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Fairness, Class and Belonging in Contemporary England

Katherine Smith

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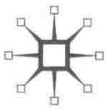

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For Winnie Fielding (1921–2010) and for my husband,
Steven Fielding – the fairest of them all

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This book is all yours as much as it is mine. The shortcomings are my own.

Contents

Introduction: Fairness and Belonging in Contemporary England

I began 12 months of residential fieldwork in a place I will call Halleigh,[1] North Manchester, England, on 1 June 2006. It was around the time when the football World Cup was beginning. There were streamers and Union flags covering the city centre of Manchester. Little flags, linked up, were tied to lamp posts and strewn across the suburban streets of Halleigh. On looking up, one would see grey sky behind flags flapping in the wind. While the football matches were on, the streets were relatively empty of people. They were in local pubs and social clubs watching the matches, at work wishing they could be watching the football or in their homes, yes, watching the football. I walked along the streets of Halleigh, taking pictures of the flags hanging from bedroom windows, missing my husband and my home terribly, but eager to begin the long task before me.

I walked to a bus stop on the main road cutting through the centre of town and took a bus to nearby Rowbottom, a place that I would soon learn is referred to by many people in Halleigh and surrounding areas as 'Little Pakistan'. I walked around the markets there and took pictures of the saris and the colourful fabrics. I bought a bag of cherries from a shop which sold brightly coloured fruit and vegetables stacked on top of tables, and all the spices, herbs and seasonings I could imagine. There were copies of the *Koran* hung on the walls of shops and most of the shopkeepers did not speak English. Somehow I managed to communicate, with an exchange of smiles and saying 'thank you' when someone offered to take a picture of me in front of a display of luminous fabrics. I felt for a moment as if I were in another place, somewhere far away from England. However, I walked through Rowbottom with the knowledge in the back of my mind that Halleigh was just a five-minute bus ride away.

When I arrived back in Halleigh, back to the red-brick council houses and Union flags, I went into Starlings, where the doors were left open to let the cool air from outside into the club. I watched people as they watched the football match: England versus Trinidad and Tobago. Emotions were running high: men and women were shouting for the England team to score, hugging the person next to them, buying rounds and sharing cigarettes. There was laughter as people jumped up from their seats in intense excitement as the football on the wide screen reached ever closer to the goal net. Faces were painted red and white and most people sported their football shirts, demonstrating their support for the England team. I took more pictures and captured a video on my camera of the fans in this social club singing 'God Save the Queen' as they swayed to and fro, with their arms tightly holding the people next to them.

Celebrations of the World Cup were evident everywhere. St George's flags were being displayed from Rochdale to the centre of Manchester. Men and women had their faces painted red and white. St George's flags sat proudly atop the heads of England team supporters. Pubs and clubs made significantly more income from selling alcohol. Smart entrepreneurs claimed the right to sell flashing lights on necklaces and whistles to blow when the England team scored – and they had better score. The celebrations lasted for as long as England was in the game. They lessened when the England team lost to Portugal, in a match deemed to be extremely 'unfair', but the flags remained on display for some time after.

During the first week of the World Cup, Manchester Refugee Week was being celebrated in various parts of the city. These celebrations were significantly different. The leaflets advertising the event – some of which I found in a small stack on the main desk in the local library, some in the local housing offices in Rowbottom – read 'Celebrating Manchester's Cultural Diversity'. I searched the text to see whether there was an explanation as to why 'Refugee' had been chosen rather than any other term that might be viewed from a 'white, English' perspective as the 'cultural other'. Populations of Asian immigrants, South Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, first, second and third generations of Bangladeshis, and growing numbers of Eastern Europeans were all referenced under the banner of 'Refugees'. An offhand observation may be that each group and individual represented in Manchester Refugee Week has 'moved into' an already defined space, involving a history of oppression and domination, when arriving in the city. I soon learned in the course of fieldwork that there is also a potential perception that the 'people of

Manchester' need to be reminded of the oppression suffered by refugees so as to be sensitive to their fight to transcend such oppression – the week was intended to be an educational and moralized outlet for ways of relating. Equally problematic, although perhaps a more glaring concern, was the sweeping categorization of groups of people with both micro- and macro-levels of heterogeneity and 'difference' within and between their origins, histories, beliefs, ethnicities, self-identifications and objectifications, representing them as innately different, despite the single-word reference to 'diversity', completely bypassing the multiple genealogies of a 'networked world' and reducing it to a fantasy of 'elegant categories' (Gilroy 2004: 31).

