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The Magic of the Marketplace: Sociality in a Neglected Public Space

Sophie Watson

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Abstract

This study explores the potentiality of markets as public space where multiple forms of sociality are enacted. Research was conducted in eight UK markets. The research revealed that markets represented a significant public and social space for different groups in the locality as a site for vibrant social encounters, for social inclusion and the care of others, for 'rubbing along' and for mediating differences. The article concludes by arguing that the social encounters and connections found in markets contradict pessimistic accounts of the decline of social association, offering a contrast to the shopping mall and providing the possibility for the inclusion of marginalised groups and for the co-mingling of differences where these are increasingly relegated to more private spheres.

Introduction

Markets have a long history in Britain, dating at least from the Anglo-Saxon period when Anglo-Saxon kings consolidated their authority through making provision for the proper conduct of trade. The granting of rights to hold markets was a highly valued privilege conferred by the king on his nobles. Over the ensuing centuries, towns grew up around the site of regular markets which were typically held in the centre of town in a marketplace marked by a stone cross, within which stood a hall where produce was weighed and measured and tolls and taxes were collected. Since then, markets have represented a key site of commerce, trade and consumption in the majority of British towns and cities, and 1400 markets exist in Britain today (National Market Traders Federation, website, 2007). Despite their numerical significance, over the past 20 years or more, markets have been under threat, closed down or resituated, suffering from limited strategic thinking or policies on markets at a national level and a distinct lack of investment as local authorities choose to invest in programmes and services that are deemed higher priority, such as education and housing. Nevertheless, many people continue to shop in markets with an estimated total of 5 363 437 shopping visits across Britain in 2003–04 (NABMA, 2005).

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My concern here is not with markets as sites of commerce and trade although, given that this is the primary rationale for their existence, their economic viability is a basic precondition. Rather, the argument in this paper is that markets represent a much neglected public space and site of social connections and interaction in cities which is not often recognised. In the context of pessimistic accounts of the decline of public space as a consequence of the drive towards privatisation or thematisation (Sorkin, 1992), the retreat into the private realm (Sennett, 1974), growing socioeconomic divisions (Smith, 1996; Kaznelson, 1981), the militarisation of space (Davis, 1990) and the prevalence of a risk culture (Watson, 2006), this paper seeks to argue that markets have the potential to provide a social space in cities which has been little exploited and little explored by urban analysts. In contrast, considerable attention has been focused on shopping malls (Crawford, 1992; Goss, 1993) and the constrained forms of sociality these spaces engender and, more recently, on car boot sales as spaces of playful engagement (Gregson and Crewe, 1997).

Goss (1993) argues that shopping is the most contemporary social activity, primarily taking place in shopping centres. In ‘The magic of the mall’, Goss analyses the ways in which the developers and designers of the retail built environment exploit the power of place and the structuring of space to maximise consumption and profits, by designing a symbolic landscape that provokes associative moods and dispositions in the shopper.1 A brief inspection of the promotional material from one of Britain’s largest shopping centres, Bluewater in Kent, illustrates this point well. The promotional material states that

The Bluewater philosophy is simple: to make shopping an enjoyable stress free experience, to treat its customers as Guests (http://www.bluewater.co.uk).

Crawford (1992) similarly explored the proliferation of shopping malls in the US—the ‘world in a shopping mall’—where success relied on strategies which place dissimilar objects, activities, images and services adjacent to one another, thereby stimulating their mutual attraction and expanding their recreational role. Shopping malls and the multinationals contained within them, it is argued, have killed the high street and the local shops traditionally located there. These are the ‘new enclosures’ which are argued to represent the ‘insidious privatisation of our living space’ (Speed, 2008) where groups of individuals that are deemed undesirable are excluded and which are locked at night, placing large areas of public land out of bounds.

Over the past decade, studies of alternative trading spaces such as car boot sales and ‘malls on the meridian’ have asserted the importance of new spaces of trading. In her analysis of a variety of commercial uses of pavements, median strips and front lawns in Los Angeles, such as street vending and garage sales, Crawford (1999, p. 34) argued that these informal activities brought disparate groups together, engendering a renewed community spirit and constituting a new sense of everyday public space where a condition of social fluidity “begins to break down the separate, specialised, and hierarchical structures of everyday life in Los Angeles”. Gregson and Crewe’s exploration of the space of car boot sales similarly revealed the space as one of play where

the conventions of retailing are suspended, and where participants come to engage in and produce theatre, performance, spectacle and laughter (Gregson and Crewe, 1997, p. 87).

