

Developing positive identities of place in marginalised areas through the revival of minority languages

Field of Study : Anthropology, Linguistics, Political Science, Sociology

Mandatory training needed to apply for this research topic : Excellent knowledge of contemporary British politics

SUPERVISORS

	First name	LAST NAME	University	Research Unit
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KEYWORDS

National populism; minority languages; 'placeism'; cosmopolitanism; marginal areas

ABSTRACT

National populism is on the rise across the globe¹. This form of nationalism tends to foster an exclusive notion of territorial identity and to circumscribe citizenship to abstract membership of the nation state. It fosters a negative sense of 'placeism' defined by Gillian Evans as 'a fierce sense of territoriality and a social preoccupation with a hierarchy of born-and bred belonging [which] implie[s] a generalized suspicion of outsiders of all kinds'². This sense of 'placeism' appears to be particularly present in marginal areas that have been described as 'places that don't matter' who revolt against the status quo and embrace regressive nationalism³.

This project explores how a more positive sense of 'placeism' can be developed that embraces cosmopolitanism and diversity. Following Raymond Williams who argued that a progressive nationalism can be built from the ground up through an inclusive 'politics of place'⁴, it focuses on how the revival of minority languages might foster a sense of empowerment and positive narratives of belonging.

¹ R. Eatwell and M. Goodwin (2018) *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy*. London: Penguin.

² G. Evans (2017) 'Brexit Britain: Why we are all postindustrial now', *American Ethnologist* 44(2), p.217.

³ A. Rodríguez-Pose (2018) 'The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it)', *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 11(1): 189-209, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsx024>*

⁴ R. Williams (1984) 'Decentralism and the Politics of Place: An interview with Raymond Williams', Interviewer: P. Cooke. *Environment and Planning, Society and Space* 2: 369-74.

Research aims and methodology

This project will take the promotion of minority languages in marginal areas in the UK as a case-study. The UK is characterised by considerable linguistic diversity: Cornish, Irish, Scots, Scottish Gaelic, Ulster Scots, Welsh and Manx Gaelic. Whilst the promotion of these languages has the potential to divide communities, most blatantly in Northern Ireland, this project will explore the extent to which they can allow communities that might be considered as ‘left behind’ to develop a positive place-based identity that grants them a sense of recognition that might address the ‘recognition inequalities’ that can fuel social resentment which manifests itself as ‘geographies of discontent’, feeding into exclusive nationalism⁵. The case of Protestant communities in Northern Ireland learning Gaelic suggests that the practice of minority languages has the capacity to bring communities together across diversity and ethno-religious divides.

The project will:

- Examine both local government and national policies regarding the promotion of minority languages, highlighting the possible tensions that exist therein. Policy papers will be analysed in detail and government actors will be solicited for interview.

Carry out in-depth qualitative interviews with representatives of civil society from organisations promoting minority languages and from locutors of these languages in order to elucidate motivations for language learning/practice and to examine to what extent that gives them a sense of belonging in the wider polity beyond the local place.

Relevance and added-value of the proposed research in relation to the current state of knowledge

At a time when the Council of Europe emphasises the need to promote the use of minority languages in accordance with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages to ‘contribute to the building of a Europe based on democracy and cultural diversity’⁶, it is particularly relevant to understand precisely how these aims can best be met. As highlighted above, it is also particularly urgent to explore how marginal areas can be developed in a positive direction that addresses feeling of being ‘left behind’ that can fuel the rise of regressive identity politics.

Whilst the focus of the research is not on a romance language country, the UK can serve as a useful case-study given the considerable extent of linguistic diversity present. Despite moves towards the devolution of powers to local assemblies who have largely assumed responsibility for language policies, the UK remains very much a unitary state in which national government has a major role to play in the promotion of minority languages. At times local and national policy objectives clash. It is essential for countries across Europe to learn from each other to understand how these conflicts might be resolved in the interests of promoting cohesiveness in a spirit of diversity.

To date, most research has been focused on nationalism and separatism at the level of the State. The ground-

⁵ P. McCann and R. Ortega-Argiles (2021) ‘The UK “Geography of Discontent”: Narratives, Brexit and Inter-regional “Levelling Up”’, *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 14(3): 545-564.

