

A photograph of Professor Lou Kushnick, an older man with glasses, wearing a suit and tie, speaking. A woman is visible in the background. The image is faded to serve as a background for the text.

Interview with Professor Lou Kushnick

13 June 2014

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JD: What would you say has been the significance of this journal?

LK: I think it exposed users to the latest literature, giving them a critical perspective, because there are still an enormous number of books in the field, that keep coming out, often reiterating the same arguments and the same battles, but it was always our belief that it was very important to cut through that and give the users a perspective. Also the scope it provided for young scholars, to publish articles in peer reviewed [*journals*], and that is becoming more and more difficult because departments are all competing in the RAE [*Research Assessment Exercise, now the Research Excellence Framework, REF*], and they are having to prioritise certain journals. Therefore, particularly young scholars who are adventurous, who are critical, who are trying to go across the boundaries, find it very difficult, because they don't quite fit, and if they don't get published, even in less than prestigious [*journals*], it's very difficult for their futures. We wanted to be able to give them a space in which to try out their ideas and get responses, so I think the journal kept both of those perspectives of what we were trying to do right from the beginning [*with Sage Race Relations Abstracts*], and then continued on in this journal.

JD: I was going to ask you about your previous journal. So what was the first journal that you were involved in?

LK: In 1980 I was asked by Sivanandan, [*director Emeritus of the Institute of Race Relations, London*], to take over *Sage Race Relations Abstracts*. Robert Moore, who was interviewed here by CoDE [*Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity, The University of Manchester*], a couple of weeks ago, founded the journal with his own money, his own commitment, and then he passed it on to the Institute, with SAGE as the academic publisher, but we had all the editorial control. After Robert it was Stuart Bentley, who was very dedicated politically, but he had MS [*Multiple Sclerosis*], so I was involved for a number of years before 1980 writing abstracts. But it got too much for Stuart so I took over in 1980 and carried on until SAGE sold it from under us in 2007. I was lucky because I had a wonderful associate editor, Benjamin Bowser, who is now retired, he's an Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Cal State, East Hayward [*California State University*], but he was at Cornell at that time. I had never met him, but we were put in touch, he was tremendous, thinking up ideas and liaising with contributors and potential contributors in the States.

And at Manchester, one of my former students, Roz Rickards, became assistant editor for a couple of years, and then she left, and then fortunately, Jacqueline Ould, who is our director now, stepped up and we worked together tremendously well, for many many years. It was crazy, various people said, '*There must be a way to organise this electronically?*', but nobody ever did it, because what we were trying to do was identify the literature but also to give the maximum number of cross references, so any one article would have a 3 x 5 card for the author, if it was two authors, two 3 x 5 cards, then it would have the primary category, then there would be the cross references, so mechanically we had to do that four times a year, we would sit at the kitchen table, either hers or mine, and we'd go through it. That was after getting all the abstracts, so we had abstractors in the US, abstractors abroad, abstractors in British universities. We had people like Pedro Noguera at NYU [*New York University*], what he did was he used it as a way of bringing his grad students along, so they took a theme, they organised this, and he selected a whole range of literature, modern and older and each of his students took a certain number of these articles around this theme and they wrote a joint paper but that meant

you had to get all of those articles in the index as well, so it just spiralled and spiralled. But also one thing that was very important was to cover grey literature. You'd review it, someone would say, '*That's very interesting*', but they'd have no idea how to get it, so what we'd do was have a section at the back of each issue, on what we called 'addresses of elusive publications'. Also we saw it as a way of bringing young scholars along, young scholars of colour, progressive scholars. James Jennings, now at Tufts [Massachusetts], used to be director at the William Monroe Trotter Institute, African American Institute at UMASS [University of Massachusetts], Boston, and he was absolutely brilliant. He still worked with us on this journal [Ethnicity and Race in a Changing World]. He was Afro Puerto Rican, from New York. And he had this incredible network of young scholars, whom he'd mentored and so he would constantly commission or let us know of somebody who was writing something, and we met the most wonderful people over the years so that was a continuing supply of essays. Then some of us felt there was a need for more contemporary responses, so if there was a big dispute in the scientific racist field, or whatever, and somebody wanted to respond quickly to it before it became embedded, so we said, '*Ok, we'll create a comments section*', and so we had this section, which was remarkable.

