everthorpe, and John Row, WIR at HMP Blundeston, have both done ground-breaking work with the Traveller prisoner community. Travellers have a strong oral tradition, many with interesting stories to tell; a lack of literacy, which is prevalent among this group, is no bar to our publishing their stories.

Lucy Hannah, HMYOI Rochester WIR, came from a BBC script department background, but during the course of her residency produced three rap CDs covering imprisonment, the run-up to release, and then the impact of post-release. Only one of the seven contributors has been returned to prison within two years, compared to the average 70 per cent re-offending rate.

Another project at HMP Canterbury brought together an array of nationalities – including Pakistani, French, Vietnamese, German, English and Russian. Between them they produced a book and an hour-long original drama, performed in front of the entire prison.

Ernest, a prisoner originally from Nigeria said:

“When I came to prison I was distressed. My cellmates said I had to think of my sentence as a voyage. The ship would call into ports. Some people would get off; some new ones would get on. Eventually my port would come and I would leave.” This is exactly the kind of thinking that Writers in Prison support. As we say to prisoners, “the creative arts are the only legal way to escape.”

These are just a couple of examples highlighting how the creative arts can contribute to the rehabilitation of offenders. Yet the Arts Council recently decided to cut all funding to Writers in Prison. This does nothing to reduce our passion for what we do or our determination to continue to deliver what we know is essential to the BME population in prison.

Our experience has shown that minority ethnic people in prison are too often misunderstood, sidelined or ignored. WIPN makes sure that they are included and that their important voices are both heard and published.

If you’d like to support the Writers in Prison Network check out their website: writersinprisonnetwork.org
Can we learn from the US?

Rob Berkeley filmed his trip to Chicago, finding out what social justice activists there can teach the UK race equality sector

We launched Number Games on April 11, the same date on which, 30 years ago, we saw the riots, or uprisings, in Brixton. What the uprisings made clear was that ignoring discrimination and social exclusion is not a recipe for building harmonious communities. We pride ourselves on the progress made since 1981, in terms of legislation and political representation, but is that progress as great as we would like? After all much has changed in the past 30 years, right?

In 1981, black youth unemployment was estimated at 55 per cent; last year we saw unemployment among black 16 to 24-year-olds reach 48 per cent. In 1981, there was an 18 point gap in achievement of 5 or more higher level CSEs or O-levels between white students and black Caribbean students. Last year there was an 18 point gap between the achievement of black Caribbean boys and white boys. In the mid 1980s, black Caribbean men made up 8 per cent of the prison population. Last year that figure had nearly doubled to 15 per cent.

The inequalities persist. To paraphrase Professor Melissa Harris-Perry of Princeton University, who features in Number Games: Anyone who’s been to a rock concert or hip hop concert knows that people will do all they can to get over, under or around the barriers, and many do; it does not mean that the barriers no longer exist.

Inequality has not been solved

Yet the myth that race inequalities have been solved, or are too complex to address, can provide cover for those who do not have the will or inclination to act. At the extreme, they argue that anyone who poses that racism might explain some inequalities is in fact the racist for drawing attention to difference. After all, they argue, we are all individuals and class is a much better indicator of disadvantage. Yet this analysis distracts us from addressing the real problems. Recent analysis of the English Longitudinal Youth Study has highlighted that of the year that African Caribbean boys are behind the average attainment level at age 14, only two months can be explained by controlling for class.

Race still matters, and makes a difference in the life chances of too many people in our society. But it doesn’t have to be this way. Thirty years on from the riots in Brixton, and with progress being at best patchy, we do not have the luxury of waiting for racism to dissipate; we need to know what steps we should be taking towards our goal right now. That is why we made Number Games, a film about race equality in the Big Society.

I was initially confused by what to do with the Big Society concept. I am fighting my healthy scepticism turning into cynicism as the cuts start to kick in with towns and cities like Sheffield, Wycombe, Reading and Hounslow losing their race equality councils. Organisations like Peacemaker who did so much to rebuild communities after the disturbances in Oldham, have disappeared; and colleagues at organisations like Voice for Change England fight for their survival.

The very people who would be well-placed to capitalise on the rhetoric of Big Society, to turn it into meaningful action to promote race equality, have fallen prey to the other part of the government’s plans: smaller government, and smaller government quickly.

Further, the idea of a Big Society seems to lack seriousness. No one appears to have any idea how you measure success, or how to deal with the problem of a growing accountability gap (e.g. arbitrary groups of citizens taking control of public services or local institutions), and there has been little or no discussion of what these reforms mean for equality. Those with the best networks appear to have been given a head start in the brave new world of local decision-making. This perhaps suggests why there has been more success in saving forests than saving Sure Start centres.

Finding opportunities

But I wanted to look for opportunities in the Big Society agenda to find ways to promote race equality and in particular to respond to the challenges of accountability, differential levels of participation, and ensuring that all voices are heard.

I couldn’t think of a better place to look than the United States. As we seem to have inherited much of this policy direction from our American cousins, I thought it would be useful to find out how people from marginalised communities there have sought to ensure that issues of equality and racial justice are taken seriously. While the American context is very different, I felt that there may be some clues there about the steps that we take in the UK.

I look forward to the discussions provoked by the film and hope that it sparks some ideas. It is far from a final word and some of the responses posed in it are in need of further development. If we are to end racism in this generation - so that my successor is not pointing to similar patterns of inequality in another 30 years - then finding the tools to make change in this changed context seems to be a worthwhile exercise.

Watch the 20 minute film at: runnymedetrust.org/number-games

Number Games, presented by Rob Berkeley, is the first Runnymede documentary, produced by Feedback Films: feedbackfilms.com
From multiculturalism to ‘interculturalism’

Ali Rattansi argues that, while attacks against multiculturalism are mostly without foundation, we need to find a new framework for thinking about issues of cultural difference and policies for creating ‘multi-ethnic civility’

Multiculturalism, we have been led to believe, has long been dead and buried, its demise a key achievement of the last Labour government as well as administrations in a variety of other EU countries such as the Netherlands. If so, David Cameron’s attack on it may have been only a diversionary tactic, as the hollowness of his Big Society agenda is exposed time and again.

Criticism of multiculturalism

But why has multiculturalism been so reviled? Among other things, multiculturalism has been blamed for the following: undermining national identity; diluting social cohesion; creating ethnic ghettos and cultural fragmentation; providing fertile ground for Islamic radicalism; encouraging perverse ‘political correctness’ and cultural relativism; restricting liberal freedoms of expression; granting damaging and restrictive group rights; supporting backward cultural traditions that are bad for women; and subverting hard-won secularism and the separation of religion and the state.

How much real evidence exists for these claims? In researching these questions for my recent book, I found that most of these charges are either exaggerated or, in many cases, simply not true. Although the attacks against multiculturalism are mostly without foundation, we nevertheless need to move on to a new framework for thinking about issues of cultural difference and policies for creating what I call ‘multi-ethnic civility’. We now face new social, economic and political conditions both nationally and globally and these require a set of new responses, which I group together under the title of her recent book puts it. But, although her intention is laudable, this is a self-contradictory exercise; that is, to support a framework that insists that the cultures of all ethnic groups are constantly changing, have internal contradictions and disagreements (a view also endorsed by Parekh, Modood and others, of course).

Thus, ‘multicultural’ education, for example, remains an exercise in providing understanding of ‘other’, different cultures, even if commonalities are included. Also, the way in which multicultural education and multicultural and anti-racist social policies were implemented was too undemocratic and top-down, without adequate involvement of local populations affected by immigration. This is something that was highlighted by the 1989 report into the murder of Ahmed Iqbal Ullah, an Asian schoolboy, at Burnage High School in Manchester.

Interculturalism

However, if we shift our focus to interculturalism, the starting point is not merely that different ethnic cultures also have commonalities, but that, in global terms, cultures have always been interrelated and have had inter-connected histories. This is a viewpoint that informs Parekh’s latest contributions; it is a logical development from his previous framework of dialogic multiculturalism, and is taken further in my own interculturalist rethinking.

If history is viewed from this interculturalist standpoint, two themes stand out. First, that a rigid division between ‘the West’ and ‘the Rest’ is misleading. We have been taught to see ‘modernity’ and contemporary industrial and democratic civilization as uniquely Western achievements, but a wide range of non-Eurocentric historians and anthropologists show us that it is much more an interwoven ‘Eurasian’ product, in which Chinese, Indian and Arab Islamic cultures, knowledge and institutions have played crucial roles. And this is because, secondly, it is now indisputable that ideas such as democracy, human rights, tolerance, pluralism, religious freedom and so forth...
have been present in a wide range of non-Western cultures. As Jack Goody, the eminent comparative anthropologist has put it, the ancient Greeks may have invented the term democracy, but they certainly did not uniquely invent the concept and practice of popular representation as a form of government. Together with Amartya Sen and others, Goody has shown this to be the case for a variety of other supposedly unique Western achievements, such as rationality, agnosticism, and the rule of law.

Relationships with the ‘West’
A rethinking of global history of this kind has profound implications for how we should now understand the relationship between Western societies and the non-European immigrants who have settled here since the middle of the last century. They cannot be viewed simply as diluters of uniquely liberal and democratic European civilisations, but as partners in global historical trajectories that have led to contemporary conceptions of liberty and tolerance, as well as achievements in science and technology.

The current wave of democratic movements in the Middle East has emphatically shown up the Euro-American ethnocentrism that created perspectives in which non-Western cultures were forever doomed to prefer to live out their lives under authoritarian institutions. Examples of this include the idea of ‘Arab exceptionalism’ and the Huntingtonian ‘clash of civilizations’.

