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Building Community under Conditions of Fractured Citizenship: The Covid-19 Crisis and the Politics of Hope in East London.

Paper to the Panel on Citizenship, Community and the Politics of Hope in Sao Paulo, London and Mumbai during the Covid-19 Pandemic at the Citizenship in Pandemic Times, 3 June 2021.

Simon Parker* (Dept of Politics) and Ozgur Yardimci, (Dept of Sociology) University of York.

Abstract

The ways governments deal with the pandemic and communicate the crisis with their constituencies have created new fault lines in the practice of citizenship. During the first lockdown in the UK, we have witnessed ‘the blitz spirit’ called on by the government to combat the virus. The responsabilisation of the individual paved the way for the renegotiation and circulation of shared ideas regarding which individuals/social groups are entitled to belonging and presence and which are stigmatized/ and/or scapegoated. Drawing on an analysis of online community forums and a virtual protest in the borough of Barking and Dagenham in London during the first wave of the lockdown, we will outline social media representations regarding the ‘civilized’/responsible/taxpayer citizen (who happens to be White British) as opposed to the ‘parasitic/virus-like’ migrant/foreigner who puts lives in danger by failing to obey legal restrictions. In the second part of the presentation, we explore how grass roots community organisations advocating for refugee and migrant populations succeeded in building community under conditions of extreme adversity and largely in the absence of state intervention. We argue that the lockdown helped assert moral geographies of citizenship in ways that are aligned with an exclusionary nationalism in the country, while at the same time DIY forms of community have managed to build new networks of solidarity offering an important corrective and a counter-narrative of hope and unity in the face of adversity.

Introduction

There is this constant push wherever you can to be in the front. And not in the front to see, but in the front to survive. Because who’s left in the back is gonna be stepped on. And this was here when lockdown started and ... this whole kind of English mindset of ‘people are to be nice’ shifted... I’ve seen many ugly sides of people during this time. I was expecting that... I knew that this was there. It’s just that with the virus it came so open... But then there are these other people who overcome this fear and say ‘wait, we’re all in the same boat’. It makes you see both sides of the medal and say, ‘well I choose to be a positive impact on whoever I talk to and that’s my choice’ (Alin, interview, 7 May 2020).

This is a quotation from Alin, a 20-year-old unaccompanied young adult who was seeking asylum when she was interviewed in Spring 2020. What she described above illustrated well the fact that the pandemic has brought to the fore the long-lasting paradox inherent in citizenship in the UK, and elsewhere, that is citizenship as an exclusionary privilege mobilized around ideas of ‘Fortress Britain’, and citizenship that arises out of solidarity in the absence of the state, that revived multicultural hope. The paradox became apparent in the state failure to respond effectively to the coronavirus crisis, evident in initial responses of denial and delay followed by sudden U-turns and acting on short notice (Yardimci et al., forthcoming). Accompanied by a decade-long policies of austerity, particular social groups including the urban poor, migrants and asylum seekers suffered more from the desperation led by the outburst of the pandemic. In contrast, we have witnessed rapid mobilization of dozens of mutual aid groups at street and neighbourhood levels in cities across the country. They were effective in responding to daily and urgent needs of the people in the immediate surroundings. 750,000 volunteers and the 3,400 local mutual aid associations that have sprung up in the UK.

Inspired by the above quotation from Alin, in this paper we will explore the implications of the pandemic and the lockdown for citizenship. We will demonstrate how the crisis has reinforced ideas around ‘Fortress Britain’ creating a moral panic about international arrivals on the one hand while opening space for mobilization of new grassroots solidarity networks at an unprecedented scale and speed, on the other. We will argue that the former led to a revival of nativist and xenophobic understandings of citizenship (aligned with the top-down, pro-Brexit divisions and the rhetoric of culture war), yet the pandemic has enabled new forms of social intervention that have contributed to a reinvention of citizenship. Grassroots community organizations were able to challenge the former through offering corrective and counter-narrative of hope and unity in the face of adversity. We develop this argument through an examination of public forums in Facebook groups during the first period of national lockdown, diary entries and semi-structured interviews conducted as part of the Citizenship Futures project led by the University of York.

