HOMInG interview with Les Back

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Les Back is professor of Sociology at Goldsmith, University of London. He is specialized in the sociology of racism and ethnicity, popular culture and music, and urban life and community. Much of his work is based on fieldwork in the hinterlands of south London. Besides a number of research monographs, he has published books on social theory and research methodology. He describes his work as aspiring to create a sensuous or live sociology committed to the search for new modes of sociological imagination, writing and representation.

How would you approach home in the light of what it means to you?

The idea of home, or the sense of home, is compelling because it anchors our experience of social life. One of my great inspirations is the writing of John Berger (1991), *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos.* That beautiful book includes a very short and useful passage where he talks about the way in which the idea of home foregrounds our sense of being in the world. The idea of home, Berger says, is rich and useful because it can be preyed upon by very different political interests. So, it can be a controlling claim like a male head of a household within the patriarchal family or a sense of property. The dominant order within the home is about control, ownership and power. The language of home and homeland can also be about proprietorial claims on home and things that belong within it. For example, England football fans still sing the anthem 'The Three Lions (Football's Coming Home)' written in 1996 by English comedians David Baddiel and Frank Skinner and the rock band the Lightning Seeds. That song is a good reminder of how nationalistic claims to belonging are made within popular culture through the language of home. The song lays claim to football for England where the 'beautiful game' truly belongs.

But the idea of home is rich because it can also be a place that is remade, reclaimed, opened, assembled, and represented differently. During the lead up to the UEFA Euro 2020 Football tournament a new anthem for the England team was commissioned. In the lead up to the tournament south London rappers Krept and Konan, wrote the Official anthem to celebrate the racial diversity of the England football team. The tune called "Olé (We Are England '21) premiered on June 26th, 2021 and set out to explore the meaning of Englishness in 2021. The video made by filmmaker Suave opened with a shot of Grenfell Tower and the performance references urban multicultural Englishness masculinity and featured rappers from around the country East London's Morrisson, Birmingham's M1llionz and newcomer S1lva from Oxford. It failed to replace Baddiel and Skinner's melancholic hymn to white Englishness but it signalled the struggling going on around competing definitions of home.

So, I've long been compelled by the idea of home because it connects us to place and people and that sense of being in the social world. That's why I find home a very rich idea sociologically. It's been something that's been at the centre of my interest in relationship to city life and the migrant experience in terms of how homes are made, particularly by the displaced and those people who are seen either on the fringes of belonging or having to fight for it.

So, home is as relevant to those who do not have one as to those who are well housed.

Home is relevant to those people who don't have a home because the techniques they go about creating a sense of place and being in the world are often extraordinary. They invite us as researchers and theorists to think differently about what home is composed of and how it's made. Why are there so many great songs and ballads about London? I think it is because these songs set a sense of home to music and tell stories that are furnished with images and symbols. Ray Blak's beautiful tune 'My Hood' is a good example. It paints a south London landscape where young black Londoners feel at home in their - "Socks and sliders everywhere and every day. Full English breakfast at a caff, not a café." At the same time it doesn't shy away from the divisions between people West African and Caribbean heritage in London, captured by Stomzy's bars "The woman in the Caribbean shop is always rude/ Tryna get a patty just to compliment my food/So why you gotta tell my friends to move?" which have an echo of Franz Fanon's essay on the subject (Fanon 1980). They make us understand 'home' as imagined and represented in the way that Benedict Anderson (1983) suggested. So, home as a story or a narrative of place. These stories have consequences because they shape and set the terms of expectation and of what is possible. Stories of home almost always have a sense of history and an unfolding sense of place. Then there is the practice of making a home, as something that is created or assembled and built within everyday life. The cultural aspects of this 'homework' makes it interesting for us as anthropologists and sociologists because it helps us understand how the terms of belonging are set and challenged. 'Building home' involves work and materials – both symbolic and physical – and also forging social relationship. So, one of the things so rich about the idea of home is that it is representational, narrative and material all at the same time.