This revision in our understanding of global history has important implications for developing the core principles and policies of multiculturalism in more interculturalist directions. ‘Other’ cultures are far less other or different; there are many more commonalities of history, custom, principle and aspiration between the ethnic minorities and the majority communities than is usually acknowledged. In any case, majority communities contain serious divisions on matters of faith, personal freedom, sexuality, the status and role of women, and the limits of authority than the bald description of them as homogenously ‘liberal, secular and democratic’ acknowledges.

Policies
An interculturalist perspective demands more than a mere celebration of diversity. It incorporates as a key practice the positive encouragement of encounters between different ethnic and faith groups and the setting up of dialogues and joint, co-operative activities. This is an aspiration that was present in somewhat lukewarm form in New Labour’s community cohesion plans, and implicit in more dialogic forms of multiculturalism. Evidence from ‘post-troubles’ Northern Ireland and ‘post-riots’ Gujarat in India shows that inter-communal mixing in associations and co-operative activities plays an important part in bridging divides between different ethnic and faith groups. And there is a host of other encouraging examples, from the Burnley Youth Theatre and Oldham Unity in the Community projects, to Rotterdam’s Mixenaan de Maas initiative, which provide ideas for what can be achieved.

The goal is not the unrealistic one of the creation of a perfect consensus and ‘harmony’ between groups. This form of inter-ethnic mixing can bring tensions to the surface and create conflict, and the encounters have to be skilfully organised. Differences and disagreements will always remain, but need to be openly acknowledged and subject to further discussion and negotiation.

Interculturalism, like multiculturalism, requires adequate funding and cannot by itself address issues of racism and ethnic minority inequalities. Nor can interculturalism alone tackle the wider issues of class inequality, housing shortages and educational provision, the resolution of which is vital to multi-ethnic civility and the preservation of social bonds in increasingly privatised, consumerist societies. This is particularly true as we face the challenges of retrenchment in public services, de-industrialisation, regional fragmentation and further influxes of new residents and job-seekers.

But this new situation of what has been called cultural and ethnic ‘superdiversity’, coinciding with considerable economic disruption, requires fresh thinking on policies and practical initiatives.


Photo: Vijay Jethwa
Fighting the odds

British Bangladeshis are among the most disadvantaged groups in our society, often living in the poorest areas of the country. Academic excellence can be a way out of poverty for some families, but there are still challenges for high achievers, as Kerrie Proulx discovers.

“Britain’s got talent – lots of it. It is not ability that is unevenly distributed in our society; it’s opportunity,” claimed Alan Milburn in the final report of the government-backed Panel on Fair Access to the Professions in 2009. As a PhD student at the government-funded National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY), based at the University of Warwick, I had a unique opportunity to explore Britain’s young talent; in particular, that of 152 British Bangladeshi secondary school students in the top 5 per cent of national examinations. My doctoral research focused on the factors that contribute to their high attainment in education, aspirations for the future and potential challenges they face in fulfilling their ambitions. Sixty per cent lived in deprived communities; hence their success in education is a remarkable achievement against the odds.

Great expectations

The findings show that the students had lofty academic aspirations to match their high attainment. Nearly all students would like to get a place at leading universities, with Oxford and Cambridge as top choices, followed by top universities in cities with large Bangladeshi populations.

“One in three students agreed that the lack of careers advice was a potential barrier to achieving their goals”

(University of London, London School of Economics, the University of Birmingham and the University of Manchester). There was no indication that students perceived these higher education institutions as ‘not for the likes of them’, as previous studies with ethnic minorities have found. If anything, students viewed entry into elite universities as the ultimate affirmation of their ability and a source of family honour. University course preferences were narrow and directed towards ‘hard’ and ‘respectable’ disciplines, with medicine or life sciences as the top choice (53%), followed by mathematics (11%), law (8%) and engineering (6%). Four in five students aspired to future careers in the professions. Again, medicine was by far the single most popular choice (48%), followed by law (9%), engineering (7%), teaching (7%) and accountancy (7%).

The power of education

Students reported that they wanted to get high grades in school, first and foremost because they hoped that it would lead to a good job in the future. The findings suggest that students firmly believed in the achievement ideology endorsed by society, schools and their own families: that academic achievement and merit would open doors to future rewards and upward social mobility. As study participant 14-year-old Sadia said: “If you get good grades, you have a high chance of being what you want to be. Education is the thing that sets your life. You can’t be what you want to be if you don’t have education”. One in three of the participants’ fathers worked in the restaurant trade and 60 per cent of mothers were full-time housewives. Students aspired to different future pathways - and often an ‘easier’ life - than the present realities of their families.

The findings suggest that although rich in human capital – that is, the knowledge and competency to do a job well - the students were relatively poor in the social capital needed to get ahead. They were lacking, for example, in high-quality careers guidance in schools and access to the social networks of, and work placements in, the professions.

One in three students agreed that the lack of high-quality education and careers advice was a potential barrier to achieving their academic and career goals. Only 25 per cent of parents had been educated in UK secondary schools and far fewer, if any, had attended the leading universities that students aspired to. Students perceived that parents were not in a position to provide practical and strategic post-16 education and careers advice, because they “did not understand how the system works”. Few students used their school’s careers guidance service in schools because it was perceived as unhelpful and for lower attaining students looking for job opportunities or vocational routes. Consequently, students typically relied on a patchwork of siblings, teachers and the internet for information, guidance and advice, which was often just that: patchy.

A lack of guidance

Sixteen-year-old Akmal, for example, had a life-long dream of studying medicine and enrolled at his local sixth form college, but found out on the first day of classes that it did not offer the required A-levels for medicine. Seventeen-year-old Yasmin doubted that she could afford to attend university and found out that she was eligible for bursaries, but only after the application deadline had passed. There are many examples of students like Akmal and Yasmin, which highlight the need...
for targeted, high-quality education and careers advice to help students navigate increasingly complex educational pathways and achieve their goals. The study found that the high attainment and aspirations of students were undermined by inadequate guidance and advice in schools, and consequently students were at risk of making ill-informed choices.

Secondly, the study highlights the need for fairer access to social networks and work placements in the professions. This could be improved through merit-based work placements and internships, especially in the most socially exclusive professions including medicine and law. Forty-eight per cent of students aspired to a career in medicine – but only one per cent of parents were employed in the medical profession. Nine per cent aspired to a career in law – but not a single parent was employed in the legal profession. Social capital is a powerful resource for securing educational and employment opportunities because it connects people with solid and reliable ‘insider’ advice, strategic information and relevant networks. It could be argued that social capital is at least as important as human capital, or even more so, when seeking entry into elite universities and access into socially exclusive professions such as medicine and law. The findings suggest that students’ high attainment and aspirations are undermined by a limited access to the social capital that could connect them to opportunities. That is to say, referring back to Milburn’s comment, they have the talent, but not always the opportunities.

The government’s Gifted and Talented programme was recently disbanded, with efforts to target funding towards socially disadvantaged students instead. Moreover, the careers service is undergoing a period of transition, with plans to set up a new, all-age careers service in September 2011. The findings from this study provide strong evidence that the students have high attainment and aspirations – but need social capital opportunities in education. Firstly, they need to have access to improved education and careers advice – which should be in place from the start of secondary school when students start planning their career trajectories – and, secondly, improved access to work placements in the professions. Although students were in the top 5 per cent of national examinations and had high aspirations, they continued to fight against the odds throughout their educational pathways. Students’ talent and ambition will be wasted if they are not able to realise their aspirations to access the top universities and most prestigious careers.

Social capital

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Refugees hit by tuition fee rise

James Lee of the Refugee Council argues that refugees will have to drop out of university due to a little-known policy

Refugees will be badly hit by the increase in tuition fees, as many of them are excluded from receiving a student loan. Those with refugee status in the UK are entitled to work and study here, enabling them to integrate into our society and make a valuable contribution. Refugee students who are accepted at universities as ‘home students’ (rather than ‘overseas’) must pay tuition fees equivalent to UK nationals, and are usually able to access the finance schemes that allow them to repay a loan, rather than find tens of thousands of pounds upfront.

Policy not meant for them

However, the Equivalent and Lower Qualification (ELQ) policy was brought in at the start of the 2008/2009 academic year, to ensure that students taking a degree for the first time would be top of the priority list for student loans. Applicants applying for a higher education course which is equivalent or lower than a qualification they already hold are not eligible for help with finances. There are a few exceptions, such as teacher training and medicine.

What the policy has meant is that more than 100 refugees per year are expected to pay tuition fees in their entirety with no support or loan, as they already hold degrees from their countries of origin. With the recent increase in fees, many of these students cannot afford to continue with their education. Yet, neither are they necessarily able to enter the profession they are aspiring to, as employers are keen to see UK qualifications, which they are priced out of applying for.

British qualifications needed

Many refugees were often students, academics or skilled individuals in their own countries, before being forced to flee, leaving their studies and jobs behind, due to their political or intellectual views, or involvement with unions. While around 25% of refugees have studied for a higher education qualification, research shows that the majority of overseas degrees and experience are not accepted or recognised by UK employers. So a refugee from Iran with a degree in architecture, for example, will most likely have to obtain the equivalent UK degree before being able to practise in the UK. Refugees are faced with a completely new culture when they arrive in the UK, and their academic merits and career background may not have currency here. As one Refugee Council client put it, “When I speak to some refugees coming from different countries, they all suffer the same problem. They couldn’t find any job with the qualifications they have got from overseas so they have to go back to university and prove their qualification.”

