

## Advisory Board Second Meeting: 4-5<sup>th</sup> July 2017

The Hemsley, University Park, Nottingham

Board members in attendance:

- Daniel Laqua (Senior Lecturer in History, Northumbria University)
- James Mansell (Assistant Professor in Cultural Studies, University of Nottingham)
- Fiona McConnell (Associate Professor in Human Geography, University of Oxford)
- Robbie Shilliam (Professor in International Relations, Queen Mary, University of London)

This two day meeting of the research team (PI Stephen Legg, CI Mike Heffernan and PDRA Jake Hodder) was divided into four sessions. The first allowed the team to recount our activities during the second year, before opening out into a discussion of the broader themes informing our work and the shared research interests of the board. In the second and third sessions, board and team members introduced pre-circulated papers as a basis for a discussion of our shared interests. In the final panel the team introduced a series of more pragmatic questions around carrying out and communicating research. The board members had received a report in advance containing information on the original bid, the readings groups conducted and blogs posted so far, some of our outputs, and a summary of our archival work. Some of our original objectives were returned to, namely:

**A. Cities:** the impact of international conferences on host cities and the cities they connected to.

**B. Attendees:** To explore the motivations and perceptions of international conference delegates based on a comparative prosopographic methodology.

**C. Senses:** To explore international conferences as embodied, grounded and multi-sensual experiences associated with a range of tastes, sounds, smells, sights and feelings.

**D. Infrastructures:** To examine the institutional and technical infrastructures of international conferences.

**E. Careers:** To support the career progression of the PI and especially the PDRA, who will work in a supportive and experienced host environment.

**F. Impact:** To ensure public engagement by developing a network of academics, local black and ethnic minority community groups, and non-academic professional practitioners who work in fields connected to international conferencing.

## Session I

Session I opened with the team outlining their work over the previous year. This had included data collection, reading groups, blog posts and website work to establish a broader media presence, networking via conference presentations and panel composition for forthcoming events. Steve Legg identified some of the common challenges and experiences of the team, namely: the relative lack of material for some of our key interests (material on food, drink and music more broadly, and on visual materials for the Pan-Africa Congresses); archival biases replicating some of the hierarchies we are studying (the Round Table Conferences being quite heavily documented in official repositories, the League and PAC archives being more dispersed); the absence of certain key conference organisers figures from the archive; and the emergence of supplementary projects (on interwar Indian constitutionalism, PAC and the black geographical imagination, and on the League of Nations, geography and education). The team members each then spoke briefly to their experiences of the archive. Steve spoke of the different official perspectives on the RTC between London and New Delhi, but also on the official yet alternative collection of the NMML in Delhi and the Maharaja of Bikaner's collections (covered in various blog posts). Jake contrasted his three main sources so far, being the voluminous online DuBois papers, the black press, and various USA archives. Rich material on the conferences of the PAC had been collected, which also lays the foundations for future work on African Studies, the influence on the PACs of crises in Haiti, Liberia and Abyssinia, and the significance of the Harlem Renaissance for the cultural world of the PAC. Mike spoke to issues raised in the archive which stretch across all of our conferences, including the assumption of failure, the significance of location for place making, the way certain nations claimed the international, and the challenges of performing an ethnography of the conference via historical documents. The figure of the historical conference organiser, who also wrote about how to organise conferences, has emerged as a major figure of interest.

The broader discussion with the board members raised issues that strike to the heart of our ongoing theoretical and methodological work. In discussing the role of cities we contrasted how different source materials do (or do not) cite the location of conference (and spin off) events. Robbie asked how diasporas responded to conference events and celebrities from their homelands and asked how these events had transformative effects on these diasporas, and how conference delegates returned to their homes with changed views of the cities they had visited. Mike reminded us that interwar European cities often provided grim host spaces for their delegates, and that there were many anti-conference campaigners, arguing that they were expensive wastes of time (or, for Churchill, the opposite, posing a threat to future of the British in India).

In terms of our “senses” objective, James reminded us of the diversity of sources we could consult, including photograph and film archives, museum collections, sound archives and material artefacts. Robbie also reminded us to engage with fiction emerging at the time (and since) which attempted to portray our cities (and perhaps the conferences) in particular ways (Steve Carter’s 1976 play *Eden*, set in 1920s New York, or Erna Brodber’s *The Continent of Black Consciousness*, for instance). He also suggested that we think of multi-sensory artefacts not in explanatory or diagnostic or explanatory terms but as a way of also engaging new audiences and created new experiential engagements in the present with our historical materials.

## Session II & III

The middle two sessions involved the discussion of pre-circulated materials, of various types. Daniel circulated a book proposal addressing *International Organizations and Global Civil Society: Histories of the Union of International Associations (UIA)*, part of his ongoing broader work on international activism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The focus is on the UIA as a compiler of information about the international as well as an event organiser; that is, as a network facilitator and a centralizing force within internationalism. In discussion we considered the extent to which the UIA was bringing a “realm” into being that had not epistemologically existed before, even if international practices had (much like the international economy and international public health were being collated at similar times). Mike posed the question of whether the data the UIA collected was ‘pure’ internationalism in the sense of being meta-data (information about information) and non-thematical. Robbie our ever present question of what international actually *is*, and asked whether the UIA analysis could provide a way of getting rid of the state as the key actor in internationalism (another being to emphasise that the actors were empires and (ex)settler colonies, bringing the imperial and international back into contact through the study of inter-imperialisms). Jake pointed out that the PAC nearly bankrupted itself trying to maintain an office in Paris such that it might get itself listed with the UIA!