Home, you suggested, is a paradoxical notion. What do you mean by that? How can this idea of paradox help us to better understand home?

Home is paradoxical in the sense that it contains tensions that cannot be resolved. I am really influenced by the creative writing of activist Ambalavaner Sivanandan. In one of his short stories his protagonist "Ishwar" says: "A contradiction is capable of resolution, but a paradox... you can resolve a contradiction, but you've got to live with a paradox." (Sivanandan 2000: 122). The experience of colonial and postcolonial worlds is about living with these tensions, they might move and shift but there is no necessary promise of resolution to the legacy of empire. And I think home is like that because it is very often haunted by that past. It can be a conflicted space in the sense that it holds contradictory and sometimes opposed impulses and forces. This comes back again to Berger's very helpful idea that home can be preyed on by very different interests, and those interests can't necessarily be squared. They can't be resolved because they are paradoxically locked in an antagonistic relationship.

Is this the same as to claim that home has to do with ambivalence?

Indeed, the paradoxical is deeply ambivalent. To go back to those three ways of sifting what's interesting about home, if we think about home as a narrative they often contain ambivalent attachments. It can be something that we yearn to find or reach, an allusive peaceful place of being in the world that is comfortable, even if you've not moved, even if you stayed in the same place. There are many examples in popular culture. I am admirer of the Scottish comedian from Glasgow, Billy Connolly. When I was a child in the 1970s, the only person on TV that described a world that I understood as a young working-class kid growing up in the suburbs of London was Billy Connolly. The world that he described of the tenements in Glasgow outlined an experience that felt close to me even though it was 400 hundred miles away. Those stories were incredibly vivid and full of life. They had texture. The stories of tenement parties where the children were upstairs in the bedroom listening to the party going on downstairs trying on the coats of the glamorous women who had thrown off their fur coats. He described the feel of the silk lining on your skin as a child, and the scent of the perfume of the women that wore them. It was so familiar to me. The children should be asleep, but actually we'd be up in the bedroom wrapped up in the fur coats listening to the adult goings on. Billy Connolly tells great stories about elaborate sorts of forms of pub singing that would happen at the parties that was true of working-class communities throughout Britain. Richard Hoggart called 'club singing' ballads of the 'feeling heart' (Hoggart 1957: 166). So, on the one hand, Billy Connolly documented vividly the stories of working-class life that were not being told. At the same time, Billy Connolly makes his name as being of this place of Glasgow, he works as a welder in the shipyards, but he can't stay there. He's like one of the ships on the Clyde. He had to leave, to get out of Glasgow, even though it was his 'home'. He is celebrated there but he cannot live there. One of the things that's so interesting about his biography *Windswept and Interesting* (2021) he talks about the damage in that place and

the sexual abuse that he experiences at the hands of his father. He escapes it when they were moved out of the Glasgow tenements to the new homes of the council estate on the fringes in a place called Drumchapel. In an almost matter of fact way, Billy Connolly says: “Finally, I could sleep soundly in my own bed without interference” (Connolly 2021: 100). So, on the one hand, he paints these incredibly vivid and homely portrayals of tenement life that captures and honours the value of those kinds of communities. At the same time, he's carrying the memory of this abusive home that he needs to flee. That creates ambivalence. So home is a place to celebrate and escape from at the same time.

It seems that discussing home brings you back to the memories of your own childhood and past experience.

Yes, the idea of home makes us see our lives moving through time both looking back and dreaming forward. Like Billy Connolly's stories, thinking about home makes us reflect on how we are formed by the place we grew up as children. The idea of home can be prospective and also about the life that we hoped for in the future, of how migrants move in their minds first. If you moved across space, and a life unfolding in different parts of the world, it means having to imagine a diasporic sense of home. The young migrants that Shamser Sinha and I spent so much time listening to and working with in London for our book *Migrant City* (2018), were often trying to find ways to describe this sense of home. One of the participants in the project talked about how she loved her particular corner of London because she saw local traces of the many places she had lived from the Horn of Africa to Central Europe to London. She saw the traces of those places every day on those East London streets. And she powerfully said that “Newham completes me” - not in a finished way, but a home in which all those traces of her life are present that allowed a kind of reassembly of self.