I never encountered anyone commenting on the unfortunate clash of timing of the two events. No one I met commented on the lack of advertising for Manchester Refugee Week or the fact that very few people in and around Halleigh took much notice of the 'celebration', or even knew about it. Information about it could be found in only a select few places around Halleigh.

Most celebrations for Manchester Refugee Week took place in local town halls, community centres and some local schools, and a fee was often charged for admission to these gatherings. However, local schools celebrated the week by teaching pupils about what exactly a refugee might encounter when moving from terror and oppression in their home country to England, a place of 'sanctuary' and safety. When Manchester Refugee Week was mentioned to individuals gathering to watch a World Cup football match, most said that they did not know that it was happening. If they had known, they still would not have gone. They would rather watch the match. As for the few individuals who were interested in attending a celebration or gathering for the rival event, they changed their minds the moment they realized they would have to pay. For most individuals it was not so much a lack of interest as the fact that their interests were directed towards another celebration within which they could gather with like-minded people to share emotions and sentiments as they watched 'the boys' score for their country. However, many individuals commented on the entry fees for the Manchester Refugee Week celebrations. I wondered how many would have attended had there been no entry fees. I had been told by individuals in Halleigh that 'it would not matter if the entry fees were £20 or 20p, pensioners would not attend because of the charge.' Also, the fact that the gatherings were during the day was problematic for many, as few people would have been able to take time away from work or home to attend. Rarely, however, did anyone in Halleigh miss the

opportunity to watch an England match in the World Cup, whether it was at home or in a local pub or social club.

My experiences of celebrating Manchester Refugee Week as well as the World Cup had many similarities and differences, paralleling a vast number of issues encompassed within these two celebrations. Emotions, sentiments and values were felt, expressed and historically grounded for different reasons, although experienced in shared contexts, so that each individual attending each celebration had a sense of shared goals, desires, loyalties and histories. Experiencing events in both 'celebrations' was very unfamiliar and new to me. To 'set the stage' for the ethnographic narrations which follow (Pratt 1986: 35), addressing the start of my fieldwork experience begins to highlight the social milieu within which I worked, learned and lived in Halleigh. Both my own experiences and the narrated experiences of others during my fieldwork began at a time when two significant and socially competing 'celebrations' were occurring. Although these two examples of 'celebrations' did not continue beyond the first month of fieldwork, the emotional involvement in their maintenance and celebration, the conflicting scheduling of their events and the lack of acknowledgement of such conflict mirror, but do not fully encapsulate, the entirety of lived experiences in Halleigh at this time. What these two examples highlight are the passionate involvements of individuals in each event, and the indifference of their organizers and the local government to other celebrations happening at the same time. It appeared that each group's celebrations were underpinned by powerfully constructed histories and aspirations for the future and would not be easily compromised. The emotions I felt, observed and engaged with during fieldwork were passionate, with their own legitimate origins, histories, motivations and sentiments, which would not be easily transcended for the benefit of 'others' in a loose Rawlsian sense of 'justice' and 'fairness'. But how are such emotional engagements, constructions, emotive histories and futures dealt with and influenced once the celebrations are over?

The local idiom of fairness

Underpinning the themes addressed in this book is an egocentric construction, which serves to relate the individual to society and society to the individual. As an individual construct and social concept, 'fairness' has social dimensions beyond the self. This book is an exploration of how belonging and otherness are determined and expressed through the individual construction and social conception of 'fairness'. Through

a process of documentation and analysis, I propose to apply a method underpinned by a theoretical apparatus to analyse 'fairness' as conceived and applied to concepts of belonging in Halleigh. This book works through theoretical, methodological and political concerns by paying close attention to the body of knowledge co-produced by individuals in Halleigh. Careful attention is paid to the historical moments that continue to shape present-day experiences and subjectivities.