A Spatial Approach to Citizenship

The traditional ties between citizenship and the nation-state were long being unsettled, with the ongoing rescaling of citizenship both upwards and downwards (Purcell, 2003: 564). Much has been already written about how the market-oriented nature of neoliberalism has introduced a new mode of ‘governing through sub-national communities’ (Desforges, Jones and Woods 2005), which promotes active and self-responsible behaviour (Koster 2015; Paton 2014). Citizenship in the age of neoliberalism has become inextricably linked to consumption in a civilising project aimed at reconciling behaviour with moral discourses of responsible and responsabilised behaviour (Paton, Mooney and McKee 2012: 1474). As neoliberalism is an inventive, constructivist force (Davies

2014), it required the state to take an active role in creating a shift towards the transformation of the people from a common society with shared responsibility, into self-seeking consumers, 'who would act and think in ways that fit market rationality' (Sayer, 2014). During the development of neoliberal program in the UK, the cultural policies of promotion of 'the taxpayer' and 'the customer', and demonisation of working class as shifty, feckless, and irresponsible (Hall 2011: 721) accompanied the stagnant or falling incomes of the already less powerful groups. This created an anti-welfare rhetoric (MacLeavy 2010), which associated poverty with personal failure.

To examine the reconfigurations of citizenship in the UK against this background, a spatial approach to citizenship proves useful. As Painter and Philo (1995) led the way to the geographical inquiry into citizenship a few decades ago:

Thinking about material spaces of human society ... is related to the varying constructions of citizenship present in shared understandings regarding what sorts of individuals and groupings can 'properly' live and work in these spaces (and then of both the 'rights' that citizens enjoy in these spaces and the 'obligations' that they have towards the other occupants and possessions of these spaces).

Thus, a focus on the linkages between space and citizenship enables exploring both material spaces and the immaterial spaces of the mind. The latter became important as citizenship in both its *de jure* and *de facto* guises is invented in it prior to its installation in actual practices 'on the ground' (p. 108). These immaterial spaces are constructed relationally within the territorial limits of the nation-state. Differing from mere membership, therefore, as Isin (2009) argues, being a citizen almost always means being one who has mastered modes and forms of conduct that are appropriate to being an insider (pp. 371-372). This means that membership has not been the only basis of 'true' citizenship as some of the residents within territorial limits may be regarded as not being 'like us' who are fashioned out of the same historical, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and even religious materials (Painter and Philo, 1995: 112).

Due to growing tensions at a time of gradually rising populist-white revanchism since early 2010s, there has been a shift back to the 'social-cultural form of citizenship wrapped up in questions about who is accepted as a worthy, valuable and responsible member of an everyday community' (Painter and Philo 1995: 115). There was intensified tension, particularly in urban areas where the geographies of the 'native' and the 'foreigner' are adjacent. London is one of them, as a 'world city of metropolitan paradoxes in which trouble, damage, hate and division co-exist with freedom, conviviality, escape and hope' —sometimes on the very same streets (Back 2019: 2). As Bauman (1995) noted, 'the chance of human togetherness depends on the rights of the stranger and not on the answer to the question who is entitled-the state or the tribe-to decide who the strangers are' (p. 15).

Moving from that, the paper will first demonstrate how the mundane forces of nativist division and hate operated amid the Covid19 crisis in Barking and Dagenham, and then turn the attention to the civic activism, as a force that ‘unmakes’ the strangers and opening space for hope.

Case Study and Spatialising Nativism in the post-Brexit UK

This research is conducted under the auspices of the ESRC/GCRF project Citizenship Futures: The Politics of Hope. It is a comparative study of socially excluded populations in Paris, Mumbai and London. In this paper, we will focus on the London case study, which took place in Barking and Dagenham. It is an Outer London borough in East London, which lies around 9 miles (14.4 km) east of Central London (see the map below). Barking and Dagenham has had a relatively stable, predominately white (and proud) working-class population. The famous Ford Motor plant was built at the end of the 1920s on over 55 acres of land, and by the 1950s it employed more than 40,000 workers. Even as late as 1991, 40% of workers in the borough were in manufacturing but the Ford factory was mostly closed in 2002 (Asthana, 2010) and by 2019 only 1,763 employees remained at the plant, making diesel engines for export to the European Union and elsewhere.



