A Racial Archaeology of Space: A Journey through the Political Imaginings of Brixton and Brick Lane, London

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A Racial Archaeology of Space: A Journey through the Political Imaginings of Brixton and Brick Lane, London

George Mavrommatis

This paper conducts a form of racial archaeology in relation to the areas of Brixton and Brick Lane in London. Both inner-city areas are strongly associated with meanings related to race and difference. This paper examines some of the dominant ways through which Brixton and Brick Lane became represented in key policy texts. It investigates how these representations changed through time and identifies three different moments that have dominated the evolution of multiculturalism in local political discourse: a moment of racial pathology, where race is viewed as a problem of space or in space; a moment of reflection, where race is perceived through the lens of cultural difference; and a moment of celebration, where cultural difference is represented as an asset to be capitalised upon by acts of local regeneration.

Keywords: Race and Difference; Space; Discourse; Multiculturalism; Integration; London

Introduction: Race, Space and Time

‘But how they do it?’, Chamcha wanted to know. ‘They describe us’, the other whispered solemnly. ‘That’s all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct’ (Rushdie 1988: 168).

This paper is a form of racial archaeology of space extending from the 1970s to the early 2000s. It examines particular contexts that were responsible for the emergence of specific forms of race-making within the history of British multiculturalism. It investigates specific representations of race, difference and identity within the local
politics of Brixton and Brick Lane. However, representations are always contested, and the same holds true for the representational wars of Brixton and Brick Lane.

Any form of archaeology is a description of an archive (Burn 1995; Kendall and Wisham 1999; McHoul and Grace 1993). It is an attempt to investigate ‘the limits and forms of the sayable’ in different periods (Foucault 1991: 59). Our archive is constructed with a historical sensibility in mind. It examines some of the dominant ways through which Brixton and Brick Lane became constructed during the last few decades in key policy texts. More importantly, it sheds light on how these representations changed through time by identifying three different moments that characterised the evolution of local multiculturalism:

- the 1970s and early 1980s—a moment of racial pathology. Political imaginings of race and difference in this period clearly pathologised the metropolitan spaces of race; spatial forms of ethnic concentration were represented as a cause for concern;
- the 1980s onwards—a moment of reflection. These former political imaginings substituted the old category of race with that of ethnicity, and a multicultural agenda came to the fore;
- the mid-1990s to the early 2000s—a celebratory moment. Political imaginings of this period celebrated and commodified differences.

In this paper, I argue that these different local multicultural moments correspond to the different stages of evolution of British multiculturalism.

From the late 1970s, Stuart Hall (1978) suggested that some inner-city areas with high levels of black concentration were breeding a specific discursive correlation between crime, race and inner-city space. As he argued, ‘black crime becomes the signifier of the crisis in the urban colonies’ (Hall 1978: 239). Other writers suggested a similar ‘discursive traffic’ (Stallybrass and White 1986: 195) unfolding between ‘race, crime and the ghetto’ (Solomos 1993: 132). These were the first intellectual attempts to expose any discursive correlation between inner-city space and race within the political and media discourses of the era. These efforts made explicit the ‘hidden’ mechanisms through which space becomes racialised and race and space come together.

As Back and Solomos have argued, race does not comprise ‘a fixed trans-historical category whose meaning is the same’ (1996: 27). On the contrary, processes of race-making are always context-specific. Furthermore, Keith (2005: 9) has argued that different contexts are responsible for the emergence of various forms of racialised construction. Nevertheless, we have to remember that discursive traffics between race and space change significantly through time. In what follows, I historically analyse processes of racialisation in relation to the inner-city areas of Brixton and Brick Lane.

**On Local Histories**

Brixton and Brick Lane are part of London’s inner city. Brixton is located in South-West London and belongs to the London Borough of Lambeth, while Brick Lane is in
East London and is part of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Both areas have historically functioned as settlement areas for a number of migrant populations arriving in the capital.

After the Second World War, Brixton received significant numbers of Irish, Polish, Cypriot and Maltese immigrants, attracted to the area’s affordable boarding-house character. After the 1948 Nationality Act, West Indians started to settle too. The area was one of the few places in the capital tolerant enough to accommodate such ‘dark strangers’ (Paterson 1963). As a result of processes of racial discrimination in the allocation of local social housing, and also of the infamous colour tax that local landlords charged on newly arrived migrants, many West Indians acquired local properties and then rented them out to fellow countrymen. By the end of the 1950s, Brixton had evolved into a poly-ethnic enclave of various West Indian communities. From the 1980s onwards, strong African migration flows arrived. More recently, migrations from other parts of the world—especially Central and Eastern Europe—have further diversified the multicultural character of Brixton.