Documents lost in a swift escape

Given the motivation for, and speed at which many refugees are forced to flee their countries, many are unable to bring their educational certificates with them, or to get access to them once in the UK. Similarly, as a result of persecution they may have faced, it is likely that refugees will have had to leave university courses mid-term, and were not able to complete their full degree.

On applying for a place at university in the UK, a refugee with an overseas degree will need to have this assessed by the National Recognition Information Centre for the UK (UKNARIC), to determine the UK equivalent of their degree and what courses they can then apply for. In many cases, refugees will have their overseas degrees assessed at below an Honours level Bachelor’s Degree, often as a Diploma of Higher Education (level 5). It is then up to a university to assess the academic level of an applicant. Where the assessment of a refugee’s previous level of study is below a British Honours level Bachelor’s Degree, the ELQ policy does not affect their status as a home student for fee purposes, which means a university can claim money from the government for them.

Once a refugee has been accepted onto the course, as with other home students, they then apply for loans. However, the ELQ policy works differently from UKNARIC when...
it comes to deciding whether an overseas qualification is equivalent to a UK course, looking instead at the number of years of study. In the case of Belay, for example, his first degree from Ethiopia had taken five years to complete as it was, in part, on-the-job training, and didn’t involve year-round study. In Ethiopia he was a science teacher, but he is unable to take a course that will allow him to get the same job in this country, as the ELQ policy prevents him from getting a student loan for the fees.

Nearly all the refugees we interviewed for this article received a maintenance loan from Student Finance England to cover their living costs. However, many were refused a loan to cover their fees because of the ELQ policy. The impact of this is that many of these students are unable to start their courses, or may have to stop halfway through the first year. For some, it has meant having to borrow money while they wait for Student Finance England to make a decision. As Cheryl, a refugee from Zimbabwe told us, “I had to borrow money to stay on the course. I had to borrow from a certain loan company to survive for my rent, for kids to go to school. They will charge higher interest.”

Many forced to drop out
At the Refugee Council, we have worked with many refugees who have been affected by this policy. Accepted by a university onto a full degree, their applications for loans to pay their study fees have either been refused or restricted to the final year of the course, forcing many to forego their place.

It is clear is that this policy was designed for British and EU students whose qualifications are already accepted in, or easily transferable to, the UK. The assumption seems to have been that the policy would not apply to international students. The regulations are simply not flexible enough to respond to refugees who are UK residents and are accepted as ‘home students’ but have overseas qualifications. As a result opportunities are being handed to refugees, only to be taken away again.

The Council for Assisting refugee Academics (CARA) says: “It is important that higher education funding policy provides some support to students in their studies. If these refugee students who have been accepted on courses have to drop out, this represents a great loss to academia, UK society and economy.”

What is the Refugee Council doing?
The Refugee Council is lobbying the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) to accept that the ELQ policy has a disproportionate impact on refugees, and that the lost potential of refugees to contribute to our society is significant. We are also targeting education and employment professionals to ensure that they acknowledge the exceptional circumstances facing refugees who have often been unexpectedly uprooted from their lives. Policy makers must recognise that many refugees will need to study equivalent or lower degrees to obtain useable qualifications in the UK.

Ideally, we would like refugees to be exempt from the policy for their first Honours level Bachelor’s Degree in the UK. If this isn’t possible, refugees whose UKNARIC assessment is below an Honours level Bachelor’s Degree - including when this is as a result of interrupted study or being unable to access degree certificates - must be made eligible for loans to help cover their fees.
Will fairness mean equality?

We have engaged with the Big Society from an academic, theoretical and policy-based perspective, and will no doubt continue to do so. But what do ordinary people think about it? Kamaljeet Gill distils the outcomes of discussion forums held with UK residents across the country as part of Runnymede’s Fair’s Fair project.

The Big Society has become one of the most discussed topics in contemporary political debate. Yet the terms and limits of this debate remain, even in May 2011, nebulous and ill-defined. It seemed to us that the elements which had been lost in the confusion were fairness and equality. While few would argue against the principle of greater empowerment for communities, there are grave risks that increased localism simply leads to local elites aggregating greater power, leaving vulnerable groups like minorities forgotten.

Fair’s fair
Runnymede’s Fair’s Fair project was in part an opportunity for us to talk to residents of different areas up and down the country about their hopes and concerns for the Big Society. If this new policy agenda is to become successful and, more importantly, fair, it must be accepted by citizens from all walks of life. We found significant challenges to the legitimacy of the Big Society programme on four levels. Each of these must be addressed if we are not to descend into greater inequality.

First challenge - nothing new
The first challenge was residents’ scepticism over the Big Society’s claims to novelty. Sentiments like “we’ve been doing this for 34 years…” were prevalent, as residents felt they were already engaging in the Big Society, often in the teeth of local and national government opposition. This prompted residents to challenge the government’s right to impose reforms essentially from the top down, regardless of the rhetoric of localism and empowerment.

Second challenge - capacity building
The next challenge is the widespread fear that ordinary citizens simply do not have the capacity to engage more in providing essential services. Our participants were concerned that they lacked both the skills and the time, and this would leave those with the greatest need open to neglect. As one participant put it: “The most vulnerable in our society are being hit the hardest, and to me that is the worst discrimination of all”.

Third challenge - greater social divisions
The third challenge is the concern that these reforms could be hugely divisive. People we spoke to expressed grave fears that free schools, for example, will become a barrier to integration. A comment from one of the discussions was: “Personally, I would be worried about segregation because parents would always want to send their children to schools within their religious community.”

Fourth challenge - increased inequality?
The final challenge is a thread that actually runs through much of our study. Participants worried that the Big Society would result in greater inequality; as one put it “…the Big Society is a bigger divide”. Differentials in social and financial capital, lack of spare time and lack of skills will mean that for all the government’s rhetoric about fairness, the Big Society has huge capacity to be unequal. And it is the measurable equality of outcomes, rather than vague fairness that must be the focus, if the Big Society is to succeed.
1. Ethnic minority people make up approximately 7.9 per cent of the population in the UK, yet only 4 per cent of the arts workforce.

Prospect Magazine

2. All 76 core musicians in the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in 2008 were white. In the same year, of the 63 members who made up the Ulster Orchestra, 62 were white and one was Asian.

The Guardian

3. In 2009, the BBC employed 12.1 per cent of its staff from ethnic minority groups, Channel 4 employed 12 per cent and ITV 8 per cent.

The Guardian

4. Less than one per cent of poetry books that are published in the UK are by either a black or Asian poet.

Spread the Word

5. Marianne Jean-Baptiste, who won an Oscar for her role in Mike Leigh’s Secrets and Lies in 1996, was the first black British actress to receive an Academy Award.

The Independent

6. Manchester-born Chris Ofili was the first black artist to win the prestigious Turner Prize, which he received in 1998. He was also the first painter to win the award.

The Telegraph

7. Between 2004 and 2007 more than 150 editions of Radio Times were published. However, just 12 of these issues featured a black or Asian person on the front cover.

The Telegraph

8. The first all-black cast of celebrated Tennessee Williams play Cat on a Hot Tin Roof included British actor Adrian Lester in its West End incarnation.

Reuters

9. Seven per cent of the people working in museums come from a minority ethnic background.

Museums Association, 2008

10. Love Music Hate Racism was set up in 2002 in response to the rise in support for the racist British National Party. It has since drawn a list of headline acts such as Babyshambles and Ms Dynamite.

Love Music Hate Racism

“Chris Ofili was the first black artist to win the Turner Prize, which he was awarded in 1998.”
over the grasp that our decision makers have of the role that the arts and humanities play in the cultural and material economy of our nation. We must not forget how much international prestige and revenue Britain’s cultural industry has brought, and brings still, to our country. The return on the nation’s investment in the formation of artists and cultural workers far outweighs the input; art is good for a country’s emotional health, tourism and culture. The material advantage of having a vibrant cultural industry is a well-established case. To ignore this is short-sighted.

The creative industries, the arts and humanities take the experience of ordinary people into the aesthetic realm. It gives an equal chance for the life experiences of ordinary people to be represented analytically and all inclusively, and to reach a wide audience, which is a profound aspect of our shared humanity. If we lose this, we are close to degrading the quality of our humanity, our culture and our civilisation. [The government’s cut in funding to the arts] is a disservice to something far bigger than party politics: it impoverishes the fabric of the life of the nation.

How will extortionate tuition fees affect students from poorer backgrounds?

For graduate students to borrow between £8,000 and £9,000 is a massive consideration. I think the government should have considered the cultural arguments against the withdrawal of subsidies rather than opt for a purely market solution. I think that there has been insufficient investment of creative thinking in the need to achieve a balance between sustainability and the aspirations and futures of our children.
It is difficult to predict how the educational market will respond and behave, and whether potential students to the arts will be put off. But I do know that if the call to be an artist is powerful and passionate enough, then people will avail themselves of the educational facilities, costs notwithstanding. However, the burden of the lifelong debt ensuing remains a serious consideration.

What does the Black and Minority Ethnic Staff Forum, which you chair, do?

The Black and Minority Ethnic Staff Forum works closely with the university to represent its members’ difficulties, and create the space for personal narratives to be considered. It offers advice and support, and helps in the representation of members in race related issues and in incidences of racial discrimination in the workplace. The network’s success prompted the university to encourage other equalities strands to coalesce into comparable networks, resulting in networks for disabled staff, for women, for employees with diverse sexual orientation, for faith groups, and finally there’s one for carers being formed at the moment.

