

Reframing the 'Left Behind':

Race and Class in Post-Brexit Oldham

THIS LEFT BEHIND IDEA, BEING AN IMMIGRANT, YOU WERE ALWAYS LEFT BEHIND - AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PILE. YOU KNEW YOU WOULD HAVE TO WORK THAT MUCH HARDER TO JUST SURVIVE. SO THE IDEA OF BEING LEFT BEHIND WASN'T NEW TO US.



SOMEONE DECIDES YOU'RE EITHER BLACK OR WORKING CLASS. LOTS OF US ARE BOTH! THIS IS ONE OF THE THINGS THAT HAS ALWAYS FRUSTRATED THE CRAP OUT OF ME, THERE IS TALK OF THE WORKING CLASS BEING LEFT BEHIND. THE WHITE WORKING CLASS WERE LEFT BEHIND, BUT THE WORKING CLASS IN GENERAL HAVE BEEN LEFT BEHIND.

By

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Introduction

This booklet draws attention to the key findings of a research project carried out in Oldham between January and May 2018. Drawing on interviews with 15 local residents from a range of different areas of the town and different racial and ethnic backgrounds, the main aim of the project was to critically reframe the prevailing conception of the 'left behind'.

In recent times, the term the 'left behind' has been used by academics, politicians and journalists to explain both Brexit, as well as the electoral gains made by political parties such as UKIP. Invariably, this term has become a shorthand way for referring to older white working class men with few skills and qualifications, and located primarily in post-industrial areas. Central to the 'left behind' argument is the idea that people who are white and working class have been disadvantaged by globalisation, deindustrialisation and, more recently, austerity. Our interviewees, however, questioned this narrative. In doing so, they pointed to the ways in which the 'left behind' narrative excludes the experiences of black and minority ethnic communities, and the losses they have also endured in terms of jobs, living standards, and services. What is more, our research participants challenged the idea that the 'working class' can be understood simply as white, identifying instead a multiracial and multi-ethnic working-class who have all been adversely impacted by processes of deindustrialization, welfare reform, austerity, rising inequality, and increasingly depleted public services.

Using quotations from the interviews, the artwork presented in this booklet forms part of a broader attempt to reframe the 'left behind' narrative by calling for a broader consideration of who has been impacted by social, economic and political change, and the role that processes of economic and urban decline, structural and institutional racism, and class exclusion play in shaping contemporary working class life. The booklet also draws attention to issues raised by our interview participants in the hope that it contributes to wider political discussions towards alternative future possibilities and priorities, especially in relation to the pressing concerns - as shared by our research participants irrespective of racialised identity - with regard to austerity, housing, regeneration, jobs, and, of course, racism more generally.

For a copy of the full report based on this research, please visit www.ethnicity.ac.uk.

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All artwork by Paul Gent: pablogent@outlook.com.

Deindustrialisation

BEFORE IT WAS KING COTTON, NOW IT'S LIKE
WHAT DOES OLDHAM STAND FOR?



We had that sense of community and I don't think we lost the sense of community because we had immigrants. I think we lost the sense of community because we lost the industry.

