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Living with difference: making sense of the contemporary city

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Abstract Discussions of ‘smart’ cities generally focus on the technologies that can be mobilised to make cities work better, to ensure services are delivered more effectively and to empower citizens in various ways. But another way of considering the smartness of cities is to focus on cities themselves as social organisms and to review how they work, particularly in finding ways of living with difference and generating innovation. This chapter considers these questions with the help of evidence drawn from research on the experience of multiculturalism as a lived experience in three different and distinctive English urban areas.

1. Introduction

There is a long tradition that portrays cities as ‘hard’ spaces, as spaces of alienation. In popular culture, they are often framed as places within which individuals are homogenised and disciplined (for example, as depicted in Fritz Lang’s iconic film, *Metropolis*), or as places of threat, of crime, poverty and insecurity, segregated and divided (as expressed in some of Charles Dickens’ evocation of London’s dark side).

Alongside this tradition, however, runs another in which cities are understood to be places of opportunity. This stretches back to medieval times, and even before, when they were understood to be the spaces of free citizens in contrast to the feudal relations of the countryside. A similarly optimistic vision has recently found a powerful expression in the visions of the World Bank (reflected in its stream of work on urban development) and the European Commission (as it seeks to develop an ‘urban agenda’), as well as in the work of authors such as Edward Glaeser [2011] who celebrates the ‘triumph of the city’ and Richard Florida [2002] with his evocation of the creative class to be found in particular urban settings

The notion of the ‘smart city’ is consistent with, but independent of, these optimistic interpretations of what urbanism and urbanisation can deliver. It is generally (e.g. in the

European Innovation Partnership on Smart Cities and Communities launched by the European Commission) framed in terms of the possibilities associated with the use of information and communications technologies. There is a particular emphasis on the ways in which big data can be analysed to identify trends and opportunities for effective policy intervention, particularly in the fields of energy consumption and the planning of urban transport but also in less apparently technical areas – for example, in the expectation that urban e-government will ensure greater responsiveness from the agencies delivering services to urban populations [Budd and Harris 2008].

The smart city is expected to empower individual citizens as much as policy makers or those delivering services – the provision of tailored information at the personal or household level will, it is believed, also allow people to make their own decisions about how to access services (e.g. in terms of public transport and its availability), as well as to consider what initiative they might be able to take themselves (e.g. in terms of the management of energy consumption). Smart cities are also those which are imagined as having strongly developed forms of social capital, with populations comprising a remarkable pool of human capital, with the skills and attributes required for economic success in an increasingly globalised world. Smart cities, in other words, are made up of smart people and the technologies enable that smartness more fully to be realised.

2. What makes cities smart?

But it is also possible to think of the smartness of cities along rather different lines, moving beyond framings in terms of smart technologies or even smart people. One way of doing so is to reimagine the city itself as a social organism, as one that could itself possibly be 'smart'. In contrast to Wirth and the Chicago school this makes it necessary to reimagine urbanism as a way of life that is 'smart', rather than one that is necessarily alienating or divisive. From such a perspective, the city could be seen as a remarkable achievement, in which not only are very different and potentially warring populations juxtaposed to each other, but they somehow seem able to live together and generate productive social spaces. There are, of course, high profile examples of failed or divided cities (such as Beirut, Nicosia or even Jerusalem) and moments when urban conflicts break out (for example in the form of riots) but that is not the everyday experience of most of those living in urban areas.

Back in the 1960s, in her classic book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs was the poet of the city as social organism, describing the ways in which city streets helped to generate what she called a 'sidewalk ballet':

'an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole'
[Jacobs 1961,
p. 60].

But this was more than just a romantic vision, because for Jacobs it was of direct practical significance. As she went on to argue:

'Although it is hard to believe, while looking at dull grey areas or at housing projects or at civic centres, the fact is that big cities are natural generators of diversity and prolific incubators of new enterprises and ideas of all kinds. ... The diversity, of whatever kind, that is generated by cities rests on the fact that in cities so many people are so close together, and among them contain so many different tastes, skills, needs, supplies, and bees in their bonnets'.
(Jacobs 1961, pp. 156–9)

Jacobs emphasized the extent to which the complexity and heterogeneity of the urban experience might create order out of apparent chaos and, above all, generate dynamism and innovation.