The BME Staff Forum’s fundamental policy is to appeal to the university’s own principles regarding human rights and dignity at work, to work with the university for the elimination of barriers to participation and advancement of its members and share good practice with other networks. The advent of the Equality Act and its various stages was timely and fortuitous and we took full advantage of this change in the culture of employment. We are grateful for some brilliant changes, but there is still a lot of ground to cover.

What do you think of positive action schemes in the arts sector?

More faces of colour became visible in the arts sectors as a result of the previous government, but the norms of any European Union nation, and particularly Britain, are basically white, male and middle class. So unless we provide routes for others to access opportunities, we can’t change this for the better of all. Positive action schemes help make normative values more inclusive, and that is real culture change.

I’ve been in education for 30 years and for 20 of those years I have joined in the campaigning for greater diversity within the arts. The alternative is marginalised communities, and underachievement in education, under-representation in jobs, over-representation in the criminal justice system and inequality throughout society. So, as the first step, positive action schemes have been very important. Education has a large part to play here.

I think this government needs to review its understanding of positive action programmes and reappraise their sociological import. The government also needs to get to grip with the dynamics underlying issues of identity in all sectors in our society, and make productive use of the lessons of immediate history. Otherwise, it is a pitiful waste of human experience.

You had your first Black History Month (BHM) event series in 2010. Why is BHM important?

Black History Month is important because the academic discipline of history can be described as ‘explanatory and justificatory history’, where certain norms prevail; much of it is not inclusive. Events such as the Black History Month give us an opportunity to lay claim to our own humanity, it is our own review of what we’re about, and it is performed by us.

What worries me is losing this history in the trans-generational gap among minority ethnic people. I was born in Mauritius, and still think of it as home. But for our children born here, home is the UK, so it’s important to make them a gift of our experiences. This will support them in their search to establish their own identity.

What role do we wish the arts to play in promoting racial equality/social justice?

The arts have a primary role because they provide a neutral ground. Our galleries are open to everyone and the display space encourages a contemplative disposition. There are things that are voiced within the arena of the arts that would not be voiced elsewhere; issues articulated in a way that cannot be done otherwise. We live in a world governed by images, and the realm of images can be appropriate for articulating particular issues concerning race and identity, especially because it is as a community that we embrace them.

What is next for you?

I am helping in a festival of sculpture and installations in Finland in August and am looking forward to Shisha’s arts and cultural programmes in the forthcoming Asia Triennial 2011.

Wherever the arts call, I go. I want it to be acknowledged that people of colour have talents for all the branches of the arts, besides musical performance. And this generation emerging now promises even more talent than the previous one. The tragedy is to withhold from those who are talented, irrespective of their cultural complexion, the fertile ground on which to grow their abilities. This is what my little bit of effort in this arena has been all about.●
While visiting Liberia with a large charity, Alison Hunt was told by locals that race and tribal allegiance have long been used by politicians to divide the country’s people. Here she outlines the nation’s interesting history, shedding some light on modern Liberian power struggles.

A short history
Liberia was founded in 1847 by freed slaves from the southern states of the USA, who had been shipped ‘back’ by a private organisation called the American Colonization Society. The new arrivals brought with them the norms, lifestyle, and even the names of North Americans of European descent, and they established a state based on the US model.

The return of the ex-slaves to Africa was sold as a liberation - hence the name Liberia - and a homecoming. Yet most of those sent to settle in the newly formed country had been born in the US. Some were of mixed-race parentage, and their African ancestors were unlikely to have originated from the land that was now called Liberia; Africa, of course, was later carved up to suit the political whims of European colonisers, separating ‘tribes’ and even families with new national borders.

Racial mix and tribal allegiance were present, then, at the formation of Liberia. The new settlers’ lives had been formed and dominated by racism and the indigenous peoples (called ‘natives’ in Liberia until very recently) were separated by tribe and had been manipulated and divided by colonisers.

Present day Liberia
To this day, race and tribe are across every aspect of Liberian society, but above all they affect economics, power and politics. Complex aspects of identity and allegiance come to the fore and then recede depending on the situation and can be ripe for manipulation in a vulnerable community or a time of stress or change.

Power divide
The settler America-Liberians have lighter skin, English-sounding names and tend to hold the more prestigious positions. The English they speak is closer to that spoken in England, as compared to their darker-skinned neighbours. Though the America-Liberians represent less than 10 per cent of the country’s population, they remain the wealthiest, best-educated and most powerful group, and are widely considered to be ‘superior’. However Liberia is one of the world’s poorest countries, and those in extreme poverty in the villages tend to be ‘indigenous’. In some cases families are living on one meal of rice a day, with no clean water and no sanitary facilities. Children can be seen everywhere selling water, fruit and vegetables.

The first ‘native’ president
Until 1980, all Liberian presidents were from the settler class. Attempts were made at unification, notably by President Tubman, who ruled from 1943 until his death in 1971. He said “we are all Liberians” and sought to heal divisions between the settler and the indigenous groups. He increased suffrage and brought indigenous men into government. The results, however, did not match the rhetoric and the change was mostly superficial. Meanwhile, inequalities in wealth increased and political opposition was crushed. The issue of the hierarchy of race and the power and access that went with it had been raised but not dealt with adequately. It was on the agenda but ignored, and this was used to the advantage of Samuel Doe, the first ‘native’ president, who led a coup in 1980.

Hopes dashed
Hopes were high in 1980 that the majority indigenous peoples would be able to redress the balance of the power in Liberia and cut through the racial discrimination woven into the structure of their society and economy. These hopes were dashed as Doe reinforced another division – that of tribe – by favouring and appointing only members of his own small tribe, the Krahn, and using troops to attack rivals. The story of the next 20 years is one of civil war, atrocities and more division.

Since the end of the last civil war in 2003 the picture has improved. The new democratic government has worked with the UN on peace building, and a presidential election is set for later this year. Hopes are high once again.

The view, albeit an outsider’s one, from Liberia then, shows a society still divided by race and tribe. Assumptions of superiority and allegiances to sub-national groups pervade and work to undercut attempts at nation-building, and these frictions can be ignited in times of crisis and radicalisation. Yet many are optimistic, recognising the ingrained divisions, but nonetheless looking to overcome them, for a better future.

“To this day, race and ‘tribe’ cut across every aspect of Liberian society, but above all they affect economics, power and politics”
For decades Denmark has been one of the frontrunners of the protection and promotion of human rights. But within the last ten years the right-wing political movement has changed the country’s reputation. Critics are now accusing the Danish government of breaching human rights and discriminating against ethnic minorities and refugees. What has changed?

From tolerance to intolerance

Denmark is among the happiest countries in the world according to a 2010 study by global research agency Gallup. The results of the survey on general wellbeing revealed that 72 per cent of Danes would describe themselves as ‘thriving’. But while it is true that Denmark is known for its tax-based welfare system – providing free healthcare and education to all – the relative ‘happiness’ of its citizens has more recently been exposed as something that may be exclusive to the ‘true’ Danes.

Like other European countries, Denmark has been deeply affected by a fast-growing far right movement within the last decade. This is evident from the distribution of seats in parliament. Currently, the far right Danish People’s Party (DF) takes up 24 seats in parliament. This represents an increase of ten seats since the party’s electoral debut in the 1998 Danish parliamentary election, in which they won 7.4 per cent of the vote. This makes the DF now the third largest party in Denmark; the governing party, Venstre, has 47 seats in parliament.

As DF has gained power in parliament, Denmark has witnessed a continuous tightening of immigration policies. Only six months ago the Danish government passed a new law, which requires any persons applying for permanent residency to obtain a total of 100 points in order to be accepted. Points are collected by meeting a set of strict standards: for instance, education and employment records, proficiency in Danish and English and passing a test in Danish society, history and culture. Applicants can furthermore obtain points if they settle in areas that are not marked as ‘ghettos’ by the council.

According to the Danish Government, the points system is a necessary tool to respond to the new situation that Denmark is facing in a time of globalisation and increased immigration levels. Those in power maintain that the new immigration regulations will help to improve the integration of immigrants and, incredibly, prevent arranged marriages, though explanations as to how this will work are thin on the ground.

Organisations, such as the Danish Institute for Human Rights (DIHR), have claimed that the system is breaching human rights conventions. As applicants will need to have English language skills, DIHR argues that people from non-English speaking countries are less likely to be accepted. Moreover, the UN’s Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) argues that the system excludes some vulnerable groups such as refugees due to the high requirements for employment and level of education. In their critique of the points system, the DIHR states that the continuous negative view of immigrants from ‘non-Western’ countries damages equality levels in Denmark.

Farewell to cultural diversity

Commenting on the passing of the new points system, Danish immigration minister Søren Pind declared that all immigrants should assimilate to Danish values, norms and traditions or be deported. Such a statement is in alignment with far-right DF’s campaign: ‘Denmark for Danes’. Such arguments appear to be derived from a fear of losing cultural identity, but this concern is not supported by the facts. The immigrant population in Denmark is only around 120,000 or approximately two per cent of the total population. Yet the worry that immigrants’ cultures are taking over seems to have consumed political focus and is one of the most fiercely contested election issues. It could be argued that Danish culture and identity is not disappearing because of foreigners coming to the country. Rather, it is exactly this fear of non-Danes that is corroding Danish cultural values.

Denmark’s place as one of the happiest countries in the world may now be at stake. Poul Madsen, the editor of the Danish newspaper Ekstra Bladet, recently questioned whether it is ‘reasonable to want to force people to give up everything to become 100 per cent Danish?’ If Denmark wants to maintain the collective wellbeing and ‘happiness’ of its inhabitants, it will need to protect and promote equality and personal freedom - principles that were once integral to Danish culture.
We recently held a conference to discuss this topic. Recommendations included a call for more focus on strategic arts development with community organisations, rather than one-off event-based activities (for Eid al-Adha, as an example) run by mainstream organisations on behalf of minority communities.

