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Understanding the world through accessible cultural resources

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Introduction

Using accessible cultural resources to understand the world is not a new concept. It is, however, a complex and multi-layered activity with historical routes in many different aspects of the sciences. The activity is clearly subjective, both in terms of the research subject and the cultural resources accessed. My cultural reflections span a period from the early 1960s to the present. I will try to structure this article by firstly outlining some of the personal cultural inflection points that influenced my choice of subject matter to research, and give a brief outline of the areas I spent time researching. Secondly, I will outline the type of cultural resources that I used for my research and, to conclude, I will reflect on how accessing cultural resources has, and still does, positively influenced my life.

Short biographical details: I was the seventh of eight children and like my siblings was born in a two-bedroom council flat in North Edinburgh estate. My father was a construction labourer most of the time. My mother, after having eight children in eleven years, was a full-time housewife. By the time I reached the age of four, we had moved to a relatively commodious, four-bedroom council flat in an even bigger council estate in North Edinburgh.

Cultural inflection point 1: Early education

Reflecting back on my childhood, my first cultural inflection point was at the age of eleven. The state education system at that time was quite hierarchical, with a bursary system to allow fee paying schools to 'cream off' the brighter pupils. Our primary school would offer selected P7 pupils the opportunity to participate in the bursary programme. The system used by the class teacher was to spend the last part of the school day prepping the (half a dozen or so) selected pupils for sitting an exam at the fee-paying schools towards the end of the academic year. The prepping would involve the teacher in writing up their homework assignments on the blackboard, marking the previous assignments and giving feedback to the 'elite' pupils. The other thirty pupils in the class were told to be quiet and read a book. On reflection, the system

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was very elitist and compounded the already emerging inequalities of opportunity. I was invited to join the 'bursary bairns' but opted, in spite of my parent's advice, to attend the local high school. It could be argued that the Scottish Education system has not changed significantly, with the brightest pupils still utilising a disproportionate amount of educational resources.

Cultural inflection point 2: Available choices

My first day at Ainslie Park High School in August 1967 was, on reflection, a continuation of the elitist streaming that took place at primary school. The new S1 intake assembled in the playground in their old primary school cohorts waiting to be assigned to their class. The class system was in three cohorts: Academic (A) (six classes) would be mixed boys and girls with the main focus on academic subjects. Boys (B) (five classes) boys only, with an emphasis on technical skills with a view to preparing them for work on the shop floor or other manual labour. Girls (G) (five classes) girls only, with an emphasis on basic office and domestic skills. I cannot recall with certainty, but I suspect very few pupils would have been able to escape their educational pre-ordination and be moved to another category. It should be noted that gender self-recognition was not a factor in the mid 1960s. Neither was the possibility that girls might want to be engineers or boys might want to be typists! My own second cultural inflection point was making a choice between working hard and getting good qualifications or hanging around the street corner with other delinquents. The latter option was taken, and I ended up being permanently excluded from school at 14 years of age.

Cultural inflection point 3: Political activism

By the age of seventeen I was married to my pregnant girlfriend, and became a father at the age of eighteen. I was engaged in a series of low-wage, unskilled work with sporadic bouts of unemployment until along came what proved to be a seismic cultural inflection point in my life. The Conservative Party won the General Election in 1979, and Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. Whilst not from a politically active family, my working-class perspective seemed to suggest that Tory governments were not good news for working-class communities. This perspective was debated on several occasions in my workplace and local pub. In a particularly heated debate in the latter, I was challenged with a, not unusual, Scottish pub retort 'If you feel that strongly, why don't you join the fucking Labour Party?' I said I would, and the following week I did.

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The first branch meeting was a bit intimidating as I knew nothing about party procedures, agendas, correspondence etc. However, I joined my new-found comrades for a beer after the meeting and, with hindsight, I was lucky that the Pilton-Muirhouse branch had three left-leaning Councillors and some local activists that I could relate to. Within a few months, I was an evangelical socialist attending citywide meetings and discussing anti trade union legislation, international politics and Clause 4. The latter was a massive issue in the Labour Party at that time: *To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.* This was the foundation, at least in theory, for the Party programme and manifesto.

The nationalised coal industry was powering the nationalised energy grid and the nationalised steel industry which, in turn, supplied the materials for the nationalised shipbuilding industry and car factories. In addition, British Telecom (BT), British Gas and British Petroleum (BP) were publicly-owned. This system had the capacity to grow, and that was the driving belief for many socialists at the time.

