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## Conference Report

### 'Racism: From the Labour Movement to the Far-Right'

DRAFT

*This is a report on the conference 'Racism: From the Labour Movement to the Far-Right' held at the University of Glasgow on 5-6 September 2014.*

**Keywords:** *racism; race; far-right; anti-racism; class; migration*

In this report, the organisers – Neil Davidson, Minna Liinpää, Maureen McBride and Satnam Virdee (University of Glasgow) – look back on the conference 'Racism: From the Labour Movement to the Far-Right' held at the University of Glasgow between 5 and 6 September 2014. This piece will outline the rationale for the conference, and look at some of its highlights. This will be followed by an overview of Professor Floya Anthias' plenary talk and a reflection on some of the key themes and issues that were discussed over the 13 panels. The conference also featured two exhibitions and two book launches which will be briefly discussed before we offer some final remarks about how we intend to take the event forward in subsequent years.

The impetus for organising the conference came from observing two concerning developments in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, namely, 1) the continuing mutation and expansion of racism into new 'cultural' forms, above all in the form of a virulent Islamophobia; and 2) the electoral consolidation of parties of the far-right, who are not always fascist, but committed to deeply reactionary positions on most social issues, above all in relation to racism and migration. These two developments are distinct, but overlapping. On the one hand, racism is more widespread than on the far-right, institutionally embedded over centuries in even the most notionally liberal states and exerting an influence even in

the labour and trade union movement which might be thought to have most to lose from the divisions which it engenders. On the other hand, the far-right almost always includes racism among its repertoire of mobilising issues, but has politics which extend beyond it. Since planning for the conference began in March 2014, consideration of both these issues was given added urgency by the success of far-right parties in elections to the European Parliament in the summer of 2014 and the British Social Attitudes survey which showed continuing, if uneven levels of racism across the UK (NatCen British Social Attitudes survey 2014).

Although the focus was international, no conference held in Scotland during September 2014 could avoid the fact of the independence referendum. While the national question was not directly the subject of the event, any discussion of racism inevitably had to deal with its role in national formation, particularly in the case of the imperial powers of which Britain was once so preeminent, and in which Empire Scots played such a disproportionately large role. Themes which the Conference addressed specifically in relation to Scotland included anti-Irish racism and, more generally, claims that it suffers less from racism than England or other areas in Western Europe – claims which, at the very least, have to be modified in the light of UKIP's recent electoral success. Other sessions explored anti-Muslim sentiment in Glasgow and Scotland's historical connections to the Caribbean and how such links continue to impact on contemporary national identities. These sessions were an important corrective to currently dominant Anglocentric understandings of racism and helped to highlight how racism works differently in Scotland.

The conference was a success on many levels. Firstly, the quality of the 37 papers was uniformly high generating lively discussions and debates. Second, the organisers were keen to organise a conference on racism that brought academics into conversation with social movement and anti-racist activists, trade unionists, community activists and informed members of the public. Delegates from organisations such as Show Racism the Red Card,

African Caribbean Cultures Glasgow, the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, the Irish Heritage Foundation, Unite Against Fascism, Unite the Union and many other third sector organisations suggest this objective was met. This combination of different voices contributed to discussions which were both scholarly and comprehensible to non-specialists in ways that are not always characteristic of academic conferences. Overall, the conference was attended by 137 delegates and featured 13 panels and 37 speakers. The conference was international in its orientation such that along with speakers from 12 different universities in the UK, we also had papers delivered by delegates representing universities of Pisa, Bologna, Aalborg, Université Paris XIII and the Sorbonne. Further, the event was genuinely interdisciplinary with attendees representing the disciplines of geography; history; sociology; anthropology; politics; public policy; and international relations.