James introduced a recent paper on a temporary exhibition on noise abatement at the London Science Museum in 1935 as a provocation to think about how we imagine the sounds of the past and the politics of this (that is, what is at stake in our recalling sound, and what were the politics of the way it was used in the past). He challenged the view that sounds is the democratic counter to the oppressiveness of visibility (the press, surveillance, the gaze) through showing how hearing is also framed (ways of hearing, not just ways of seeing), and showed how hearing and sound is framed in class dimensions (the importance of quiet for thinking) and gendered dimensions (the noisy secretary or housewife). “Sonic encounters”, where sound and subject meet, pose broader questions about our attention to culture/regulation and affect/the pre-conscious in our wider research. Comments from

the group raised the question of “peace and quiet”, of the ways in which black migrants to Britain in the 1950s were accused of laughing too loudly in public, and asked what sort of different sound spaces existed at international conferences (private spaces of prayer, loud tearooms which enabled public but private conversation, the acoustics of large halls).

The third session discussed three papers which, loosely, addressed themes of race, difference and internationalism. The first paper under discussion was Fiona’ rich evocation of the UN Forum on Minority Issues, which charted processes of scripting and subversion between recognised states and non-state community representatives. She introduced her intensive ethnographic work and her training of minority groups in advocacy, which is also informing other papers on diplomatic decorum and anticipatory socialisation. In discussion we contemplated the significance of these meetings taking place in Geneva, not New York, and whether this location and the formatting of the event worked to further cement international hierarchies of recognition through this temporary inversion/acceptance? Or, rather, was it a valuable training ground in political practice that could be used at other international fora? The importance of labels and naming was acknowledged (China denying they have ‘indigenous’ groups) and the value of this sort of thick description for IR was suggested.

Robbie introduced his paper on the concept of the “black deficit” in the British Academy by contrasting race studies in the USA (based on slavery and exclusion practices within America) and the UK (influenced by commonwealth literature and postcolonial studies in which race is posited as an external-origin problem). The British academy failed to acknowledge this purity-drive at a deep level. As such, widening participation drives seek to increase recruitment whilst the problem lies in experiences at university (not the failure to get ‘in’). Conversation touched on the three historical phases that Robbie used as ways in to this present, the intersectionality of the deficit (in terms of gender and class), and the role of ‘theory’ in determining wider validity and use where theory itself arises from the Euro-American (white) academy.

Steve introduced a paper draft on the Round Table Conferences which explored ways of finding out if they were ‘international conferences’ at all (through the influence of the League of Nations and of rival internationalisms at play), concluding that the RTCs function as a site of (and of transforming) imperial internationalism. Fiona pointed out how common a “coherent messiness” is to conferencing events, bringing together contingency, blurring and ambiguous geographies (a common feature to imperial politics more broadly; denying precedent and then pulling together policies on-the-spot). Robbie also suggested, however, that what seems messy to us may have been much clearer on the ground and in the time under study; messiness may, therefore, be a sign of our incomprehension not, necessarily, of the vibrant messiness of the worlds we study. He also suggested that internationalism

is always posed as the evasion of something (just as European law was based on non-intervention *although* issues of sovereignty only arise when it is denied to others, making sovereignty the other side of directed non-intervention. Being a colonial background this element of sovereignty is usually suppressed). Is, therefore, imperialism the element of internationalism that it relies on so heavily that it must erase its traces, where possible? Mike suggested that the traditional view of the RTC's as national events was actually the imperial viewpoint; posing them as international events was one way of countering imperial historiography. Daniel suggested that the mandates warrant more attention, if only to show that the imperial engagements of the League went way beyond the (relatively few) mandates.

## Session IV

In the final session we looked forward to the next two years' worth of work that lays ahead. We spoke of the various pathways to impact that we will be pursuing. These include plans to engage with Black History Month in local schools and to engage with teachers through the local Geographical Association branch based at Nottingham; the conferences could here be used to introduce 'inspirational role models' but also to reflect on where delegates came from, what the cities they visited were like, to engage with multimedia records we find, and to reflect on historical developments since the interwar in various locations. Local connections can also be explored where possible (a planned international exhibition in Nottingham, or Gandhi's visit to the University). There may also be the possibility of putting together teaching packs for use in new A'Level core topics such as "global systems and global governance".

We discussed the possible topics that we would organise workshops around over the following years. We had originally planned to invite conference practitioners to each workshop but one practitioner focused event in a London venue used by the PAC was also discussed. Robbie asked us how we could make these events more richly experiential rather than didactic through thinking about our materials more inventively (possibly through the Being Human events, or the University of Nottingham's open days). For a more academically focused workshop memory and the senses could work together to help us think about experience and recollection in useful ways. James encouraged us to think about using interwar technologies to communicate our sound materials in the exhibition which will accompany our 2018 conference.

We also plan to work with existing connections in local BME communities to enliven their sense of community and to make the absolutely vital point that in the interwar years many of the most exciting

internationalists were resolutely *not* white and that many communities that are separate were working together (as well as pulling apart).