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**Academic Research(ers) and Collaboration
with local State and NGO Actors in
Challenging Racism and Discrimination:
A necessary Relationship
located within an unhelpful Context**

A Presentation to the ECCAR Conference in Nancy 2013

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***ACADEMIC RESEARCH(ers) AND COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL STATE AND NGO
ACTORS IN CHALLENGING RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION: A NECESSARY
RELATIONSHIP LOCATED WITHIN AN UNHELPFUL CONTEXT.***

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by

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Context

Austerity and Financial Constraints

If we are to examine in a critical and positive manner the potential collaborative relationship between academic researchers and local state and NGO actors in seeking to challenge the expression of racism and discrimination in our society and communities, then it would be good to start with a brief examination of the context in which they both operate.

Both sets of partners across Europe are likely at present to share a common experience of financial constraint as the local impact of the European financial crisis unwinds in its own particular way in their area of work. Thus it is reasonable to assume that nearly all of the potential partners are working in a context of considerable financial constraint; and anxiety. Jobs may have been lost, initiatives closed down and future budgets put under a permanent cloud of doubt. Thus, whether in universities, or NGOs or local government departments, all existing personnel are likely to be working at or beyond their limit. Treasured aspirations to pursue particular initiatives may have been shelved. Valuable colleagues, and their expertise, may have been lost. New, and perverse, forms of management surveillance may have been introduced into the workplace. Job satisfaction may have been undermined and routine genial collegiality may have become a more scarce phenomenon, as individuals seek to handle their own work place pressures.

We need to acknowledge this as a reality before we go any further because this is likely to become a significant factor when later we come to speak of the logistics of collaboration.

A Retreat from Multiculturalism

For all of the potential players in the collaborations we will come to consider later, there is one change in the political context within which they ALL work; which is the retreat from multiculturalism as an agreed conceptual framework for developing their work.

Across Europe in the last decade we have seen a dramatic collapse of governmental and popular belief in multiculturalism, understood as an acceptance of the legitimacy and positive potential of ethnic diversity within the state (Lentin and Titley, 2010, Husband, 2010). Multiculturalism was never a universally agreed political concept and never had an absolute popular consensus. But from the late 1960s onwards in different European countries a form of politics of diversity developed in which at national and local level ethnic minorities became recognized as legitimate members of society, whose commitment to the state did not require them to give up their attachment to their own distinct cultural heritage. The persistence of cultural diversity through minority communities reproducing a variant on their culture of heritage was accepted as a demographic and political reality. In some countries, like for example the United Kingdom, the state went beyond mere acceptance of the reality of the resilience of minority ethnic cultures and actively involved itself in initiatives which were intended to facilitate the viability of minority communities in their wish to sustain their cultural integrity. (Thus there were states that *de facto* embraced a form of Charles Taylor's (1992) *politics of difference* and put into practice variations on Will Kymlicka's (1995, 2007) *differentiated citizenship*).

From the massive transition in the demography of European populations following the European and international migrations following the Second World War it was possible to chart a political trajectory from harsh policies of assimilation and marginalization, often accompanied by populist racism, to the development of soft cultural recognition, to the development of anti-racist programmes founded on the necessary recognition of minority rights.

Initially this process produced a shift to recognition of the migrant minorities as persons with legitimate cultural differences that could be *tolerated and celebrated*. This was an early version of multiculturalism that was mocked, in the British context, as a superficial celebration of *saris, samosas and steel bands*.

The continued critique of this paternalistic and cosmetic form of multiculturalism produced a shift in some countries, and some local communes, from a culturalist multiculturalism that continued to gloss over economic and civil inequalities, to a more radical anti-racist politics which sought to expose the power relations between majority and minority communities. This form of multicultural politics addressed the institutional reproduction of inequalities and sought to empower minority ethnic persons and communities as political persons: not just as interesting repositories of cultural difference.

Thus across Europe, from the 1970s into the late 1990s, we could identify a wide range of policies that shared some form of acceptance of the legitimacy of the claim by minority ethnic communities that they should be able to retain their cultural distinctiveness (Heckmann and Bosswick, 1995).