The need to develop an artist-based and led policy forum was also highlighted. As was the importance of providing networking opportunities across the UK, and across the public, private, voluntary and community sectors.

In this way we could promote and share good practice in community development and improve support, training and professional development opportunities, paid and unpaid.

Finally, it may encourage more people from minority ethnic groups to enter the arts if we could raise the profile of community development practice among mainstream agencies.

What can be done to increase the representation of black and ethnic minority people in the arts?

Aziz Zeria
Managing Director
Culturelinks Alliance Ltd

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Asma Shah
Founder Director
You Make It

When my CV was at its strongest, and there were jobs to apply for, I found I couldn’t get a look in. A well-respected theatre director apparently likened the arts sector at the moment to other professions decades ago, when my parents’ generation first came to this country as teachers and pilots. They had so much to offer but ended up working as cab drivers.

Instead of becoming a cab driver, I was driven to set up a not-for-profit company called You Make It, which develops the learning and earning potential of young people from disadvantaged communities. Its pilot project, Ladies who L-EARN, is almost funding-free and, I hope, will spark engagement in arts and culture among young women in particular.

One way to get more ethnic minority people engaging in the arts is to employ more of us to develop and deliver programmes. Otherwise it is tough. I work part time for a commercial theatre company, which just about enables me to live and to work on Ladies who L-EARN.

Anthony Ebanks
Transformation Architect
D&AD

If you take the arts to mean, as I do, anything that has a form of creative expression, then I don’t think lack of engagement is the issue; but rather recognition of the engagement. When I attend events judging arts creativity, a pattern occurs: work that is not understood does not do well.

Community groups need to show the value of their work and highlight links to classic art forms, such as the jazz cadence in great speeches, the roots of graffiti in social commentary and the visualisation of narrative in poetry.

Secondly, pedagogy needs to embrace the arts from every source. This includes reviewing what texts and artefacts are used, updating outdated resources, and never assuming that not understanding is grounds for exclusion.

Finally, industry has to welcome attention from the non-traditional sectors, openly communicate with community groups and have a willingness to see the arts differently.
Many voices on multiculturalism

The Ashgate Research Companion to Multiculturalism

Edited by Duncan Iveson, Ashgate, 2010
Book review by Eleri Seddon

DUNCAN IVESON NOTES IN HIS introduction the awkwardness of the term ‘multiculturalism’, variously used to describe a theory about how society should be organised, or simply a description of lived reality. The lack of clarity over the meaning of the word, together with the increasing criticisms to which the idea has been subjected, make clear the importance of the thoughtful discussion that this collection of essays provides.

The book starts from an understanding of multiculturalism as a ‘distinctively public ideal’, and seeks to find new ways of articulating and defending this ideal. Contributors approach the topic from backgrounds in philosophy, political science, sociology and anthropology, under the headings of ‘Foundations’, ‘Challenges’ and ‘Alternative Perspectives.’ They consider key criticisms of multiculturalism, including charges of moral relativism, and the claim that it can encourage separatism and conservatism in a way that threatens the rights of those within minority groups, particularly women.

In ‘Multiculturalism and the Social Sphere’, Barbara Arneil and Fiona MacDonald tackle an accusation levelled at multiculturalism from critics on the progressive left: that it undermines social cohesion and ‘social capital’. Citing Canadian multiculturalism as an example, they argue that there need not be a trade-off between redistributive policies and recognition of cultural difference. They point out that much depends on the approach of the state, and the extent to which immigrants are made to feel they belong in the new country, such that they will trust their fellow citizens and engage in society. Divisions within multicultural societies in the short term, moreover, can be seen as part of the process leading to a more fully developed conception of justice. The greater challenge for multiculturalism, Arneil and MacDonald argue, is not the question of redistribution and solidarity, so much as whether the framework is able to encompass other forms of social difference besides ethno-cultural diversity.

Through this and other essays, the book provides thought-provoking debate on the theoretical basis for multiculturalism. It seeks, as Ivison puts it, to provide an alternative perspective to discussions driven by fear or short-term political agendas.

Class affects multiracial identity

Multiracial Americans and Social Class

Edited by Kathleen Odell Korgan, Routledge 2010
Book review by Jessica Mai Sims

THIS BOOK SEEKS TO ANSWER THE question ‘How does social class influence identity?’, focusing on the intersections of culture, class, demographics, racial identities, hierarchy and inequalities. The research features some of the perennial themes of mixed race studies in the American context, with the addition of the contemporary preoccupation of interracial dating and pop culture.

British audiences will be particularly interested in the chapters that feature statistical analyses of data not available for the UK population; namely, how racial and ethnic identity choices can be compared to social and economic characteristics (such as parental education and income) and generational change in terms of migration and ethnic background. For example, Burke and Kao find that adolescent responses change depending on whether in the home or at school and these responses do not necessarily correlate with their parents. While 4.8 per cent of students report having parents of two different races, 8.6 per cent report being multiracial. Bratter’s analysis of the enduring salience of hypodescent (the ‘one drop’ rule: that if you have non-white ancestry, then you’re black) in contemporary identity formation finds that highly educated inter racial parents tend to favour labelling their children either ‘multiracial’ or as a non-black single race (the ‘All Other’ category).

In their study on Hispanic youth, Herman and Castilla suggest that characteristics such as phenotype, name, and neighbourhood will contribute to adopting Hispanic ethnic and racial identities, but that higher socio-economic status is associated with maintaining a non-Hispanic identity. This is similar to the findings of Khanna; through interviewing mixed black and white young adults she found that class and racial backgrounds of parents determined how the interviewees blur racial culture and social class. The use of non-standard English was identified as ‘low-class’ and typical of ‘black culture’, while eating organic food and attending museums were not. The chapter on models of racial hierarchy by Dineen-Wimberly and Spickard provides an appropriate conclusion, suggesting using models to discover insights into the complex relationships between multiracial ancestry, racial identity choices and social class.
Clybourne Park
Written by Bruce Norris

Theatre review by Jessica Mai Sims

The praise Clybourne Park has received from critics relates to a convincing cast and more importantly, ‘its humorous take on political correctness.’ A notable facet of the play’s success is the widespread belief that it furthers discussions on racism and race relations. It ‘nails the thorny subject of race relations’, according to Michael Billington in the Guardian, and ‘tramples politically correct pieties’ says the Telegraph’s Charles Spencer. Playwright Bruce Norris is commended for his ‘refusal to see racism as blandly monolithic. He depicts it as complex and layered, manifesting itself in strikingly different ways’, according to Henry Hitchings in the Evening Standard.

Clybourne Park does not shy away from exposing the hypocrisy in both post-war and contemporary middle-class America; that is, that the discussion of social disadvantage was plagued with euphemism, and tragedy was masked with a gleaming white smile. However what the play has failed to achieve - despite other reviews purporting the opposite - is to provide a meaningful discussion on race and class.

In first act we are taken back to the cosy and desirable area of 1959 in Clybourne Park, a well-to-do white middle class area of Chicago. Through interchanges between the characters, we are pulled into the lives of one shattered family, who are moving from their home to escape their past. The death of their son following post-traumatic stress has opposing effects on the couple. Saccharine mother Bev pauses with hands clasped and eyes held tight to enjoy each moment of her mundane experience as a housewife, as if it were a gift. Husband Russ is stoical, spending most of the act in pyjamas, firmly planted on the sofa. However the couple are determined to leave behind the social pressure of saving face in their small community, so much so that in their rush to leave they sell the house to a black family. This action does not sit well with the residents’ association, who declare the new family will threaten the social cohesion of the community and plead with the couple to reconsider the sale.

In the second act we return to the same house fifty years later. The tables have turned and a white family has just bought the same house in the now predominately black area of Clybourne Park. In this situation, the residents’ association protest against the new residents’ plans to demolish and replace the existing house. Lindsey, pregnant mum and the archetype of progressive liberalism, finds the slightly run-down urban neighbourhood ‘charming’ and does not understand the residents’ association’s reservations. Her husband, Steve, is portrayed as a plain-talking all-American man. He is the one that seeks to root out the reason for the association’s resistance – not believing that it is simply that the properties in the area are of historical significance for the black community, a symbol of class mobility for black people.

Clybourne Park is Bruce Norris’ response to A Raisin in the Sun, the groundbreaking play by Lorraine Hansberry. A Raisin in the Sun told the story of black people struggling against racism and aspiring to a better life. Clybourne Park is about white people exerting economic power, whether to protect their community or by buying into ‘charming’ inner-city (and non-white) neighbourhoods.

It reminds me that phrases like ‘having an honest debate’ can be code for ‘saying whatever you like regardless of whether it offends people’; a concessionary statement to justify views you know are bigoted. All references to how Clybourne Park tramples political correctness concern the scene in which the characters engage in a racist insult volley. We can infer that when critics commend Clybourne Park for seeing racism as complex and layered, this means that it exposes black people as prejudiced too.

I found myself not uncomfortable about the onslaught of racist jokes, but rather at the explosion of laughter they sparked within the audience. During these moments – being one of a handful of ethnic minority people in the theatre – there is a lingering feeling of the crowd laughing ‘at you’ and not ‘with you’. I left the theatre feeling that the emphasis on the racist jokes trivialised the issue of gentrification and took the easy way out of the discussion with simple answers. Racism was shown to be the only possible reason black people would object to white people building grander houses in their neighbourhood. If you go to see Clybourne Park, do expect fantastic acting. Don’t think about the plot too much, and you’ll enjoy yourself.
How do we decide who we are?