Once home for the white working-class communities, the relatively affordable housing prices and good developing transport links with the city centre have been attracting families from Asian, Eastern European, and African backgrounds over the last three decades. As a result, the white British population in Barking and Dagenham decreased from 80.86% in 2001 to 49.46% in 2011. Of the total

population of 212,906 almost one in every five people in Barking and Dagenham is an EU national. Today, two social groups suffering from the inequalities driven by neoliberal globalization live adjacently in the borough, that is the white working classes and international low-skilled and semi-skilled migrants. Amid the collapse of the welfare state and the welfare family, both ‘native’ and ‘migrant’ communities in the borough have found themselves in intensified despair.

These two groups have been subject to not only neoliberal challenges but also aspirations. Today, much of the borough is within the London Riverside area of the Thames Gateway zone, an ambitious urban redevelopment scheme, and is the site of considerable house building and other development aiming to attract more middle-class populations, that is, consumer citizens. Nevertheless, many of the white British and non-British residents of the borough are not entitled to benefit from the emerging prosperity, and this stokes the flames of the pro-Brexit cleavages. The division within the community was manifested in the Brexit referendum in which 62.8% voted in favour of leave compared to 38% who voted to remain, with a turnout at 63.8 that is higher than standard (source Guardian, 2016). Therefore, Barking and Dagenham is a laboratory that reveals the. As an increasingly diverse borough with high levels of destitution and social exclusion, it provides a useful laboratory to explore the implications of globalized neoliberalism and more recent rise of right-wing populism for citizenship.

Method

Social media has presented virtual spaces in which the politics of community membership, belonging and citizenship are constantly performed and renegotiated, such as mobile neighbourhood crime prevention groups (Pridmore, Mols, Wang and Holleman 2019). Virtual community groups enable not only discussing popular political and social events but also circulating feelings and ideas through technology in ways that generate a shared sense of community and strangerhood. Within this framework, one of the research team members, Oznur, became a member of two private community groups on Facebook. The first one is *Barking and Dagenham Community Page* which is a private group with over 14k members at the time of the research. The other is *Barking and Dagenham Days Gone By*, another private group with 16k members). Over the three months of the first national lockdown (23 March to 23 June when restrictions were relaxed), she followed these forums and interactions. Among the posts, screenshots of those that include words ‘lockdown’, ‘breach’, ‘restriction’, ‘Eastern Europe’ were copied and filed. The last was informed by the observation of a strong stigmatization and prejudice against the Eastern Europeans in the borough. In addition to this, the words ‘BLM’ was also added to the search as there were mobilizations of physical and virtual protests in the borough following the murder of George Floyd. To explore the interactions in FB forums, the qualitative analysis has taken the posts with at least 50 comments into account.

Sense of belonging and community renegotiated

When we started our fieldwork in February 2020, one of the central themes for further exploration was the discontent among many in the white populations about the demographic changes in the borough. This was usually framed through strong ‘territorial’ ideas and expressions such as ‘this is not my area anymore’ and ‘we never see a white family move in!’ (Labour councillor interview, February 2020). The BNP exploited these fears in early 2010s by spreading a false story of a secret ‘Africans for Essex’ scheme (see Figure 1 below). It was claimed that the ruling Labour Party were providing Africans with £50,000 grants to buy houses in the borough. This was, their literature claimed, a deliberate attempt to gerrymander in order to buy future council victories. In fact, the incentive scheme was open to everyone, not just immigrants, and only 39, of which 13 were black, bought in Barking and Dagenham. The party even distributed leaflets entitled "New Labour Have Changed the Face of Barking & Dagenham" with juxtaposing images of Muslim women and traditional white British women (see Figure 2 below).





The exploitation of nativist prejudices and fears led the British National Party to win 12 council seats in 2006 with 17% of the popular vote predominantly in the wards, which had the largest numbers of long-term white residents. What is more, in the month before the election Margaret Hodge the Labour MP and Employment Minister had alienated her local party and council candidates by claiming that eight out of 10 voters in her constituency were contemplating voting for the BNP.

The right-wing populist governments in the UK have repeated such efforts over the last few years, which paved the way for the Brexit. Over the last few years, Britishness has been redefined on a very narrow ground of white, Christian, Anglo subject. During the initial phase of the Covid19 crisis and the first lockdown, the appeal for the 'Blitz Spirit' against the virus eventually brought back the nostalgia of a white British citizen and community acting responsibly and sacrificially to fight the

common enemy. As a result, citizenship has become a battleground and particular qualities had to be constantly performed to prove to be ‘deserving’ of it. The wartime spirit of unity against the virus was soon replaced by explicitly normative judgments regarding who can properly be present in the public space, leading to the construction of moral geographies of citizenship.