Markets would appear to offer a similar site for sociality and performance, although they have been subjected to surprisingly limited analysis to date, particularly in the British context. Wohluter’s (2002) study of women,
work and sociality in St Martin's rag market in Birmingham is one exception. The limited research on markets has mostly been undertaken overseas and has focused on their economic role. Sherry's (1990) ethnographic case study of a Midwestern flea market, for example, explored market buyer and seller behaviour, marketplace ambience, the social embeddedness and experience of consumption. Bromley's (1998) study in a Latin American city argues that marketplace trading is associated with government intervention, with principal policies being the creation of markets outside traditional trading sites in the centre. Stillerman's (2006a, 2006b) research on the street markets of Santiago, which identified the importance of shopping in markets as a way of building and maintaining casual relationships, bears the greatest resemblance to the study undertaken here, in its emphasis on modes of communication in the more fluid spaces of the city which often go unrecognised, but which constitute a more socially encompassing idea of the public realm (Bridge, 2005, p. 104).

The Study

This study set out to explore the everyday sociality which is enacted in markets which has been little recognised by urban analysts and policy-makers, but which constitutes an important aspect of the making of social worlds in cities across the world. To put this another way, the research set out to consider what constitutes the 'social' as a multiplicity of lived encounters and connections in this frequently neglected public space. With a few notable exceptions (for example, Wolhuter, 2002; Stillerman, 2006a, 2006b) there is little in-depth ethnographic material on the textured daily life of markets. This study set out to extend our understanding of this city space in the UK context. Eight markets were selected for the research to reflect a range of different socioeconomic and cultural population profiles and also types of market. Two were in country towns—one partially covered and attached to a shopping centre (Lowestoft, a Suffolk seaside town with a majority low-income population) and one in an open market square (Ludlow, a Georgian market town, popular with ‘foodies’, inhabited by a predominantly middle-class population; see Figure 1). Three were in medium to large northern cities: one which was entirely covered and enclosed in a shopping centre (St Helen’s, a town with high unemployment and a high level of social deprivation following the reduction in workforce at the city’s key industry, Pilkington Glass); and two which comprised indoor and outdoor markets (Preston, an industrial town with a comparatively large Asian population (11.6 per cent) and Rotherham an old de-industrialised town with a small Asian population). A further market was located on an outdoor site adjacent to a shopping centre in the Midlands (Milton Keynes, a post-war New Town with good employment levels and 10 per cent of the population Black or Asian British). The remaining two were located in London: one was a long-established outdoor street market (Ridley Road in Hackney, which is one of the most ethnically and racially diverse inner-city areas in the UK; see Figure 2) and the other was a farmers’ market (in Islington, a borough in the inner city with large pockets of gentrified housing).

The research entailed a number of different methods. First, detailed observation of social interaction in the market was carried out and recorded at focal points in the market site—for example, the café, the entrance, a food van—on each of the visits. Information recorded included gender, age, ethnicity of individuals engaged in social interaction, form of social interaction—greetings, chats between shoppers, trader–shopper relationships,
Figure 1. Ludlow market

Figure 2. Ridley road market, Hackney
place and length of interaction, conflicts and tensions. Secondly, interviews were carried out with shoppers, traders and local officials, all of which were recorded and transcribed. Most of these were one-to-one interviews. Trader interviews were conducted during trading hours at the stall—since traders were keen to leave at the end of the day—and were thus often interrupted. Typically interviews spanned 15–30 minutes, although some were longer. In each market, between 10 and 20 interviews with traders were conducted. Efforts were made to interview across a range of stalls and to include the chair of traders in each market. Shoppers were approached and interviewed within the market site and in cafés or adjacent to the market (these were more productive). Shoppers’ interviews tended to be harder to secure and shorter, 5–15 minutes, with some exceptions. Efforts were made to interview a variety of shoppers in terms of gender, age and—where possible—ethnicity. Non-White shoppers, particularly Asian (and possibly Muslim), appeared suspicious of the interviewers. In the current socio-political climate in Britain, this response was perhaps not surprising. The majority were interviewed individually, although a significant minority (one-third) were interviewed in pairs or groups. Between 20 and 40 shoppers were interviewed in each locality. Market managers and local authority officials with responsibility for the market, and other relevant local officers in, for example, tourism and regeneration, were interviewed in each locality (5–10 in each site). Thirdly, photographs of each market were taken during the research visit. Finally, in-depth interviews (seven, lasting 1–2 hours) were conducted with the following key national informants: the managers of Manchester market, Borough market, Leicester market; Chair of the National Association of British Market Authorities; the National Federation of Market Traders (a focus group); Towns Centre Initiative; London Farmers Association.