This sounds like a very embodied and sensuous experience.

Yes, homemaking is a profoundly multi-sensory experience because it is about our sense of being in the world, which is not just a story that lives in language or in a visual representation. It also involves the tangle of the senses and how ideas of home are registered in our senses. One of my favourite books is Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*, a book about education and literacy in working class life. He describes the childhood home he was born into in a working-class community in Leeds so sensuously. The passages that are about taste and about food and smell as so evocative. That's a Proustian reminder in a way that those things can be the triggers of memory. They can move us through time. For example, Hoggart writes about the luxury of ‘tinned salmon’ or canned fruit like pineapple and peaches that would signal ‘something approaching an occasion” (Hoggart 1957: 38). The tastes contained the promise of something special, a luxury in a world where there weren't so many luxuries. And somehow the taste of tin salmon evokes in him a sense of place and also the promise of something else. He was a clever small boy growing up in a working class community where he was being told

“Education really isn't for you” or “Books aren't really for you” but he used education to find a different sense of the world and become more than that.

Home as a place, whatever the scale, may have both regressive and emancipatory dimensions. What accounts for it to work either way? Is there anything specific to migrants and ethnic or racial minorities about that?

The regressive and the emancipatory dimensions of home are interesting because they make us really put our discussion of home in the unfolding time frame. So much of the regressive aspects of home is a melancholic turn back or desire to return somewhere. Going back in time, to a time that was better, are often laments about the ‘death of community’ or elegies to a lost home. Raymond Williams would say we should be suspicious of the idea that it was once beautiful, it was once an ideal, a golden age (Williams 1973). It can be the presence of the stranger or the other that is linked to the loss of home (Back 2009). That regressive idea of return is often deeply melancholic. Paul Gilroy has a wonderful way of describing it through his conception of post-colonial melancholia (Gilroy 2004). The sense that if only Britain, or more specifically England, could return to its former of greatness, then everything would be OK. And that regressive sense of home clings to a symbolic imagination and we have seen a great deal of this in the discussion of Brexit which in many respects Gilroy’s book *After Empire* predicted in 2004. It’s there in the iconography of the Spitfire, so it's for good reason that England football fans sing “two World Wars and one World Cup” or dress up as Crusaders when they go to international football fixtures: this is the embodiment of postcolonial melancholia.

The strange thing is that these regressive claims to home and homemaking are often completely dislocated from the actual cultural history of a place like England. The radical theorist Stuart Hall, who was a great mentor for me both in terms of his writing and as a person, made his home in London but never really felt he belonged here. Stuart, who as a Jamaican scholarship boy who comes to Britain, ends up in Oxford, is probably the most articulate and perceptive interpreter of Englishness. I learned more from Stuart about England than by anybody else, and certainly much more than by those people who were born and bred in England. He was always both at home in England and out of place and not at home (Hall & Back 2009). Stuart would often say, the English don't know much of Englishness. Why is that so? England is an interesting place, interesting history, as he would say, but the delusion that England could push the peoples of the world around estranged it from itself. Well, what is England now? And Stuart Hall had a better answer than most because we have to read England like the cup of tea is made from the traces of empire but shapes the national story.

The regressive melancholic sense of home is often completely out of step and out of tune with both present realities but also the past. English folk music, for example, is a figure of fun in the public discussion. It’s a very interesting tradition of songs that come out of the experience of the land, of the sea and maritime movement, and also the experience of martial culture: it is an incredibly rich tradition. And yet no English schoolchild really

knows anything about it. So that's the regressive side. Yet at the same time, home can be a place of refuge.

