

City, Street and Citizen

The measure of the ordinary

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How can we learn from a multicultural society if we don't know how to recognise it? The contemporary city is more than ever a space for the intense convergence of diverse individuals who shift in and out of its urban terrains. The city street is perhaps the most prosaic of the city's public parts, allowing us a view of the very ordinary practices of life and livelihoods. By attending to the expressions of conviviality and contestation, *City, Street and Citizen* offers an alternative notion of 'multiculturalism' away from the ideological frame of nation, and away from the moral imperative of community. This book offers to the reader an account of the lived realities of allegiance, participation and belonging from the base of a multi-ethnic street in south London.

City, Street and Citizen focuses on the question of whether local life is significant for how individuals develop skills to live with urban change and cultural and ethnic diversity. To animate this question, Hall has turned to a city street and its dimensions of regularity and propinquity to explore interactions in the small shop spaces along the Walworth Road. The city street constitutes exchange, and as such it provides us with a useful space to consider the broader social and political significance of contact in the day-to-day life of multicultural cities.

Grounded in an ethnographic approach, this book will be of interest to academics and students in the fields of sociology, global urbanisation, migration and ethnicity as well as being relevant to politicians, policy makers, urban designers and architects involved in cultural diversity, public space and street-based economies.

Suzanne Hall is an urban ethnographer, and Lecturer and Researcher at LSE Cities (London School of Economics and Political Science, UK). Her research and teaching interests are foregrounded in local expressions of global urbanisation, particularly social and spatial forms of inclusion and exclusion, urban multicultural, the design of the city, and ethnography and visual methods. She is a recipient of the Rome Scholarship in Architecture (1998–1999) and the LSE's Robert McKenzie Prize for outstanding PhD research (2010).

Routledge advances in ethnography

Edited by Dick Hobbs, University of Essex and

Geoffrey Pearson, Goldsmiths College, University of London

Ethnography is a celebrated, if contested, research methodology that offers unprecedented access to people's intimate lives, their often hidden social worlds and the meanings they attach to these. The intensity of ethnographic fieldwork often makes considerable personal and emotional demands on the researcher, while the final product is a vivid human document with personal resonance impossible to recreate by the application of any other social science methodology. This series aims to highlight the best, most innovative ethnographic work available from both new and established scholars.

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To Tony, Pip and Nicky Hall

Acknowledgements

'Odd that you should come all the way from South Africa to study the Walworth Road,' a friend remarked, not without raised eyebrow. I have relished this unexpected journey along a street that I have lived above and continue to travel along. This being a first book, there are many teachers, colleagues and friends I would like to acknowledge, both 'here' and 'there'. Let me start with the street, where 'Nick', 'Dorah' and 'Reyd' gave me a base, in the fullest sense of the word, to carry out my fieldwork. Numerous individuals who live or work off this street were generous enough to share their views, without which the substance of this book would not have accrued. Thank you to my neighbour and friend Jean La Fontaine for reading parts of this project as it emerged from its early observations.

In the early years of fieldwork, I made frequent use of the Southwark Local History Library, an invaluable public resource staffed by an astute group of librarians with a local knowledge not retrievable via the catalogue, Stephen Humphries amongst them. I hope the quality of this wonderful archive will not be severely affected by the austerity measures that currently abound in the UK.

LSE Cities and the Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science has been the very best home from which to pursue a combination of spatial and social research. My thanks extend to my doctoral supervisors Janet Foster and Robert Tavernor, and to Fran Tonkiss, Juliet Davis, Ricky Burdett, Claire Alexander, David Frisby and Paul Rock. Savitri Lopez-Negrete, Thresh Govender, Maria Sisternas and David Church were not only talented students but infinitely more adept at computer-aided graphics than I, and I thank them for their contributions. I developed much of the thinking for this book through participating in the NYLON and Writing Cities Research Groups, and I am particularly grateful to Craig Calhoun, Jerry Frug, Vic Seidler and Richard Sennett and to the graduate students in these groups for their comments on work in progress. Richard Sennett and Les Back examined my Ph.D. thesis, and their comments and writings have been invaluable in shaping this book. Equally, my early intellectual joy at exploring the city was sustained by teachers and colleagues at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town, and I would like to especially thank Jo Noero, Roelof Uytenbogaardt, Iain Low, David Dewar, Fabio Todeschini and Lindsay Bremner.