During the first lockdown, which was belated and with short notice in a way that created frustration and fear, the initial calls for the Blitz spirit easily evolved into anger towards those failing to comply with the government restrictions. Social media forums turned into one of the key platforms of performing citizenship in accordance with this anger. When the health system nearly collapsed, there were forum discussions around some residents being ‘undeserving’ burdens, rather than lawful citizens. Through entries about the breaches of restriction to the police and neighbourhood surveillance, the residents in the borough of Barking and Dagenham renegotiated their shared understandings about ‘who is entitled to space, presence and belonging’. The main activities in the Facebook groups under examination were sharing photos and content relevant to the borough, asking for recommendations, expressing opinions about popular issues, sharing news about the borough, and so on. During the first lockdown, people also wrote posts to report and/or share photos of residents/stores breaching the lockdown restrictions and consult with other groups members about whether and how to report them to the police. What is more interesting was that some of these comments revealed racist sentiments against the ‘stranger’. The individuals failing to behave appropriately during the lockdown tended to be Eastern Europeans, one of the most stigmatized ethnic groups in the borough.

One striking post was circulated in the Barking and Dagenham days gone by group by a white man, who is in his 50s, which goes as below:

Bring in the army to stop this social gatherings in parks and beaches. I’ve just had to tell two Eastern Europeans to move away from my house parked up drinking coffee and chatting. (10 April, 205 comments, 98 reactions including 73 likes)

Similar social media posts that associate the misbehaviour against the lockdown restrictions with particular groups help redefine shared understandings regarding who can act properly, and who can thus be regarded legitimate and equally respectful members of the community. Thus, these generate shared feelings of community founded on explicitly normative/moral ways. Also, the emphasis on the use of army against those ‘allegedly’ failing to comply with the restrictions is aligned with the government’s attempts to revive ‘blitz spirit’ in response to the virus. As the English playwright and screenwriter Mike Bartlett put it in an interview (Guardian, 11 August 2020), lockdown has made more relevant the ongoing struggle between a Britishness that stems from the idea that “we have been here” versus that which involves immigrant journeys. These ideas served to legitimize the division

between people regarded 'surplus' and/or 'problem', and inclusive welfare amid the populist/authoritarian turn in the global neoliberalism.

The austerity regime ongoing for over a decade now has reactivated and legitimized the already effective campaign against welfare dependency and stigmatization of the 'welfare recipient'. This facilitated a set of criteria of deservingness founded upon neoliberal ideas of profitability and consumption. The socio-economic transformations driven by neoliberalization also underpinned and paved the way for the political transformations in the immigration policy. The announcement of the Hostile Environment Policy in 2012 introduced a set of measures designed to encourage irregular migrants to leave the UK. This anti-immigrant policy was legitimized based on the stigma about the migrant being the abuser of the welfare system and nurturing an understanding of us versus them. 'Us' here refers to the taxpayer, responsible citizen who happens to be white British nationals whereas 'them' refers to the 'scrounger' welfare recipients, who are non-British, migrants. The xenophobic, anti-immigrant discourses, which had become more popular during and after the Brexit campaign, were a manifestation of this intersectionality between the 'undeserving' welfare dependent and the non-British stranger.

This process also nurtured a widespread disillusionment in diverse communities with especially Labour Party, who no longer represent their interests. This disillusionment was specifically linked to immigration – the dominant political issue in these communities (Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, 2005). Against such background, parties such as BNP were enabled to mobilize support in local arenas that lay claim to distinct traditions, histories and cultures that render predominantly working-class residents amenable to exclusionist forms of political mobilization (Goodwin, 2008).