But anti-discriminatory policies based upon tolerance have a very different set of logics and outcomes compared to policies framed by an assertion of the rights of minorities (Brown, 2008, Husband, 2003). Policies based upon tolerance in essence require the minority communities to be grateful for *the privileges* that they have *been allowed*.

In my years as acting as Scientific Advisor to ECCAR, and of being a member of its Steering Committee, this diversity was very apparent across the range of your membership. I can remember as a member of the Steering Committee visiting a member city where we were invited to celebrate their 'success' in putting in place a classic 1960s expression Saris Samosa and Steel bands as they promoted tolerance through a celebration of the cultures of their minority communities. Tolerance of *their* difference was very much on the agenda, a recognition of their human rights was not. On another occasion we visited a city where a senior member of their minority affairs office, in a conversation, told me of the unreasonable expectation of the local Muslim population that they should be allowed to build mosques. In his words – "How would we know what they were doing there." He clearly expected me to agree with his 'reasonable concerns'. I did not.

Similarly in consideration of the acceptance of cities to join ECCAR it has been clear that ECCAR is a broad church, in which acceptance of the 10 Point Plan of Action is not accompanied by any clear expectation regarding the framework that will be employed in addressing them.

But we need to acknowledge that over recent years there has emerged across Europe a new consensus. Namely that multiculturalism has failed: or that indeed it has been a positive hindrance to effective social cohesion within multiethnic Europe. The confident assertions of Angela Merkel and of David Cameron are just some of the more visible examples of this retreat to an assertive assimilationism. A new confident, but neurotic, nationalism has become the norm across many European states: what Fekete (2009) has called xeno-racism.

This too we need to acknowledge as a very intrusive element of the context in which we are now working. It is not helpful to the aspirations and political purposes of ECCAR. But it does mean that we need tough friends who will stand outside of our national and civic consensus and provide critical comments on the framework for diversity that we employ, or, have imposed upon us.

Academic Researchers as Partners

As a university based researcher who from the 1970s has defined myself as the sort of academic who wants to be socially relevant, and who in particular has tried to sustain a prolonged commitment to antiracist politics I would like to offer what I see as a few necessary warnings from inside my side of this collaborative partnership.

Very few universities can in the contemporary context be properly best understood as centres of learning; and the disinterested engines of critical knowledge. I would advise you to look upon universities as highly competitive corporate enterprises. There is a history to this which I do not have the time to go into here; but researchers working in universities now find themselves constrained by a complex network of performance indicators that are heavily micro-managed. Routinely, these performance indicators are contradictory in their implications for individual university researchers, and not unusually perverse in their consequences. [See for example: Readings (1996), Newfield (2008), Collini (2012), McGettigan (2013)].

Let me pick out just a few of the implications of this circumstance in order to inform local authority or NGOs understanding of where their academic colleague is likely '*to be coming from*'. A primary task for all university researchers is income generation. It is vital to the prestige and sustainability of their university, and is one of the key

indicators in their prospects for promotion. Thus researchers need grants and consultancies.

A number of risks can be linked to this reality.

They may seek to get projects that they are not truly competent to carry through: because they need to be seen to be bringing in grants.

For the same reason, they may allow you to negotiate down how much money YOU can afford to offer them, because you are in a powerful market position: but then their university will not allow them the extra time and resources that they will need to do a good job. They may have to cut corners.

You need to assume that any researcher working on a current project is simultaneously preparing bids for their next project. You have not necessarily got their full attention.

Additionally, they may well have a personal academic profile in which they have developed a commitment to, and competence with, a specific theory or method. It is part of their professional identity. Thus when talking to the partner in the local state they may not ask *What theories should we draw upon to best address YOUR question?*

It is possible that their spontaneous response to YOUR problem might be – *How can your problem best serve my theory.* The research under these circumstances is likely to be skewed to serving the greater betterment of this preferred theoretical model; rather than optimally addressing the immediate concerns of the funder.

No matter how committed a researcher is in working with you during the project, it is wise to be prepared for their compromised ability to follow through in their commitment to your shared activity after the completion of the agreed project: - because they are already committed to another project, or have been loaded with other tasks within the university.

Even the most committed researcher cannot easily free themselves from pressures like this.

It is best to be honest and clear about where we *May* find ourselves when entering into collaborative partnerships.

