

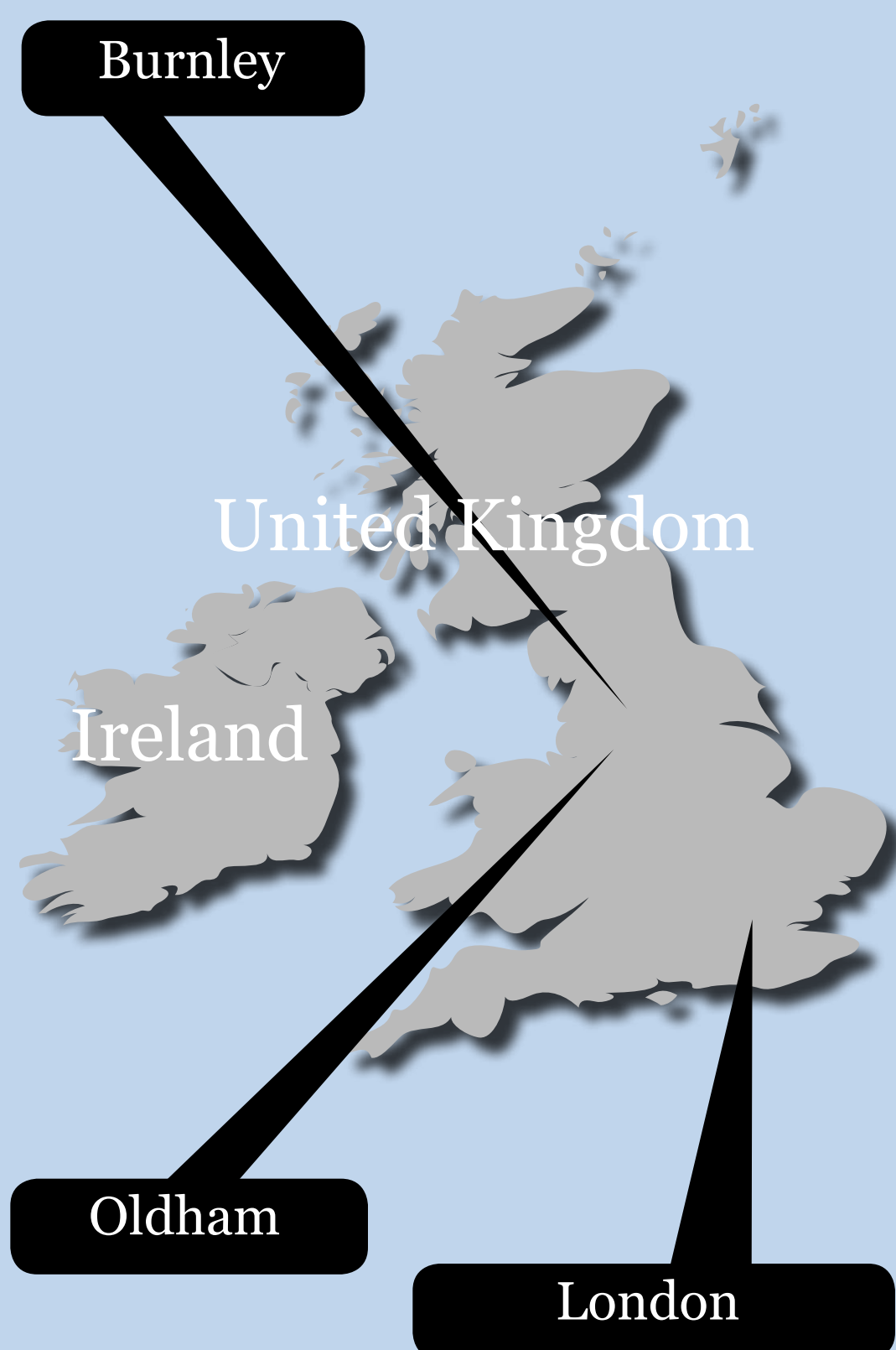


ANDREW ASHLEY
Class of 2011
Durham, NC

Andrew Ashley

“It’s Grim Up North” was a popular techno song released by The Justified Ancients of Mu Mu in 1991. Now the phrase has become a tagline for the North. One can see it on travel posters as well as in the collective subconscious of Britain. And, the North seems grim. Counties like Lancashire are peppered with mid-sized factory towns with no factories anymore. The structural changes in the British economy since the Second World War – and the completion of deindustrialization during the 80s – crippled the labor market of these towns.

CONTINUED ►



Some of the largest cities, like Manchester, have been able to rebrand themselves as centers of culture, finance, and technology. However, such transformation has only been possible in a few communities.



For other communities, the national discourse has mostly concentrated on a lack of community cohesion between different ethnic and racial groups. When I prepared my research, I chose to focus on two communities outside of Manchester – Burnley and Oldham. Both of these communities had experienced “race riots” in the summer of 2001. Both had attracted attention from the British National Party – a far-right party with a racial exclusionary platform. The BNP had found some moderate success in the councils of the region. However, in the last elections the support has waned. I was curious to what was going on at the community level. How were these communities changing the discourse of community instability and endemic racism?

Through a series of interviews with community activists, academics, professional bureaucrats and local politicians I began to grasp a sense of what was really going on. Personally, I discovered my own sense of naivety. I learned how to do actual empirical research - to do something behind reading and talking about thoughts in a book. I learned how to conduct

an academic interview – at first by a trial and error process.

I began to understand the complexities of contact theory on the ground. In other words, I saw how the banalities of everyday life – pensioner bingo halls or community sporting facilities – help bring people together. In many ways, these community facilities try to recover a sense of the days of factory employment. At that time, both immigrants and traditional inhabitants worked together in the cafes and pubs, and united in the union halls. But with the change in industrial labor to the more precarious service sector, there has been less mingling. The need for community based programs has therefore become more important.

However, I learned that theories on community development do not work unless they are fit to each community. Kaye Mahoney, a community activist I interviewed, shared with me that “Communities aren’t created, they just happen. Often times [they happen] in spite of someone trying to do one thing or another”. I learned, and this was a hard lesson for a budding academic, that no matter how much



I read or think about something in the abstract, without an empirical analysis of a situation the theory will not stand. For instance, I went to a

community youth theatre in Burnley. There adolescents of all backgrounds come together to work on interactive theatre projects about pertinent issues in their community. In theory this is a great program that should work anywhere. Yet, it comes from a specific history and is the run by a skilled director. A similar project in another community would have to also be born out of a community’s need and skills.



I also realized that most of my original theories were not nuanced enough. For instance, I came with a binary of “Do people vote for the BNP for their platform, or in protest against the other parties?” I quickly discovered through conversations that often— at a local level – people vote for the person, not the party. In other words, a voter is often more concerned with who will keep the garbage disposal policy, than grander theories of national policy. It is in running respected members of the community who have a true commitment to local issues that led the BNP to their early success – not a generalized racist platform nor simply a protest against labor. As I look forward to my future life, I know this experience was the most important singular two months of my educational career. It not only taught me important lessons on how to conduct research but also convinced me how to do good work.

In conclusion, it is not grim up north. While many of the towns suffer from economic troubles, there are many people on the ground contesting ideas of outsiders views of endemic racism and backwardness. And because of my experiences, the North of England will always be some of my brightest memories.