Brick Lane has also functioned as an area of migrant settlement. The first migrants were Huguenot refugees in the late seventeenth century. The Irish in the eighteenth century, Jewish refugees in the nineteenth and Bangladeshis in the twentieth, have all made the area their home (Fishman 1979: 76). Cultural traces of all these historical migrations can still be found in the area. Most remarkably, the building at the corner of Brick Lane and Fourier St. has successively functioned as a chapel for the Huguenots, a synagogue for the Jews, and a mosque for local Bangladeshis. The last 25 years have experienced intense migration from Central and Eastern Europe, including refugees fleeing ‘international trauma’ in the Balkans and other troubled areas of the world (Keith 2005). Today’s Brick Lane is a poly-ethnic enclave dominated by a strong Bangladeshi presence.

Traditionally, both areas have been associated with race and difference, a direct consequence of their multiethnic composition that set them apart from other more ethnically homogenous London neighbourhoods. Brick Lane in the 1970s was a theatre of fascist and anti-fascist confrontation. At the corner of Brick Lane and Bethnal Green Road, National Front supporters would sell their newspaper while racially abusing local residents of ethnic background. Racial attacks in this part of London were commonplace; one of the most-highly publicised racial murders took place in May 1978 when Altab Ali, a young local Bangladeshi resident, was stabbed to death near Brick Lane, provoking a rally of anti-fascist and anti-racist demonstrations.

Brixton in the 1980s was the scene of multiple urban riots. The most famous of all, the 1981 Brixton disorders, were the result of a confrontational relationship between police and local black youth building up over a period of time. These riots made explicit the scale of socio-economic problems that prevailed whilst further racially marking this area in the popular imagination.

Finally, the nail-bombing attacks of 1999 demonstrated once again the perceived difference of these areas to the rest of the capital. In April 1999, an explosion outside
a busy supermarket in Brixton injured 39 people. One week later, a similar explosion in Brick Lane left seven people injured. Both criminal acts were racially motivated. The nail-bombing was designed to create maximum havoc. The areas were picked for their ethnic and multicultural character. Accordingly, if space is said to constitute a sign in itself and race and difference another, then these two areas might comprise one of the few instances where the two signs come together (cf. Gilroy 2000: 48; Keith 1991: 187–91). The discursive meaning of the first becomes substituted by meanings attached to the latter; space becomes subdued to race and difference; space becomes racialised.

**Brixton in the 1970s and Early 1980s: The Multiracial as a Problem Of/In Space and the Deployment of a Pathologised Language of Race**

From the 1970s onwards, a political debate in Britain that linked race to the declining status of inner cities was given greater prominence. It was suggested that high levels of racial concentration in specific parts of British cities led to highly problematic socio-spatial situations (see Lee 1997; Western 1981). Race was not perceived as the victim of an already declining inner-city space but was, instead, constructed as the main reason for inner-city deterioration (Runnymede Trust 1980: 86), and blamed for all the inner city’s ills and evils (Smith 1993: 133).

Media and press reports in Britain became increasingly involved with discourses that criminalised sections of the black population (Bridges and Fakete 1985: 46; Gilroy 1987: 109; Gutzmore 1983: 18). The British economy was facing serious problems that eventually led to severe economic restructuring (Solomos et al. 1982). Its mainly industrial character was transformed, with thousands of jobs being lost. Ethnic minority populations were hit hard. This was the period when sections of black youth became overtly represented as criminal elements, leading lawless lives. These processes of criminalisation of black masculinity led to a structuralist reading of black youth as ‘the enemy within’ the British state (Solomos et al. 1982: 21). Inner-city areas with high levels of West Indian concentration became constructed as lawless urban lands, parts of an ‘urban jungle’ (Bridges and Fakete 1985: 58).

Particular types of crime became inextricably linked to specific parts of the city (Hall 1978: 239; Solomos 1993: 132). Inner-city areas with high levels of black concentration became ‘problems in space’—to be avoided at all cost. These processes of criminalisation of race led to a specific construction and articulation of a language of difference that equated race with crime (Keith 1993: 193). I now identify processes of criminalisation of race at the local level by examining key policy texts of the era.

In 1977 the Department of the Environment (DoE)—a governmental institution with no ethnic-minority high-ranking staff—published the Lambeth Inner Area study (broader Brixton area). It was written by a group of technocrats with no real-life connections to the area. According to the report, the area possessed all the classic symptoms of inner-city decline; race was acknowledged as one of the main issues (DoE 1977: 25). The study suggested the deployment of voluntarily policies of
dispersal and ethnic balance as a way out of local ‘hazardous’ situations and concluded that:

we would expect that increasingly members of the West Indian and other ethnic minorities will seek to move to the suburbs and beyond, and we see our policy of balanced dispersal as enlarging the opportunities for them to do so along with other inner-city residents (1977: 203, 206).