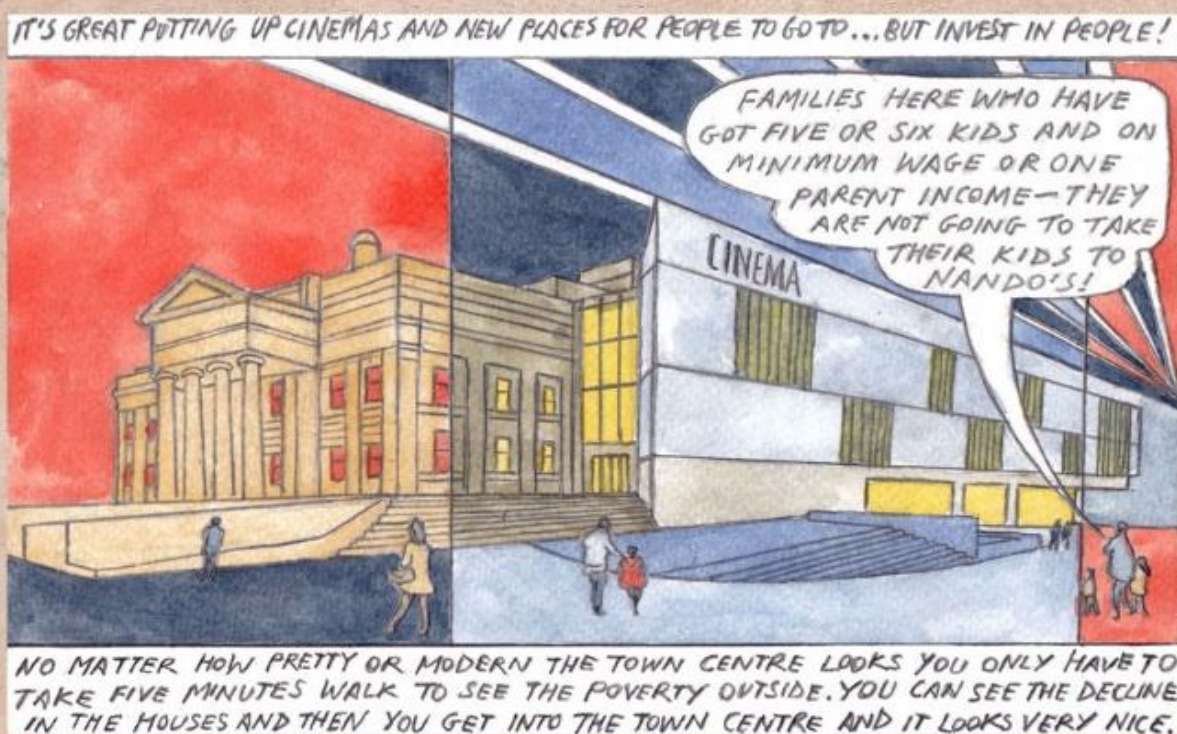
Oldham was once known as 'King Cotton'. From the very beginning of the industrial revolution, the rapid rise of the cotton-spinning industry in Oldham, and across northern mill towns more generally, was in large part down to colonialism. Cotton grown on the plantations of the Caribbean, the fields of Bengal, and the deep South in America was spun into cloth, before being sold back across the British Empire for a profit. Oldham's textile mills started to go into decline in the 1930s. When the speed of decline accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s, wide-scale redundancy followed. The Hartford Mill was built in 1907, before closing in 1959. The mill stands as testimony to the legacies of deindustrialization. It represents a process marked not just by the loss of jobs but by the changing nature of work, community and place. It prompts questions about the identity of formerly industrial towns and communities. How we remember this industrial past matters.

A key feature of the 'left behind' narrative is the way in which the 1950s and 1960s is remembered for relatively secure employment and decent wages. Over the years industry provided work to established residents and successive generations of immigrants who sought to make a life in Oldham. However, what is often left out of 'left behind' accounts of this period is the role played by racist practices which worked to exclude and marginalise people racialised as non-white.

During the 1950s and 1960s, many employers adopted 'colour bar' policies which restricted the employment of people racialised as non-white to just 5% of the workforce. These policies were commonplace in Britain's textile mills and iron foundries, where Black and Asian people were often restricted to unskilled jobs which usually paid less than the skilled jobs occupied by many white workers. It was also common for Black and Asian workers to be refused the same breaks as their white colleagues, as well as being refused training and being subjected to segregated shift patterns where contact with white workers was limited. Discriminatory 'last in, first out' policies also provided many white workers with a limited degree of protection from redundancy. Such arrangements were often the result of agreements between employers and trade unionists. In Manchester, Sikh men working in the transport sector were not allowed to wear turbans and breads at work. In fact, this resulted in a eight year dispute to secure the right to do so. In Oldham, South Asian mill workers found themselves concentrated in lower-paid, semi-skilled and manual work, as well as the night shift. What is more, with the textile industry already in decline, South Asian mill workers found also themselves increasingly under threat from redundancy.