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Suzi Hall, October 2011

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Introduction

Urban multicultural: an ordinary orientation

The sign above the shop-front read, 'Mixed Blessings Bakery. West Indian and English Bread'. The bakery was on my twenty-minute bus route from south London into the centre of the city, and from the top of the red double-decker 68 or 171 buses I could see the stack of oblong loaves that on cold days steamed up half of the shop-front. On holidays a haphazard queue would form along the pavement outside Mixed Blessings Bakery, while people waited to buy a warm, sweet piece of the Caribbean to take back to their south London homes. The bakery is one of many small shops along the mile length of the Walworth Road, and from the top of the bus I could see the dense, linear assemblage of these small shop spaces, and an array of people going about their everyday routines.

As a newcomer to London from South Africa, what struck me first about the Walworth Road was the unfamiliar collage of surfaces and expressions displayed by spaces, activities and cultures. The visible convergence of diversity that I first observed on this street may be of little surprise to the more accustomed Londoner's eye, and in a city populated through perpetual histories of immigration, scenes like those on the Walworth Road may well appear much like those on many other high streets across the city. What came to matter as a local resident in using the Walworth Road was the ordinariness of its differences: the basic value of social contact on the street refined through regular, face-to-face meetings.

My bus route to the London School of Economics ran past the tight alignment of shop-fronts on the Walworth Road, where the rhythm of spaces briefly paused on the east side of the street, providing a view of the shoppers at the East Street Market whose perennial allegiance, despite the changes in traders and goods, remains the pursuit of a bargain. At the northern end of the Walworth Road, the intensity of entrepreneurial life was abruptly truncated by the monolithic, prefabricated forms of the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre and Heygate social housing estate. Built in the 1960s and 1970s respectively, these dreary monoliths follow the Modernist predilection for functional separation and are detached from the street. At the Elephant and Castle, buses and cars wound into two centrifugal roundabouts, which distributed the traffic over the Westminster, Waterloo, Blackfriars and London Bridges, crossing the River Thames as the great watery divide.

The presence of a number of cranes and sites under construction, and a billboard renaming the area 'South Central', indicated that the Elephant and Castle, a

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comparatively cheap but well-located area, was targeted for strategic redevelopment. A little further to the north, the script engraved on the obelisk at St George's Circus signalled that I was only one mile from the symbolic centres of London represented by Westminster, Fleet Street and St Paul's Cathedral. From here it took mere minutes on the bus to reach the bridges and to cross the River Thames, entering into a city proximate to, but entirely distinctive from, the Walworth Road. All in all, only twenty minutes to travel from one kind of urban experience to another: emerging from the eclectic array of small shops and large concrete housing estates along the Walworth Road, to the picturesque arrangements of world famous landmarks, Portland stone and plate glass that lend prestige to the city. This bus journey was to repeatedly remind me that traversing London and crossing the river was about experiencing the miscellaneous proximity of local worlds highly differentiated by income, culture and built fabric.

My time spent on the Walworth Road, both as a resident and a researcher, revealed the social and cultural formations of a diversifying city within the shared terrain of the street. Along its linear aggregation of a multitude of shop spaces and sub-worlds are the intersections of class, race, ethnicity, inequality and opportunity. In its ordinary dimensions a city street like the Walworth Road provides a palpable presence to our milieu, to the global process of social change in which societies are urbanising and diversifying. If the contemporary reconfigurations of 'community' and 'family' and of 'class', 'race', and 'ethnicity' have both a locus and a pace in our milieu, it is that of the accelerated city. *City, Street and Citizen* focuses on the impact of the unprecedented scale, speed and flows of global urbanisation on local forms of participation and allegiance. It is a fine-grained, ethnographic