The local multicultural community was constructed and narrated as a problem in space. However, it was suggested that, through a voluntary implementation of dispersal policies, a much-sought-after ethnic balance could emerge within the metropolis. In short, the ethnic became constructed as a problem of/in space such that its dilution within the rest of the capital became an imperative.

Another similar representation emerged during the Public Hearings of Lord Scarman’s Inquiry into the Brixton Disorders. Most dominant were local criminalising narratives from the Lambeth and Metropolitan Police Force (MPF). During the Public Hearings, Chief Superintendent Jeremy John Plowman, the person responsible for the implementation of ‘Operation Swamp 81’, argued the following:

On my arrival back in Brixton ten years later I was extremely concerned to find that the level of crime ... had increased enormously. The aspect that concerned me most ... was what I termed ‘footpad’ robberies—the street muggings, dippings etc. ... there is a vast majority of people that commit footpad robberies who are black youths ... we have to ... find out which ... are ... committing crimes and which are not (Public Hearings HO 266/4: 53).

The MPF seemed to agree with this particular reading of Brixton’s criminality. In his written submission to the inquiry, the then MPF Commissioner described Brixton as:

... unique in terms of its violent street crime and the fear it generates. It also has the same problem of crime as elsewhere but to a greater degree (Public Hearings HO 266/44: 2).

From the above, it becomes apparent that the official language for describing race and difference in Brixton at the time was that of criminalised race. Local multiracial communities were constructed as unnecessary urban developments transforming the familiar cultural landscape of British cities. These high levels of ethnic—more precisely, West Indian—concentration in Brixton allegedly generated unacceptable levels of street crime. In short, Brixton and other urban multiracial communities became the subjects of an ongoing process of criminalisation; they became stigmatised. They acquired a racial ‘epiderme’ that was able to proceed into specific closures of meaning (Keith 1995: 367; Solomos 1988: 118; 1993: 128)—the historical construction of the multiracial inner city as a place where crime, chaos and anarchy reigned. We find the well-saturated representation of the metropolis divided along colour lines, within which black and white signify differently and produce the racial urban phenomenology which some of us, consciously or unconsciously, reproduce.
These criminalising narratives did not remain uncontested. Many writers deconstructed them and discursively separated race and crime, bringing to the fore the realities of discrimination, racism and disadvantage that ethnic populations at the time were facing in Britain (Bridges 1983; Bridges and Fakete 1985; Gutzmore 1983; Hall 1978; Solomos et al. 1982).

Brick Lane in the 1980s: The Transition from Race to Ethnicity and the Emergence of a Multicultural Agenda

However, British multicultural debates and policies should not be perceived as a straightforward journey (Hall 2000: 209). Instead, they should be understood as a series of discontinuous moments or ‘transruptions’ (Hesse 2000: 16–17). In what follows, I shed some light on the second multicultural moment of this journey—after the urban riots of 1981, when political imaginings of race became reflective and contemplative—and investigate the emergence of a multicultural agenda in Brick Lane’s former political discourses. The emphasis shifted from a previous space–race problematic to a progressive multicultural agenda, a transition also coinciding with a change of vocabulary. In key policy texts of the time, the ‘old’ category of race was substituted by that of ethnicity.² While race referred to skin colour and implied a differentiated human biology, ethnicity was strictly related to culture or cultural differences.

The 1980–81 Home Affairs Committee (HAC) report on ‘Racial Disadvantage’ conceptually broke with a long tradition in British politics and argued that ethnic-minority populations might not be responsible for the decaying status of British inner cities. Alternatively, their settlement in such dilapidated spaces might form part of their racial disadvantage. The emphasis shifted to the poor living conditions and lack of opportunity for ethnic minorities within decaying inner-city spaces. According to evidence presented to the Committee:

The concentration of ethnic minorities has been thought by some to be a problem, but it is not the mere fact that they are concentrated in some areas, which is important in the context of racial disadvantage, but also the fact that many of the disadvantages that they experience also tend to concentrate in areas where they live (Home Affairs Committee 1980–81: 298).

This was one of the first instances where the ills of inner cities were not attributed to postwar Commonwealth migration. Instead, ways had to be found to elevate inner-city migrant populations from their spatial disadvantages. This change in attitude towards migrants and inner-city space was part of the evidence presented to the Committee by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), founded just a few years before under the Race Relations Act of 1976, which made it unlawful to discriminate against anyone on grounds of race, colour, nationality or origin. The CRE would work towards the elimination of discrimination, the promotion of equality and the
development of good race relations and was the most significant public body working for the interests of ethnic minorities in the country.

