

# **Institute for Social Change: Research Strategy**

## **1. Introduction – The Mission of the Institute for Social Change.**

The neoliberal thrust of the world economic system over the course of the past thirty years has succeeded in speeding the flow of money around the world and hollowing out the manufacturing base of many advanced industrial societies, redistributing it to newly emergent industrial economies. Established economic powers have experienced significant shifts in their labour force, moving from a predominantly male manufacturing profile to a more feminised service economy. As capital and goods have travelled across borders more easily, facilitated by an ever-expanding global transport and communications infrastructure, population shifts and cultural capital have followed, leading to profound changes in the socio-demographic composition of these societies.

How and why social and political life in modern democracies has changed in response to these trends is a key theme of the research conducted at the Institute for Social Change. In particular, we focus on how far such shifts are producing a realignment in the national, political, ethnic and religious cleavages that have structured modern Western democracies since the early twentieth century. While new social and political divisions may be emerging, new areas of consensus and collaboration are also in evidence. For example, tensions prompted by immigration have fuelled support for anti-immigrant parties across the EU, while at the same time we see signs of increasing mainstream tolerance for ethnic diversity. Similarly, while scholars have documented the declining bonds of social and political trust, there has been enormous excitement over the potential of new technologies for social networking and community activism to revive and re-engage the citizen body. These simultaneous processes lie at the core of social change, with disruption, fragmentation and reconfiguration all part of the process of building a more inclusive society. From this perspective, research needs to look beyond macro trends to develop a wider and more historical understanding of how social inequalities are produced and reproduced, and how social actors can intervene to restructure the distribution of resources to ensure a fairer society. Thus, while many accounts of social

change have tended to focus on the negative consequences – rampant individualism and isolation – we look also to the positive outcomes, adopting a more structural perspective.

More specifically, our research programme focuses on the dynamics, conflict and cooperation engendered by difference and inequality between key groups in society based on characteristics such as race, gender, social class and age. In particular we look at the present and longer term divides across the groups with regard to how such dynamics affect:

- Political and civic engagement and influence
- Levels of social capital, cohesion and inclusion
- Education and occupational participation and attainment
- Social, religious and political values

Methodologically we adopt a systematic and empirically grounded approach to the study of these important questions. Our research incorporates both micro and macro factors in order to enhance our understanding of these group dynamics. Our work is thus rooted in a contextual approach that incorporates the effects of both time and space in shaping individual action, placing socialisation and institutional factors at the heart of our models. Finally, we aim to apply our research to public policy, thereby helping to minimise the costs and maximise the benefits of social change.

## **2. Background**

Periods of significant social change and upheaval transform the economy, culture and politics in a society. The Industrial Revolution is an example of such a seismic shift. Subsequent changes, not least the collapse of communism and the rise of globalised neo-liberalism, have been just as far-reaching.

Since the 1960s there have been significant shifts in the fabric of society and values held by citizens. The rising tide of democratisation, the increasing flows of people and goods

across borders and the expansion of new communication technologies have stimulated an increasing openness of the world order. This more porous international context has produced many new opportunities but also problems around the environment, population health and aging, immigration and race, the role of religion, workplace practices and active citizenship.

Leading scholars such as Putnam and Inglehart have identified links between economic development and modernisation and changes in the social and political character of societies (e.g. in relation to inequality, diversity and social trust/social capital). Furthermore, while modernisation changes social, political and cultural values, these values change societies. One of the key challenges for social scientists is to explain the relationship between economic change, social change and value shift, and to show how governments can influence those processes in a positive way.

The goal of the Institute and its collaboration with Harvard is to strengthen empirical, and largely quantitative, social science (with an applied edge) at Manchester. This approach is commonplace in the US but tends to be more marginal in the UK. The Institute will focus on the importance of social dynamics and changing values in driving social change, and on the efforts of individuals, organisations and governments to coordinate and solve collective problems. The Institute aims to identify the key drivers of social change, and to improve our understanding of what can be done to create more effective social organisation. Ultimately we hope to develop a framework that will become associated with Manchester and ISC. In what follows we set out a research strategy that is consistent with these broad aims and builds on the expertise available to ISC.