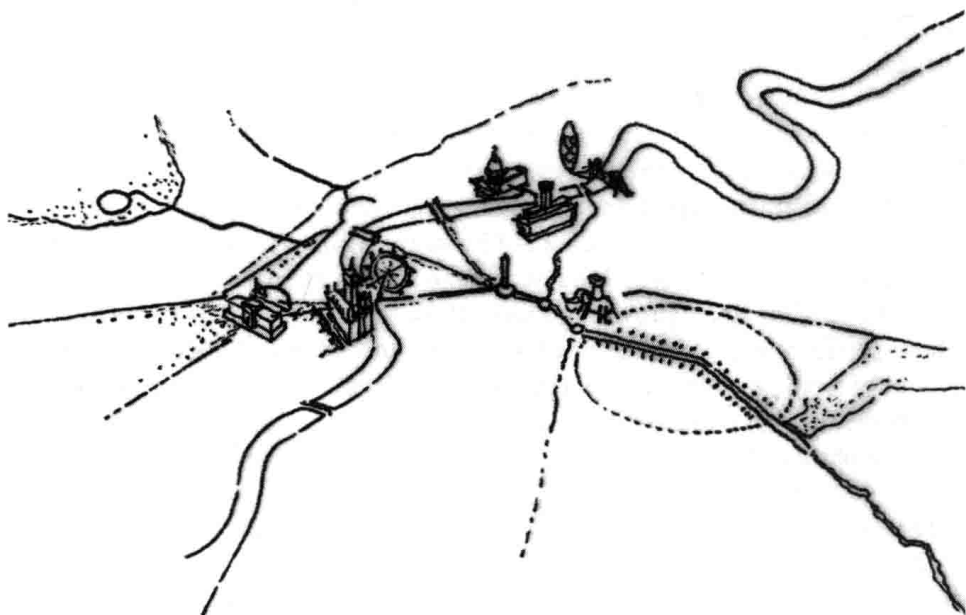


Figure 0.1 The proximity of the Walworth Road to the River Thames and to London's prestigious landscape.

exploration of how historic understandings and individual practices of belonging reconcile with or reject the ethnic and cultural diversity that manifests on the street.

At the heart of the book is the question of why it is imperative that everyday practices of urban multiculturalism are made visible. Why is it crucial to the dominant political and media framings of 'multiculturalism' in Britain and further afield that an alternative approach, based on empirical observation, needs articulation? During 2010, election campaigns in Britain and Europe were pointedly oriented around the issues of diversity coupled with citizenship¹. In Britain a core focus, indeed the opening question for the first televised election debates, was the subject of diversity as encapsulated by immigration². The fervent consensus across the Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative spectrum advocated tighter visa and border controls, conceptualising the idea of citizenship in a highly fluid, global world as one still predetermined at the national border point. And it is a discriminatory frontier, as recent immigration legislation in Britain suggests, where highly skilled workers are afforded greater entitlement to belong³. In Germany in 2010, Chancellor Angela Merkel asserted with resolute conviction that the 'multikulti' project had 'utterly failed'⁴. Multikulti's perceived demise was collectively synonymised by Germany's 2.5 million Turkish migrants (revealingly categorised as 'guest workers') who since the 1960s had contributed to the country through work, but whose perceived failure to integrate in Germany is flagged by the retention of the Turkish language as well the religious solidarity of Islam.

It is not only the interpretation of integration through homogenisation but the fear of influence of 'the foreigner' that has permeated recent European political legislation. President Sarkozy's ban on the burqa, promulgated in 2011⁵, is a total restriction on wearing a full veil in the public realm, and is echoed in the ban on the construction of new minarets in Switzerland in 2009⁶. These siege-like strategies that embargo the religious differentiation of bodies and spaces seek to control diversity through the political frame of secular nationalism. The nationalist imperative underscores singular prescriptions for allegiance⁷ despite deep economic dependencies on migrant workers in all their guises and the exchange of ideas and goods, never more apparent than in this global era. It is the provocation of migration exacerbated by the increasing flows of people since the 1990s that is the contemporary litmus of national tolerance or lack thereof to engage in the realities of a fluid and disparate global world.