Furthermore, the report aspired to contribute to debates on migration, cultural differences and identity. It argued that:

Both Asian and West Indian children may be in trouble by having a double identity ... Associated with this shifting and insecure personal identity is a conflict between the outlooks, habits and behaviour expected by the family, by authority at school and by white and minority peer groups (Home Affairs Committee 1980–81: xiii).

The Committee depicted Asian and black children born in Britain as trapped in-between cultures, torn apart between opposing cultural affiliations. Such representations of biculturalism were familiar at the time (Benson 1981). The fundamental assumption of the Committee was that each person can only correspond to one culture. As Britain had its own culture, differences—represented as obstacles to the smooth integration of ethnic populations into the societal fabric—should be unloaded at the point of entry to the host society.

In 1986, another HAC report explored the problems of ‘Bangladeshis in Britain’ (Home Affairs Committee 1986–87). The researchers and writers of this report were educated Bangladeshis with first-hand experience of the realities on the ground, and their ethnicity might partly explain the progressiveness of its multicultural agenda. From the 1980s onwards, British multicultural policies and practice were on the rise, especially in education and at the municipal level. In 1985, one year before the publication of ‘Bangladeshis in Britain’, the government had published Education for All, a governmental policy text clearly promoting the idea of a multicultural educational system (Lord Swann 1985). The publication of this influential report opened the way to other governmental policy texts to advocate progressive multicultural agendas, as with the ‘Bangladeshis in Britain’ HAC report, which presented Bangladeshi communities across Britain as the most disadvantaged ethnic minority groups in the country:

As for the distribution of Bangladeshis within Britain, the main features are the heavy concentration in Tower Hamlets ... Bangladeshi settlement tends to be localised within local authority areas, as for example in the western part of Tower Hamlets ... no other authority has anything like so high a proportion of Bangladeshis among its total population (Home Affairs Committee 1986–87: xi).

The report narrated a different multicultural tale in relation cultural difference. Instead of perceiving it as unnecessary cultural luggage that had to be left at the entrance to British society, it went on to preach cultural tolerance. For the context of local education, the HAC suggested that:

Cultural differences pose several complications for schools and LEAs. They occur in respect to halal food, sex education, religious education, uniforms, single-sex schools and the observance of purdah ... These are matters for individual schools.
More importantly, the report advocated an affirmative reading of cultural difference. It was assumed that the more ethnic cultures were added to the British national culture, the richer the latter became. In this way, British national culture is perceived as the accumulative total of a native culture and a diversity of other cultures.5

Furthermore, the Committee represented young Bangladeshi children born in Britain as the bearers of two distinct cultures: a native and an ethnic. In sharp contrast to the ‘racial disadvantage’ report, these dual cultural subjects are not presented as being torn between opposing cultural affiliations; instead, an alternative image of existential tranquility between cultures comes to the fore. The multiculled existence is no longer perceived as opposing but as reconcilable and federate. Here the HAC argues its case:

As for the curriculum and the place of different cultures within it, we share the former Secretary of State’s view that it should be a minimum objective of education ‘to educate all children and young people so that they are better prepared for adult life in an ethnically mixed Britain, in a way that will do justice to the accumulated richness of this country’s national culture, and develop respect for the cultures and beliefs of the different groups that make up our societies.’ Young Bangladeshis are heirs both to the cultures of their parents and to the culture of the country they now live in; reflection of their own culture as well as the majority culture in the curriculum . . . can help to prevent any feeling of alienation (1986–87: xvii).

These new political imaginings of race and difference shifted emphasis from race pathologies to cultural differences. The ‘old’ category of race became the ‘new’ category of ethnicity; skin colour gave away to cultural difference. Early political imaginings of the 1980s tended to pathologise biculturalism, and viewed cultural difference as problematic in nature. Nevertheless, from the mid-1980s, a new multicultural narrative surfaced, advocating cultural tolerance and the ability of British national culture to accommodate other ethnicities and cultures. Different ethnicities found a place for themselves within a changing, multi-ethnic Britain gaining discursive powers.

In this transition from race to ethnicity the British Asian experience played a significant role. As Modood (2005: 6) has argued, ‘Conceptualisations of race and racism, and hence also antiracism and racial equality, have been too narrowly defined. They are too dependent on the black–white relationship’. In such binary racial conceptualisations, British Asians did not find enough space to have their own cultural and religious differences accommodated. As a consequence, they pushed for a new multicultural agenda able to recognise different ethnicities and cultures. It is no coincidence that the writers of the ‘Bangladeshis in Britain’ report were themselves British Asians.
Celebrating Cultural Difference: The Rise to Dominance of Ethnic Diversity in Local Regeneration Policies

This section reflects on the third multicultural moment of this journey, when cultural difference became celebrated and commodified. From the mid-1990s, the British economy was rapidly characterised by historically low levels of interest rates and unemployment. Political imaginings of race and difference during this period reconsidered the potential market value of difference. They moved away from earlier multicultural narratives of cultural differentiation to debates that openly promoted ethnic diversity. The earlier multicultural agendas of the 1980s gave way to more commodified forms of politics of difference. In some cases, differences became the main engines of local urban redevelopment.