**Making Social Connections**

Markets clearly would not function as social spaces if they did not succeed as places of trade and consumption. Thus, markets need to have a diversity of goods on offer which are seen to be of reasonable quality and good value, laid out in an appealing way, and are more successful where they offer a unique selling-point—such as goods and products which are difficult to find elsewhere. These prerequisites ensure that a market is visited either instead of, or in conjunction with, shopping visits to a supermarket. Once in the market site, the social can be constituted in many different ways across a continuum of limited engagement- an exchange of glances or mutual recognition to ‘thick’ engagement— which may involve embodied interactions or conversation- with many different possibilities in between. The research in the market sites revealed their significance as social space across four dimensions: rubbing along, social inclusion; theatricality/performance; and mediating differences.

**‘Rubbing Along’**

In *City Publics: The (Dis)enchantsments of Urban Encounters* (2006), I proposed the notion of ‘rubbing along’ as a form of limited encounter between social subjects where recognition of different others through a glance or gaze, seeing and being seen, sharing embodied spaces, in talk or silence, has the potential to militate against the withdrawal into the self or private realm. Sennett (1996) and Bauman (2003) have similarly expressed concerns about the increasing tendency in contemporary cities for individuals to withdraw into mutually reinforcing socially homogeneous groups—what Bauman refers to as ‘mixophobia’. As Sibley (1995, pp. 28–29) amongst others has argued, stereotypes can form in a conflict situation when a community that represents itself as the norm feels threatened by those who are perceived as
different and threatening. The fear and anxiety generated are translated into a stereotype. My argument is that a minimal level of encounter in the form of inhabiting the same space as those who are different from oneself, such as markets can embody, has the potential to play a part in challenging racist discourses and stereotypes of unknown others. This is not the public space of rational debate and communication (Habermas, 1984); rather, it is the space of pedestrian rhetoric (de Certeau, 1984), of weaving complexity and difference into the texture of mundane everyday life or of Benjamin’s streets which are the dwelling place of the collective [which] is an eternally wakeful ... being that—in the space between the building fronts—lives, experiences, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls (Benjamin, 2002, p. 398).

For Benjamin, it was the phantasmagoric space of the arcades which symbolised the quintessential space of the urban flâneur, yet my point here is that the everyday space of the market can likewise correspond to such a space—albeit a less glamorous one, although this is rarely recognised. In this research, the informality of market trading and shopping, the openness of market spaces, the proximity of stalls to one another, the lack of restraint on entering and leaving market sites clearly gave rise to a multitude of easy encounters and informal connections. This is the idea of the market as lived space where affective and bodily experiences constitute differentiated daily textures (Lefebvre, 1991). Observation of all the markets and the records of social interactions revealed a diversity of connections from looks of recognition and brief greetings to much longer conversations between individuals and groups, often in proximity to a specific stall, where conversation was interspersed with comments about the produce. Very few people entered the market and left again with no interaction of any kind, however, minimal. In all the markets observed, the social interactions between traders and between traders and shoppers were a particularly striking feature which appeared to represent a kind of social glue holding the market’s sociality in place and providing a focal point through which shoppers could relate.

Everyone gets to know each other because you’re standing there all day. Especially when it’s dead quiet and you have to talk to the person next to you (trader, Ludlow).

If anyone’s in trouble, everyone will always help you out, you know it’s ... Well if you need fixtures, fittings, you know it’s like if your car breaks down, you need a hand ... Yeah everyone’s always ready to help you know (trader, Milton Keynes).

Oh, I’d talk to them [the traders], you know, chit-chat. But also about advice on particular things, like if I hadn’t cooked something before I’ll talk to them about how you cook it and they’re always very helpful with that. And yeah I ask them how it’s going, because I’m very conscious that it’s pretty hard work for them, I can’t imagine how they make a living. So I partly want to make them feel good, and I want to make myself feel good by feeling like I’m connecting with people (female shopper, Islington).

The physical lay-out of the market contributed strongly to the levels of easy sociality—‘rubbing along’—enacted in the markets. Thus the more social markets were those where there were places to eat and drink, either cafés or food vans on or near the site (in Ridley Road market, the food van sold goat curry, plantain and other popular Jamaican food), where there were places to sit, even informal seating places such as packing cases, or the stairs of old containers as in Ridley Road, or where there was a variety of stalls, particularly stalls selling unusual or attractive-looking products.
Inclusive Sociality

Over the past decade in the UK, the term social inclusion has dominated the policy agenda (Barr et al., 2001, pp. 4–5), where social inclusion denotes the active participation of marginalised people to improve living conditions and bring about change. A plethora of policies and programmes has been mobilised across the UK and Europe under the rubric of social inclusion, from work and employment reforms, such as initiatives around flexible employment and youth unemployment, to the integration of ethnic minorities and questions of citizenship (European Commission, 2004).