The overlaps between the legacy of austerity and white supremacy nurtured anti-BLM backlash, which became apparent during the mobilizations in the borough in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd by the white police. The lockdown provided a very beneficial excuse to criminalize BLM protests, such as in the comment below, which was written under an entry that informed people about an upcoming BLM protest at Barking station dated 8 June 2020:

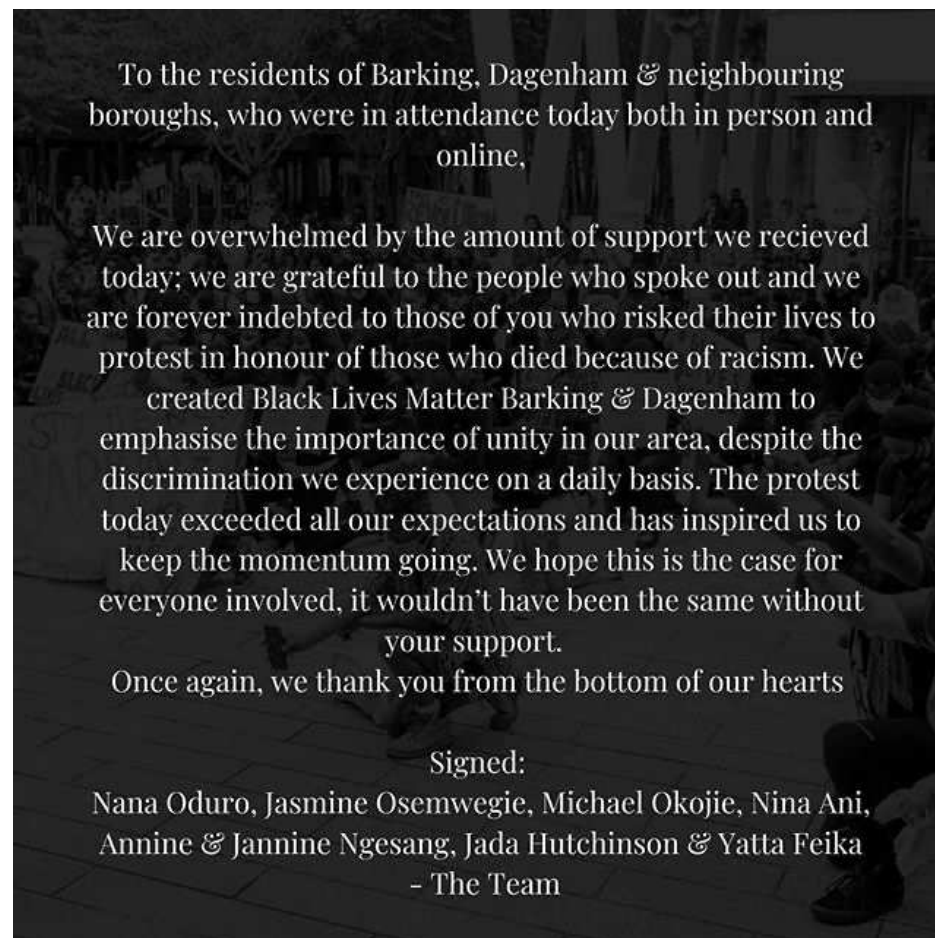
After spending 11 weeks locked down business closed not seeing family or friends - seems a waste of time - most protesters are probably furloughed while their bosses struggle - absolute joke - should take away their NHS privileges and next time they need the hospital or police invoice them for the service they clapped for key workers for weeks now have no respect for police or NHS - lets hope lives matter when some take the virus back to their families and watch them struggle to fight for their lives ! (8 June 2020, 13 likes).

This was well aligned with the broader criminalization of BLM at government level and the culture wars that underpinned the official approach to citizenship and immigration. Accompanied by the wartime spirit, the lockdown weaponized the white nationalist to identify those who challenge it as being not patriotic enough.

In stark contrast to the feelings of loss of place and community and the accompanying nostalgia of Barking as a white-British and peaceful borough; more left-leaning former and current residents of the borough and the young BLM activists were building up a sense of a diverse community that defeated the racist fascism a decade ago. In a virtual protest aimed at tackling racial bias within the schools in the borough dated 3rd of July 2020 (see an image below), there were enthusiastic discussions that had glimpses of hope for a borough taking pride in equity and diversity. In that, activists from Stand Up to Racism and National Education Union celebrated the legacy of the defeat of the BNP a decade ago and electing Black councillors in the borough. Accordingly, the election of 12 BNP councillors in a solidly Labour borough with a proud history of trade union struggle shocked the local Labour establishment and led to ‘a changing of the guard’ in the subsequent borough election (B&D councillor interview, 2020). Those committed to anti-racism and anti-fascism joined the local Labour Party or helped with canvassing and leafletting. In 2010 these seats had all been taken back by Labour. Unite Against Fascism claims that its efforts to unmask the BNP as a ‘Nazi’ party, working intensively on a door-to-door basis in parallel with the team of Labour incumbent Margaret Hodge, helped to alert wider sections of the electorate to the dangers of electing far-right candidates.