In what follows, I exemplify the uses of ethnic diversity discourse within local urban regeneration policies (see Bailey and Robertson 1997; Keith and Rogers 1991). I explore the ways that ‘difference’ was deployed in order to regenerate Brixton and Brick Lane. More particularly, I examine the elevated ‘status of difference’ (Gilroy 1995) within Bethnal Green (Brick Lane), Brixton City Challenge and Cityside regeneration policies. The City Challenge Programme and its immediate descendants were the most significant platforms for the proliferation of ethnic diversity discourse in British urban policy.

Bethnal Green City Challenge: The Banglatown Redevelopment Story

The local Bangladeshi community in the East End of London has been the subject of investigation for a number of authors. Some have focused on community, identity and space (Eade 1989, 1994; Fremaux 2000); others on education (Tomlinson 1992), religion (Glynn 2002), transnationalism (Eade and Garbin 2002; Garbin 2005), tourism (Eade 2002), migration narratives (Gardner 2002), redevelopment (Jacobs 1996), inclusion (Gardner 2004), and race relations and the welfare state (Dench et al. 2006). Here the focus is on local regeneration and the Bethnal Green City Challenge scheme in particular.

In 1991, as part of Michael Heseltine’s City Challenge initiative—a nationwide regeneration scheme characterised by a free-market approach to inner-city revitalisation—Bethnal Green was selected as one of the initial 15 inner-city areas that would receive significant amounts of public money in order to attract private investment. Such a neo-liberal approach to urban revitalisation dominated the British regeneration agenda of the 1990s.

Bethnal Green City Challenge (BGCC) ran from 1992 to 1997, and covered the western part of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, a total of 13.7 hectares. It lay within the former Bethnal Green neighbourhood and comprised the whole of Spitalfields Ward and parts of Weavers and St Peter Wards (BGCC 3 1996–97: 23). The BGCC’s aim was the social, economic and physical regeneration of the area through attracting private investment. Community participation was kept to a
minimum. However, the Company was accused of pursuing a form of local regeneration that created winners and losers while implicitly promoting gentrification.

The BGCC regeneration discourse only began to deploy affirmative readings of ethnic diversity from 1996, a transformation which took place for two reasons. Firstly, from the mid-1990s onwards, the local housing market experienced a sustained property boom that changed any negative attitudes towards the area’s attractiveness and future potential, and provided the substantial private investments that the Company was so eager to attract. Nevertheless, these funds were not put into productive use—generating extra jobs for example—but took the form of private consumption through investment in housing. Secondly, the 1994 local elections, which brought a Labour Council into power, became increasingly seduced by the Banglatown redevelopment concept. Cultural differences within the context of the BGCC became the object of celebration and commodification.

To start with, local cultural history and ethnic diversity emerged as significant narrative tropes within the Company’s regeneration vision. The area was depicted as ‘far from homogenous, with a diverse range of people’ (BGCC 1996–97: 5) characterised by ‘a rich history and cultural diversity’ (1996–97: 68). However, the Company acknowledged that the area suffered from a poor image:

> The poor state of the physical environment, together with bad press resulting from deprivation and racial tension, give rise to negative images of the area. Image, identity and local pride are therefore key issues to be addressed in any regeneration programme. ... A new positive local imagery is needed that would celebrate [local] history and cultural diversity (BGCC 1 1995–96: 43)

Increasingly, the Banglatown concept dominated the imagination of the local ethnic business community. Through their influence, both the BGCC Company and Tower Hamlets Council became familiar with it. The concept was not new; from the late 1980s, the idea of putting emphasis upon the local ethnic character had been considered within the local council. The main pressure group behind this initiative was the Spitalfields Community Development Group (CDG), a Bengali think-tank established by local ethnic businesses. Its main aim was to influence redevelopment plans in the area and capitalise upon its ethnic character to attract business and visitors.

