

### The Urban Everyday: The History and Dynamics of Place Making

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#### **City, Street and Citizen: The Measure of the Ordinary**

By Suzanne Hall

Routledge Advances in Ethnography

Dick Hobbs and Geoffrey Pearson,

Abingdon, Oxford, Routledge, 2012.

It is not difficult to gain the impression that we live in times saturated by preoccupations with celebrity, or with actions that seem incomprehensible because of their extreme violence. It is with some pleasure, therefore, that I accepted to review a book whose focus is to illuminate the world of everyday practices in multicultural urban settings.

Ethnography provides us with a means through which to understand the extraordinary and yet ordinary ways in which people produce their lives in particular contexts. What Suzanne Hall terms the “visible convergence of diversity” on the Walworth Road in London is the focus of a book-length study whose overall purpose is to render visible practices in a multicultural setting. Set against the backdrop of managing multiculturalism in the name of the “Nation,” this book sets itself against the dogma that informs this thinking: “The value of ethnography in understanding difference is that it renders a situated and multi-vocal sense of people and places as they live in, respond to and shape their worlds” (p.8).

As both a resident and fieldworker in the area (for six and two years, respectively), different sources of data are deployed in order to understand the wider forces that shaped the area. The richness of the account does tend to be punctuated by many questions and the quoting of other authors, but what stands out is the scale and pace of change: more than half of the UK’s migrant population being based in London, of whom more than half arrived after 1990 and a quarter since 2000.

So what is it to be “local” in this milieu? With the unit of analysis being the “everyday street,” there are two dispositions: cosmopolitan and parochial, with improvisation as the connection embodying an ingenuity and frailty in practice. Using “Nick’s Caff” as an observational base and meeting space, a rich account of life on the Walworth Road emerges that is supplemented by a survey of the

independent shops in the area. These exhibit public, semipublic, and private areas, along with visual representations of the surroundings providing connections across different scales of activity (the author is also an architect).

If these are the dispositions, what of senses of belonging? Here boundaries exist as forms of physical and perceptual ordering, as well as historic spaces of “transition and stasis” (p.31). With land and rent mixing at the urban margins with class and migration, she discovers where the owners of the independent shops came from. A vivid map of places of origin demonstrates an extraordinary diversity, set against a backdrop of control of the urban poor. The intersections of the historical and contemporary reinforce: “the boundaries that confine and relegate people to place” (p.46). Perceptions of territoriality and insularity mix in places via housing tenure to produce the contemporary urban landscape where boundaries are: “simultaneously a place of crossing and containment” which “allows for wide and near views of past and present, and global and local” (p.50).

The book then moves to urban sociability in the context of Nick’s Caff as a: “‘prosaic public’: space of habitual, local and close-up forms of contact, the uses of which, at the very least, are to include diverse individuals in shared space” (p.54). Here is a daily rhythm where people find a place outside of home that is familiar and allegiances and divisions are apparent. Ideas of “foreigners” and “locals” mix with turning a blind-eye to minor, but illegal activities within a shared recognition of the importance of the social values of meeting points.

An emphasis on style is apparent when attention is turned to bespoke tailoring. In places of inequality, the values of a once thriving industry live on in the respect that is accorded to both the client and the skill of the tailor in producing a suit that accords self-respect to its wearer. It is a reciprocal arrangement in which it is not the physical garment itself that informs the purpose of production, but is a medium in which Reyd, as the tailor, has “refined his way of life, from his apprenticeship to his set of social and business relationships with diverse customers” (p.94).

Reyd’s shop is a “skilful space,” as is the street itself where life and livelihoods and work and leisure mix. These spaces are supplemented by the “familiar” and “intimate”: the former being a means of navigation and the latter a form of interpersonal intimacy within group settings that “might support personal as well as political allegiances” (p.96). What is revealed is the everyday dexterity or cosmopolitanism exhibited by the residents through “recognition of difference without convergence to sameness” (p.108).

Here is a study of a street that adapts. Deploying measures of duration, diversity and “give,” a different sense of value emerges than the one saturated by narrow constitutions of the “economic” in urban development. There are no underlying cohesions to inform policy initiatives, but skills that arise from being immersed in diverse contexts. Holding onto ideas of place enables feelings of continuity in the face of change. What this study does, therefore, is provide a celebration of the everyday ways in which senses of belonging arise in the contexts of diversity and inequality that characterize the contemporary city.

### ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR(S)

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