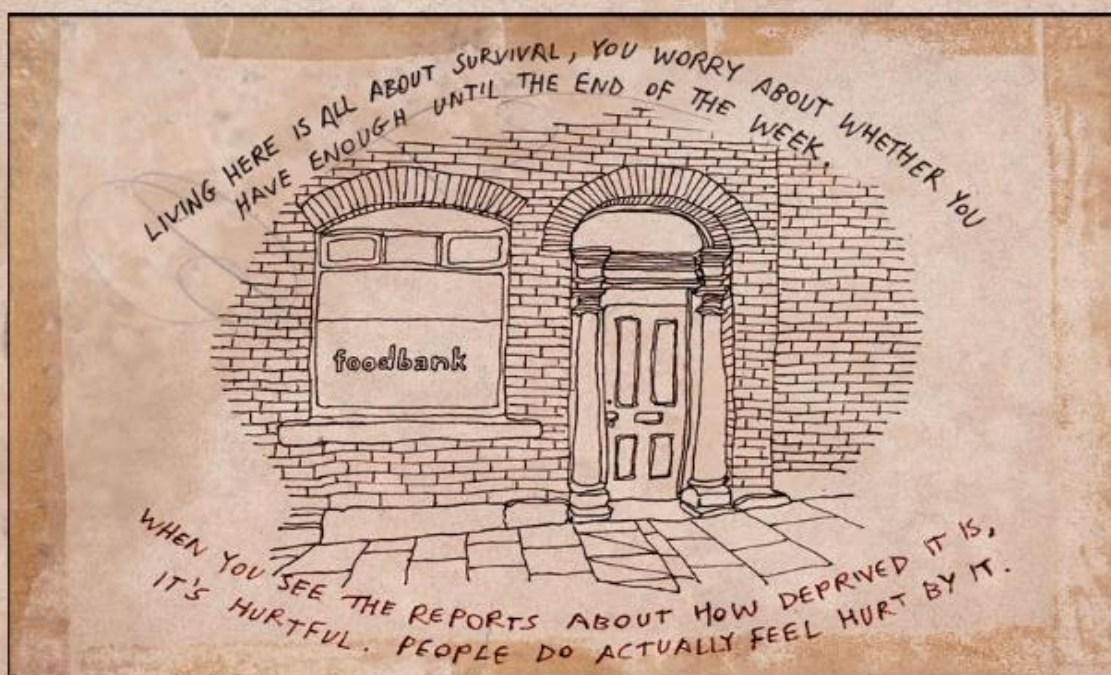
The history of post-industrial towns such as Oldham tells us that deindustrialisation and the long-term unemployment that resulted was a multiracial class experience. As one of our research participants put it, 'the working class in general' were left behind when the last of the cotton mills closed its doors in 1998. It is crucial that we remember this history if we are to imagine economic and political alternatives to current neoliberal orthodoxy and austerity, as well as the enduring and interlocking effects of class and racial inequality.

The regeneration of Oldham town centre



Oldham is in the midst of a programme of urban regeneration, most notably with the new cinema and town hall development. In 2018, the council announced plans for £350 million of investment in the town centre beyond the next decade, including new apartments, business space and retail and leisure facilities. While residents welcomed the regeneration of the town, they raised important issues about its limitations and its potential. They pointed to the high costs of building and using the new amenities. They called for an investment in 'people' as well as 'place', where improvements in the appearance of the town are matched by commitments to enhance the lives of those who have made a home there. Residents held concerns about the prevalence of low-wage work and the need to attract better-paid jobs. They also wanted regeneration efforts to engage residents, to bolster civic and social life, and for investment to extend beyond Oldham town centre. Delivering the types of regeneration people want will require the tackling of deep-seated inequalities, as well as offering more inclusive visions of who belongs and who counts in the town.

Poverty



Residents identified poverty and inequality as a key issue in Oldham. Between 2004 and 2015, Oldham fell eleven places from 43rd to 34th in the English Indices of Multiple Deprivation. A report in 2016 by the Office for National Statistics declared Oldham the town with the highest proportion of deprived areas in the country. Low-wage has been a significant driver of this. Figures recently released by the Department for Work and Pensions show that nearly 40% of universal credit claimants in Oldham are in paid work. Residents felt that conditions had worsened in the town in the context of austerity. Between April 2017 and March 2018, the Trussell Trust foodbank in Oldham provided 7,435 emergency food supplies to people in crisis. 10.7% of households in the town are in fuel poverty (i.e. where fuel costs are either above the national average or where household spending on fuel would leave a household with an income below the poverty line).