By 1996, the BGCC Company became increasingly seduced by local narratives of a Banglatown and started to view it as ‘an exciting development ... similar in concept to Soho’s Chinatown’ (BGCC 2 1996: 6). Only six months later, the Company agreed to the development:

> ... in partnership with LBTH [London Borough of Tower Hamlets]. [This would] deliver physical and environmental improvements in Brick Lane ... [and] help to build a cultural identity for the area, the aim of which is to promote the intrinsic qualities of Brick Lane as an asset of local economic development (BGCC 3 1996–97: 15).
Jacobs (1996) reflected on processes of gentrification in the area. In her view, the Spitalfields Trust, a local organisation aiming to save the area's old architectural styles, promoted and facilitated a local 'multiculturalism of convenience' (1996: 160). This kind of multiculturalism perceived Bangladeshi ethnicity in a purely depoliticised fashion: a neighbouring attraction that augmented the area's character. BGCC went down a similar path. The building of a cultural identity for the area—a culturalisation of Bangladeshi ethnicity—was one of the first examples in British urban politics, and defined what an urban cultural policy agenda might include. Within this race-for-place marketing, race and ethnicity were transformed into important redevelopment assets. Bengali ethnicity as culture could attract visitors—drawn by the pleasures of an aesthetic cosmopolitanism (Urry 1995: 167)—or businesses and employers. It was suggested that the local economy could be regenerated in two ways. Firstly, by releasing a ‘visitors economy’ where ‘visitors can play a vital role in bringing prosperity to Bethnal Green’ (BGCC 2 1996), and secondly, by attracting inward investment that ‘can release opportunities for new development’ (BGCC 1996–97: 58).

The BGCC argued that long-existing, negative images could be overcome by promoting the unique local ethnic character. Forms of inner-city ethnic concentration were transformed from causes of concern to causes of celebration: differences became viewed as local assets to be capitalised upon by various local regeneration projects—a moment of complete discursive metamorphosis.

**Brixton City Challenge: The United Colours of Brixton**

In 1993 the London Borough of Lambeth received City Challenge funding from the Department of the Environment. According to the project’s evaluation report:

A successful bid by Lambeth was unexpected. Conventional wisdom held that the demands of the new Challenge regime would test the management capability of the most effective local authorities. In 1992 Lambeth was still widely viewed as the archetypal and incompetent ‘loony left’ London local authority (Local Economic Policy Unit 1999: 6).

Brixton City Challenge (BCC) was a local regeneration scheme which ran from 1993 to 1998. Its main philosophy was that wisely spent public funds could generate private investment through a trickle-down effect which would help to lift local populations out of their socio-economic misery. As with the BGCC, this free-market approach to regeneration with minimum community participation was heavily criticised and the Company accused of actively evicting local populations by promoting and facilitating gentrification. Syndicate, a Brixton-based collective, worked on the issue of the gentrification of their area and vowed to listen to local views on the subject and present them back on-line to the community for discussion. Their view was that:
The regeneration of Brixton... arose from the riots of the early 80s and early 90s. Lambeth Council, by trusting commerce and business to be the agents of change, have failed the community by allowing capital to dictate the reshaping of Brixton... The transformation of Brixton into a chic inner-city area where the so-called ‘night time economy’ is nothing more than a ‘theme-parkisation’ of urban space for a privileged social group at the expense of the poorer and marginal inhabitants. This is multiculturalism without real content, a cosmopolitanism that suits the establishment, a postcard-style ‘Benetton’ society in which citizen participation is nothing more than mere fiction sold under the slogan ‘The United Colours of Brixton’ (www.cactusnetwork.org.uk/syndicate.htm).

From the very beginning, Brixton was presented as a ‘vibrant, multicultural and exciting place’ (BCC 1995). This local multicultural talk became embedded within the Company’s regeneration vision:

Brixton Challenge will make Brixton the centre of multicultural entertainment and shopping in South London, expressing the energy, enterprise, achievement and proud spirit of its people. A great place to live, work, visit, shop and have fun (BCC 1992: I).

Such an emphasis on the local multicultural character resulted from the company’s aim to develop a strong tourist economy. The Company had clearly understood the potential of a local multicultural urban market and had evaluated the economics behind the contemporary urban trend of celebrating difference. The figure of the visitor emerged as the most potent symbol of reference within the Company’s vision:

The visitor will probably arrive by tube. They will find themselves in a new shopping centre... Nearby will be new refurbished offices and the homes of people who live in the area... Brixton will become a destination for visitors. They will go shopping and visit the Lambeth Archives as well as clubs, restaurants and the enlarged Ritzy cinema... the visitor will feel more comfortable because there is more work, better housing and leisure facilities, there is less fear of crime (BCC 1992: iii).

In July 1995 the company revealed its new slogan, the United Colours of Brixton, heavily borrowing from a controversial Benetton advertising campaign. Writers have argued about the existence of processes of commodification of difference within the world of media and advertising (Back and Quaade 1993: 65; Root 1996: xiii). Nevertheless, the deployment of a Benetton slogan signified similar tendencies within British urban regeneration politics. According to Solomos and Back (1996): 186), the ‘United Colours of Benetton’ advertising campaign gives out messages of a transcultural, underlying unity. Nevertheless, these themes of unity were transmitted by juxtaposing images of absolute cultural, racial or ethnic difference.