⁶ Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (2024) *Sixth Evaluation Report on the United Kingdom and the Isle of Man*. Council of Europe, 1680b1a73f (coe.int)



breaking works on stateless nationalism of Keating⁷ and Guibernau⁸ have later been complemented by party politics analyses focusing on specific aspects such as: the role of ethno-regionalist parties as ethnic entrepreneurs⁹; the relationship between stateless and regionalist parties and European integration¹⁰; the positioning of such parties along the left-right and centre-periphery divide¹¹; the influence of devolution on state and sub-state national identity as well as on peripheral and state-wide parties' strategies¹²; and the transition of such parties from 'protest to power'¹³. Little attention has however been given to stateless nationalism that can be built from the ground up. Yet, focus on modular nationalism¹⁴ at the sub-state level will fill a huge gap in the literature and offer a fresh perspective of the role played by diversity in a global world. To counter insurgent national populism that is often rooted in marginal and marginalised areas, it is important to develop alternative narratives on belonging¹⁵. This project concentrates on how the promotion of linguistic diversity might help construct such a narrative.

Interdisciplinary nature of the research together with the alignment with the CHORAL programme and complementarity expertise of the teams

The proposed interdisciplinary research project combines political science and sociology, social anthropology and linguistics. To the extent that minority and regional languages are regarded as part of Europe's cultural heritage, the project fits clearly into the CHORAL programme. More specifically, it corresponds to the fourth research theme identified by the CHORAL project: Innovation policies for the development of marginalised areas by seeking to explore how such areas can develop a positive sense of identity and feel empowered and included in the national polity through the practice of minority languages.

The two research supervisors come from an interdisciplinary background. Emma Bell is Professor of Contemporary British Politics. She initially trained in law before undertaking post-graduate research in penal policy, drawing on political science, criminology and sociology to understand the political impetus behind punishment. Her current research on new forms of emancipatory democratic praxis is informed by political philosophy, political science and sociology. Filippo Barbera is Professor of economic sociology at the CPS Department of the University of Turin and Fellow at the Collegio Carlo Alberto (Torino). Current research projects focus on the role of democratic populism in marginal areas, the regeneration of the public sphere and the analysis of foundational economy experiments in the provision of citizenship goods and services.

⁷ M. Keating (1996) *Nations Against the State*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

⁸ M. Guibernau (1995) *Nationalisms: The Nation-State and Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*. London: Wiley.

⁹ L. De Winter and H. Türsan (1998) *Regionalist Parties in Western Europe*. Abingdon: Routledge.

¹⁰ A. Elias (2008) *Minority Nationalist Parties and European Integration*. Abingdon: Routledge.

¹¹ E. Massetti, (2009) 'Explaining Regionalist Party Positioning in a Multi-dimensional Ideological Space: A Framework for Analysis'. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 19(4–5), 501–531. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597560903310246>

¹² S. Alonso (2012) *Challenging the State: Devolution and the Battle for Partisan Credibility*. Oxford: OUP.

¹³ A. Elias & F. Tronconi (2011) 'From protest to power: Autonomist parties in government', *Party Politics*, 17(4), 505-524. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068811400528>

¹⁴ B. Anderson (1991) *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.

¹⁵ C. Crouch (2019) 'Post-Democracy and Populism'. *The Political Quarterly*, 90: 124-137. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12575>; A. Amin (2023) *After Nativism*. London: Wiley.



Output plan including publication and dissemination activities

The PhD student recruited will be expected to follow up on and develop existing UNITA projects, notably that on *Experiments in Democracy*. Launched in autumn 2021, this project brings together researchers from different disciplines across the UNITA alliance (Linguistics, Political Science, Sociology) working on democratic experiments across Europe in order to draw out best practice and seek to contribute to the public debate on democracy's current failings and possibilities. Whilst the current rise of populist movements across the globe is often regarded as a threat to democracy, the project postulates that it should be interpreted as a demand for more democracy. Rather than dismiss the 'populist moment', it argues that it ought to be taken seriously and perhaps even be regarded as an opportunity to render democracy properly representative by empowering ordinary citizens. The aim of the project is to explore new forms of economic and political democracy which go beyond existing Statist attempts at citizen empowerment. It fits into the overall theme of cultural heritage by examining how the European tradition of liberal democracy might evolve and adapt to contemporary challenges.

A workshop organised as part of this project in 2022 has already given rise to an edited book with Bristol University Press (Barbera & Bell, *Commons, Citizenship and Power: Reclaiming the Margins*, publication 2025) in the collection 'Civil Society and Social Change'.

The PhD student will be expected to participate in research activities organised by both UNITO and USMB and to regularly disseminate the results of their research at international conferences. The final PhD should be published as a book with an international publisher.

Estimated schedule

2025-26: enrolled at USMB:

- Semester 1: development of the theoretical framework
- Semester 2: field research

2026-27: enrolled at UNITO

- Semester 3: field research
- Semester 4: writing up results and analysis

2027-28: enrolled at USMB

- Semester 5: finalisation of the PhD
- Semester 6: viva

