

My book, *Small Towns, Austere Times*, is a politicised re-write of PhD research undertaken at Goldsmiths, supervised by Les Back. I published the book with Zero, a company perceived to operate on the borderline between politics, academia and the lay reader. The aim was partly to present a kind of 21st century blues, or elegy, in regard to the state of public and private life in small towns, at this point in history.

Like many ethnographers, I tried to do two things at once, conceal and reveal. There are huge debates under this contradictory urge. Marx famously claimed that philosophy should aim to change, and change can't take place via un-named semi-fictions, although the book is a collage. The larger picture, rather than the detail, is meant to provide an alternative to both think tank research and cosy localism. It is raw and fiery in places, intentionally so. But to do any real political work at all - and it is supposed to - it had to be quite specific about its examples.

The representational surface of the work essentially presents fictions made from 'real' research. They are stories, but 'real' stories taken from one small town, about 'austerity', class and 'getting by' in the early 21st Century. Where names haven't been changed, it is in relation to public figures who are already in public-facing roles, and frequently make public statements. At one point, I was going to call Todmorden 'Alltown', after Jeanette Edwards' semi-fictional, but very recognisable version of Bacup. Edwards' small town sociology is a big influence.

But I decided that if the book were to do any real work, it would need to declare the place it described. The alternative, basically, was to write a novel, but novels are too distant, as for many they are categorised as things to pick up where the serious world ends and leisure begins. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the distinction between those two 'worlds' is a dubious one. I agree.

I tried to create an overall representation of Todmorden and its inhabitants, using ethnographic material that could then be joined to the main arguments being made in the book, about theory and sociology. Several examples of, for instance, people found practicing informal economies, have been merged into one figure, and the same technique has been applied to other research encounters. I have explained all of this in the many public talks I have given.

The book is filed under 'sociology', but I am quite ambivalent about its category. It could equally legitimately be described as investigative journalism, or political writing. But it is, with all that theory and terminology, still clearly an academic book, albeit one that questions some aspects of the disciplines it draws upon: Sociology, British Anthropology, Cultural Studies and Human Geography. Those subjects, in institutional form, are now shot through with an obsession over real 'impact'. I wanted to write a book that spoke to both academics and the public, but also one that aimed its argument at the subject it researched, a small town.

The key questions I have received so far regarding the book can be placed into two categories, firstly, around ethics and revealing, and secondly around dialectics. I will try to explain the ethics and revealing dimension first.

The most frequent comments at my book talks were characterised by a concern that a writing of the social should not be allowed to touch that social. It was assumed that it

should stay remote from its object, although in this case I couldn't, as I lived in the town I studied.

Why should this be? In small towns, changing names is only a little short of pointless. One key point of the book is that the myth that everyone knows everyone else in a small town is just that, a myth. There are micro-worlds in small towns that never encounter each another, just like cities. Yet if you want to find out, in this small-scale place, you probably can.

At a recent talk, a notable sociologist exclaimed 'my department would have you boiled', for showing a picture, from a public blog, of a local political activist. He was quite aggressive and bombastic about the point. Afterwards, I decided that under his assumptions, the writing and representation of the everyday social was simply not possible.

Another respected sociologist seemed to feel that because I had researched some people I knew before I began the research, the project was somehow less serious. The whole history of anthropology seemed to lurk under this assumption, with the 'legitimate' subject, the colonial other, the 'curio' being brought back into the centre of Empire for codification, and ultimately to then fall into line as a potential resource, to be exploited. 'You don't examine your own tribe', he seemed to be saying. Of course, he wasn't consciously expressing some sort of nasty colonialism at all – and he's a truly great sociologist - but so much still lurks in our unexamined assumptions about what is right and wrong for sociology. My book attempts to shake the ancient epistemological oak a tiny little bit.

So, the wider point I want to make here is that a writing of the social that doesn't touch the social is another contradiction to add to those I outline in the book. The book itself is an attempt to present the contradictions embodied in its own epistemology. That is why I returned to dialectics.

Many of the questioners at my talks were not pulled back enough to see the arbitrary historical assumptions under the idea that sociology should never 'disturb' its participants, in the multiple senses of that term. I feel very 'pulled back', but I see how history operates under my own words too, 'feel', 'sense', 'know'. The terms we all use structure the discourse, and therefore the subject. But I can't create entirely new terms and expect to be understood.

The idea that I have 'revealed' people involved in criminality means, in practice, only that the people in the town know all too well who those people are, in all likelihood because they have received illegal goods from them. You can change the names - and in this case they picked their own pseudonyms - but really, here, and this is different to urban sociology, people know. With that material, I was trying to draw our attention away from the binary of 'criminal' and 'clean'.