Of course, the Company did not construct images of absolute racial difference to accompany its slogan. Nevertheless, by linking its own regeneration discourse with Benetton’s advertising campaign, an in-between traffic of multicultural images was established.
In 1996 Tower Hamlets Council and its partners, anticipating the end of the Bethnal Green City Challenge, applied for Single Regeneration Budget funding (SRB) for the continuation of local regeneration efforts. Running from 1997 to 2002, the newly formed Cityside Regeneration Ltd concentrated its regeneration programme on the western part of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

Great emphasis was again put on the development of a local visitor economy. The Company tried to capitalise on the following four themes: the recent accelerated development of local key sites, the expansion of the visitor and cultural economy, the long-established small-business sector and its proximity to the City of London (Cityside 1997–98: 1).

The Company suggested that ‘the programme seeks to develop the existing cultural base’ (Cityside 1999–00: 1) and ‘the expansion of the visitor and cultural economy’ (Cityside 1997–98: 1). This concept was used for the first time in local urban regeneration policy and suggested that the embodied cultures of local people might have economic potential within a proliferating urban multicultural market. This narrative broke with a long tradition in British regeneration policies of focusing on highbrow manifestations of culture as significant engines of urban redevelopment (Whitt 1987). To put it differently, art-led regeneration efforts were complemented with anthropological notions of culture-as-way-of-life. In this sense, culture-as-anthropology found a role to play within contemporary urban regenerating policies.

The deployment of an affirmative ethnic diversity discourse became even more noticeable in the case of the RiCH Mix project:

This national centre aims to foster an increasing understanding and contribute to breaking down barriers between communities, races, religions, and geographical areas, by celebrating London’s cosmopolitan richness and the contributions which its communities have made to develop the capital’s position as a leading world city (Cityside 1997–98: 10).

The RiCH Mix is a dynamic cross-cultural arts and media centre in the heart of the East End, on Bethnal Green Road. This former garment factory now houses a three-screen cinema, exhibition spaces, recording and music-training studios, a performance venue, workspaces etc. Its mission is:

- to bridge cultures and build mutual respect by inspiring, sharing and developing creativity in all its forms. In so doing, we will enhance the social, economic and cultural richness that Britain exchanges with the world (www.richmix.org.uk/about-objectives.htm).

The RiCH Mix centre signified the concrete institutionalisation of ethnic diversity discourse within the capital; an important moment, as local histories of migration became broadly acknowledged. This specific project was based on an affirmative
reading of cultural difference. Through a cultural hybridity mentality, differences were presented as capable of intermingling and producing a newly born creativity; ethnic differences, from being stigmatised, became transformed into assets to be capitalised upon by acts of local regeneration. The ethnic-diversity discourse had found its own temple of bricks and mortar—another feature of the metropolitan urban landscape, another visual sign erected to celebrate the merits of urban difference, doing its small part within the continuous struggles of signification within the metropolis.

**Goodbye, Goodbye British Multicultural ‘Age’**

From the 1970s onwards, political imaginings of race and difference in Brixton and Brick Lane experienced significant processes of transmutation. Former imaginings of a pathologised race gave away to more contemporary celebrations of ethnic diversity. Nevertheless, the realities of being different in these areas might not have changed to such an extent.

From Mbembe (2001: 14) I borrow notions of age and *durée* to enrich the understandings of this racial archaeology of space. First, this archaeology takes place within the age of multiculturalism in Britain. This age unofficially started in 1966, with Roy Jenkins’s remarks on integration ‘not as a flattening process of assimilation but equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance’ (cited in Sivanandan 2006), and came to maturity through the struggles of black and Asian postcolonial British subjects. It was characterised by three different *durées* or moments in time:

- of criminalisation, where the spaces of race were pathologised and presented as causes of concern;
- of reflection, where race was replaced by ethnicity and a multicultural agenda came to the fore;
- of celebration, where an affirmative ethnic diversity discourse reached many facets of the mainstream.

The argument I want to make is that the age of British multiculturalism is characterised by the entanglement of these different moments. It was dominated by a back-and-forth movement, but also the parallel co-existence of these three *durées*.