In a globalised world, these issues become still more salient, as populations move across space to settle in global and not so global cities and – equally or more important – flows of capital, information and corporate power move still more freely. Engin Isin powerfully writes of the city as a 'difference machine', where groups form, orienting 'for and against each other, inventing and assembling strategies and technologies, mobilizing various forms of capital, and making claims to...“the city” [Isin 2002, p. 283]. The city becomes the place where claims and counter-claims are traded, temporary coalitions formed, and differences negotiated. The placement of different cultures, actors, needs and demands in close proximity produces a distinctive kind of (urban) social and political formation.

From this perspective, the urban represents a distinctive nodal formation around which sets of relationships overlap, settle and come together. But it is also a space of connectivity; one that involves the intersection of relationships drawn from far and wide across the globe, yet which combine and settle in cities in very specific ways [for a more extensive discussion

of these issues, see Allen and Cochrane 2014]. Amin and Thrift [2002, p. 157] neatly summarize what they see as the possibilities inherent in the modern city, which is 'so full of unexpected interactions and so continuously in movement that all kinds of small and large spatialities continue to provide resources for political invention as they generate new improvisations and force new forms of ingenuity'.

If it is necessary to recognise the remarkable possibilities of the city – the smartness of the city as a social phenomenon; it is equally important to acknowledge some of the potential downsides of urban living – in other words, the extent to which the city can be dumb. Cities also have the potential to reinforce and develop powerful forms of socio-spatial segregation and division. Urban spaces may become sites across which conflicts take place, and cities can become defined by what Mike Davis [1998] has called an 'ecology of fear', in which a range of protected enclaves is constructed by the middle classes to exclude those who may challenge their security. There is a possibility that physical or spatial proximity may increasingly co-exist with relational difference. In other words, the connected live alongside the disconnected – the favelas and shantytowns and informal living survive and develop alongside the gated homes of the rich.

It is perhaps hardly surprising in this context that the search for the 'good' city has been a recurrent theme of debates. Cities have been the focus of a great deal of dystopian and utopian thinking, which has incorporated different understandings of the ways in which they are constituted. So, for example, Ebenezer Howard [1902/1965] and Le Corbusier [1929/1987] emphasize the extent to which cities are unruly places that need to be managed, while Jane Jacobs [1961] and Richard Sennett [1970] stress the importance of fluidity, uncertainty and mixing as defining the urban condition. The challenge of urban governance is to capture both aspects of the urban experience, in ways that permit the expression of vitality, while allowing for forms of popular control of urban development.

3. Living with difference

Within that framing we now want to turn briefly to think about the everyday urban experience of what might be called living multicultural, with the help of evidence from a project focused on three distinctive urban areas in England. This is a two year Economic and Social Research Council funded project [ES/J007676/1] whose purpose has been to examine how difference is lived and managed in practice in three quite distinctive urban places (Hackney, and inner London borough with a long experience of multicultural; Oadby, a small suburbanising town on the edge of Leicester with a growing middle class population of

south Asian heritage; Milton Keynes, a new city on the edge of the South East of England with a rapidly changing and diversifying population). A range of different sites of social life was explored in each case - urban parks, chain cafés, social-leisure groups (including sports clubs, a gardening club, and a writers' group), schools and colleges for young people (16-18), local policy-makers and community actors. Over 100 individual and group interviews and over 600 hours of participant observation were undertaken with diverse groups of participants.

This research starts from the recognition (confirmed in the results of the 2001 Census) that England's 21st century urban environments are increasingly and complexly diverse – it is no longer a question of *multiculturalism* as a (contested) hope or a vision, but instead it is increasingly necessary to acknowledge the reality of multiculturalism as the ordinary *is*. Multiculturalism in England has become increasingly complex over the last decade in a number of significant ways: the emergent geographies of ethnic diversity are increasingly dispersed; new, different migrations have continued and established migrant populations have fragmented along socio-economic axes; as a result, in some urban areas it became possible to talk of super-diversity; and the experience has stretched far beyond the traditional urban centres, incorporating suburban and rural areas [see Neal et al 2013].

Urban parks. In the parks, the dominant impression from our participant observation work was – as one of the field notes from Hackney summed it up – that: *'People were using the same space but not paying much attention to one another, other than the group they were in – though many of the groups of friends or family were of mixed ethnicities'*. One of those we interviewed highlighted the extent to which even groups which tended not to mix came together in the park: *'You usually see them walking in the street and you don't get much interaction [...] but at least in the park you feel like you're kind of interacting even if you're not speaking with them directly, but you're sharing the space together...you've both come to the park to enjoy what it is'* (these issues are explored further in Neal et al 2015).