GARY YOUNGE HAS SAID THAT HE first started thinking about his new book after 9/11, when “two fundamentalisms, Islam and the nation or market” dominated debate. He described Who Are We – and should it matter in the 21st Century? as “a discursive contribution”.

Younge’s personal history (born in Hitchin to parents from Barbados, raised in Stevenage, taught English in Sudan, university in Edinburgh, exchange student in Paris, studied in Leningrad, now living in Brooklyn) and journalistic background (Guardian feature writer and columnist, author) make him uniquely placed to tackle the first of the questions in the title: who are we?

The discussion begins with a detailed description of Younge’s background. We are told where, literally and metaphorically, he is coming from because “we do not cut our politics from cloth but weave it from the material we have at hand.” With Younge’s own context in mind, we are led on an exploration of politics broken down into the specifics of race, racism, ethnicity, nationality, religion, power, powerlessness, grammar (“grammar matters. The objects of oppression are many, but the subjects are few.”), gender, sexuality, class, language, height difference, globalisation and more.

As you might expect from a current affairs journalist, many of the examples are recent or ongoing, such as: Islamophobia in Britain, Europe and the US; Islamic extremists in England; gay rights campaigns in California; homophobia in Jamaica; the rise of the far Right in European countries (“Like arsenic in the water supply of their political cultures.”); immigration in England. Most of these are carefully and necessarily set in their historical, political and economic contexts be it the civil rights movement and gay rights struggles in the US, the division of Ireland by the British, immigration policies in Europe or the violence and economic inequality in Jamaica.

Younge is, perhaps, most authoritative when he has been on the ground and able to follow a story at close quarters. So, for example, his analysis of the 2008 US presidential campaign is fascinating and the details we might have missed are sometimes shocking: Former congressman, United Nations ambassador and civil rights leader Andrew Young said that Bill Clinton “is every bit as black as Barack.” His reasoning? “He has probably gone with more black women than Barack.”

With forensic examination, Younge makes the case that who we are does matter. Should it matter, though? That’s the critical question in the title. Younge answers with a deft touch, most often resisting the hammer and selecting instead irony and humour, reducing the debate to the clearly absurd and inarguable. On the issue of the niqab, he writes: “As though we didn’t have enough to worry about: now, veiled Muslim women were perceived as a physical threat to white teenage boys.” On the use of the phrase ‘political correctness’ to stifle debate: “In the space of one month in 2006, the term ‘political correctness’ was used in the British press on average ten times a day. During that period, it referred to the ill treatment of rabbits, the teaching of Gaelic, Mozart’s opera La Clemenza di Tito, a flower show in Paris and the naming of the Mazda 3 MPS.” On the politics of language in Merchtem, Belgium the mayor tells Younge that on municipal property you must speak Dutch. Younge muses: “De Block tells me this in his office, in the town hall… in English.”

The arguments in Younge’s book are not easy, but the book is an easy read. The writing is pared down and fluent, the discussions simple but not simplistic, the style personal and engaging. Younge is also eminently quotable: “Identity is like fire. It can create warmth and comfort, or burn badly and destroy.”

I have one quibble: Younge writes that ‘coloured’ has always been a problematic term. Well, for me ‘blacks’ has always been a problematic term. It raises my hackles and instantly takes me back to the days of apartheid South Africa when ‘coloureds’ and ‘blacks’ were used to depersonalise people. I wish that Gary would write of ‘black people’. But that’s a minor detraction.

Who We Are… is a thoughtful, timely and essential contribution to an analysis of our changing identities, and the consequent impact on global, national, local and personal politics. Early on in the book, Younge states that: “In general, the more power an identity carries, the less likely its carrier is to be aware of it as an identity at all.” The consequent tragedy is that, for that reason, the powerful may not read this book.
Wisdom from the classroom

THE CONCEPT OF ‘CRITICAL thinking’ as explored by hooks does not, as I had automatically assumed when picking up the book for the first time, refer to how one should approach teaching the A-Level syllabus to a group of unresponsive 17 year-olds. Instead, hooks provides a new perspective. She describes a critical thinking that involves interaction and engagement in which teachers and students both actively participate in discussions, creating a ‘community of learning’. These are all characteristics noticeably absent from the current A-Level specification, which is assessed by a three-hour exam completed in silence. No interaction. No engagement.

Teaching Critical Thinking - Practical Wisdom could be interpreted as hooks’ attempt to enter the burgeoning self-help market. Her previous texts relating to teaching, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom (1994) and Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope (2003) were both comprised of a series of essays. This latest offering, however, is organised into 32 relatively concise ‘teachings’. There is certainly a self-help element to the book and hooks informs the reader that the book is a response to requests from teachers for advice on a plethora of issues, from maintaining “authority without being viewed as an angry black woman” to managing crying and humour within the classroom.

The text’s cover is inscribed with the Spanish ‘la mano’ (hand); my interpretation being that the enclosed work’s purpose is to offer a guiding hand. By grouping the ‘teachings’ in loose themes, the reader can locate passages of interest with ease. As a white British undergraduate from a relatively privileged background, my position is almost the antithesis of hooks’ and presumably that of the intended audience.

The wisdoms that hooks offers extend beyond the four walls of the classroom, and even in the fortnight during which I digested the book, I frequently came across articles in the press that resonated with the previous day’s ‘Teaching’. In the Introduction hooks recounts her experiences of college: being taught by staff who regarded themselves ‘racially superior’ and deemed black students “incapable of learning”. She went to Stanford University in California during the early 70s, and yet an article by David James Smith in the Sunday Times Magazine in 2010 recounting his son’s current experiences at school echoes hooks’ words. Smith cites race and education expert Dr Rollock’s view that there persist “preconceived ideas in education about you being a troublemaker if you’re black, or up to no good if you’re black.”

Smith’s piece, punctuated by personal anecdotes, includes a reference to his daughter’s “marvellous head of Afro hair”. This account provides evidence that the fears and concerns addressed by hooks are relevant to today’s black population, as hooks discusses childhood memories of her own hair in Teaching 21 ‘Writing Books for Children’. The book challenges negative images of black people’s appearance, exemplified by the opening sentence, which describes black girls’ hair as “soft like cotton, flower petal billow soft”.

Scattered throughout are pearls of wisdom. In Teaching 9 - ‘Telling the Story’ hooks writes that inside all of us is a sick self and a self struggling to be well, the one that survives being the one we feed. Advice that, in my opinion, many need to hear. In contrast there were other cases where to use hooks’ own words I was, perhaps, “not yet ready to receive the teaching” (p.138). Teaching 26 for example, speaks of the important contribution of touch within the learning environment, an action I deemed to automatically have sexual connotations. It is on such occasions that the need for one to think critically is evident, the need to learn to see and appreciate things “from perspectives other than our own”.

My criticism is that hooks has titled the book ‘practical wisdom’, and yet on many occasions the practical element is absent. Frequently hooks refers to ‘spontaneously written paragraphs’ as being a useful tool in the classroom, however there are no examples given. Despite hooks’ declaration that this text is the last in the trilogy, I feel a fourth may be required.

One could get caught up undermining the credibility of this work from the failure to include a bibliography, which is admittedly unfortunate, given the number of references. However, hooks’ ability to evoke confidence in her readers, to condone crying, laughter and spiritual expression in the classroom makes this a liberating text for both teachers and students, black and white.
Not quite a conservative view

THE CLAIM THAT THE LIBERAL Democrats did not simply join with the Conservatives for pragmatic reasons, but are ideologically closer to the them than to Labour, is based on a recent trend in part of the Lib Dem leadership. This is best exemplified in the 2004 volume The Orange Book, the animating idea of which is that markets can and should be marshalled more effectively to deliver public goods. So-called ‘Orange-bookers’ are a minority, and their views were not accepted by the party activists, or indeed by the major part of the parliamentary party. Nevertheless, Orange-bookers have shaped Liberal Democrat tactics and philosophy, not least because current or former cabinet members Nick Clegg, David Laws, Chris Huhne and Vince Cable are perceived as the most active proponents of it.

However, only David Laws and Paul Marshall’s chapters and introduction can be interpreted as suggesting strikingly new market-based deviations from existing Liberal Democrat policy. The sections by Ed Davey, Nick Clegg, Mark Oaten and Chris Huhne hint at a link with the broader narrative Paul Marshall stamps on the volume, but none of their arguments require any significant renegotiation of the existing Lib Dem tradition.

Behind the strong reaction to The Orange Book, and the conviction that it explains the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition as the book’s strong attack on the ‘nanny state’, a phrase used by many of the contributors. Most of the chapters do not, however, claim that the state is always wrong, or markets are always right, in responding to citizens’ needs. Ed Davey’s chapter on localism is the clearest statement that the overreaching of the central state, defended by both Conservative and Labour governments over the twentieth century, needs to be constrained by greater local decision-making. This is a distinctive Liberal Democrat view, and one that connects the chapters in the volume, but it is simply a restatement of pre-existing party policy.

Important Liberal Democrats, most notably Nick Clegg and David Laws, clearly agree with the Tory view that not only should the central state be reduced, with more power devolved to local decision-making bodies, but that markets and non-state institutions should provide much of what the state does currently. But the ideological agreement is a bit of a mirage for at least two reasons. Firstly, relatively few Liberal Democrats hold on to the strong version of what we might call ‘Orange bookery’; in particular, the idea that less restrained markets are the response to an overbearing state. Secondly, all politicians now seem to be neither left nor right, but rather managerial or pragmatic.