The best example that comes to mind is a project I did in the 1990s with Michael Keith and Phil Cohen on 'finding a way home' (Back, Cohen & Keith 1999). We were interested in young people's landscapes of safety and danger, and we were constantly surprised at the things that young people told us about their special safe places or the places that they felt were at home. They often seemed incredibly inhospitable. It was particularly true for young women who took photographs of themselves laughing together with the disposable cameras in seemingly inhospitable places. It could be the landing of a tower block or the stairs at the entrance of where they lived. They were always places outside of the home where there was no expectation that those young women would have to do chores and domestic work. It wasn't in the street either which was often coded as a masculine space, where the boys ruled the roost. So, the landing or stairs in between, which is often dark and dingy prices, would be the place that these young women would go and hang out and laugh and feel a sense of freedom that was constrained but at the same time was vital and joyful.

Home may be an exclusionary concept, in all discursive repertoires of domopolitics. Is this exclusionary side an unavoidable one? What do you think of the metaphorical ways of scaling home up on the national scale as a tool of exclusion?

It's very important to hold to account the ways in which home is colonized by the powerful. The nation and the state become the architecture and the technology for claiming exclusive senses of who belongs, who was automatically defined as being at home and those who are passing through. The idea of home is scaled in terms of an architecture and structure of power that is both geographical and based on the creation of categories of person and status in terms of the language of citizenship and of who holds a document that can authorise their claims or not. This is the side of John Berger's conception of home that is about the way in which our sense of being is imprinted by those structures of citizenship, state formation and nationalism. It's important to understand the cultural, political and judicial shape of that process. It is written into us all through our passports or our 'leave to remain' or immigration status. At the same time, there are homes that are made in a different image with redrawn terms of inclusion that are not imprinted by that legacy of citizenship. Sometimes the most inspiring examples are homes that are providing refuge for people in the most vulnerable parts of their lives. For example, there's a wonderful health care activist called Cicely Saunders, who was involved in the development of the hospice movement for people who are terminally ill. Cicely Saunders set up St Christopher's Hospice dedicated to palliative care in south London in 1967. Her conception of the hospice was as a *community of the unalike*. What I think is wonderful about this is that here the idea of home doesn't require or expect similarity. In a way, it's a utopian idea and at the same time it was a practical everyday unfolding community of people, on the edge of life itself. The hospice is a home and refuge that does not have to be about imposing condition of inclusion or a test of

belonging. There are possibilities to make space a space of being in the world, a sense of home that can be about homes where the unalike can coexist.

This sounds like a political project about home.

It is a political project, but one based in everyday practice, and that's something I feel very committed to – paying attention to the everyday practices through which the unalike make a sense of home across difference. That's such an important thing to be attentive to. And once you start looking and listening for that homemaking work, you find it everywhere. It might not have the authorizations of the public discussion, and it's often going on in places that are completely ignored, but it's important to try and document the building of those kinds of open homes. One of my favourite examples from the *Migrant city* book (Back & Sinha, 2018) is the building of Ali's bench. Ali, who took two years to get from Afghanistan to London, had his asylum claim turned down by the Home Office within 20 minutes. He then spent the best part of a decade appealing that decision in order to secure his leave to remain in London. Living in this condition of suspension or 'dead time' as we refer to it, what does he do with his time? Well, he befriends his neighbour next door, who is a white Englishwoman. In the back garden he finds a discarded bed. He dismantles the bench and from the wood he makes a bench for the elderly folk in the neighbourhood to sit on. It made this place more comfortable. It was a practice of homemaking. Ali wasn't using those words, but that's what he built – a more comfortable place just for a while, just to sit and take things in to talk and rest.

So, making home is also a way of making sense of one's life under exceptional circumstances.

Well, making home is not only about a physical every day and inhabitation, but it involves a reckoning with the world as it is but also as we would like it to be. It is an existential experience or what John Berger refers to as "a place from which the world could be founded" (Berger 1991: 56). Where am I? Where have I been? Where do I want to go? Those questions are being answered on every street corner, in every community every day. A friend of mine, Nirmal Puwar, a colleague here at Goldsmiths, University of London, told me the story about one member of her family who looked up at the planes in the sky. They watched the contrails of the jet planes pass overhead and would think about them like threads that linked their life here to other places that they lived in East Africa. You know, South Asian communities who moved from Indian to East Africa were forced out during Africanization, particularly in Uganda under Idi Amin, and ended up fleeing to London. For them those lines in the sky made by the contrails of jets are like the threads that weave the cultural fabric of their lives. That process is part of what it means to develop a sense of home and a feeling for home within a diaspora experience or what Doreen Massey called a "global sense of place" (Massey 1991).