The primacy of nation has also permeated the management of multiculturalism at the level of neighbourhoods, evidenced in Britain by the commitment to, 'a clear primary loyalty to this Nation' in the *Community Cohesion Report* (Home Office 2001: 20). The underlying prerequisite of consensus achieved via community under the auspices of nation and rendered through the political predilection for targets has shaped 'multiculturalism' as a project for organised intervention. The significant political oversight is the inadequate recognition of the multiple allegiances and visceral forms of mixing that spontaneously occur in urban life. Further, the contemporary city as an arrival point in a world-wide web of flows grounds an entirely different reality to the political dogma, as if nation and city are in a tug of war, with the ideology of containment heaving against the reality of movement.

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I resort here to statistics to evidence in purely numeric terms, the scale and pace of the diversifying populace in London. *A Profile of Londoners by Country of Birth* (GLA 2008) reveals the velocity of change: 40 per cent of the UK's migrant population is concentrated in London; more than half of London's current migrant population arrived after 1990 and a quarter after 2000; and the variety of its migrant group is such that 42 per cent is comprised of ten primary groups. These include: India, Bangladesh, Ireland, Jamaica, Nigeria, Poland, Kenya, Sri Lanka, South Africa and Ghana. The figures render the combined impacts of contemporary and historic global endeavours of Empire and colonisation, as well as UK's membership within the European Union.

What then are the conceptual and pragmatic alternatives that allow us to understand ethnic and cultural diversity in the contemporary city? An essential start is the recognition that global economic forces have not only propelled the migrations of skilled and unskilled workforces into cities but have also resulted, as is evidenced in the aptly entitled research on *Divided Cities* (Fainstein, Gordon and Harloe 1992) and *Unequal City* (Hamnett 2003), in increasingly polarised urban landscapes. In Alexander's south London housing estate (2000) or Wacquant's *banlieue* on the outskirts of Paris (2007) the overlap of historic urban areas of deprivation and increased immigrant occupation over the past two decades is more than apparent. GIS mappings of London since 1990 render a spatial articulation of the urban margins, evidenced in historic areas of poverty within the city correlating with contemporary and increasing ethnic diversity in these locales. Deep and advanced marginalisation in such parts of the city therefore needs to be integral to understanding the constraints on and achievements of the varied forms of social integration that occur in these locales.

In this sense the Walworth Road provides a good empirical beginning: as a street located within the urban margins of London, it offers a contextual lens with which to view local expressions of social adaptation in the face of global change. While it is a street from which one can hear the chimes of Big Ben, it remains culturally and economically distinct from the prestigious Southbank landscape only a mile and a half to its north. Historic ward area surveys reveal that Walworth is a comparatively poor neighbourhood, ranking in 2001 as amongst the 10th percentile of the most deprived boroughs in England (Office for National Statistics 2001). The spatially concentrated patterns of deprivation are represented on the 2007 Indices of Multiple Deprivation maps at borough level that incorporate three of London's largest housing estates – the Heygate, Aylesbury and Brandon Estates – directly adjacent to the Walworth Road (Greater London Authority 2008a). Southwark, the south London borough in which Walworth is located, has an ethnically diverse populace with 48 per cent of its residents classified – to use the somewhat coarse 2001 census terminology – as other than 'White British'⁸.