In line with this, the current Labour government in the Borough use a discourse celebrating the presence of multiple communities including residents with white-British, Asian, African, European backgrounds and adopt a grassroots approach by being visibly present on the doorstep and in community meetings. Amid the spread of the BLM protests across London, the local council took the side of the Black residents and activists in the borough. A group of young students organized a march and a public demonstration in the town hall which included performances and speeches from Barking residents, which was supported by the council. The residents pushed the door even further and mobilized a virtual protest together with the National Education Union, in which Barking residents across all age groups came together and discussed strategies to address and tackle the mundane forms of racist inequalities in the schools within the borough and beyond. The councillors Margaret Hodge, Princess Bright and the council leader Darren Rodwell were also present in that meeting, expressing their support for the dedicated and vibrant young adults, who made up of Barking and Dagenham BLM. The council leader Darren Rodwell emphasized in his speech that they are the most representative borough in London, promoting equality across London boroughs, and the door will

remain open to those who want to take everyone forward together (Speech in virtual protest, 3 July 2020).



The enthusiasm around this mobilization created discontent in some borough residents who reclaimed a heroic in the white British legacy and heritage, which is allegedly under attack from ‘vandals’.

There were comments and posts on Facebook forums blaming the protesters for being selfish and idiot for risking lives, and spreading hate using the murder of a man far away as an excuse to lead to chaos. Nevertheless, these mobilizations garnered support as shown in the above poster shared by the BLM activists on social media, opened a conversation and incited the desire to reinvent community and citizenship from below. These residents engaged in these demonstrations and discussions rendered imaginable a different sense of community that is tied together through shared visions of living together and equitably. What came out of these meetings was the consolidation of the efforts to overcome racism and racial discrimination, through virtual roundups that followed, and invitation to white colleagues to put more labour in implementing the anti-racism charter that was produced in the borough.

Conclusion

What the above discussion illustrates is that reclaiming space and citizenship has become intertwined during the lockdown. The Covid19 crisis and the lockdown have brought to the surface the long-lasting paradox in the UK ‘between cosmopolitan hope and racist intolerance (Keith 2003). This was most evident in forums around the BLM movements which involved calls for overcoming structural racism in the UK on the one hand, and a renewed trust in the legacy of white supremacy for some residents in the borough. Out of the different, competing claims to space and presence, different notions of belonging emerged: (1) Barking as a white working-class borough and strong pride around the white, British heritage and history and (2) Barking as a multicultural borough and pride around the fight and victory against the racists. Thus, the implications of the lockdown for citizenship were dynamic and multi-layered. On the one hand, it prepared the ground for realigning citizenship with nativist and anti-immigrant sentiments amid the rising populism. Yet, on the other hand, the grassroots movements such as BLM Barking took immediate action and challenged this through mobilizing a more activist and civic citizenship.

Understanding the responses from the migrant and ‘native’ populations to the lockdown is important to speculate about citizenship futures. The lockdown and the fears of uncertainty might have helped circulate already existing sentiments of xenophobia. An exclusionary notion of citizenship, that is grounded on explicitly normative judgments regarding ‘who can/is allowed to be out in public space’ and ‘who (can) behave appropriately’ came out of this, without any reference to the material inequalities preventing some people from complying to the restrictions. The growing tension caused by racial and ethnic diversity amid austerity can offer opportunities for populist parties and movements to exploit a sense of loss and abandonment on the part of more established White British residents. Nevertheless, in multi-national neighbourhoods such as Barking and Dagenham, glimpses of a new understanding of an activist, civic notion of citizenship emerged. Alongside scapegoating driven by fears and anxieties amid the overlapping health, social, political, and economic crisis, some people chose and were inspired to choose to be a positive impact, as Alin put it in the beginning of the paper. Local political institutions, politicians and pro-unity urban social movements can build an alternative and more inclusive and hopeful “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1961) when afforded the opportunity.

Newspaper webpages

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/deborah-ross-how-exciting-i-ve-never-met-proper-racists-1958673.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/aug/11/mike-bartlett-albion-play-interview-brexit-covid-bbc>

*Corresponding author. Email simon.parker@york.ac.uk