

## Nasar Meer

**Nasar Meer is Professor of Race, Identity and Citizenship at Edinburgh University. His postgraduate study was in the sociology of scientific knowledge at Edinburgh and he wrote his PhD on W.E.B. Du Bois, citizenship and Muslim identity at Bristol University. In 2016 he was awarded the Royal Society of Edinburgh's Thomas Reid Medal for excellence in the social sciences, and in 2017 he was elected as a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences**



### Your first book is *The Labyrinth of Solitude* by Octavio Paz – why did you choose that?

Can I just begin by saying that this has proven harder than I'd anticipated. As I sat down to think about these books I quickly realised that my reason for choosing them were more biographical than purely intellectual, in so far as each of these books have helped me to understand my life and that of those around me.

So let's begin with my first choice. When I started at Essex University I didn't know they had brilliant sociology and politics departments: I enrolled to study Latin American Studies. I'd travelled to Ecuador a few years before and I liked the degree program at Essex (I wanted to learn Spanish and go back to study politics there). Before sociology eventually got me, I was introduced to this collection of essays by Octavio Paz.

In truth I didn't really understand all of them but the chapter on 'Mexican masks' left its mark by forcing me to think more seriously about two things. One is the relationship between private identity and the public self. Sociologists of course have a wide repertoire of concepts to describe the same dynamic but, with the exception of Du Bois, they always felt abstracted or 'deontological' to me.

Not so with Paz. The rhythm, tenor and illustrations are rich in drawing out the ways people negotiate 'I', 'me', the 'self' and 'subjectivity' in conditions where they are a cultural or racial minority. That's the second part of the essay that did a lot of work.

The Mexican story in the US, along with African-American story, is at the heart of what the United States is, in a way that drove home something important about the ahistorical and vacuous ways I had been taught about national identity and racial minorities, and which would later feed into ways I thought about Britishness (and more

recently Scottishness). The book has all kinds of flaws too: it is essentialist in places and oddly teleological in others, but it gave me an insight into a way of thinking about the world that has shaped my sociological imagination ever since.

### Your next choice is *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* by Michael Lipsky – what made you choose that?

My siblings and I grew up in relative poverty. We had the essentials but we were what I would later come to understand as 'asset poor'. Our parents did their very best and were rich in dignity, but the local state was our benefactor.

When I first read Lipsky it took me back to the routine encounters my mum and dad would have with our local authority in West Yorkshire. Their English was poor and so one of us kids invariably went along to translate.

What Lipsky shows so well, and which we experienced routinely, is that in order to process large numbers of clients, 'street-level bureaucrats' develop idiosyncratic and arbitrary routines to ration services and manage clients. As administrators they themselves are 'coping' but they do so through stereotyping and making access difficult, requiring clients to wait for services and withholding information, all intended to decrease demand and make their jobs more manageable (e.g., my dad being asked to take a ticket to wait even though the reception knew they wouldn't get through half the existing clients to see him that day). "Their actions effectively become the public policies they carry out," said Lipsky.

In many respects this book gives us an empirically emergent theory of social action, and when you think about the condition and role of function of the local state, I can't imagine how Lipsky could be any more relevant.



### Why did you choose for your third book *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois?

So where do I start with a book like this? I did part of my PhD on Du Bois when I was at Bristol, and during the interim 15 years there's been a massive growth in interest in his work, and for good reason.

Born before the invention of the electric light bulb, Du Bois (1868-1963) would go on to make an astonishing contribution to the social and political sciences. By the time of his death, at which time satellites were orbiting the earth, his scholarly and wider intellectual repertoire ought to have secured his place in the canon.

Over the last two decades, people have addressed why this did not happen. Most take the entire sweep of Du Bois' contribution and orient it, very persuasively, to an argument about omission from core features of American sociology in particular.

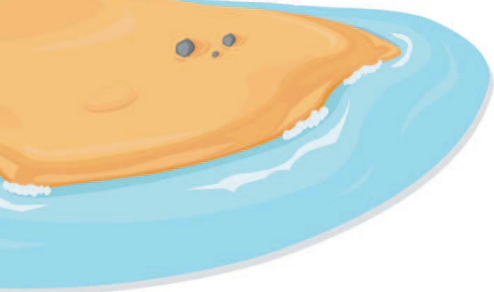
What I have always got from Du Bois is something much more focused in his concept of double consciousness. This referred to the sense of unresolved – but not irresolvable – conflict, anchored in a process of structural and psychic misrecognition. Sociologically, we can understand this as a schema which becomes progressively 'thicker' in capturing (a) the contexts in which minority subjectivity is formed, (b) the nature and form of this subjectivity in and for itself, alongside (c) the transformative potential it heralds for society as a whole.

This includes an examination of both the conflicting accounts evident in the construction

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of the self, and the grounds on which minorities who are subject to exclusionary discourses can strive for political recognition and incorporation.