The implications of this work are both particular and general. This is by no means an exhaustive study of concepts of 'fairness' and belonging, as these issues are not only particular to the social contexts in which I found myself during fieldwork in Halleigh but are also specific to each individual at any given time, depending upon their personal intentions and self-creating moments. This book examines specific individual articulations of ways of embodying fairness and thus belonging in Halleigh, seeking to specify how each narrative selected and included here is marked by the interlocking concerns and effects of geographical origin, nationhood, familiarity, political orientations, social class, ethnicities, gender and shared histories of racial and 'cultural' imaginations in Halleigh. These concerns will be drawn upon and used as necessary to make particular points about the perceived and lived experiences of changing social worlds, thus providing the scaffolding for the chapters that follow. The book will present a progression from social histories and perceptions of social class into how such perceptions influence the ways in which individuals feel they can speak and behave in Halleigh and in wider social contexts, particularly with reference to ethnic minorities and forms of racisms.

It is important to mention here that I will also use this framework to address the micro-political processes within which resistance and sometimes illegal actions may be justified by individuals in attempts to deal with the ever-changing global, national and regional political processes which appear unfamiliar and challenging to the everyday lives of individuals living in Halleigh. This book explores local and individual concepts of 'fairness' and governmental prescriptions of 'equality' to question whether or not there are discrepancies and disparate connotations concerning these concepts. This discussion also considers potential hierarchies of 'fairness' and a prioritization of what is perceived to be 'equal' as these processes come into contact with one another in local discourses in Halleigh. I believe that, through this study, further exploration of the manifestations of conflict and exclusion can be considered. In the chapters that follow, 'fairness', perceptions of 'dominance', 'social class', 'ethnicities' and 'race(isms)' will emerge

as complex, lived experiences. These are not abstract categories, but historically situated and material in their meanings and effects.

A fair future?

'Fairness', 'fair play', 'fair enough' and 'only fair' are expressions commonly heard throughout Britain today and regularly remind us of who we are and the values we hold. As an expression, 'fairness' is fluid and can be about, or imply, many things; for instance, the need for equal consideration, an awareness of another subject position and/or not making 'snap judgements' about a situation or a person. Depending upon the message that an individual wants to communicate, the issue of 'fairness' can be raised in relation to just about any situation that requires mediation between distinct points of view. Thus, fairness may not necessarily be a token for a specific meaning, but, rather, a symbolic vehicle to express much more complex and subtle messages.

More recently, the coalition government has been focusing on a 'fair society' and a 'smarter' government. But raising the issue of 'fairness' does not detract from wider public perception of frequent contradictory messages from government. During the recent general elections in the UK, the Labour Party wanted to build 'a future fair for all'; this was the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown's campaign slogan for the 2010 general elections. In response to the campaign slogan, one commentator on BBC news remarked, 'A future fair for all? Well, that just doesn't make any sense, does it?' Since former Prime Minister Tony Blair's government, emphasis has been placed on the importance of the concept of 'multiculturalism' and a commitment to value diversity and promote racial equality on the one hand, while calling for the promotion of a unified sense of national diversity around a core set of British values on the other. Despite the recent speech by Prime Minister David Cameron in February 2011, stating that 'multiculturalism' has failed in Britain as it 'weakens our collective identity' and encourages different cultures to live 'separate lives', apart from each other and apart from mainstream society, questions remain about the contours and the make-up of British core values. Britishness is a topic that has inspired much controversy and debate in the United Kingdom, especially in recent years. Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown's efforts at encouraging patriotism, 'capturing the [Union] flag from the far right' and creating 'British jobs for British workers' since 2006 seem to have been, as one commentator put it, 'thrown into extremely long grass – that is, has been ditched' (Tony Helm, *The Guardian*, Wednesday, 4 February 2009). It is hardly

surprising to see that claiming a 'future fair for all' can be alluring in the eyes of politicians but equally perplexing in the eyes of voters. This is because the undefined concept of multiculturalism exists alongside the idea that notions of 'tolerance' and a 'respect' for difference can at the same time contribute to and buttress the core values of the British (see Modood 2010); questions of fairness and equality become blurred, unclear. Within these competing and highly political discourses are the equally mutable notions of what it means to be 'English' today and how 'Englishness' is changing for individuals and groups as they deal with the competing discourses of belonging to an ever-changing Britain.