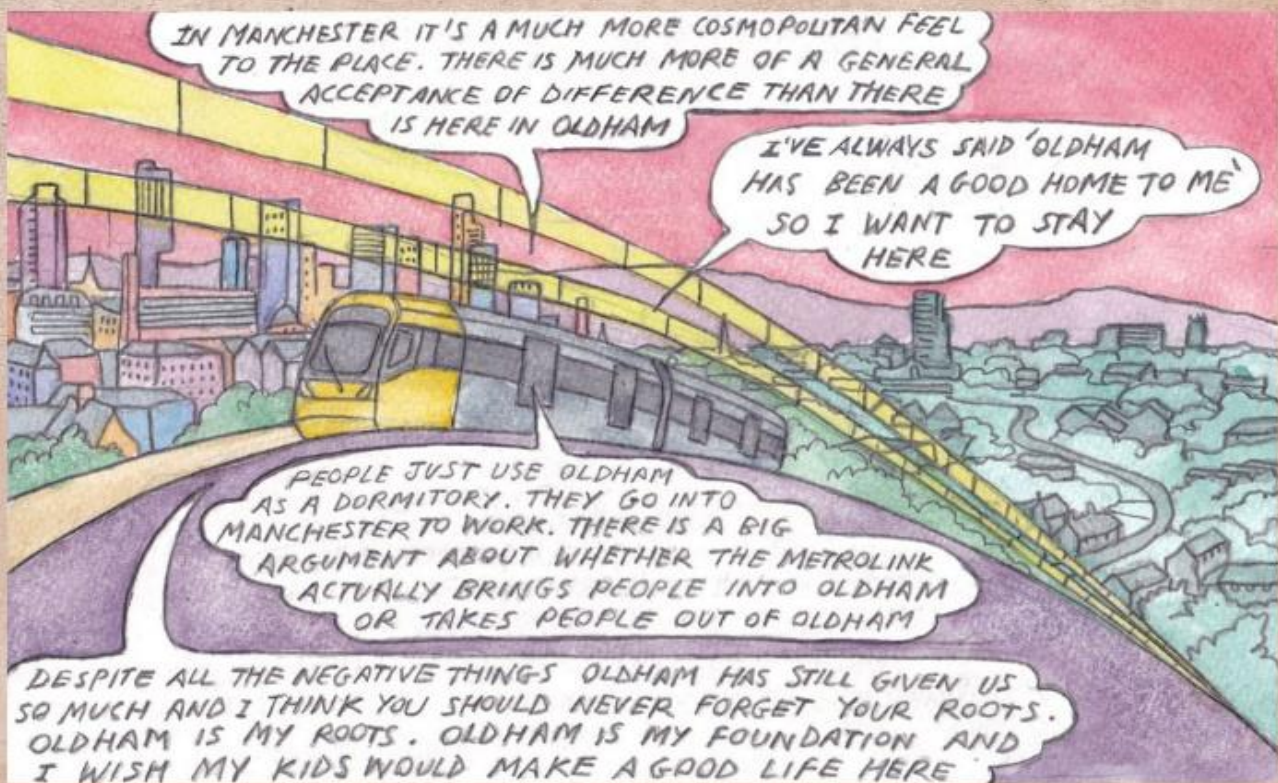
Research conducted by the End Child Poverty coalition also shows that the Coldhurst ward has the worst rate of child deprivation in Britain. The 2011 Census shows that just over 60% of the population in Coldhurst come from a Bangladeshi background.