The Conservative onslaught was happening in a wide range of areas, with attacks on trade unions, local authority autonomy, reductions in benefits, selling off public assets and a shift in investment from manufacturing to service industries etc. As a new socialist, it appeared that the Government attacks were never-ending. On a cultural level, many musicians and artists were supportive of campaigning against the Government, and traditional songs of protest were enlivened by a new wave of high-profile musicians. In Scotland, organisations like Left Turns, a collective of musicians, were always on hand to lend support to campaigns. Creativity and art also became prevalent in campaigning with local arts organisations in Edinburgh. Craigmillar Festival, Wester Hailes (WHALE) and Muirhouse Festival Activities Centre etc. All became intrinsic to social and housing campaigns. It is interesting to note the change in cultural emphasis, with music and art shifting from being an aloof bystander to becoming integral to campaigns in working class communities.

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At a UK level the tide seemed to be changing. From Thatcher's election in May 1979 until October 1982 every UK opinion poll (84 in total) showed Labour ahead of the Conservatives. Two major events would soon change the opinion poll leads. Firstly, there was a major split in the Labour Party with a significant number of MPs from the right of the party leaving to form a new political grouping (The Social Democratic Party). This division led to Labour losing its opinion poll lead over the Conservatives for the first time since the Thatcher election. The Social Democrats then forged an Alliance with the Liberal Party. The Conservative lead was further increased after victory in the Falklands war. The 1983 election saw a three-way split, and Labour was well-beaten. For the record, the result was Conservative 42% (-1%), Labour 27% (-9%) Alliance 25% (+11%). Interestingly, for psephologists at least, Scotland bucked the national trend, and Labour increased its hold in elections including local authorities and, in 1984, giving Edinburgh Council a Labour majority for the first time in its history. The victory was celebrated with an impromptu performance by renowned Scottish singer Dick Gaughan on the roof of the City Chambers.

Finally, in 1997, the Conservatives were beaten by Labour in a general election. Tony Blair was swept to power with a large majority. After being damaged by the right wing desertions in the early eighties, Labour was then damaged by mass desertions on the left over the decision to support the United States and join a coalition of armies to attack Iraq on the basis of military intelligence which was quickly to be proved inaccurate. Perhaps this was a moment of schadenfreude for the centrists in the Labour Party.

Cultural inflection point 4: New knowledge

In 1995, unusually for the traditionally-staid higher education sector in Edinburgh, a project was developed to enable students with non-traditional educational qualifications to enter university. The scheme was targeted at community activists from the large council estates, minority ethnic and disability campaign groups (see 'I want more: Learning at L.A.S.T.' Shaw & Tett, 2023, *Concept*, 2023,14:2).

I, along with a cohort of 23 others, was accepted onto the scheme. The general principle of recruitment was that the community activists' former campaigning and research should be regarded as equivalent to formal educational qualifications. The organising and funding body

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Lothian Apprenticeship Trust (LAST) had the main responsibility for recruitment and additional support for the cohort, who would join the Community Education B.A. course as first-year participants. Alongside this, each student was given a placement in a community organisation, hence the apprenticeship title and model.

As a cultural inflection point, this was a life changing experience. I had been excluded from school at 14 and, other than very short trade union and youth work courses, had no formal qualifications. As a generalisation, some LAST members had reasonable writing skills; others had developed research skills during their campaign work; others were quite well-read, and some had political experience of lobbying for change. As far as I can recall, I don't think anyone in the group had the full gamut of skills for Higher Education. Therefore, it was a steep learning curve which was both an exciting and intimidating experience for all involved. As a keen reader on politics and social policy, having access to the libraries was a thing of beauty for me. The only downside was that there were always more interesting things to read on a subject than time permitted. So, without having developed the scholarly approach of allocating limited time to reading, essays were often a 'dash to the wire' to meet the deadline. However, after graduating, I had more time to indulge in wider cultural interests.

Cultural inflection point 5: Cultural heritage

Migration to Scotland in general, and Edinburgh in particular, has been a cross-cutting narrative in some of my cultural research. Sometimes, the interest was simple intellectual curiosity and, at other times, it became work related. I will give a very short description of some of the areas that I chose for cultural research and a brief motive for my interest.

My parents came from distinctly different cultural backgrounds. My father was born in Edinburgh to an Irish Catholic mother and father. My mother was born in Edinburgh to a fiercely Protestant family. Neither family was happy with the relationship, but love prevailed and the couple married without the blessing of either family. Although each parent maintained their religious affiliation, neither foisted this onto their eight children; so religion did not become a significant element of growing up for any of the children.