The plenary talk was given by Professor Floya Anthias (University of East London), who spoke on *'Intersectionality and the Struggles against Racisms: problems of theory and practice'*. In the first part of her speech, Professor Anthias considered notions of race and racism. She pointed out that in order to have racisms, you need some construction of race. Furthermore, in order to understand how things such as race are constructed, we need to look to political structural processes as well as to related ideological and cultural phenomena attached to these. Racism, as a range of discourses and practices, identifies certain types of categories of population and produces effects and outcomes which result in the dehumanisation and inferiorisation of some, thus leading to notions of race. For Professor Anthias, racisms are not definitional issues. Rather, they are heuristic notions that help us analyse and explore things. She also noted how notions of identity and belonging are of critical importance for analysing racism – structures, which are central to racism, are not just about economic and material processes, but also about ideas regarding identity and belonging.

The second part of Professor Anthias's talk critiqued what she termed the 'growth of the diversity industry', pointing out that while diversity appears to be a neutral and benevolent notion, and that we should, of course, embrace the multiplicity of life, we should ask critical questions about what diversity talk does, and who is it that are 'diverse'. 'Diverse', she argued, is always the other – never us, never the self. As a result, a boundary is erected between two groups because the process of acknowledging difference, at the same time, sets up boundaries of difference. Professor Anthias argued that diversity talk glosses over questions regarding what are the differences that matter, and how are they constructed, thus neutralising difference and depoliticising it. She suggested that it conceals a range of essentially racist mechanisms, as diversity talk – which is often part of a 'social cohesion' or 'integration' agenda – tends to focus on differences that are seen as a problem (that is, diversities 'we do not want'), thus leading to the construction of apparently 'dangerous' others.

In the final part of her speech, Professor Anthias moved on to discuss the concept of intersectionality, describing it as a radical analytical and political tool which is very much tied to an anti-racist project of transformation of society. Professor Anthias questioned whether intersectionality can be a form of politics and whether it becomes possible, on the basis of intersectional identities or intersectional social locations, to mobilise people along dimensions of racism, sexism and the other 'isms' in order to pursue political projects of emancipation. Some have pointed out that the anti-racist movement's strength, for example, is in its form of organising around a particular identity category and experience. But if experiences are different and unique (which is recognised by intersectionality), how is social mobilisation then possible? Professor Anthias argued that in order to answer this question we must revisit identity politics, as many of the single axis struggles partly depended on a form of identity politics. Identity politics, with regard to intersectionality, becomes problematic as intersections do not produce common identities. Nonetheless, Professor Anthias argued that we can make a distinction between identity politics in the sense of people taking up a particular identity (of racialisation, gender or disability, for example), claiming it for themselves and therefore struggling from it, and the politics that is

concerned with a political and ideological concern with dismantling the boundaries of violence and inferiorisation that occupy the terrain in many – if not most – people’s lives who are not privileged. Furthermore, the potential of an intersectional framing is that it can attack broader processes such as naturalisation, essentialisation and collective attributions. She argued that an intersectional framing focuses on social locations rather than identities. Particularly, it can forge solidarity, and Professor Anthias urges us to rethink what solidarity can look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Following Professor Anthias’ excellent opening address, 37 papers were delivered across 13 different panels covering the themes of:

- Race, gender and class in the workplace
- Neoliberalism, racialization and the contemporary workplace
- Racism, ethnicity and employment in Scotland
- Welfare states and the populist far-right in Europe: comparative perspectives
- The far-right and capitalism since WW2
- Racisms of the far-right
- Theorizing racism and anti-racism
- Anti-racism, anti-fascism and the socialist Left: historical and contemporary perspectives
- Refugees, asylum and migration
- Racism, multiculturalism and citizenship in Europe
- The racialization of Muslims in Britain
- Imperialism and its legacies in Scotland
- Loyalism and the legacy of anti-Irish racism in Scotland

As we have already indicated, because this conference was held in Scotland it offered an opportunity to explore the ways in which racism specifically manifested itself in Scotland. Several speakers took up this challenge, and their papers offered an extremely interesting comparison to those which looked at racism and the far-right in other parts of the UK and in Italy, Germany, Russia, Scandinavia and France. Some of the papers offered an important historical focus and served to identify lessons which could be learnt from past events to advance anti-racist struggles today. Furthermore, following on from Floya Anthias’ opening

address on intersectionality, many of the papers continued this important theme, analysing the different ways in which intersections such as gender and class shape individual and group experiences of racism. Papers on the legacy of anti-Irish racism and anti-Semitism helped to broaden this debate and draw attention to the experiences of groups who are often conceptually invisible in racism and ethnicity studies.