Home has also to do with hope about the future, but hope about what? And who cultivates it?

Listening and paying close attention is one commitment I've tried to apply not just to home, but to any aspect of social life. It is an attention to that which others may not think is remarkable or trying to find what's remarkable in those things are not remarked upon. That process can lead us to confront some of the worst violence and abuses of power. But there's another side as well, and I do think that sociology is a kind of vocation of attentiveness. Part of that vocation is to attend to the world and being able to recognize, admit and honour those things that are shifting and emerging and hopeful as in Ernst Bloch's wonderful conception (Bloch 1995). Hope is something that is 'not yet' realised. It is not finished, it is emerging, and unstable. Bloch is writing in the midst of generic fascism, where the claims to home are being made in fascistic ways. What do you do in that situation as a thinker, but also what you do politically? Bloch makes us think about a 'principle of hope' as an attention to that which is not finished yet. So, hope is an empirical question and all critical thinking is hope's work (Back 2021). The work of hope is tied to an attentiveness of how home is struggled for.

So this is a way of engaging with the struggle for home.

Those struggles for home very often contain a fragile, emergent sense of a different set of terms, a different way to live, new forms of being coming to life. That long ten-year story of researching and writing our book *Migrant City* (Back & Sinha 2018) documented that struggle for home. It's a sociable form of sociology, where you don't just go and do a period of fieldwork and that's done. Instead, we are continually going back to ask again and think again together. It's a difficult practice because it makes it hard to know when it's finished. But for the participants and co-authors it is never finished, it's constantly unfolding. A young person called Charlynne Bryan captured it brilliantly when she said, "I have pieces of places that I've lived in me. And I leave pieces of myself in those places that I've lived". So, one carries a sort of existential trace, those landscapes are carried in the person and the person at the same time is remade by them. They are deposited in place to their making place differently or they're making home differently through the involvement of the person in that place. Charlynne is the repository of all the places that she's lived. Something about that is very much in the key of hope. It's not the poetry of the future, as Marx would say, it is homework in the here and now, but it is unfinished and incomplete.

Moving to fieldwork, is there anything specific or distinctive in the way of feeling of making home of younger, second generation and racialized minorities?

I admire their capacity to create a sense of themselves and the places that they made home. The extraordinary work of that in the face of being told, 'You don't belong here. Go back home' and in the language of racism there is a clue, namely "Go back home because you're not at home here. You're not wanted here." The incredible capacity of that

generation to make culture and art in the face of that hatred still astonished me. In art and music Black Londoners created a liveable home for themselves. It wasn't something that was done in a cerebral cosmopolitan way. Sometimes it was a street brawl, a physical confrontation – "Don't talk to me like that, don't come to me with that stuff." I witnessed firsthand that struggle, and both the incredible courage in that generation of Black Londoners.

So, the counterclaim is 'This place is home to me' or 'to me too'. Does it result in antagonistic homemaking or in a shared home?

I think it's a transformative form of home. You know, the people who came from the Caribbean as part of the Windrush generation were colonial citizens – not migrants. They became 'migrants' when they got off the boat in the UK. But they were citizens. We think about that process as a matter of people coming from outside and being integrated inside the landscape of home. However, the lesson of the twentieth century in Britain is that 'integration', if we can call it like that, is *two way street*. The culture of reggae sound systems in London is a history of making a liveable home for black young people in the community centres and church hall where the music was turned up as the lights went down. The history of how the buildings are repositories of that past and the struggle to make homes. The work to make it so required saws and nails and hammers and screwdrivers to make the speaker boxes and solder the cables to string that technology up. It was DIY culture long before punk rock, you know, it's made by the people who want to create a sense of a place and being in the world.