For a book with the subtitle ‘Reclaiming Liberalism’ The Orange Book is shockingly short on references to real liberal thinkers, other than John Stuart Mill (though not his Principles of Political Economy), William Beveridge and the New Liberals, such as Leonard Trelawny Hobhouse. What is missing is any reference to post-war liberal thinking, which is after all the dominant trend in contemporary British (and Anglo-American) philosophy. There are no references to John Rawls, the most widely cited liberal philosopher, or to the hugely influential Isaiah Berlin, and indeed none to any living liberal philosopher or thinker of note in the UK. Contributors seem unaware of the significant contribution that liberal thinkers have made in such areas as insurance markets, global justice, sovereignty and cosmopolitanism, social justice, health care ethics, and the limits of markets. Nor is there any reference to empirical work, whether in sociology or economics, on these and related issues.

The Orange Book has almost nothing to say about entrenched social inequalities. For most black and minority ethnic people the state has been an important guarantor of equal rights and a protector against racists, even if it has not always done so fully or consistently.

The Orange Book is, however, a significant book for two reasons. Firstly, it shows that some Liberal Democrats, and in particular Nick Clegg, do indeed share the Conservative view that the current state is too large. The second is that it points to a potential source of disagreement among Liberal Democrats, and of course for the coalition more generally. For most Liberal Democrats, the aim of reducing the power of the central state is not to empower markets or volunteers in a local community, but rather to bring democracy and collective decision-making more closely to those affected by this decision. To Liberal Democrats, unlike the Conservatives, such local democracy is explicitly not about shrinking the state, but rather about redeploying it.
More than a ‘tragic mulatto’

DANIEL MCNEIL ILLUMINATES harrowing accounts and insidious perceptions of mixed-race that exist across Canada, America and Britain. His monograph charts the transgression of the ‘colour-line’, exploring the subjectivity of those compelled to negotiate a mixed-race heritage while providing a critical intervention into the discourse of mixed-race as the contemporary cosmopolitan signifier of a post-racial future. These issues leap from the pages as he draws upon influential figures and popular culture ranging from Philippa Schuyler to Barack Obama.

As the title suggests, these issues cannot be analysed without considering the gendered forms of violence and the masculine structuring of desire, which snare the mixed-race woman, particularly, between a rock and a hard place.

This is best exemplified in the second chapter of the book, in which McNeil seeks to uncover the linkages between the likes of W.E.B Du Bois, Frantz Fanon and Otto Rank. McNeil does not undermine recent poststructuralist readings of these theorists, instead choosing to delve into their perceptions about the mulatto. Here he finds that within their masculinist framework the mixed-race woman, in particular, is perceived as a hindrance, a problem, a neurotic and an object of pity. McNeil has provided a novel contribution, subtly showing that mixed-race is not simply a position of the petty bourgeoisie, but rather is seen as a shameful reminder of colonialism and ‘dilution’.

McNeil’s account of renowned American child prodigy Philippa Schuyler is a strategically deployed case study for elucidating a far more complex identity than the ‘tragic mulatto’: i.e. “a feminised and neurotic figure who desires a white lover and either dies or returns to the black community”. Schuyler’s life is deployed to expose how the black/white binary is paradoxically and simultaneously transcended, escaped, denied and repudiated, while also remaining a continuous weight upon her life.

What is interesting about McNeil’s account of Schuyler is that it shows how the existential journey mapped her physical journeys, which led to an anti-black position. This was not through a simple embrace of the white; instead seeking to construct herself as a South European and South American, which McNeil portrays as far more complex than simple ‘racial confusion’. His reading of Schuyler is innovative, but some will not be persuaded, leaving one to adopt a Du Boisian perspective of the mixed-race women to find closure on her life.

However it is this very point of seeking oppressive closure with mixed-race identity that helps us understand mixed-race beyond a masculine lens that dominates the black/white binary. This ignores the fluidity of mixed-race engagement with exoticism, authenticity, methodological nationalism and ‘dilution’. McNeil provokes us to acknowledge this through his numerous case studies.

Meanwhile, McNeil’s analysis of President Obama in chapter six exemplifies the ‘pursuit’ of black identity in the contemporary mixed-raced discourse. In this context he shows how choices are made to produce an identification (or lack of) with the mother or father, but never adopting the constructed and feminised mixed-race identity, instead emphasising ‘post-racial’ America. Drawing upon examples of figures in Hollywood and the world of sport, McNeil also finds such constructions interlace with whether a nation can or cannot be sold as desirably ‘post-racial’.

McNeil is perhaps too energetic in disseminating his case studies of high profile figures, and we should not be seduced into believing that the theorisation of those under study within their particular class position is representative of a mixed-race lived experience across the ‘Black Atlantic’.

In summary, the study is fruitful in its exploration of how mixed-race has been and is perceived as a battlefield, without tip-toeing around sensitive issues. He does not place the mixed-race simply caught between the seduction or oppression of white and black, instead showing agency to fashion new spaces of being and resistance.

This book will be of primary relevance to academics and students who require a refreshing critical alternative to the lingering racist perceptions of the mixing of races, as well as the multiculturalist normalisation and the ‘post-racial’ consumption of mixed-race identity.
Warm welcome, but fear of change

WELCOME TO SHELBYVILLE IS A DOCUMENTARY THAT SHOWCASES THE IDEAS OF THE Welcoming America GOOD MIGRANT RELATIONS MOVEMENT, ESSENTIALLY A NETWORK OF ACTIVISTS OFFERING SUPPORT AND SOLIDARITY TO THE COUNTRY’S NEW IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES.

The film’s director, Kim Snyder (pictured, left), is an established documentary filmmaker, who was new to immigration issues. She alighted on the community in Shelbyville, Tennessee, because it illustrated so many of the changes which have hit US towns and cities in recent years. Her time in Shelbyville, which coincided with the final weeks of the 2008 presidential election campaign, allowed her to talk to many of the town’s principal citizens. This included interviews with city and county mayors, the local paper’s chief reporter, the church leaders prominent in the ‘Bible Belt’ ethos of the district, the matriarchs of the local African-American community, as well as people from the Latino and Somali immigrant communities.

From the start of this film it seemed that another theme had emerged: change of many different kinds. Lots of people in Shelbyville don’t like change. The local reporter presents events on his main street as calamities arising from the arrival of a new Muslim community in the town: the Somalis. Meanwhile the trailer park family wonder what happened to the jobs that used to exist when Shelbyville proclaimed itself as ‘Pencil City, USA’, before the pencil factories were closed. The pastors mull over the implications of what it means to live cheek-by-jowl with a group of people likely to be resistant to the idea of washing away their sins in the blood of the Lord.

A Mexican family, whose years of residence in Shelbyville have moved them a degree closer to acceptability, offer a narrative that proclaims the need for change on their part as they become American citizens. Aware of the distance they have been obliged to move from their roots, they also review the meaning of the Obama election and draw strength from the evidence that the USA is changing too.

Howa (pictured, right), the figure who references the Somali experience of Shelbyville, explains that she came to Shelbyville because she was offered a job in Tysons, the chicken processing plant which is the region’s last big employer. Retaining the dress of her home country, she attends the orienteering America classes run by Miss Luci, local Welcoming America stalwart, and looks forward to the day when she will become American.

Some sense of what change might look like follows in scenes shot in the homes of the Somalis, thrown open by Howa and her friends to facilitate a heart-to-heart discussion with the town’s newspaper reporter, who edgily hears the complaint that his articles offend and provoke fear. Then Beverley and the women members of her clan crowd into the kitchen to see how Somalis cook their chicken, urging their hosts to join in a spontaneous dance to music playing in the background. Later, with the food consumed and the promise to exchange recipes, the American descendants of Africans turn to complimenting their African hosts on the resplendence of their dress. What had previously been the greatest marker of difference has led to good-humoured familiarity; change is happening.

Shelbyville is a town that had the Klu Klux Klan parading in its streets within living memory for many; now it has a black mayor. If that counts as progress there is also a more depressing narrative of economic decline, with jobs going, growing insecurity and the heightened sense of a fall from grace.

Welcome to Shelbyville concludes with the annual fair at which the local people ride around a track on small ponies. Fast-food stalls ply their trade and a marching band of high school students practise their moves with drums and flags. Led by Miss Luci, the Somali women form their own small parade as they take in the sights and the rituals of their new home. Their bright colours and the swirl of their head coverings have almost ceased to mark them out as being different in an event which is absorbed by its own exotic rituals.

With this conclusion, the film affirms that some sort of ‘welcome’ ritual has taken place in Shelbyville. Just how long the apparent peace it has made with Shelbyville’s new immigrant communities will survive remains to be seen.
FROM ITS INCEPTION IN 1948, THE National Health Service has depended on recruiting staff from overseas. The NHS would not have been able to function without the thousands of doctors and nurses who have come from abroad. Against the Odds: Black and Minority Ethnic Clinicians and Manchester, 1948 to 2009 is an important investigation into the history of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) nurses and doctors in Manchester since the Second World War. It deals primarily with the two themes of health workforce planning and discrimination in the NHS, in the local context of Manchester. The book draws on both historical research and oral history, integrating personal testimonies from BME clinicians with the wider history of the development of the NHS over the last sixty years, covering labour shortages, migration, and racial discrimination.

After a succinct introduction, the book is structured into five chapters. Chapter two sets out the context of post-war Britain, exploring the history of labour shortages and the subsequent immigration of nurses and doctors from overseas. Having looked at the national picture, Chapter three then concentrates more on the local specificities of the situation in Manchester. These two context-setting chapters discuss racism in Britain and public attitudes towards overseas doctors and nurses more specifically. Chapters four and five draw on the oral testimonies the researchers collected through interviews with nurses and doctors who worked for the NHS. The case histories explore their experiences of migrating to Britain and the difficulties they faced when trying to progress in their career with the NHS. It is noted that BME clinicians were overrepresented in the lower grades of the professions, and worked in the less popular areas.