All of this becomes much more urgent, for me, when I consider the current spike in student numbers in criminology departments. The wider economy of a small town involves criminal money moving from legitimate circuits into 'informal' economies and then back again. We are all implicated. The same goes for the perceived split of the 'local' and 'global', and Todmorden is noted for its zealous localists. All these big,

binary categories are properly dialectical, perceived opposites that are in fact part of one larger whole, a fact that, once acknowledged, makes the neat binary of 'good' and 'bad' begin to decay.

Yet at the same time, 'holism' is being declared here. By different groups, in particular ways. The stories of subjects trying to describe themselves as 'complete' and 'whole' in a global economy that rarely allows one to be much more than chopped-up. Or the 'holism' of the new age spirituality of permaculture enthusiasts. I wanted to show these 'holisms' as constructed, concealing agency and power, and to revive dialectics as a methodological and political tool, in the face of the politically abstracted, relatively recent adoption of the 'expanded dialectics' of Deleuze-Guattari and post-structuralism.

To be clear, I am very keen on Deleuze, and have collaborated on published pieces with Deleuze translator Robert Galeta, who studied with him at Paris VIII, and Derrida, whose lectures he also went to. But as Robert's friend Hugh Tomlinson explained, when reviewing Derrida's *Writing and Difference* for *Radical Philosophy* in 1972, Derrida represents the absolute zenith of a particular strand of philosophy, but also illustrates how useless, in practical terms, it is to reach that summit. Just actually what is at the top of Everest, after all? My book advocates practical dialectics, for this kind of work, but my second book is a much more expansive philosophical piece.

This brings me on to the second group of questions my book has attracted, which have circled around its 'dialectics'. The main one came from a reviewer, Phil Smith, who seemed to want me to produce a 'third term', to go all the way through the dialectical process and find a transformed 'synthesis'. The whole point of my take on dialectics is that an epistemological chemical fusion is not the point, that this tripartite version of dialectics, in general everyday circulation, is not what Hegel meant at all. Kierkegaard was equally confused in his critique of Hegel, and is actually my kind of dialectician. The real point, though, is that the 'mess' of the social world can never become a neat, always fake - because constructed by language - 'synthesis'. Conclusions really are for fiction, and so Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* is also important.

*Small Towns, Austere Times* presents a sociology of the other, but also a sociology of the close. I tried to offer up Todmorden, but also myself, as a subject of study. I couldn't make that point in any length - thankfully - but I compared myself with some troubling figures in the landscape.

I would rather try to make work like this, rather than hide my ego in written performances that strategically hint at egolessness and egalitarianism, when clearly other things are going on under the surfaces, in academia as well as the places I 'research', investigate, explore, call it what you like.

I once went to deliver a guest lecture, for a sociology department. The Head of Department kindly gave me a lift back to the station in his car at the end of the day. It was summer, hot and sweaty, and the windows were down. He was suddenly, dangerously swerved into, by another car, in the rush hour traffic, a truly terrifying near miss.

'All fucking Midlanders are thick!' he shouted out of the car window. In his office, he had been talking eloquently about the 'scapegoating' and misrepresentation of the poor, and I still don't doubt his sincerity for a second. Sociologists don't turn off their rawer reactions to intense moments because they are sociologists, and the ones that successfully conceal them are more suspect to me than the ones who let it out and then think about that.

The wider point to make is that sociologists are never neat. They are as much of a mess as the subjects they describe, they are temperature gauges of the social, but their own quite particular socialising is the meter, the scale, always.

At a much simpler level, many sociologists are middle class, and they write in their own 'metre', both in the sense of poetics and measuring. I am half in and out of my class background, and I have retained, whether I like it or not, a spiky element of being between the factory floor language of my origins, and the perhaps more philosophical language of later life.

The 'double ledger' anthropology of Malinowski, one notebook for the institution, and one of fantasies about native women and other 'taboo' thoughts, show that the 'civilised' is just as primitive in its repression, and that Malinowski can be studied, equally legitimately, by the subject of anthropology.

It might be tempting to state that my book is not more deceitful, but more honest. But that statement would also conceal as much as it reveals. My book isn't Malinowski's two notebooks combined, that is not fully possible, not ever, and even his secret notebook didn't contain the full 'truth' of repressed drives, and although they might settle it into doxa, a psychoanalyst wouldn't find it all either.

Again, there is a much bigger point to make here. When I read the smooth, assured tone of much sociology, I don't hear the speaking clock - proper diction on autopilot - I hear Daleks. The tone of my book is intentional. It is troubled, pessimistic and sometimes irritated. It is the splinter in my eye. My work is subjective. I never claimed it to be other. Yet some work presents itself as objective, while concealing an underground lava flow of subjectivity.

Michael Keith has written about how 'angry writing' is routinely excluded from academia, emotion is not just discouraged, but taboo. He also argues that in many ways, the ethnographer is already always unethical. I agree with all of that.