Since New Labour's talk of 'diversity' and policies on multiculturalism, new anxieties have manifested around the meaning of Englishness and the uncertainty about multiculturalism. This book will introduce and examine how individuals in Halleigh make their daily choices in relation to rhetorical strategies of the state, bureaucracy and media in England, as responsibility for progress is increasingly offloaded onto individuals, communities, cities or regions rather than the state, thus producing new and greater degrees of self-government and the redistribution of power (see Rose 2000). Specifically, it will examine the constitution of fairness, how it has worked in practice for some individuals in Halleigh, its effects and its ever-changing moral and ethical associations with governmental parties. It explores how the positioning of white, 'working-class' individuals in Britain is shaped through ambivalence in governmental, institutional and bureaucratic legislation and policies of 'equality' (see Back et al. 2002). Throughout the chapters in this book, I explore the relationships between individuals in Halleigh and their local and national government. The ways in which the everyday lives of individuals are experienced and lived in Halleigh deserve a much more nuanced understanding and analysis than they feel they have been allowed, particularly in local and national government. It will become clear throughout this book that talking about identity markers and categories is very different from living them.

This book is based on the 12 months of residential ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in Halleigh, particularly with a group of people who meet regularly and socialize in a local social club that I will call Starlings, in the heart of Halleigh. From June 2006 to June 2007 I lived in Halleigh and worked behind the bar in Starlings social club. I arrived in Halleigh with thoughts and expectations that I knew would change throughout the next 12 months, but I had little awareness of just how much they would be changed. The people I lived with and learned from are my co-authors here. The content of this book is derived from their

sophisticated responses to my flimsy questions – open-ended questions often posed without preparation in response to new perspectives that I was learning about moment by moment. I focus on the narratives of individuals in the writing of this book because they are self-reflexive, and they confirm as well as contradicting other accounts of social worlds outside this project.

The Halleigh area has a historically informed categorical status as 'working-class', although many individuals refused to associate themselves with any class status. Most individuals with whom I lived and worked in Halleigh generally identified themselves as 'white' and 'English', whereas the contentious label of 'working-class' was rarely, if ever, mentioned, unless to signal the abhorrence of a specifically 'middle-class' way of being; not implicating a formal class system, but rather an ideological and desirable embodiment of integrity, humility and humbleness – not 'going above your station' (Skeggs 1997). In this book I focus upon the discourses and narratives of predominantly 'white', 'English' individuals in order to better understand such loose concepts as 'Englishness', 'whiteness', 'social class' and 'belonging' in Halleigh, while also interviewing individuals who would not associate themselves with being 'white' or 'English'. Working in Starlings, I found myself forging relationships with individuals who regularly socialized there and who identified themselves as 'white' and 'English'. However, Starlings is not an exclusive social space; it is open to all members of the public, and, indeed, people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds occasionally came into Starlings to socialize. There was, however, a distinct group of 'regulars' in Starlings, who defined and maintained the social space, and it is from those individuals that I learned most in my research. The nuanced ways of belonging to this group in Starlings form the basis of the chapters that follow. Halleigh, in this sense, was a very conducive environment to carrying out my research.

As Jeanette Edwards has pointed out, '[f]ormulated in interaction, co-produced for particular reasons and with intention, understanding is contingent' (Edwards 2002: 172); thus, belonging entails a (local) say in changes to wider social contexts, 'especially changes engineers from the outside' (those who do not belong) (Edwards 1998: 161). Individuals in Halleigh have expressed to me their perception that their voice is rejected (and often seen as fostering racism) on institutional and governmental levels, and that this is a direct source of frustration and disenchantment with governmental legislation, particularly on immigration and politics of multiculturalism. The vexed questions

of multiculturalism, immigration and global movement, in 'urban' areas in particular, highly influence 'endeavours to constantly re-make and invent traditions in the present' (Back 1996: 8). However, individuals in Halleigh appeared to feel great uncertainty about their agency to do this, and at the very least were wary of its appeal.