### **3. Current areas of staff expertise and research themes covered**

Current ISC members have a breadth of expertise in issues related to social change, both substantive and methodological. Substantive areas mainly focus on the values and behaviour of the population in modern democracies, especially the UK, Europe and the US, although research into issues surrounding international migration extends our interests to emerging economies. Specific interests include

- Political engagement
- Electoral behaviour
- Social mobility and social stratification
- Social capital
- Educational and occupational participation and attainment
- Ethnicity, migration and integration
- Religious change
- Political and social implications of new media technologies
- Causes and consequences of inequalities in population health and ageing

#### **4. Methods**

There is a wealth of methodological expertise in ISC, particularly quantitative. We will adopt the most appropriate methods to tackle the important questions we have identified. However, it is integral to our identity and to the skills and perspectives of everyone in the group that quantitative methods are at the heart of our research. We do not rule out using other methods; the statement simply identifies our niche. One particular area we intend to promote is longitudinal methods, which are critical to understanding social change.

Studying social *change* implies identifying and characterising the action of causal processes unfolding over time. Making inferences about such longitudinal processes based purely on cross-sectional research can be highly misleading. Longitudinal, or panel, designs can overcome such limitations but present significant analytical challenges. A research objective of the Institute for Social Change is therefore to build capacity in and extend the application of state-of-the-art methods for empirical longitudinal research. This may be achieved by working in partnership with other units such as CCSR.

Important lessons about social change can also be learned by examining variations across place – between localities and between countries. For example, at the local level we are interested in understanding how local context affects behaviour in political and social

life, and how governments, institutions and communications technologies can influence outcomes. At larger spatial levels these issues become transnational, and research questions become comparative ones.

Specific methodological areas to develop therefore include:

- Analysis of national and cross-national survey datasets
- Analysis of cohort and panel studies
- Combining and linking data, including geographically referenced data
- Experimental designs
- Statistical modelling to support the above, e.g.
  - Missing data analysis
  - Dynamic panel data analysis
  - Latent growth models
  - Multilevel models

## **5. Agenda**

The research strategy of ISC is guided by the following criteria:

- Contemporary relevance and salience of issues
- Research priorities of major funders<sup>1</sup>
- Expertise and specialisms of ISC staff
- Synergies and potential overlap with other centres
- Comparative advantage/competition
- Publication in journals of international standing

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<sup>1</sup> Major funders include the ESRC, the European Union and European Science Foundation and charitable trusts such as Leverhulme, Joseph Rowntree and Nuffield.

The research agenda of the ISC builds on but is not constrained by our current areas of expertise. We also seek synergies with other centres in the University and outside. For example, we share common interests with CRESC on socio-cultural change and the BWPI on poverty. In building our connections we try to identify where our comparative advantage lies. In particular we want to build on our strengths in advanced quantitative analysis, as this is not only an area of relative advantage, but is likely to remain a strategic priority of the ESRC. We also aim to build links where new thematic interests can be developed, such as with the Centre for Chinese Studies.

ISC has links with scholars both within and outside of Manchester that extend our research expertise in a range of key fields. In particular, ISC is home to the Democracy, Citizens and Elections Research Network (DCERN), a multi-disciplinary network that brings together scholars from business administration, politics, philosophy and sociology engaged in the study of democracy and citizen politics. DCERN develops ISC strengths in the study of political/civic engagement, electoral behaviour and in understanding citizen attitudes (see [www.dcern.org.uk](http://www.dcern.org.uk) and appendix for further information). Other fruitful research collaborations with individuals/centres at the University of Manchester include projects on social capital and ageing (Zimdars, RICC), immigration and multiculturalism (Fieldhouse, Morales, RICC), social class and mobility (Tampubolon, Li, CRESC and Sociology), development of new e-research tools (Gibson, NceSS), social networks (Morales, Manchester Social Networks Group), and political and civic engagement, online deliberation and consultation (Fieldhouse, Gibson IPEG). Externally, members have links to a range of national and international initiatives that are closely related to the ISC research remit. Specifically, they work on cultural capital with the Institute of Education (Zimdars), on ethnicity and migration with colleagues at Oxford and Harvard (Li); on comparative religious change with European programmes and networks including EVS, ENER and Eurel (Voas), and on the professionalisation of political parties and campaigns with the International University-Bruchsal in Germany and Mid-Sweden University (Gibson).