Housing and segregation



In the wake of the 2001 riots, Oldham has repeatedly been identified as being 'segregated' along racial and ethnic lines. Over the course of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s a number of studies have shown that racist housing policies, particularly in the public sector, contributed to growing segregation within towns and cities across the country. In the early 1990s, the Commission for Racial Equality found the local authority in Oldham guilty of operating a segregationist housing policy. However, Census data shows that segregation decreased for most ethnic groups between 2001 and 2011, with people from most ethnic minority groups residing in a greater number of wards across Oldham. At the same time though, local White British and White Other populations were found to be living in areas that had become more ethnically homogenous. Local people also said that the town is experiencing a 'housing crisis'. Oldham's Fifth Homelessness Prevention Strategy notes that mortgage and rent arrears place a significant number of households at risk of homelessness, while Shelter identified Oldham as a 'repossession hotspot' in 2012. The Homelessness Prevention Strategy also reported that 2,659 local households had their homelessness prevented during 2014/15. In August 2018, the Local Government Chronicle reported that there had been a 16.6% increase in the number of households in arrears for council tax payments between 2016/17 and 2017/18. Residents also pointed to issues of class segregation and the polarisation between more affluent outlying areas and poorer neighbourhoods. In many cases, this polarisation was understood in terms of racial inequality, with the more affluent areas being referred to as white. Oldham Council's 2011 Census Ethnicity Report highlights that in comparison to white residents, people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage are still more likely to live in overcrowded conditions.

Investing in People?



Residents of Oldham frequently made reference to Manchester. There was a sense that a lot of the investment in the region has been concentrated in Manchester to the neglect of outlying areas. A 2016 Joseph Rowntree Foundation report into 'uneven growth' across the UK described how relative economic decline was particularly concentrated amongst smaller northern towns. So-called 'overshadowed places', located next to larger cities where economic activity and growth is largely focused, were identified as being particularly vulnerable. Residents discussed such concerns, fearing that Oldham's proximity and connections to Manchester might divert jobs and investment away from the town. Residents were also concerned that city devolution might not rectify this. Within media and political accounts of the 'left behind' apparently metropolitan, larger cities like Manchester are often contrasted with deprived post-industrial towns which are stigmatized as places of racism and poverty. While this ignores the presence of these challenges in larger cities, residents in some ways endorsed these ideas, contrasting what they viewed as a relative lack of integration in Oldham, with the 'cosmopolitan' feel of Manchester. Residents also expressed a strong sense of pride in being from Oldham. Irrespective of racialised identity, residents expressed a strong identification with Oldham as 'home'. There was also a strong desire to see greater opportunities and more investment in the town, with a particular emphasis placed on younger generations being able to imagine their futures there.

Racism, policing & hate crime after Brexit

YOU SEE YOUNG BLACK LADS ARE TREATED WITH SUSPICION FOR JUST BEING. YOU DON'T NECESSARILY HAVE TO HAVE DONE ANYTHING AND YOU CAN BE LIKE STOPPED AND SOMEONE SEARCH YOU...



WE HAVE SOMETHING CALLED 'TENSION MONITORING' IT'S WHICH IS CIRCULATED BY THE OLDHAM COUNCIL ON A TUESDAY. A DOCUMENT THE VAST MAJORITY OF INCIDENTS LOGGED ARE RACIAL ABUSE. BEFORE BREXIT WE USED TO GET ONE OR TWO REPORTS OF RACIAL ATTACKS, NOW IT'S FIVE OR SIX.

In the year following the 2001 riots, Oldham witnessed a 25% rise in 'racially motivated crimes'. Some local people we spoke to suggested that policing had improved since, noting examples of good community policing. However, people we spoke to also commented on the police's use of their stop and search powers. Historically, the police have been criticised for disproportionately targeting people racialised as 'non-white'. Despite there being an overall decline in the number of recorded stop and searches at the national level, Stopwatch have recently reported that the disproportionate use of stop and search in Greater Manchester actually increased between 2016 and 2017. In comparison to white people, Black people were four times and Asian people just over twice as likely to be stopped and searched by the police. At the national level, there were 4 stop and searches for every 1,000 White people, compared with 29 stop and searches for every 1,000 Black people in 2016/17. Additionally, some of the local people who took part in our research pointed out that racist attacks and abuse had increased since the EU referendum. Home Office statistics have shown that Lancashire Police recorded a 36% increase in 'race-related' crimes in 2016/17. At the national level, Home Office figures also show that the police recorded 'unprecedented spikes' in hate crime following both the EU Referendum and recent terror attacks in Manchester and London. In fact, the 29% increase in the number of hate crimes reported in 2016/17 was the biggest annual increase since records began.