Britain today is in a particular state of crisis that is not necessarily shared in the same way by other European countries. The nature of a multicultural as opposed to a liberal Britain seems to leave little room for freedom of choice about anyone's individuality and shifts between categories as they so choose. In many responses I received in Halleigh, Governance in Britain does not seem to have a recipe for individual identity and freedom stated clearly enough in law or the political arena. The 'liberal' agenda of government devolving responsibility onto the individual is at the same time liberating in terms of how individuals may associate with others and also profoundly frustrating, because there can be conflicting perspectives on the shifting and uncertain terrain of social categories.

There is an important distinction between 'equality', 'equality of consideration' and 'fairness' that is blurred in political discourse. This book sets out to explore the ways in which individuals living in Halleigh make this distinction clear and what it means for them in their everyday lives to deal with categories that they, themselves, embrace or reject. It will demonstrate, through ethnographic exploration, how individuals' experiences do not always coincide with what is classified as 'fair' or 'equal' in policy and legislation. The chapters that follow interrogate the assumed qualities of individuals living in Britain by presenting ethnographically informed insights into the everyday lives of individuals living in North Manchester.

During my time in Halleigh, I learned that many individuals place government and bureaucracy outside discourses on 'fairness' because of the sense of 'misrepresentations' which national and local government associate with 'working-class', 'white', 'English' individuals, particularly in urban spaces, as well as local perceptions of being 'massified' and then 'being ignored'. These responses were quite common when referencing philosophies of 'political correctness'. It became clear that there are significant conflicts between locally constructed and conceptualized normative orders and local and governmental politics – conflicts which were explained as a motivating factor in the reasoning behind some individuals leaning towards more right-wing political ideals, for instance voting for the British National Party. The sophisticated narratives of such motivations, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, directly

address the way in which everyday life experiences influence how a person participates in democracy. Thus, this book goes a fair way towards explaining the inexplicable: in terms of addressing sentiments and perspectives that are not normally discussed in wider social contexts, the ways in which subject positions are made distinct from social positions (see Skeggs 1997; 2004) and the ways in which (dis)identifications from social positions are crucial in establishing the appearance of a comprehensive identity, but are not always felt to be 'allowed' or 'tolerated' from the 'white' 'working classes' in Britain today.

A fair nationhood?

'To be a good Englishman is to be fair, and to be fair in *all* ways.' This is a quote from an interview I conducted with the late comedian Bernard Manning at his home in nearby Alkrington, Manchester, in late December 2006. Bernard Manning was and still remains a controversial figure in popular discourse in Britain. He was well known throughout the UK for his stand-up comedy, which has been widely criticized and deplored by many individuals and groups who do not like or appreciate the content of his jokes or their delivery. He has been charged, particularly in the (British) national media, with being a 'racist', a 'sexist', a 'bigot' and many other morally questionable categories, for the types of jokes he would tell on stage and television and his apparent lack of remorse in the face of these charges. For a moment, however, if we look at the quote above, in the context of this interview Bernard Manning addressed several issues, which, metaphorical in form, have meanings that are continually open to individual perceptions: what it may mean to be 'fair', ideas of 'nationhood', particularly 'Englishness' and the values he attributes to it. And, if we think about the interplay that occurs between external and internal perceptions of an individual, in Manning's case there is a very clear ideological disjuncture: while the moral majority see Manning and his comedy as overtly 'racist' and bigoted, Manning himself would regularly refute such accusations, stating that he was not racist; rather, he made jokes about 'everyone and everything', implying equality in consideration in his comedy.

When Bernard Manning is speaking of being a 'good Englishman', he addresses 'fairness' in a way that goes beyond connections with equality and morality. I dare say there may be times when equal consideration is not the desired outcome. What he coined as his 'fair comedy' implies a sense of equality to explain the mechanics of a *particular* sense of 'fair comedy'; however, what Manning was attempting to do was disassociate