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However, this cultural heritage has always interested me. Anti-Irish/Catholic sentiment was common in Scotland, particularly after high levels of migration following the famines in Ireland. One area of research on this subject was the rise of anti-Irish/Catholic sentiment at a political level in Edinburgh. Although modern day Scotland tends to associate sectarianism with the west of Scotland and Celtic/Rangers football rivalry, previous times saw a far larger and more widespread political element. Edinburgh in the 1930s was a hotbed of anti-Irish/Catholic sentiment. The leader of this sectarian activity was John Cormack who founded the Protestant Action Society. At its peak in 1936, it had nine Councillors on Edinburgh City Council and 31% of the votes. He led a huge protest against a Catholic conference in Edinburgh's Morningside district with an estimated 20,000 anti-Catholic protestors which led to significant public disorder and riots. (see Gallagher, 1987).

The Irish Diaspora who made Edinburgh their home from the 1850s onward were not welcomed with open arms. However, due to their numbers, by 1881 there was an estimated population of 14,000 Irish-born inhabitants living in Edinburgh, with most living in the Canongate and Grassmarket area. Therefore, a political constituency to be considered. My main interest in the Irish living in Edinburgh was the influence that they had on the development of labour politics in the 1870-1900 period which coincides with the embryonic developments of socialism. The Irish Home Rule movement was also very active in Edinburgh during this period. One of the most significant thinkers in Edinburgh on both subjects at that time was John Leslie. Leslie is grossly under-researched but is widely believed to be the major mentor of James Connolly of Marxist and Ireland fame (see Young, 1993).

Another area of migration which caught my cultural interest was the pre-World War Two Italians living in Scotland. Although nowhere near as numerous as the Irish, they did suffer considerable racism and sectarianism. The latter was because most Italians were also Catholics. When Mussolini, as leader of Italy, joined the axis in 1941 as an ally to the Germans, the punishment meted on all Italians in the UK was horrific. Almost every Italian- run shop had their windows smashed and their shops looted. Although not on the murderous scale of Krystallnacht, it is a horrible reminder of how easy it is to whip up a xenophobic frenzy in wartime.

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To add insult to injury, almost all Italian males aged 15 and over were interned, including those who had left Italy to escape the Fascists, and fathers who had sons fighting in the British Army. To compound their misery, 486 of them died when some of the internees were being transported to Canada on the Arandora Star which was sunk by a German U-Boat in 1940. One 15-year-old internee who lost his father and uncle in the tragedy was Leith-born and world-renowned sculptor Sir Eduardo Luigi Paolozzi (1924-2005). Potential reading as a starting point (see Ugolini, 2011).

In terms of my employment as a community educator, I was able to encourage colleagues to ensure that migrants were part of our everyday planning, and looking at ways we could more fully integrate migrants into the cultural and social fabric of local society. One aspect of this was using data-led information to inform ourselves of the local community profile and then try to ensure that our community programme attendance more accurately reflected the makeup of our local community. Some of the successful ways of making new migrants feel welcome were utilising bilingual parents to spread information on centre programmes, and creating opportunities for whole family groups to utilise the centre facilities. From a relatively low starting point, we were able to increase the after-school club attendance of new migrant children to over 30% of the overall attendance, which was in line with school census information. In addition, we created space for specific groups. By the time I left the community centre, we had three large and vibrant groups (Chinese, Central/Eastern European and Sudanese) using the centre at weekends. We were also able to support the development of a young Syrian refugee programme at Spartans Community Programme. All of the aforementioned reinforced my opinion that if more was done to make new migrants welcome, participation would become easier and enable new migrants to access community resources more readily.

In addition to the migration theme, I have also spent time researching a range of unrelated topics including, the siege of Stalingrad, King Leopold 11 of Belgium and the Congo, the Scottish enlightenment, Charles Darwin and James Hutton, the world-renowned geologist. Hutton is buried in Greyfriar's Kirkyard. Only in Edinburgh would the founder of geology as a modern science play second fiddle to a scruffy dog!

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In conclusion, I have written a brief summary of how some particular inflection points have enriched both my personal life and my practice as a community education worker. The methodology for researching the various subjects is quite varied, with a combination of books, traditional libraries, online research and non-lending libraries with reading rooms. National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh, and National Library of Ireland in Dublin have proven particularly useful. In addition to their fabulous collection of books and journals they also allow access to a range of online resources from their reading rooms. One of the wee tricks that I have learned to keep costs down is that you can fly to Dublin on the first flight out and get the last flight home the same day, thus cutting out the expense of a hotel. To offset the carbon footprint, if you live in Edinburgh, you could always shut down your heating for three hours and spend half an hour each way in a nice warm bus to and from the library, with a couple of hours perusing your chosen research subject in a nice warm library! For reasons of brevity, I have tried to focus mainly on the crosscutting theme of migration both from a cultural research and a practical use of that research in practice.

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