



Exploring Ethnic  
Tensions Through  
Locality

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## **Exploring Ethnic Tensions Through Locality**

(Originally presented at the ICS October 2001)

I am planning to do some research into the relationship between people and place in London and this working paper is exploring some of the issues I hope to illuminate through it. My starting point is that prejudice and discrimination, which feed racism, are not deviant traits in inherently 'bad' individuals. Rather they are a by-product of a human tendency to categorise and stereotype people in order to get to grips with the world and our place within it. However this does not make racism and discrimination inevitable. Rather the assumption is that there are some social structures and patterns which may encourage these tendencies while others will ensure they are less likely to arise. This view is implicit in various ways in sociological literature. For example some see racism as a product of unequal power relations (such as slavery) while Schermerhorn, writing in the 1970s described prejudice as "a product of situations; "historical situations, economic situations, political situations; it is not a little demon that emerges in people simply because they are depraved"<sup>1</sup>. Thus the aim of the research would be to consider in what set of circumstances prejudice and discrimination are most likely to arise. In particular I would like to think about how the relationship which individuals and groups have with each other is mediated by their relationship to place.

### **Why locality?**

There are a number of reasons why I am particularly interested in the relationship between people and places. There have been a number of books written on the way that processes of 'globalisation', multinationals and corporations have changed the significance of nations, and on how information technology has shrunk geographical distance (see for example Manuel Castells). However there is still a backlog of thinking to be done on the way we think about the world and our place within it, what should be our significant units of space and what are going to be the levels of identity by which we organise our lives.

Here in Britain, as elsewhere, the people-place relationship has seen accelerated change in recent years. We have seen devolution of power downwards as Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland develop their new parliaments and assemblies, and deference to wider powers as our laws become subordinated to those of Brussels, and Europe becomes an increasingly significant functional unit. What it means to be British, Scottish or English is being challenged by changes in these political structures; it is also evolving into something else from within. While perhaps in the distant past the 'British' tolerated (or not as the case may be), people from other cultures, now people whose roots lie elsewhere are integral to and part of our own way of life. Consequently what it means to be British is still in its rather transitional stages, and has yet to emerge in a confident new form. Who knows, maybe in some distant future we'll be Londoners first and Europeans second and we won't be British or even English at all.

Recent events illustrate how people's relationship to places is changing, not just in terms of political alliances but more fundamentally. Where the enemy is terrorism, organised across many borders, relations between nation states no longer provide an adequate model for understanding or organising international political life. Coalitions are built between nations, but there are dangers of ruptures appearing within them. The same split appears in the approach towards Afghanistan which the British and Americans bomb, while sending food to Afghani citizens who one hopes do not live too near. And

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<sup>1</sup> Krausz, E, 1971 "Ethnic Minorities in Britain" p.124.

while the target for the attacks was in America, the terrorists killed the citizens from 63 different countries, including no doubt numbers of people with exactly the same religious and national background as themselves<sup>2</sup>. And while the terrorists have been identified as individuals it is difficult to identify in conventional terms of land based groups of people who they represent or even what their goal is. And while they may be prepared to bomb countries of which they themselves are the citizens, they are confounded by the fact that Muslims live peacefully (on the whole) in the same countries, have a strong attachment to place and would also be the victims of any terrorist attack.

### **Place and nation**

As a consequence of all the many terrible wars which have been fought to create or defend nations or exclude people from them, the concept of nation has been almost completely discredited. With it has gone the idea that a person's relationship to place may be a vital part of a social equation, valuable or significant in any way. The people-place relationship has been assimilated to the bathwater of nationalism, and along with it, been completely undermined. This is reflected for example in the writings of Gilroy who extols the virtues of the concept of Diaspora because he sees it (I would say mistakenly) as subverting the whole relationship between people and place: "It disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location and consciousness"<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps the closest alternative for describing a people-place relationship is ethnicity, but this describes and reifies attachments to ancestral places (often nations), or the colour of a person's skin and does not reflect the place a person lives in now.

The place where a person lives, the area around which they organise their lives, is particularly important for understanding racism, because this is the unit in which some of the most virulent racist behaviour occurs. Whether name calling, dog shit through letter boxes, stone throwing, muggings, stabbings or vandalism, a great deal of it occurs at the local level. Some of this appears to be related to in-group and out-group behaviour, for example graffiti where children mark out what they perceive as 'their' territory, in methods less ecological than those of a dog or a cat.