Does so-called super diversity make any difference to the experience and configuration of home, or has it more to do with questions of race, class etc.?

The idea of super diversity introduced a way of describing Doreen Massey's (1991) "global sense of place". This was meant to make important points about broadening the imagination to recognize and think seriously about the kaleidoscopic traces of diversity that could be in those places without being so obsessed with particular groups (Vertovec 2007). At the same time, the popularization of the idea of super-diversity resulted in a lot of important things being left behind or put to the side. Most importantly, to my mind is the impact of the legacy of empire on multicultural realities and the scavenger-like aspects of racism within so many European societies. Racism doesn't exclude absolutely – rather, it sifts, orders and ranks difference. The emergence of 'hierarchies of belonging' is an ideological mechanism to order and rank desirable 'good migrants' above unwanted 'bad ones.' And so the challenge is how to balance or weigh the regressive claims to home and the transgressive or transformative ones? We can only try and think seriously about that by understanding how the coordinates of power and exclusion operate in the same contexts where super-diversity is living and breathing reality and fact of life.

Home as a notion may not be easy to bring into an interview setting, whenever it means something different than a domestic space. How would you resolve this difficulty, particularly in research with young minority people?

This is a good question. One could think of home as only domicile where you sleep at night and where you cook breakfast in the morning. The internal architecture of home is incredibly rich and interesting sociologically. When people ask me: what does multicultural mean?, I often say look, go into your kitchen, open the door of the cupboard and describe what's there! That's a place to start to think about cultural diversity. Of course, different homes will carry different dimensions of the multicultural, through different connections that carried in those ingredients and the tastes that they create. So don't expect an exposition on 'cultural identity', just think about what you do every day. Obviously, the way we live is shaped by external forces. And how do you do research that? One way is to focus on the material aspects of everyday life. Tell me what's in your cupboard? Tell me what you listen to? Tell me where you spend time?

There was a wonderful exhibition of Britishness in the ill-fated Millennium Dome that happened at the beginning of the 21st century in London. Basically, thousands of people were to choose an emblem or symbol of Britishness. The result was these extraordinary fragments of home represented through physical things from a digestive biscuits to a cup of tea. It was sobering and included a photography of the memorial to Stephen Lawrence, a young black Londoner, who was killed in the suburbs of south east London in 1993. These fragments carried so much about the meaning of home. I'm often fascinated by the things that people ask to be sent when they moved away. One way to research our understanding of home is through such fragments and emblems.

The other thing I would say is to work with people to document the things they think are important, whether it be through photography, the smartphone etc. and let them become observers of their own lives. Now, that doesn't mean those things in and of themselves are the only representations that matter, because very often those representations are both incredibly important and enigmatic. They always require being rescaled within a larger historical context, whether of a city or of a nation state. That's often our task as researchers, to bring historical context, conceptual insights and comparative perspectives to bare in the service of trying to understand the meanings of home.

To wrap up, would you agree to see home also or primarily as a metaphor? What work does this metaphor do and who is in control of the use of it?

Homes are made through metaphor and imagination. Sometimes this is regressive and about a desire of control and imposing dominant interest. So, the idea of metaphor is powerful in this regard, but homes are never abstracted from life. These are metaphors that people live by and use to create and shape both the imagination, but also actions. Home might be metaphorical, but it absolutely has real consequences. You know, if we think about it exclusive ideas about a racialised sense of home articulates a symbolic imagination that shapes social action or drives white people to ask migrants: 'Where are

you from? No, where is your real home?' That question is shaped in symbolic terms that make some (white) people automatically at home while 'racialised others' have a questionable presence. The paradox of home is the conflict between dominant and exclusive conceptions of belonging, on the one hand, and the potential of more open and inclusive terms of belonging to emerge that create a different sense of home. To put this another way, does the likeness of our passport define our identities and sense of home, or are we defined by where we dwell and what we do and make every day? That question is at the heart of the paradox of home.

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