## **6. Statement of research strategy**

ISC will carry out research that seeks to deepen our understanding of how and why social and political life in modern democracies changes in response to major socio-economic, demographic and political developments. While we focus primarily on social change within established industrialised democracies, where appropriate and relevant (such as in studies of migration and electoral participation) we will also examine emerging economies and democracies in comparative context. In particular we seek to develop our understanding of the relationship between major exogenous forces (modernization, technological change, globalization, etc.), social and political problems, and the changing behaviour and values of both citizens and governments. These questions give rise to a need to understand how governments may intervene to help solve collective problems. Nevertheless, our primary focus is on individuals and groups and how institutions affect, interact and relate to individuals and groups, rather than on the study of institutions per se.

Our research focuses primarily on relationships at various levels of aggregation, from the individual through neighbourhoods to nation states. We draw on a variety of primary and secondary data sources, including surveys, interviews and administrative records. First, analysis of change over time will be a key feature of our research, both in terms of understanding broad societal changes and micro-level transitions. Therefore we place a high priority on exploiting longitudinal data sources such as cohort and panel studies, and we aim to develop the analytical expertise to use these resources effectively. Secondly, comparative analyses play a crucial role in our programme. Whilst country level (case) studies especially in the UK are an important part of our research, we seek to develop a reputation for cross-national comparative research, especially insofar as we can see how the impact of major societal changes such as immigration or technological developments affect different countries. Again we seek to develop expertise in appropriate methods, including multilevel analysis to examine country level differences as well as more traditional comparative methods.

## **7. Plans for Implementation**

In order to implement these aims the ISC has established a formal system of internal monitoring and review via committees that meet regularly to oversee and develop a successful programme of research. The most relevant of these are the Executive and Research Committees. The latter includes several non-ISC members. All ongoing, pending and proposed research grant applications of ISC staff and associated members, as well as non-grant related projects that staff wish to report, are tabled for discussion. Attention is focused on both the development of individual staff research profiles and portfolios and how these cohere within the wider agenda of the ISC. Targets for annual overall research income generation are identified; individual contributions to that total are monitored. A quarterly research funding alert bulletin is prepared and distributed by individuals on the committee. Senior staff members are all expected to engage in peer review of junior and other senior staff grant applications.

Masters teaching and PhD student recruitment provide a means of implementing the research strategy: highly trained social science graduates can be recruited to collaborate on relevant staff projects both during the course of their studies and subsequently in postdoctoral roles. Integration of students into the wider ISC research agenda helps to stimulate individual and collective research productivity and builds bonds with the social scientists of the future. To achieve such integration and progression our MSc in Social Change contains substantial elements of research training and development that are also available to our PhD students to audit. Core modules include ‘Social science research methods’, ‘Introduction to statistical modelling’ and ‘Qualitative research methods’. Elective modules include ‘Multilevel modelling’, ‘Advanced survey methods’ and ‘Statistical foundations’. Dissertations require original, empirical research. We hope that a significant number of MSc students will continue on to complete their doctoral studies within the ISC social change programme. Our distinctive combination of expertise in the conceptual and theoretical understanding of key topics in contemporary social and political change and statistical analysis provides a good basis for recruitment and retention.

## **Appendix: DCERN**

DCERN, The Democracy, Citizens and Elections Research Network, based in ISC, develops the focus on social and political change to provide a platform for more specific analysis of current changes in the patterns of citizen attitudes and behaviour. DCERN is a multi-disciplinary network that unites scholars at Manchester and beyond who are active in the study of democracy, citizen politics and elections. The network draws on the disciplines of politics, social statistics, business studies and sociology to examine the participation (and non-participation) of individuals and groups within the wider formal and informal context of politics. Particular expertise exists in the study of local government and community participation, deliberative democracy, electoral systems and parties, and the use of new media technologies. The group meets regularly to discuss mutual research interests, develop collaborative projects and run seminars with external speakers. Major activities have included the organization of the annual conference of the 2008 Elections Public Opinion and Parties (EPOP) specialist group of the UK Political Studies Association and workshops on the Comparative Study of Citizen Politics (run with the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES)) and Votes at 16, featuring the Chair of the UK Youth Citizenship Commission.