The conference also featured two exhibitions, the first of which was arranged by Dr Sundari Anitha (University of Lincoln) and Professor Ruth Pearson (University of Leeds) and entitled '*Striking Women – South Asian Workers' Struggles in the UK Labour Market: From Grunwick to Gate Gourmet*'. Looking at two industrial disputes in Greater London, this exhibition explored the role played by South Asian women at Grunwick between 1976 and 1978, and at Gate Gourmet in 2005. Using images, interviews and text, *Striking Women* looked at South Asian women's activism in the workplace, and how the two events – although being 30 years apart – were characterised by the courage, bravery and militancy of the women. In particular, their struggle against poor working conditions and low wages helped to challenge hitherto stereotypical representations of minority women workers by the British press and others. The second exhibition, '*It Wisnae Us*', was written by Stephen Mullen and funded by the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (CRER), and looked at the significant role played by Scotland, and especially Glasgow, in the British Empire. Focusing on Scotland's role in the slave trade, CRER's exhibition highlighted and reminded us of this often forgotten and understudied part of Scotland's history.

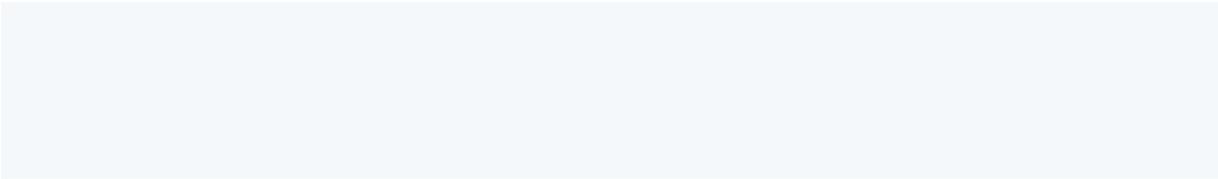
The first day concluded with two book launches, namely Satnam Virdee's *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and *The Longue Durée of the Far-Right* (Routledge, 2014) edited by Richard Saull, Alex Anievas, Neil Davidson and Adam Fabry. Wilf Sullivan – head of race equality at the Trade Union Congress (TUC) - commended Virdee's book for bringing together the study of race and class over two centuries and for locating racism and anti-racism in a political-economic as well as cultural context. He also pointed out the importance of Virdee's book in drawing out the formative role played by racialized minorities in the class struggles of the working class in England. David Renton –

barrister at Garden Court Chambers - discussed the book edited by Saull *et al*, welcoming the analogy of the long durée contained in the book's title. In particular, Renton praised Neil Davidson's analysis of the far-right in relation to capitalism, and especially his argument that the crises of 1929, 1973 and 2008 belong to different moments in the history of the system, and that, consequently, the far-right movements which emerged had quite different economic programmes: the ideologies of the far-right were certainly produced by the pathologies of capitalism, but the far-right do not necessarily act in 'the interests of capital' at every stage in the development of the system.

During the conference summation, delegates were asked to identify ways of taking this initiative forward. Feedback on the conference was extremely positive, with many attendees expressing their enthusiasm for the conference as an arena for academically rigorous but politically-engaged research. Some of the ideas that we intend to explore further include the establishment of an interdisciplinary network to help achieve a more comprehensive understanding of racism than we have to date. Relatedly, an online network of researchers and activists will be established to help share resources and ideas and ensure that this initiative remains accessible and inclusive to all academic and non-academic partners. And finally, we are considering the possibility of holding an annual conference in Scotland.

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