But beneath the statistics that signify Walworth as a diversifying urban margin is the need to explore how individuals and groups adapt to accelerated change, and in particular how they invest in their local worlds in social, cultural and economic ways. It is not simply that official census data and demographic percentages do little to render a complex or fine-grained explanation of the experiences of

difference and change. In their authorised depictions of diversifying urban societies, the modes of categorisation and stratification camouflage the crucial nuances of cultural exchange and social interaction. While I acknowledge at the outset that conviviality and conflict are part of plural and uneven societies, the focus of *City, Street and Citizen* is the practices of probing and working out between diverse individuals and groups within the small shops along the street. A core question is whether physical contact matters for these practices: do the proximities and crossovers of bodies and spaces on a city street have a bearing on how we test and learn with respect to one another?

To address this question conceptually and methodologically, the ordinary orientations of space, time and practice come to the fore. My ethnographic exploration of the life and livelihoods of a multi-ethnic street is constituted by the organisation of distance and nearness, of regularity and duration, and of participation and retreat. Raymond Williams' (1958) enduring insistence that 'culture is ordinary' is premised on human contact: everyday interactions are the primary conduit for sharing and learning, and making and building. Equally essential to Williams' notion of contact is the respective influences of work and culture on one another. But Williams' reflection of the integral relationship between working-class life and labour within vernacular landscapes is of a different milieu. A question for our urban age is what the forms of work and associated modes of public contact are that permit learning within cities that are highly varied and rapidly changing.

The question encourages a different conceptualisation of the urban margin from those that have shaped valuable ethnographic studies of inequality, discrimination, work and the city. It requires a shift away from, rather than a dismissal of, the explicit categorisations of race, ethnicity and class evidenced in the spatial segregation of American cities, as is so pertinently captured in the lineage of street-based ethnographies including Anderson's *Code of the Street* (1999), Duneier's *Sidewalk* (1999), Liebow's *Tally's Corner* (1967) and Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943). The shift is necessary for contextual and analytic reasons: the patterns of segregation within London are spatially less explicit, which is not to say that the divisions are absent, but that the formations of boundaries that limit contact and the meeting points that permit it require more hybrid categories of analysis.

London's urban margins, then, are locales that are physically proximate to but culturally distant from its symbolically dominant and prestigious landscapes on which the narrative of a 'world-class' city is conferred. Contemporary urban margins are shaped by complex interplays of pasts and presents or what Sarah Nuttall (2009) has so acutely conceptualised as the formative and informative 'entanglements' of history, people and place. In Walworth these entanglements are merged by processes of industrialisation and urbanisation; colonisation and immigration; Second World War devastation and clearance; Welfarism and large-scale social housing delivery; and de-industrialisation and globalisation. But it is a mistake to frame or relegate these territories simply as marginal. Rather, London's urban margins are places where the cultures and divisions of class, race and ethnicity are densely inscribed, as are the aspirations and innovations practised within its emerging urban multicultures.

The analytic alignment of these layered histories with the everyday individual processes of probing and working out is revealed within the ordinary and shared spaces of human contact, or what Ash Amin (2002) refers to as 'micro-publics' – the social spaces in which individuals regularly come into contact. Convenience and purpose permit less self-conscious interactions that are potentially eased by the more explicit processes of working, playing or learning. Crucially, Amin argues that these prosaic publics are not simply spaces of encounter, but of participation, and they require a level of individual investment to sustain membership. Local worlds within the urban margins are therefore also spaces where much is at stake, since these are the places in which the less mobile – the elderly, the young, the poor and the newcomer – are often highly invested. The regular participation in less official public spaces where more informal memberships are able to develop is therefore primary to the formation of alternative publics.

What the street offers us is a space that is central to the life of an area, but it also extends past the area, linking places and people. An urban street situates and connects, both focusing and expanding the possibilities for contact between different individuals and groups. The Walworth Road is supported by a large number of residents living within a convenient walking distance of the street as well as a broader group of people who reach the street by way of other journeys. Some of these journeys are part of the daily or weekly routines of commute common to Londoners. Other journeys to the Walworth Road involve a distinctive break with the regularity and comfort of a familiar world; these are the migratory journeys made between one country and another by many of its proprietors and patrons, and require traversing great physical and cultural distances.