I wrote for it, other people wrote for it here, and people abroad, and I think it kept it alive. It was distributed through all sorts of progressive networks and so that was a crucial part of what we did. Then I remember being with Frank Bonilla, who was one of our supporters, a Puerto Rican activist, at Hunter College, which was part of CUNY, City University of New York, and I visited every year, when I'd go to the States, and we were talking and he said, '*You know it would be great if we could get some of these articles around a theme published*'. Welfare was a big issue over there, because Clinton had sold out and the line of certain democrats was, '*Well we're recognising reality and we've had to shore up our support*'. There were people who hated welfare, and the welfare reform bill basically gutted welfare entitlements, and we had generated lots of articles, I'd written some, James had written some, Frank, he had written, and so we went to, I think it was NYU press [New York University Press], and we got a book (*A New Introduction to Poverty: The Role of Race, Power, and Politics*, New York, NYU Press, 1999), which was a collection of these essays and we wrote a fore piece and an after piece. We had people from Britain writing and people from the US and it was a thematic book about welfare reform, poverty and racism. So that was very good, very positive, that came out of what we were doing. And then Ben came up with this idea, it was very non PC [*politically correct*], because he had started interviewing, just by random [chance], progressive Black scholars, of an age, many of them were near death or near retirement and he started interviewing them asking, '*How did this happen? What was happening?*', and I think about this because upstairs on the fourth floor [Manchester Central Library], you have the picture of Arthur Lewis, the Black political economist. There's a building on this campus [The University of Manchester], named after him.

But can you imagine what it would have been like for him as probably the only Black professor in any venue he was in? This was very rich and so we had three, four, five essays, that he'd done and we published them in SAGE [*Sage Race Relations Abstracts*] and in a book *Against the Odds* (*Against the Odds: Scholars Who Challenged Racism in the Twentieth Century*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2002). It was a very good collection but it was all male and so it was a great embarrassment. Progressive people were saying, '*How could you publish a book that had no women in?*', so we talked to people like Barbara Ransby and others about another book, but everybody had their own agendas, their own projects so it never came out, but that was a great failing I thought. *Against the Odds* still sells the odd copy, but hopefully it's in libraries, and people can use it. So I was very excited, and all of us involved were very excited about the journal. And then, it was disclosed at very short notice, that SAGE was selling it. Obviously they were selling it because it was very time consuming to have people write abstracts, and you had to generate the funds to pay the £1.50 per abstract [*laughs*], so ridiculous, that figure never changed. So it was cheaper for them to just have an in-house operation

or some company that just basically took the author's promo and reproduced it. But fortunately, you and Emma and others, pursued the idea of creating a journal and obviously it was important for us, as a small organisation without a budget for many years, [laughs] or a very small budget, to be able to keep up with the literature. We were cataloguing this material even before main libraries were, and so we were very much at the cutting edge of that. So we kept it going until it became too difficult, financially and time wise. So I think we go out with our heads high.

JD: What changes have you noticed in publishing over this time? From SAGE to now?

LK: When we were first starting, it was interesting because it was following the 60s, so there were an incredible number of young progressive scholars, all over, who were busy addressing the issues of racism. David Roediger for example, at Illinois, was trying to follow on from WEB Du Bois; he was a White academic, because the issue was not skin colour or ethnicity, it was politics, and so he's tried to move on in a sense what's called Whiteness studies, and asks, *'Why did race, race relations, that is racism really, against African Americans and Latinos and later on Asians, so distort working class history in the United States?'* Everybody talked about American exceptionalism, not very critically, but he was saying you had large parts of the dominant working class, continually acting against their own economic, and social and family interests, because ideologically and structurally the society was built on racism. I remember Hal Baron making the point; *'It didn't matter that every African person in America was a slave, as long as every slave was of African descent'*. So it created two races, the Whites who were the superiors, who by definition couldn't be enslaved because they were White, and the Blacks who were the fit subjects for enslavement, and this continued in terms of privileging Whiteness. Incredible that you had 'the socialism of fools' in California, I mean really militant and radical socialists, working class activists and leaders, who were in the vanguard of Asian exclusion movements. Why? Because they said, *'The Asian can live on a bowl of rice a day and they didn't have the character to make the sacrifices to create a unified working class and solidarity'*. In the former Southern states and in the Northern states, it was the African Americans who lacked the character. It was just insane, and so what we had was a society which was built ideologically and materially on privileging White skin.

Now, most of those White skin privileges were very little, very low but they were sufficient, for example in 1972 there was this attempt at court ordered integration of schools in Boston, which was one of the most segregated cities in the United States, so they were going to move Black children from Roxbury into Southy [South Boston] and move White children from Southy into Roxbury. Well Southy's high school did not get a single pupil into higher education, so they were not defending a great system, but what happened was; in preparation for the poor White, working class, Irish origin kids coming to Roxbury, schools in Roxbury were given new text books, that they had never been given before, I mean this was crazy. There was a point below which you cannot put Whites. Well, White people would actually kill, beat to death a Haitian man who had nothing to do with education, he'd come to pick up his wife who was a nurse in a hospital in South Boston, and he was Black. They had stolen school buses, they attacked the police who were reluctantly protecting the kids - they didn't really want to because most of the police came from similar neighbourhoods.