However, the age of multiculturalism in Britain appears to have ended. Goodhart’s (2004) argument about the alleged incompatibility between continuous migration and the maintenance of the welfare state, Trevor Phillips’ (2005) belief in the alleged failure of multicultural policies, the multiple anxieties of the ‘war on terror’ that have killed any notion of a multicultural society (Gilroy 2005: 1), and the government’s new-found interest in community cohesion after the 2001 riots in Northern England (Community Cohesion Review Team 2001), have dealt British multicultural policies and debates a severe blow.
On a local level, this nation-wide multicultural backlash was played out in Brick Lane through the publication in 2006 of Dench et al.’s *The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict*. This controversial book—intended as a continuation to Young and Willmott’s (1992) influential study—was a ‘restudy’ of the Bethnal Green area focused mainly on the relationship between different local ethnic communities (Bangladeshi and white working-class). The new study became the topic of much controversy. Its authors argued that local welfare policies of the last three decades, primarily based on need instead of entitlement, have benefited local immigrant communities instead of white working-class populations. From this perspective, it was suggested that local welfare policies might have created racial tensions and conflicts. Most controversially, the book argued that the future of social democracy depended on the continuation of a postwar culture of entitlement where rights come with obligations:

Provisions which promote well-being and social justice among the most needy groups, including refugees and other recent immigrants, may have the unintended consequence of creating resentment among established citizens, who feel their own ‘hard-earned’ inclusion is diminished by being shared with others (Dench et al. 2006: 223).

By putting emphasis on entitlement, their argument almost replicates Goodhart’s (2004) thesis that there is an incompatibility between continuous mass migration and the maintenance of a welfare state. From the above, it becomes apparent how national debates come to influence local contexts or how Brick Lane transforms into a terrain where national discourses are enacted. In this sense, one could argue that the end of the British multicultural age becomes concretely manifested in local multicultural or multiethnic contexts.

The new age that replaces that of multiculturalism in Britain is one of integration, characterised by a spirit of a ‘new assimilationism’ (Back et al. 2002; Rattansi 2004) according to which differences (races, ethnicities etc.) in Britain have a duty to adapt to a core of British values (whatever that means). At the same time, these new assimilationist dreams are not only shared by British policy-makers. A number of other European countries have entered their own ages of integration (Brubacker 2001; Vasta 2006). In the Netherlands, all (new and not-so-new) migrants are legally obliged to sign an integration contract with the authorities, clearly stating their willingness to adapt to Dutch values and norms. In short, an age of integration has established itself in many migrant-receiving countries all across Europe.

As the era of multiculturalism in Britain comes to an end and a new era of integration dawns, efforts that promote understanding of what used to characterise this former age are more valuable than ever. By examining the past we comprehend it better and can learn something from both previous mistakes and past successes.

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Notes

[1] From the late 1970s, Brixton became the subject of intensive, paramilitary-style policing. In 1978, Police Commander Adams of the Lambeth district ordered the deployment of the Special Patrol Group to deal with allegedly accelerating local levels of criminal activity. As a result, 120 police officers were drafted in to spend more than a month carrying out ‘stop and search’ operations on the streets of Brixton. The Special Patrol Group was again deployed in Lambeth during November 1979 and July 1980, despite its discriminatory tendency to mostly ‘stop and search’ black individuals (Phillips 1976: 65). At the same time, the local police were able to implement the ‘Sus’ law, according to which the police could arrest any person suspected of loitering with the intent to commit an arrestable offence. The All-Lambeth Anti-Racist Movement openly accused the MPF of enforcing the law in a ‘blatantly’ racist fashion. It could be argued that local resentment against the police accumulated from the mid- to late-1970s onwards (Benyon and Solomos 1987). In April 1981, during a special police exercise called operation ‘Swamp 81’, an incident between a black mini-cab driver and two police officers in Coldharbour Lane sparked local tension and developed into broad-scale disorders. As Lord Scarman acknowledged in his inquiry, these disturbances ‘were not a race-riot... the riots were essentially an outburst of anger and resentment by young people against the police’ (Scarman 1981: 45).

[2] According to Barth (1969: 15), it is ‘the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses. Ethnicity (ethnic membership) emerges when different groups of people, who maintain a minimum contact between them, create an ethnic boundary based on a perceived cultural distinctiveness (Eriksen 1993). It is not the culture of one group that defines its ethnicity, but an assumed imagined cultural juxtaposition between themselves and others.

[3] I argue that this particular in-betweenness of the British multicultural discourse of the era is diametrically opposed to Bhabha’s (1994: 212) synergetic notion of being ‘in-between’ cultures. In short, the first position advocates separation and division, while the second is about synergy and interconnection.

[4] I argue that, in many racist discursive constructions of the 1980s, British society is presented as sharing one culture. In this sense, a British way of life can be clearly juxtaposed to other alien ways of being.


[6] According to Sandercock (1998), Banglatown was the result of a long struggle by specific elements of the local Bengali community to cleverly mobilise ‘notions of history and culture to achieve a redevelopment plan, to work for its own interests’ (Sandercock 1998: 173).

References


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