This has a much longer history, I would argue, that is not just to do with recent debates around subject-object cognition, but wrapped up in the cultural feminising of emotion across the nineteenth century. Yet everyone I know who writes and publishes about real places and people have irritation, frustration and anger. The assumption that no-one should be named is not 'natural', it is historical. I am trying to brush history against the grain a little, in terms of what I select for you to look at, and how I do that.

The 'neutral' work of 'science' is as anthropological, as cultural, in representational terms, as the epistolary novel or Bayeux tapestry. We have not 'finally' found some

stable floor of knowledge in dry, academic, 'sciencey' or statistical research. Great thinkers, as disparate as A.N. Whitehead and Derrida, understood this well. Goldsmiths has a very special place in its heart for Whitehead, and a shrine to him in architectural form. What I have done is not a solution to those problems either, but it is offered as a polemical intervention, into those larger arguments.

There are huge ramifications here. I have just received peer review feedback on a paper for a respected journal. The first reviewer condemned my argument as essentially false, due to its occasional 'colloquial language'. Think about that. Think about the long struggle to bring othered ethnic voices into literature and the humanities. Then think about class. I have a choice to tailor the language and publish, minor corrections, or leave it unpublished, but only because the second reviewer had no problem with the tone of the writing. This said, I have also received criticism for my work with Manchester Left Writers, as some of our readers thought that I wasn't working class enough. I am also very troubled by that kind of narrow cultural ethnocentrism. 'Shot by both sides' doesn't begin to cover it.

Academic structures and legal frameworks - the two are directly linked - militate more and more against my kind of production, but more importantly the publication, of this kind of knowledge. That, I want to argue, is far less ethical than the ethical issues my book might immediately raise. There is an assumption that in the west we are tolerant and liberal, and the east is repressive and censorious. I am chafing a little, and I think only a little, against the grain of what it means to produce knowledge.

Sociologists go into meltdown over ethics and representation, as trolls cruise theatrical web forums, wearing the mask of an anonymous username, pouring bile into everything they find. The sense of 'justice' in research ethics is skewed. I named some public figures in my book, yes, but I also named me, and I told you where I lived. Part of my book's undeclared manifesto is for a revival of public debate and a new agonism of public life, along the lines of the Richard Sennett of *Uses of Disorder* and *The Fall of Public Man*.

Some questioners at my talks, including the well-respected academics I described above, seemed to feel slightly unsettled by this, and were dismissive when I refused to completely defer to their sagely status.

The subject of my second book may surprise some people. It involves the study of Abiezer Coppe, the ranter, who was gaoled and had to falsely recant. When I read what he said now, and historical studies of the era in which he lived, it is clear that he was gaoled for broadly speaking the truth, whatever the details. But only time will show the wiser if the broad picture I have produced holds or not.

Foucault, were he alive, would see through all of this. He would say that the ethical research committee is a confession booth. We check in our baggage. It is an amnesty. Here is a science of 'revealing' that militates against its own revelations. Science, at root, just means 'knowledge', although the word has of course been loaded with other meanings. The one thing we can say about knowledge, with total certainty, is that it is never complete, pure or final. It is always contestable.

Someone suggested recently that I may be happier as an investigative journalist, a fair point, but journalistic training is largely a libel assault course. This is a big part of what 'ethics' really means to university departments, though many who sit on the committees seem blind to this. It is a legal disclaimer for institutions that provides no guarantees for individuals - researched or researcher - nor does it really create any watertight guidance in the face of the messy, compromised, sticky situations of research in the real world. Foucault would understand how these 'scripts' of academia operate. All of this seems to be fully accepted in departmental back room chat, but rhetorically talked-around in public sociology forums, written or oral.

Most sociology is produced and then vanishes, touching little, made solely to maintain academic careers. The idea that sociology influences policy and central change is overstated, even when it is hired explicitly to do so. I have been there, when the government minister came round the breakout groups, and nodded at everything that was said, but only began to listen when that matched what he had on his brief.

The ethical committee is not the 'conscience' of sociology, the superego. It is its unconscious. The place all the 'bad' things go, the processes the sociologists make themselves unaware of. The body temperature bath they lower themselves into. The net that filters what cannot be presented to the polite 'civilised' world. A civilisation that represses in order to shape, as Freud explained, tames nothing. It does not make the world nicer, or friendlier, it only re-shapes it. We throw off our moral clothes at night, for some salacious dreams, and put them back on in the morning.

We talk about impact, then create work that has little, except for internal review procedures. We talk about having political bite, there is so much posturing about being 'radical' among university staff, then we take ourselves to ethical committees to have our teeth and claws removed. I don't consider my own work radical at all. I think the term 'radical', as I have stated in my book, is also often a testimony that covers over other things. My sociology is actually quite traditional in some ways.