Entering into Collaborative Working: The position of the local authority or NGO

Forgive me if I now try to switch roles and talk about entering into collaboration from the perspective of the local authority or NGO activist (trying to draw upon my experience of such partnerships):

1) Conceptual frameworks

A good question to ask is:

(1) Is the local authority or NGO seeking to radically challenge their way of *understanding* the challenge they face, and of how to address it,

or

(2) are they seeking to develop a new initiative from within an understanding of the situation with which they are comfortable and confident,

or

(3) do they want a researcher to help them to evaluate a project that they have already completed and intend to continue with further.

Depending upon what you intend to do you may need a very different researcher as partner.

And if it is the second option: are you prepared to be told by the researcher that you should be asking question one?

As an academic researcher I can tell you it is exceedingly uncomfortable when you find yourself as a consultant having to find the words to explain to your paymasters that their model is more part of the problem than the solution.

2) Expertise and ownership of the problem

Remember that you too are the experts: and you may need to train your academic researchers to share your grounded understanding of the context.

In a project on the unfortunate conflict between policies of social cohesion and of counter-terrorism in the context of English local authority policy and practice I was massively impressed by the depth of knowledge that local authority personnel had about their local patch.

Academics may have transferable knowledge and skills, but they are often lacking in the finely nuanced understanding of the local contexts where they may be invited to work.

3) Can you aspire to build long term working partnerships with local research departments?

There is lot to be said for trying to develop collaborative working partnerships with local researchers. The benefits are likely to include:

- A mutual transfer of knowledge that may radically improve the quality of your collaboration.
- A cumulative acquisition of shared knowledge so that you don't keep having to reinvent the wheel - because new projects can start with a lot of the shared ground work already in place. This will make the project cheaper and quicker.
- A learned level of trust that might allow you to grant the researchers access to information, or feelings, that you were not prepared to share. And, to be more open and explicit in your conversations around the project.
- You may also become a hub of expertise around which other interests will gather.

However: the dangers of 'a safe pair of hands'.

There is a potential risk in the development of cosy and sustained links with a specific researcher or research group because local authorities and funders have a tendency to seek to work with a 'safe pair of hands.' (see Husband and Alam, 2011). Finding a partner for research collaboration always carries the promise of your later accountability to higher authorities for your trust and investment, further down the line. Thus linking up with someone with a 'proven track record' – which may include the fact that they are unlikely 'to rock the boat' with intrusive questions you would

rather avoid- is comforting in risk averse organizational structures. Pressures such as these may limit the range of perspectives and competences that you will consider; and could result in your failing to look at the issue from outside of an established organizational comfort zone And; it may exclude new voices and areas of expertise from breaking into the policy debate.

4) Are you prepared to be reflexive about YOUR organizational idiosyncrasies and interests that may block efficient collaboration?

In one instance of collaboration I found myself being blocked at a high level because of a political objection to the version of anti-discriminatory policy I and the team I was working with were trying to introduce: A fundamental disagreement on multicultural politics.

In a more recent project I found myself fully backed at the highest level and at the level of the community workers, but strenuously resisted by some interests in middle management.

Hierarchies of power, and contested claims of ownership of areas of expertise or practice, within your organization may be unintentionally, but potentially painfully, revealed through the process of collaborative research.

Conclusion

My comments today are not meant to come to you as the anguished cry of the desolate prophet of doom: crying: *Woe, woe – there is no goodness in us.*

On the contrary my whole academic career has been premised upon the possibility, and the proven value, of collaboration between academic researchers and those seeking to develop and implement anti-discriminatory policies. If I had had more time then I could have offered you a more detailed account of how I think such collaboration can be made to work efficiently, creatively and, even harmoniously. But I regret

my own reading of our shared current circumstances has lead me to prioritizing the need to explicitly engage with the unfortunate realities of the wider context in which we now find ourselves when trying to establish collaborative partnerships.

In conclusion we could ask does the ECCAR Steering Committee ask you hard questions about what you are intending to do; or does it rather merely encourage you to feel good about what you are doing.

Given the wider political context in which we are all living and working we must be prepared to defend robust policies that address minority ethnic rights: even as those rights are increasingly undermined .

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