However, rather than being a battleground, could the local area not provide a source of common identity, a focus through which groups and individuals could submerge their differences, a basis on which people could organise some kind of common life? If attachments to other places challenge a community's organic solidarity, wouldn't an overriding attachment to a common place provide a remedy, like some great homeopathic cure? Gerd Baumann in his book on Southall shows how people from many different cultural and religious groups form some kind of common Southallian culture; would it not be possible to discover through research what enables the development of that common identity to occur?<sup>4</sup>

### **Analysing key factors**

The extent to which place based identities develop will be influenced by a whole range of factors, and one of these will be the nature and extent of other cross-cutting ties. For example, where people have many friends and relatives who live in a neighbouring borough, their loyalties might lie over there. Alternatively, if a group of people, let's say Poles, lived altogether in a particular area, they may get their source of identity from their national group and they might take little interest in the place they live in. This would particularly be the case where group identity is combined with a lack of legal rights and second class status.

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<sup>2</sup> See Independent 11 September.

<sup>3</sup> Gilroy P, 1997 *Between Camps: Race and Culture in Post Modernity*.

<sup>4</sup> Baumann G, 1996 *Constituting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London* Cambridge; Cambridge University Press.

This is also relevant to contemporary debate where there is an increasing trend towards thinking that people are best off living with others of a similar cultural identity; this is found amongst housing associations and other community groups and is not just a feature of the walled community fascist far right. Part of this is to do with the need for minority groups to protect themselves from racism: "You also know you have safety in numbers here, that if something triggered off, there's lots of people who would stand up for you. That's why no racist groups tend to come here to try and cause trouble, because they know we're be ready to defend ourselves"<sup>5</sup>. However the need to be with others with a similar culture to oneself may go deeper than that: "It does help a lot being surrounded by families who have the same culture - you know everyone, and everyone knows you - and I personally wouldn't want to live in an area without other Asians"<sup>6</sup>. Contact with their own community can also be essential in providing asylum seekers with the networks of support which enable them to adapt to a new country and provide them with the means to build up a new way of life.

However, is there a certain point at which place, from providing the medium through which people can build up support networks, becomes subordinated to group aims and the means through which groups of people can exclude those who they feel don't belong? In recent research it did appear that some of the most harmonious places were the most heterogeneous, whereas in the homogenous populations tensions and stresses were more likely to arise<sup>7</sup>. There could be another benefit of heterogeneous populations. While place can provide the source of some internal group cohesion, cross-cutting, cultural group based identities may facilitate far wider, outward looking social ties.

While this may start sounding like a social prescription, it is not really intended to be that. Rather it is trying to point towards avenues of further research. For example one could start by exploring the advantages and disadvantages of heterogeneous and homogenous areas. While being aware of the possibility of tautology (racism pushes people to live with others like themselves, where people live with others like themselves racism occurs), is there anything inherent in terms the composition structure of a community which will encourage racism to occur? Alternatively is there something about the set up circumstances which have led to the particular ethnic composition of that community, taking into consideration for example access to housing, availability of facilities, political engineering, which has discouraged ethnic tensions? And, where you have different ethnic groups living in particular areas is there some kind of overarching identity for the whole area through which some kind of cross cultural unity can occur? Alternatively are there facilities which different groups share, for example youth clubs, markets, churches or leisure facilities so that the possibility for interaction between different groups exists? Or are facilities designed in such a way that they separate groups from each other so that while some people have facilities locally others have to go elsewhere? Do public performances and monuments alienate people from each other by being organised externally, or by reflecting only one community, or, are they joint decisions, providing some kind of symbol in which all can share?

### **Places of conflict**

In recent research conducted in Southwark and Wandsworth it became possible to start to identify some of the processes which led in one case to the heightening of racial tensions and in the other to them being dispersed<sup>8</sup>. When a large number of immigrants and asylum seekers moved into Southwark, the council capitulated to the racial tensions

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<sup>5</sup> Kerr J Time Out July 25-August 1 2001 pp: 16-17.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> ESRC Cities: Economic Competitiveness and Social Cohesion Programme.