To travel these actual and perceptual distances, crossing the boundaries between the familiar and unfamiliar, demands particular social and cultural skills. The capacity to engage in difference and change requires an ability to live with more than one spatial and temporal sense of a local place – a 'here' as well as a 'there', and a 'then' as well as a 'now' – the ability to live with combinations of what is familiar or what is 'local'. But in today's cities, shaped by accelerated change, it is not only the migrant or émigré who needs to learn the multifarious skills of how to preserve custom and to learn anew. This adaptation is also required of the urban local who has seldom or never travelled, and whose fixed position in a rapidly transforming local landscape does not provide an antidote to the enormity of change.

The street is space within the urban margin shared by newcomers and established residents that allows us to explore practices of adaptation. Sociologists would ask the question: 'Who is it that is most able to adapt?', while a geographer or architect might ask, 'In which spaces is adaptation most like to occur?'. These are questions that should not be separated. When Dench, Gavron and Young (2006) tested the capacities of immigrants and long-standing residents to adapt to change in *The New East End*, their interviews focused on sites in which access to and entitlement of public resources is highly contested, in particular social housing. Social housing is not only a domestic realm where long-established forms of belonging are revealed in kinship patterns of family and class. In Britain it is also an allocated public resource and the questions of who gets housing and who gets it first is inevitably

conflictual. But is racism or disdain of 'the foreigner' at the core of the conflict, or is contestation reproduced by the system in which public resources are organised and distributed? Similarly, is social housing – a domestic and state-owned space – a comparatively brittle urban territory, in which definitions of turf, privacy and what is public are less adaptable to rapid change?

In contrast to the social housing estates that comprise a large proportion of residences in walking distance from the Walworth Road, the independent shop spaces off the street appeared as a cheek-by-jowl series of sub-worlds that were neither overtly public nor private. The shops were adjacent to and distinct from the street, and interactions and memberships within the shops were regulated differently from those on the pavement to their fronts. I was interested in the forms of adaptation in these small interiors off the street in which things were both made and sold, and the extent to which the provision of goods and services fostered etiquette and exchange across cultures.

The street is ordinary in this sense – a space for stopping as much as for moving, a place to pause, to meet friends, post a letter, to buy goods. It is an amalgam of interior rooms and sub-worlds off its edges in which forms of belonging are sustained through everyday conveniences. My research focus came to be the small independent shops along the mile length of the Walworth Road, and the social interactions between the proprietors and customers within them. These shops initially appeared to me as a dense aggregation of lives and livelihoods and I became intrigued by the overlap of work practices and social practices within the shop interiors. Questions emerged as to whether the acumen of the proprietors and the regular needs of customers would have bearing on the social possibilities and cultural improvisations within these shop spaces.

This is however, neither an ethnography of shopping nor of consumerism as a pleasurable and readily purchasable mode of cultural exchange. It is a scrutiny of multilingual forms of communication on a multi-ethnic street, and of the modes of expression afforded within local spaces of work, convenience and leisure. The focus on the shops has led me to larger questions of belonging, participation and allegiance in a diverse and unequal urban society. In particular, I explore whether capacities to engage in urban change and difference are connected to forms of inclusion integral to daily life including skill and meaningful work that, in the case of the street, are made publicly visible and are refined through social contact.

While the Walworth Road is a local street, its small-scale retail make-up has meant it is a route to a wider world, in which migration and mobility are central. Although its feudal beginnings were as a village high street subsequently structured by the parish, the manor and agricultural production, the small-scale patterns of land ownership along its edges readily adapted to the combined forces of industrialisation and urbanisation at the turn of the eighteenth century. The Post Office directory of London streets (Post Office 1881–1950) reveals a street that by the late 1800s was not only predominantly retail, but one where its proprietors included immigrants from Ireland, Italy and Eastern Europe. Tracing the Post Office records from 1881 to 1950, the pattern of immigrant proprietors persisted, including waves of immigrants from Turkey, Greece and Cyprus. The variegated pattern of