Chain cafés. Much academic discussion of chain cafés tends to focus on the extent to which they are symptomatic of a wider globalisation of culture through corporate visions of uniformity [see, e.g., Ritzer 2008]. Our research was concerned rather more with the ways in which the supposedly bland spaces of consumerist conformity were experienced and shaped by those using them in the context of urban multiculturalism. What we saw suggested that the very blandness of the spaces and the clearly understood rules of engagement relating to food and behaviour also enabled a relatively at ease negotiation of shared space. This was captured in one field note along the following lines: *In the middle of the restaurant*

next to the drinks refill station was a white woman by herself eating sweetcorn and reading The Guardian, a young South Asian woman working on a laptop and a black (African-Caribbean) mother with two young sons who kept on getting up to get another drinks refill. Another woman – Turkish, I guessed – came in by herself and seemed to know the staff, going straight up and ordering without a menu and saying, ‘I’ll sit wherever you want me’

Education spaces. Our research in schools and colleges was focused on young people between 16-18 years old, but unlike most research in the area our concern was not to do with education, at least in the formal sense. What emerged from our discussions with young people was a clear recognition that college spaces were highly unusual in the extent to which people from different backgrounds came together in them. As one of those we interviewed expressed it: *I think it’s when you are getting to know people, like you meet new people I guess. I don’t know, I can’t really say why that is, it is just something, ever since I have been here, I have noticed that, it’s just like everyone is mixed together.* The internal spaces, rituals and expectations within the colleges helped to sustain this ‘mixing’ and in some cases that extended beyond the boundaries of the college, although this was far from a universal experience. There were often identifiable divisions between groups within the colleges, but the extent to which it was possible for young people to connect across them was clear to us both from observation and from the individual and group interviews we conducted. Young people exhibited significant skills in negotiating their relationships with others and this was sometimes made easier by the extent to which shared and secure spaces were made available outside the classrooms.

Social-leisure groups. There were marked differences between the social-leisure groups with which we worked. Some were more mixed than others. But in all cases what was apparent was the extent to which they provided safe spaces within which members and participants could share their concerns and even articulate their desires. As one of those we interviewed commented. *“We’re set the same task [and] I think what is really magical about it, is because we are such a huge mix of people, with the same task we take it in SO many different directions [...] we’ve all got very different life experiences that we bring to the same task and that creates really interesting conversations and things...”.* The social groups were places in which the rapid social change in all the localities was recognised, discussed and collectively reflected. The impact of large scale gentrification, rather than other forms of immigration, was a focus in Hackney; increasing multiculturalism an area of discussion in Milton Keynes, often as opportunity rather than threat; as was the growing South Asian middle class settlement in Oadby, particularly among existing residents from those backgrounds.

Ethnically mixed populations routinely and differentially share, experience and negotiate places intended and used for convivial, recreational, festive, relaxing, leisure, quiet and lingering time. Shared space implies connection, living side by side, but not necessarily intensive interaction. There are complex interactions between material environments and banal social practices. None of this means that prejudice has disappeared, or that there might not from time to time be explosions of rage from one group or another, although the experience of England's urban riots from 2011 suggest that they can rarely be captured in the easy terms of ethnic difference or 'race' [Murji and Neal 2011]. What we have charted is a particular urban phenomenon which can be described as the easy-uneasy negotiations of everyday urban multiculturalism – it does not always feel easy because small differences can sometimes seem important and differences of class and status are also hard to ignore, but cities provide the setting within which even difficult and tense negotiations can take place.

4. Conclusions: helping to make cities smart

The focus of this chapter has been on what might be called the 'smartness' of everyday urban life. But that does not mean that the city's smartness cannot be enhanced by policy intervention or good governance. Our research highlights the importance of creating 'bringing together' spaces for the routine 'being together' of super-diverse, complexly differentiated and rapidly changing urban populations. The tension between public spaces as democratic and elective (places people choose to be) as well as being governed and regulated (formal and informal rules of behaviour) is one that needs to be managed effectively, not one that can be ignored. Our discussions with local policy actors and community activists confirmed that they also recognised the importance of resourcing public spaces and looking for ways to facilitate informal capacities. And it is in this context that it might also make sense to return to the visions of smart technologies with which the paper started. The task may be to look for ways in which they can be mobilised to reinforce and sustain the smartness of the city as a social phenomenon, rather than as a technical solution imposed from above..

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