So although formed in a specific context and concerned with the conditions of particular peoples, it is clear that in many ways Du Boisian conceptions of consciousness help us understand that socio-cultural self-esteem emerges from forms of group recognition, alongside personal recognition.

The relationship between personal and group recognition in Du Bois' account is characterised by the idea that the 'inner strife' affecting African-Americans individually is informed by the wider mastery of white Americans, but that African-American consciousness is not the sum of this misrecognition. It's a rich and profound book whose contributions include insights that would later be celebrated when expressed in remarkably similar ways by Cooley, Mead, Mills and Goffman, amongst many others.

### Your next choice is *The Science Question in Feminism* by Sandra Harding – why?

I came to read this book quite late, when I was studying what used to be called the sociology of scientific knowledge at Edinburgh (and what now is subsumed into science studies broadly conceived). It was a revelation in and of itself, and it gave me the confidence to question what had seemed off limits – the nature and content of scientific knowledge.

Harding wasn't alone in this endeavour, of course, and philosophically this is an old concern, but with the exception of being taught about Kuhn, as sociology students we didn't get a great deal of contemporary challenges to scientific method and empiricism, and the kinds of rhetorical authority that come with that.

On the contrary, Harding's book begins by challenging what she calls the dogmas of empiricism, charging that distortions result when the phenomenal world is mapped in ways that reflect revealing inequalities in knowledge production. The interests of the dominant in this respect limit the horizon of empiricism and thus of objectivity.

Empirical evidence yielded by the subjugated, on the other hand, enlarges the realm of objectivity. Standpoint epistemologies and 'successor sciences' are the means through the latent hierarchy of knowledge production for Harding, placing on top that which openly acknowledges the social construction of knowledge, and admits a political agenda in the production of the same.

Though the conceptual focus is not one I carried through in my own work, the politics and sociological power of Harding's critique and historical vision scythed a route through which to pursue critical accounts of empiricism and objectivity through other topics too.

### Your last choice is *Not Easy Being British: Culture, Colour and Citizenship* by Tariq Modood – what led you to this?

This set of collected essays and commentaries was published not long after the Rushdie Affair. Tariq was probably the first social scientist to get beyond the binary rhetoric of being for or against *The Satanic Verses* by placing the UK Muslim mobilisations within a register of conventional minority claim-making (rather than blasphemy or religious offence). Instead Tariq's book helped establish the ways in which anti-racists should take seriously Muslim minorities, rather than dismiss them as anti-Enlightenment.

Tariq began his book with a set of biographical reflections that feed seamlessly into a

wider repertoire of arguments that incrementally broaden our sociological categories.

For example, the book stresses the need for concepts of race and racism that can critique socio-cultural environments which devalue people because of physical differences but also because of membership of a cultural minority and, critically, where the two overlap and create a double disadvantage (including on the grounds of religious identity).

This requires a sociology "that is able to connect a group's internal structure, values and understanding of itself...with how that group is categorised and treated as a subordinate race within wider society". In many respects the book was far ahead of the curve in showing interest in what I would later call 'Muslim consciousness', and indeed my own thinking owes an enormous debt to Tariq in this respect.

Important too was how the book corresponded with what Hall called the "end of innocence" surrounding the notion of an essential black subject, counterpoised as a positive identity against social relations marked by racism, and where the politics of representation around the black subject shifted enough, in Hall's term, for us to "begin to see a renewed contestation over the meaning of the term 'ethnicity' itself".

What Stuart Hall missed and Tariq Modood saw in this regard was not just the role of ethnicity but of Muslim identity politics, and for that reason alone I would encourage anybody interested in these debates to consult this book.

### As your luxury you've chosen a book, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, by Sherman Alexie – why?

I came across this book through one of my brothers, who recently took back his signed copy and so I had to buy it again! It's largely fiction, though in the 20th anniversary edition Alexie admits that as much was harvested from experience as was conjured up in his mind.

I can't really describe this collection and so you'll have to read it for yourself. What I can say is that its over 20 short stories are very much framed by life growing up on a Spokane Native American reservation near Seattle.

Spanning tales of despair, poverty, shame and alcoholism, but with enormous counterweights of comedy, intellect and a hint of magic realism, it reached out from a very particular context to speak to a universal condition. Isn't that in the end the purpose of good fiction?

## Professor Meer's choices:

1. *The Labyrinth of Solitude* by Octavio Paz (1950) Grove Press
  2. *Street-Level Bureaucracy* by Michael Lipsky (1980) Russell Sage Foundation
  3. *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) A.C. McClurg
  4. *The Science Question in Feminism* by Sandra Harding (1986) Cornell University Press
  5. *Not Easy Being British: Culture, Colour and Citizenship* by Tariq Modood (1992) Trentham
- Luxury.** *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* by Sherman Alexie (1993) Atlantic Monthly Press