Arnie Hirsch was looking at the creation of the second ghetto in Chicago, ground breaking work, laying the whole foundation of the way we look at public housing and the development of public housing, not as a way of integrating or breaking down segregation, it was a way of supporting segregation. So in each of these areas you had people like Robin Kelley, just challenging, but they've now got grey hairs like me. And then other forces came into being, the divisions along ethnic lines and gender lines, took its toll in terms of people addressing commonalities of experience and moving forward, so that was crucial.

The university sector has been gutted in the United States as is being done in the UK. Private colleges exist just to make money, so they're not interested in anything except making money. They call them in Britain - *the Guardian* had a series of articles - 'the ATM colleges', so the only thing is the students arrive to go to the ATM machine to get out the £9,000 loan. The college sucks up the money for them, it's just disastrous. But also in a time of retrenchment what happens is the most conservative, most reactionary forces find the way to serve the interests, or to make it clear that the university can be now restructured to serve the interests of, the people with power, rather than the powerless. More and more conservative forces go on boards of trustees of universities. In America, most medical schools do not teach workplace health issues. Why? Because the big donors own the mines and therefore, they weren't interested in protecting the rights of their workers and former workers who got black lung, brown lung, emphysema and so on.

So it's very difficult in each area, if you are pursuing a study of the powerful, rather than a study of the powerless. But we're lucky here because we still have, the ESRC [*The Economic and Social Research Council*], funded CoDE project, a very big project, funded for four years, and hopefully this will continue and they're dealing with serious issues. But in many institutions there's less and less space to operate. The publisher wants to guarantee that the books will be sold, but if less books are being sold, various pressures on students' lives and finances mean there's less and less books bought, and more things are going online, and if you can't guarantee that the book is going to be taken up as a text book or something, it altogether means it's becoming a constriction of publishing the sort of challenging things that we want to see.

JD: Do you think there's been a change in the audience of this sort of material?

LK: (sighs) I think so. But I don't know. I mean each generation is like, '*We were red hot and they're all working in the McDonalds*', but there are objective forces. In the States, the big universities have needs blind financial packages, which means they don't look at your finances until they decide if they accept you or reject you. Then they work out a plan, whether it's working on campus, loans, whatever to get it through. But these are not all the universities, these are the top ones, who have been forced to do that by the militancy of the minority students who have continued in many ways and still today, but it's very difficult, because many minority students are themselves the children of previously militant students, so who have made it to a degree. The Black middle class is less able to pass on their status and their money and their position to the next generation than White middle class people, but a certain segment of doctors and lawyers are able to pass on their status. The problem is that it's not your skin colour that matters, that determines your politics, it's other things, so if their parents had this fight, this struggle against racism to get where they are, but if you are born into that, it can have an effect just like the children of White formerly working class people; I mean Jack Straw, Will Straw is being parachuted into a seat, this is a reproduction of class, but not as effective in the Black community in either country.

So that has an implication in terms of the militancy or the questioning but if the job market gets harder and harder, there is greater and greater pressure to conform, not to make waves because you won't get a job, so there are all of those pressures, and of course if you are coming into university from a non-traditional background you very often don't have any financial backing from your parents, in fact you're working. They're making a great struggle because you're not contributing to the family income, you may be living at home, even if you're not living at home, you're not contributing, but your parents want you to succeed, but you have to work. So people are working six hours, twelve hours, eighteen hours a week, well that adds up if you've got a demanding academic programme. But I mean

there are all these factors. So the militancy that we saw is still there in a sense, because you saw it in the Occupying Movement, you see it periodically, about the companies not paying their taxes, you have people who are prepared to confront reality, to challenge the 99% - 1% divided society, but they are a minority. They always were a minority but it's hard to say whether they are even a smaller minority than they were before. One of the things that we've done here and in the US is make the definition of racism so narrow. In America, people are like, *'Oh God the guy who owns the Los Angeles basket ball team, he said the 'N' word. You have to sell the club'*, so that's racism, right, it's only that? Or somebody goes on television and says the 'N' word, like Jeremy Clarkson, but that's not the core of racism.

Racism is how resources are administered, distributed through society. What are the physical barriers which affect certain groups of people and not others? What are the forces that privilege certain groups of people? And so the Civil Rights movement was fighting, but in order to get the widest possible coalition, it couldn't address economic issues, and when Martin Luther King tried to address economic issues, and also the war in Vietnam, he was totally marginalised. I mean people forget, because he was assassinated, and before he was assassinated he made the march on Washington speech in 1963, but in between '63 and '68 when he was assassinated, what happened? There may be a Martin Luther King Day and a Martin Luther King Boulevard, but in between he became more and more marginalised, he had to put up with more and more violence when he came up to Chicago to try to extend the fight in the North. Other Blacks, other Civil Rights leaders attacked him saying that he was putting the movement at risk by raising such issues, he had no right to raise those issues. So in a sense what we did was, we created a space, the space is you could be an entertainer, or you could play football, but in fact, even in all the sports, people say, *'It's a Black sport'*, Blacks have to be even better to be carried on the team as an auxiliary player or on the roster, than a White player they are competing with.