We cannot take these testimonies at face value, in the institution, or out of it. We need to look at the latent functions at play. What is really happening when 'radical' is announced? What is the underlying social function, which is often very far from the straightforward surface declaration, however detailed the transcript. All of this will be going on in my own work too. My declarations here, right now, will also contain underlying social functions that I am not aware of. That requires another person to decode and unpick. A sociologist I know is doing this already. Psychoanalysts are often required to be in analysis. Perhaps sociologists should have their own social routinely 'ologied'.

In his famous book on working class Leeds, *Uses of Literacy*, Richard Hoggart clearly concealed his resentments and politics. To 'clearly conceal' is not to conceal at all, a point I make in my book. *Uses of Literacy* presents a whitened, cloth cap history, which hides its rawer reactions to place, and it is an absolutely wonderful piece of work. Those two dimensions do not mutually cancel one another out. People who have read my work will be sick of the word by now, but this is why dialectics are important. But the wider point I want to make about this book by Richard Hoggart, is that if you are going to make work that looks through the glass splinter in your eye,

blown there by the storm of history, then look fully and publish, and if necessary be damned.

That kind of work can't be made by asking committees or communities for their advice on how to edit or present it. Why is it that this is still considered a priori 'ethical'? It may be essential in some cases, but not all. When you understand the arguments I am making about the social world of Todmorden, ask yourself, would it then be sensible to ask the subjects to then edit them? What would be left of that work to publish? It isn't the case that researching and writing the social should involve a contestable act, it is a contestable act, by nature. So is the work of tick box institutional ethical committees. The ethnographer is unethical by default. If I had worried too much about that I would have done nothing and given up long ago.

When you step beyond neatly bounded codes, there lies a landscape with no rules, an amoral field, essentially. Yet we are asked to step beyond codes, routinely, by institutions. That is the nature of a PhD. It is the rhetoric of innovative academia. Therefore the tick box ethical committee is riven with contradiction, as it simultaneously asks us to 'go beyond', at the same time as it practically militates against that doing. It is a kind of punishment-reward relationship. I am for a post-foundational neo-humanist ethics that involves the constant re-negotiation of relations in a world of sheer complexity. Marcus Morgan, now at Cambridge, is emerging as an important philosopher of practice for me. Institutions need to pass the responsibility for research ethics on to the practitioner, to scatter the living nightmare of their bottomless and helpless concern to 'the field'.

I did not make this work because I wanted a nice, comfortable academic career, but because I had no choice, to name the place and give a wider picture of it, an alternative picture to the one that is so often broadcast beyond its boundaries, by those with access and the ability to do so. Cultural capital dictates so much power.

I worked at a local garden centre in Todmorden, for an ex-Communist who ignored employment laws, refused to hire smokers, refused to let people go part-time, illegality which was covered-up by the provincial attitudes and ignorance that, as I see it, is often described as a kind of fuzzy, 'warm' localism. This kind of informalism is not necessarily benign or kind. It is not and never is that straightforward. I worked in the garden centre warehouse unpacking boxes from China and Dutch trolleys full of flowers and plants from Holland, as the driver sold duty free tobacco and other items to fellow warehouse workers. Here was the international trade, formal and informal, in the same place, masked by the testimonies to 'round here', and what it consists of. It is constructed by those flows, the 'round here'.

It is not desirable to return to the willful medievalism of a local in which comparison to other ways of life is no longer possible. The Dutch driver, for instance, in his clogs, unintentionally slipping into a different language occasionally. These traces of otherness are crucial for basic freedom. The internet tells of other ways of life, but it doesn't show us, and its telling is always partial, mixed-up, and again covers as much as it reveals. Yet there are people in these locales who want to reduce the circulation of materials and labour into ever smaller borders, for worthy ecological reasons, but with, as I see it, extremely troubling sociological ramifications.

So, much more broadly, *Small Towns, Austere Times* is about 'seeing', which is why I often think about, and return to, King Lear. In 'the local', people rail, often contradictorily, at what they can see, wind turbines, for instance - Walsden was recently declared to resemble the 'land of giants' - but not the wider processes and concerns, which they can't see. Blindness to macro processes is a theme of *Small Towns*, it is its core political dimension.

The eyes see perfectly well, but they are blind to the real power, framed by global flows of capital, or its flipside, a declared 'holism' and 'generosity' that masks other processes, that are, in fact, a different thing, when one measures the gap between the rhetoric and the assemblage. The sightless do often see better. All of this made me understand how it is still possible to be an anthropologist in your own country.

I have been deliberately provocative here, to make a series of points, and to shake things up a little, in order to stimulate debate. These concerns though, I think, are all necessary considerations for a sociology of the future. Paul Gilroy and Les back have described a sociology of 'risk' as necessary. *Small Towns, Austere Times*, is my personal response to that. The point is to change, not just describe, and change hasn't been so urgent for a long time.

- *Steve Hanson, Manchester, 2015*