SOLON Members' Research Interests and Current Projects

Dr John Walliss[1]

'Apocalyptic Texts, Themes and Motifs in Popular Culture'

My background is as a sociologist of religion. Since being awarded my PhD from the University of Sheffield in 2000, my main areas of interest have been in the study of religion and violence and, more recently, in religion and popular culture. My book *Apocalyptic Trajectories: Millenarianism and Violence in the Contemporary World* (2004) was a comparative study of collective murder-suicides involving groups inspired by apocalyptic ideologies over the last quarter of the twentieth century. From 2007-2011, my research shifted to looking at the influence of apocalyptic texts, themes and motifs in popular culture, particularly in film. I have co-edited two collections of essays on this, as well as overseeing a six-volume series of edited collections on the apocalypse and popular culture with Sheffield Phoenix Press (the final volume of which is currently in press).

As part of a restructuring of my University in 2010-11, I was required to move faculty and retrain as a criminologist and, consequently, develop a new research profile. With support from my institution, over the last year I have begun to develop a research interest in nineteenth century crime and justice. In particular, stemming from my previous research in contemporary media and popular culture, I have become interested in nineteenth newspaper – particularly local newspaper – representations of crime and justice.

My interest in the SOLON project stems from both its interdisciplinary nature and, particularly, its focus on the links between crime, law and the media. My research is still at a very formative stage, but over the next year or so my aim is to undertake a project examining representations of crime and justice in the regional press in Chester over the course of the nineteenth century. Chester had six English-language newspapers during this period representing different political opinions; *The Chester Courant* (Conservative)*, The Chester Chronicle* (Whig), *Cheshire Observer* (liberal and in circulation from 1854-), *Chester Record* (liberal and in circulation from 1857-68) *Chester News* (1866-7), and *Chester Guardian* (unaligned and in various incarnations from 1867-1946).

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The first part of the project will be a comparative analysis of the reports in the *Courant, Chronicle and Observer* of the 35 public executions that took place in Chester between 1820 and 1865. While there is an established body of work covering various aspects of execution culture in the nineteenth century - not least their representation in other printed material such as broadsides, ballads and the Newgate Ordinary's Accounts - comparatively little academic attention has been paid to the way in which the press, particularly regional newspapers, reported executions. The notable exception to this is the work of Zoe Dyndor on representations of capital punishment in the *Northampton Mercury* between 1780 and 1834 and John Tulloch's analysis of Lincolnshire newspapers reporting of the first private execution in the county in 1868. The aim of my initial research is to build on these studies to examine how each of the three newspapers reported executions during this 45 year period, focusing on how the events were framed, what language was used and so on. I am particularly interested, again stemming from my previous research, on the way in which the ritual of execution was framed in the reports as a religious event. Andrea McKenzie has recently written on the role of religious language in execution culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and I would be interested to examine to what extent this continued into the nineteenth century.

I would welcome the opportunity to correspond with anyone with similar research interests.