So what we have is a structurally racist society, Blacks are worse off in America now than they were when Obama was elected president. And Obama can't do anything for them because he can't raise the level of the Blacks unless he changes the structure and parameters of public policy. But those that don't want those changes will attack it as privileging the Blacks, well, there's no privileging the poorest people in your population, you are raising them up as citizens who are entitled to a decent life, but he can't do that, and so the Blacks are worse off now. The Republicans overplayed their hands last time trying to stop them voting so it gave a renewed vigour in the presidential election last round, saying, *'They are trying to stop the Obama from voting'*, but that's not going to work because increasingly African Americans look at what's happening to them and say, *'What difference does it make?'* I mean, they came out to vote from previously not voting because nobody ever made a difference and they are going back to *'nobody ever made a difference'*. I don't mean you can't have an Occupying Movement but to be able to sort of maintain it as an ongoing force for real social change, I just don't see it.

JD: So you've already covered some of this, but, have you seen differences in race relations since the time of SAGE to now?

LK: Yeh, I think the changes are in the literature that we've published. People are addressing the economic exclusion, but it's possible, in a racist society, to discuss the inequality solely in class terms, but the way the class structures operate in a racist society is it is part of the system and so there is some literature which is progressive and I mean important, there's no question, in terms of addressing these issues but I think it's been very much marginalised. I think a lot of the stuff doesn't address these issues. You have to go beyond Civil Rights, Martin Luther King won. Well he didn't win and they didn't win. They got rid of de jure segregation but the moment they started talking about socio economic

issues we then got the agenda of reverse racism, extremism and so on. Look what's happening to the Muslims in Britain at the moment. It's absolutely outrageous, as if they've given up on terrorism, oh it's conservatism or Islam, well I don't think we should have any faith schools, but if you're going to let Catholics be taught only that abortion is bad, or the Haredi Jews are given the opportunity not to answer any questions on exams about evolution, because that would upset them. What do they think faith schools are going to do? Be good and inclusive and questioning? Of course not. Nobody, Gove [*Secretary of State for Education, 2010 – 2014*], or any of these people, ever questioned what the faith schools do, OFSTED [*Office for Standards in Education*] never questioned what the faith schools do.

The moment the Muslims start doing that, again you can reinforce their outside status and that gives you the chance to try to score political points, as your stand against terrorism. What the hell's happening to the Muslims? What happens to those kids? What happens to those families? You're not telling them they're part of our society and then you attack them because they are self segregating, but all the segregation wasn't all self segregation, it was White flight, it was Whites excluding, newspaper attacks on Islam, Islamophobia, so I think all these issues have to be addressed and the fight against this is being pursued by very progressive forces but the fight for it is very powerful. I mean even the BBC; today there was a report about getting PIP [*Personal Independence Payment*], the government's website is telling you not to call back unless it's after more than six months, for most people it's a year to get the benefit, the universal credit is three years behind, and all this evidence is there, so the BBC, the prime story is 'Trojan horse'. Even they follow that agenda so sometimes they even forget to say that the Trojan horse document was most probably a forgery [*Following a leaked letter allegedly by Islamists in Birmingham, the Trojan horse was a supposed Muslim attempt to control schools in England*]. It's a fraudulent document and so they sometimes say it, most of the time they don't say it, so the space within which people can operate becomes narrower and narrower.

JD: So what do you think the ending of this journal is going to leave? Do you think it's going to leave a hole or a gap?

LK: It will, because we were doing two things: we were giving a space for certain articles to be published and to have contemporary books held up, so we've got to find other ways of doing it, maybe in terms of our website, perhaps. We are operating within severe financial constraints, we are short of staff and committed to doing really important things, the plans for the future are very interesting and very well developed and we are not masters of our own fate. We have to do what we can do. We've achieved a great deal to get here and now we've got to make it our business to make best use of it and continue to be a space where people can access material that's progressive, find discussions that address these issues, can be pointed to other sources, that's the best we can do.

JD: Is there anything else you wanted to say?

LK: I want to commend you and Emma [*Emma Britain*] and Jo [*Jo Manby*] and whoever has been involved with producing it [*Ruth Tait, Hannah Niblett*], on top of every bit of work that you were already doing, which is commendable to put it mildly. And I really congratulate you for what you've done.

JD: Thank you.

Julie Devonald interviewing Professor Lou Kushnick.