Currently around thirty percent of clinicians in the NHS are from BME backgrounds, yet they are still underrepresented in senior managerial professions. There is clearly more work to be done in improving equity in the training and career progression of BME NHS employees. In the final chapter the authors put forward ways in which the findings of their research could be used to benefit future cohorts of BME clinicians. They show that a historical perspective help us learn from the past and highlight how barriers faced by BME clinicians have been overcome. Their suggestions include collecting longitudinal data to track inequity in training and career progression of BME clinicians and ensuring support systems such as mentoring are accessible to BME clinicians at all levels.

This book features a useful timeline of key historical events, some interesting photographs, and the biographies of those that were interviewed during the research. It is aimed at professional leaders and policymakers in Manchester, but makes an interesting read for all those with an interest in race equality in the workplace, or in the historical development of the British health service.

A limitation of the research is the small sample size, which is not representative of the different BME groups or of gender. Drawing on fourteen interviewees, by the author’s own admission, the interviews are best seen only as illustrative cases of the key concerns. By concentrating on testimonies from doctors and nurses, the book also neglects to include the experiences of the many other workers with different occupations who came from abroad to staff the NHS as porters, cleaners and cooks.

By exploring racism both at the institutional and personal level, the authors uncover the complexities of how racism in the workplace can affect one’s personal and working life, whether experienced as overt discrimination or more of an awareness of difference. Against the Odds provides a balanced mix of firsthand experience and historical content, successfully interweaving the primary evidence from interviews with the historical analysis of secondary sources. The role of those from minority ethnic backgrounds that came from abroad to staff the NHS is often overlooked in social and political histories of the health service. This insightful book is therefore a welcome and important historical account, which - by capturing the voices of these BME clinicians - recognises their achievements.

Runnymede is building on the research body used for Against the Odds, by producing a book on the historical contribution of Asian communities to the NHS since 1948.
Identity, Politics and Public Policy
by Rick Muir and Margaret Wetherell, IPPR, 2010

Paper review by Phil Mawhinney

- public participation and old bonds of community and have been eroded - and too strong, as exemplified by the British National Party and extremist Islamists. To add a further complication, some parts of the country experience successful mixing, or “ethnic conviviality”, while others are marked by acute tensions.

A glance at any newspaper comments section shows that many people think the state has no business interfering in questions of identity or culture. But Muir and Wetherell make a persuasive argument against this. Firstly, the state cannot be neutral; it unavoidably influences the landscape in which we shape our identities, such as through what is taught in schools. Secondly, ignoring questions of identity may leave a vacuum in which extreme and threatening forms of identity, such as highly ethnicised understandings of Englishness, become prominent.

It is easy to be a critic of government. More constructively though, Muir and Wetherell provide guidance for how policymakers should approach these questions. They argue that centralised approaches to building the kinds of inclusive, civic identities required for sustaining a strong society should be avoided. Policy talk from Whitehall is too generalising and insufficiently nuanced. Everyone has multiple aspects to their identity; as Amartya Sen has argued, “the less we homogenise and simplify identity talk the better.”

Interestingly, people are now more likely to identify with the towns and cities where they live than with a national identity. Local government may then be better placed to foster civic identities that cut across different cultural or ethnic groups, breaking down segregation. The latter point echoes Big Society rhetoric, but it remains whether the coalition government will encourage ethnically inclusive identities, or whether it would wish away diversity of identity.

Perspectives from other parts of the world. Scholars of race and ethnic studies from southern Europe, the Caribbean or Southeast Asia, for example, offer interesting theoretical and ethnographical insights into racism.

Nonetheless, overall, the SAGE Handbook is a valuable resource for scholars and activists alike.
Entertaining, perhaps, but at what cost?

Alan Anstead is the founder and chief executive of Equality, a charity working to uphold the rights of the Roma people. Here he writes a response to the Channel 4 series My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding.

Dear Runnymede,

Roma and Traveller people are often portrayed in the UK media - whether newspapers and feature programmes - using negative stereotypes, which are applied to the whole group. My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding, the reality television show series that was broadcast on Channel 4, is the latest in a long list of examples. The many Traveller and Gypsy people who complained to the broadcast watchdog OFCOM or aired their views on Facebook, in newspapers and on other forums, have slammed the unrepresentative image portrayed by the programme makers. The picture is one that is unheard of in many Traveller and Gypsy communities: of very young girls in skimpy clothes, of sexual assault (‘grabbing’) as a courtship ritual, and of expensive weddings.

Mary Penfold, author of the best-selling book A Field Full of Butterflies and herself a Romani Gypsy, was told a local newspaper: “Our lives were nothing like what has been shown on TV. We started from scratch with no money, bought some land and lived off it - completely self-sufficient. But the image the TV show portrayal is of big, glitzy caravans, flash cars and lots of money. It is so wrong.”

Irish Traveller Eddie McDonagh wrote a blog on the Travellers’ Times website, in which he said “I am sick of the way that the Irish Travellers and Romany Gypsies are betrayed on Channel Four’s My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding. I have never in my life seen or heard as much rubbish about our people.”

Travellers’ Times complained to the broadcast watchdog OFCOM that the series misleads the audience and leads to harm and offence, particularly through the production company’s voice over which suggests that what the viewer is seeing is typical of the Traveller and Gypsy communities in the UK. OFCOM has launched an investigation.

With high viewing figures in the UK and the opportunity to sell the series to other countries, the production company and Channel 4 will make a lot of money. With abuse, discrimination, prejudice, bullying at school and racism documented as having risen during and since the series was broadcast, what is the cost to Traveller and Gypsy communities?

Yours sincerely,

Alan Anstead
Equality

Books received: Winter 2010/11 - Spring 2011

We are unable to review every book sent to us, though many of them are worth a read. We would like to mention the following, which may be of interest to our readers.


There is still time to focus on equality

The coalition government is one year old. Contrary to predictions, it has turned out to be a radical government, seeking reform on a wide range of fronts under the guise of deficit reduction. Some attempts at reform have been more successful than others. Policies on forestry, quangos, and the NHS have been sent back to the drawing board. While others have forged ahead in areas significant for race equality, such as welfare reform, universities, schools, housing, immigration, policing, security, and local government.

Priorities of the coalition
One year in, we now have a better sense of the direction and priorities of our current administration. Key recurring themes include deregulation, localising decision-making, and stimulating private sector growth. These policy themes are not problematic in themselves. No one would seek to over-regulate industry or government. The principle of making decisions at the level closest to those the decision affects appears to be a sensible one. Growth in the private sector may serve to rebalance the economy and address the challenges of unemployment. Yet there are a number of potential pitfalls that may lead to greater levels of racial inequality, and the dismantling of safeguards that citizens have fought for over a long period. These consequences may well be unintended; they are, however, avoidable.

The future of the Equality Act
The Equality Act 2010 passed with broad cross-party support. On arrival in government the coalition decided to remove what they saw to be the more controversial areas of the act, including the duty to promote equality on the basis of socio-economic status (so-called ‘socialism in one clause’), and provisions on equality in public procurement. As the year has gone on, the drive for deregulation alongside deficit reduction has put the threat to the legislative infrastructure on equality into sharper relief. The Public Sector Equality Duties, which put onus on public bodies to enforce measures set out it Equality Act, are much less prescriptive in England, with a great amount of discretion given to public authorities to pick and choose the equality priorities they set. Wales and Scotland will now have different and more extensive equality duties than public authorities in England. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) is suffering significant budget cuts and a consultation on ‘streamlining’ its functions. Proposals include removing the commission’s duties to promote good relations, and its functions in providing grants to local organisations. Meanwhile additional levels of parliamentary scrutiny will be imposed on the commission. Changes to legal aid coupled with these cuts in grant funding do not augur well for those seeking redress in cases of discrimination.

Localism
Localising decision-making in the way government has set out, while potentially welcome, privileges geographical communities, while failing to address the needs of communities grouped by interest and identity. As the Localism Bill passes onto the statute book, government has fought to maintain the bill’s ‘Henry VIII’ clause, which enables the Secretary of State to disapply laws and regulations for local government where he feels it appropriate – this could include the Equality Act. Government has offered no minimum safeguards or guarantees to citizens and residents. This is far from reassuring for people from those groups which are most often failed by local services. The bill is also strangely quiet about the forms of local accountability that will be needed to make localism work for citizens, a particular problem given the closure of the Audit Commission as a result of cuts. Those from minority and/or marginalised groups need to know the mechanisms that they can use to make the case for inclusion and equality. Yet beyond the publication of data, government has been slow to offer meaningful responses.

Private sector deregulation
Greater private sector activity will be an important part of the economic recovery. Yet in order to encourage greater economic dynamism, government has offered up all regulations on business for review with the presumption that any regulation that cannot be defended will be repealed. For the government’s ‘Red Tape Challenge’, the regulations for review also include the Equality Act, perhaps highlighting the priority that the government really gives to equality.

Seeking to predict and address the potential impact of changes in policy on equality was a key part of the Equality Act. It would appear that the government has forgotten this. If they sought to follow the spirit of this law, they would return to the drawing board as they have done on other policies in order to make sure that the direction they take does not lead to greater racial inequality. One year into the tenure of this government, there is still a chance to prove the administration’s commitment to equality. I hope that this is an opportunity that it takes.
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