<sup>8</sup> *op cit*

in the north of the borough by housing the new comers in the newly built large housing estates in Peckham further south. Since most of the ethnic minority tenants were from poorer sections of the community, shops shut down and facilities declined, which led to the better off white residents leaving and the further ghettoisation of the community. Meanwhile the traditional racism of the north of the borough developed a political dimension which led to it being further institutionalised. Prior to the building of the five estates the boroughs had been amalgamated into a larger potentially clumsier unit called Southwark. This led to tensions between the two ex-boroughs because Bermondsey people didn't like what they perceived as being their money being spent on people elsewhere. As Peckham became increasingly black, this resentment became increasingly projected onto a particular race. It did not help when Bermondsey became a liberal democratic stronghold in a labour borough concerned to shore up its support in the wards further south. These tensions have been sustained as large amounts of regeneration money have been pumped into Peckham, while publicly owned land and property in Bermondsey has been sold off.

Intensive settlement started earlier in Battersea when the West Indians who came over in HMS Windrush went to work in the trains and railway yards located there. The allocations rules excluded them from social housing and racism of the "No Irish, no dogs, no Blacks variety" excluded West Indians from private rent. So using the partner system West Indians bought housing in the more run down areas where they lived and rented to others in a similar situation. As they became eligible for council housing they remained fairly dispersed throughout the area because the then Labour council had expanded its stock by purchasing street properties as well as building estates. Consequently the Peckham type of ghettoisation never developed to quite the same extent. Wandsworth subsequently privatised a great deal of its council property which resulted in greater concentrations of wealth and poverty and more segregated populations. However the initial mixing influenced the trajectory of the Battersea population composition and it has remained more mixed ever since. Even if white people predominate on many of the posh streets, there are many black people there as well. Likewise on the council estates black people may predominate, but they are socialising, having children, intermarrying and going to school with the whites.

These areas have been described in broad brush strokes rather than fine detail in order to demonstrate that history and politics, through in this case their impact on access to housing, can have unintended consequences in terms of race relations. One could look at processes of gentrification in Battersea, or regeneration in Peckham to show further how the use of public or commercial space can produce tensions between different ethnic groups.

### **Countervailing ties**

However any studies of place and ethnicity also need to take into consideration the pressures which go towards strengthening or loosening the links between cross cutting ethnic groups. In particular I would like to take into consideration a trend to encourage group identities based on ethnicity. In current policy, when analysing inequality there is a tendency to explore differences of race and ethnicity while differences in economic background, access to educational qualifications, or the type of housing in which a person lives, which might be alternative delineating factors go relatively ignored. So for example when exploring who has access to particular jobs, there is a tendency to see race and ethnicity as the common denominator, when frequently it might actually be class. Recently inequalities of access to lottery funding were analysed in terms of ethnic identity. But it may have been size of organisation and connections with people in right places which actually played a more determining role. ICS's own research in East London showed that extra funding is distributed according to possession of an ethnic minority identity, when it would make more sense if it went to groups with a poor academic

outcome. Although it is not the subject of his book, or this essay, Brian Barry shows how multicultural policies, like a subconscious id or ego, maintain the status quo: "There is no better way of heading off the nightmare of unified political action by the economically disadvantaged that might issue in common demands than to set different groups of the disadvantaged against one another. Diverting attention away from shared disadvantages such as unemployment, poverty, low-quality housing and inadequate public services is an obvious long-term anti-egalitarian objective"<sup>9</sup>.

### **The importance of place**

Such policies reify one type of identity over others, while the many other ways in which people identify themselves is obscured. It discourages the development of new potentially cross cutting identities and crystallises differences which might otherwise be submerged. However by focussing on place rather than specific groups of people the ways in which people identify themselves, their cross cutting similarities as well as their differences may be able to emerge organically.

The proposed research aims to uncover the tensions causing racism, and I intend to do this by looking at the relationship between groups of people and place. However it is necessary to examine how these groups are constituted without assuming the primacy of ethnicity and race. I could then go on to look at different group's perceived access to resources over their area and their perceived capacity to influence changes which occurred. This should take into consideration formal and informal methods of social influence and control. I hope through this exploration to deepen our understanding of the person place relationship and what it means to have a place to which we belong.

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<sup>9</sup> Barry B 2000 *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* Cambridge: Polity Press.

