

Travelling man

'The place where you've forged a lot of your intellectual horizons stays with you'



Nasar Meer is the newly-appointed Professor of Race, Identity and Citizenship at the School of Social and Political Science. Nick Bibby meets up with him to take the long way home.

It is difficult to get far into a conversation with Professor Nasar Meer without being infected by an invigorating dose of enthusiasm. His passion for his field of research, and for sharing and discussing the issues it raises seems to spark off him as we talk.

Although enjoyable, it makes him difficult to interview as the conversation keeps vanishing off along tangents and weaving its way over any number of subjects – and he seems all too happy to follow it.

In large part, this is because his arrival is certainly well-timed, with Scotland, the UK, Europe and the US all struggling with issues and debates that fall firmly within his field – race, identity and citizenship.

As we potter between coffee shops around Edinburgh's George Square, the conversation wanders with us - from his work with the Young Academy of Scotland to the role of social sciences in informing policymaking. Yet, throughout it all, the issue of race and its raucous return to frontline politics runs like a nagging thread begging me to pull at it.

Scotland's story

I should be asking about his time at the University of Strathclyde, which he's leaving to return to Edinburgh, or the book he has coming out a week after we speak, but the implications of his research for Europe's refugee crisis or a United States coming to terms with President Trump's ban on migration from seven predominantly Muslim countries are only too clear – and all too distracting.

As a result, I take a surprisingly long time to ask what may seem to be an obvious question: "What is race?"

"The contention of both natural and social scientists is that races don't exist," he explains, adding, "or that there's one race, *Homo sapiens*."

"So, sociologists want to know; why do we keep inventing race? My answer is partly about the legacies of historical events such as slavery, empire or the Holocaust and partly about the present in terms of how social criteria shift from colour to culture to religion. Each of these has a family resemblance to what has gone before but each is also specific to the immediate social and political context in which we find ourselves," Meer points out.

What about that context then, what about the much-vaunted idea that racism 'just isn't Scottish'?

"It's different in Scotland," he says. "When post-war migrants arrived here, they entered a climate in which they weren't seen as a mark of imperial decline. Furthermore, the numbers were different; it was very difficult to tell a story of overcrowding, of pressure on housing and on public services."

"Also," Meer adds, "Scotland already had its own 'other', which wasn't about black, white or brown but about Protestant and Catholic."

"The result has been that black and ethnic minority people have reimagined a Scottish identity in a way that isn't true of black and ethnic minority people in England," he says.

"In this respect, Scottish national identity has, what David McCrone has called, a 'lower entry tariff'. You don't have to be white or Christian or speak Gaelic," Meer concludes.

Coming home

His mention of David McCrone, Emeritus Professor of Sociology, brings me back to the task in hand and we talk about his return to the School of Social and Political Science where he completed his Masters degree 15 years ago.

"It feels like coming home," Meer says of his appointment as Professor of Race, Identity and Citizenship at the School. "The place where you've forged a lot of your intellectual horizons stays with you."

I ask if he's excited to be back. "Very excited," he replies. "I'm looking forward to making an intellectual home here. There's lots of scope for cooperation with people I know by reputation."

Meer adds: "I'm particularly looking forward to working with colleagues in the School, across the College and throughout the wider University."

I'm left with the feeling that this is a man fascinated by points of intersection; someone who relishes the interconnectedness of ideas but for whom those junctions are not simply the meeting of two lines of argument but crossroads that demand a choice from all of us as to which road to travel.

Professor Meer's most recent book was published on 1 March, 2017: N. Meer (2017) (Ed) *Islam and Modernity*. London: Routledge.

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