Although public space is fiercely defended as the space of encounter with strangers and as a democratic public realm, it rarely tends to be defended deploying ethical arguments concerning social inclusion or concerning the care of others. Indeed, social care itself is more commonly privatised in a spatial sense—in community centres, care homes, refuges, hospitals and so on, which are invisible to the world outside even if they are publicly funded.

My argument here is that social inclusion and the care of marginalised individuals can, however, actively be enacted in public space and, in particular, in markets. This might simply imply the opportunity to stop and dwell briefly in a safe place with others where there is the sense of ‘someone keeping an eye out for you,’ or a daily act of mutual recognition and the co-presence of others, or it may imply a more involved set of interactions or active engagement between those who are often excluded with less marginalised others.

This research revealed that a variety of inclusive behaviours and ‘care work’ was performed daily by traders in the markets studied. The two groups of people for whom markets were most significant in this respect were older people and people with disabilities, although many customers were similarly looked after.

Active engagement of the traders in mobilising social inclusion in the market depended in part on the customary familial structure of market employment. Traditionally in Britain, market stalls have been passed down from generation to generation, often over many years. In many markets, families of siblings and cousins own a number of stalls in proximity to one another. In Ludlow, for example, Mark’s cheese stall was opposite the flowers and vegetables, which was owned by his parents-in-law, who had been on the market for 50 years. In Ridley Road, the chair of traders described this trend thus:

Going back, it was all family-run markets, so there was loads of family and friends that ran the markets. There was about 70 families here ... you had the Caines, the Moseleys, the Greys, the Lamberts ... it had a nice social side to it ... It was very, very Jewish ... But then, Jewish people couldn’t work on a Saturday.

So some of the Jewish traders would give up their pitch to someone else on a Saturday.

But then, times change, and the Jewish people started to move away ... and we got loads and loads of Greeks, Cypriots, Turkish people.

That was another good era we had.

Even today, this respondent’s cousins owned five of the stalls including the egg stall, where the trader’s father was the former publican at the local pub, the Ridley Arms. These strong family connections, evident in all the older markets, provide a sense of social cohesion and lively talk between the stalls, which also acts to create a vibrant social atmosphere.

Many of the traders interviewed commented on their relationships with regular customers:

You do notice more on a Tuesday when it is more older people. You know they tend to have a good look round, want to have a chat with you. And you do see the same faces; more or less the same times each day, each week (trader, Milton Keynes).

I have a lot of regulars. I’ve got a lot of my ladies who are very regular on their ribbons and they do a lot of knitting. Not just for their own children or grandchildren, they knit for charities or for like one of the hospitals like
the premature baby unit. It’s very hard to buy premature baby-wear, so they do all their knitting. They do all the tiny mittens and bonnets and everything and they go through yards and yards of—or I must be correct metres and metres of ribbon ... I mean they don’t know me by name. They can pass me in the street and go ‘Oh that’s my button lady’ or ‘That’s my ribbon lady’, you know, things like that. And that’s really nice. They chat and say ‘Have you got anything new in’ or ‘can you get so and so’ (trader, Lowestoft).

I get on with my customers and I make them feel special ... they actually say, Mick, sort me out, get me an outfit ... they feel comfortable with me because I can say, there you go, bang, bang, bang, that’s yours ... right, next! I’d say about 90 per cent of my customers know me by name. That’s the kind of relationship I have with them (trader, Preston).

Long-term traders in particular drew attention to the loyalty of their shoppers and their own practice of keeping an eye on regular customers. In this capacity, they acted as focal points for the community for passing information about a local person’s health or state of their marriage—a pattern noted also by Stillerman (2006a, 2006b) in the Santiago markets. In contrast to his study, there was no apparent evidence of the relationship extending to the offer of credit to loyal customers.

Traders also claimed to play a strong role in supporting older people in the market. For example, in Rotherham a trader of 35 years, whose stall was located close to the ‘form’ where the old people (mainly men) sat, described her 92-year-old father’s (also formerly a market trader) daily visits to that site and her own involvement with these men, offering tea and water and attending to their needs “All the traders do the same”, she said.

In the towns which exhibited high levels of unemployment and a majority of the population on low incomes or benefits—St Helen’s, Rotherham and Lowestoft—a striking sight was the prevalence of shoppers in motorised wheelchairs. St Helen’s, Rotherham and Preston all had shopmobility schemes. Observation of these shoppers revealed that, despite appearing relatively isolated, they seemed to be enamoured with the vibrant activity around them and stayed on average for longer periods than other shoppers. One middle-aged respondent reported that, although he knew no one there, he liked sitting watching people go by—a version of Benjamin’s flâneur. A woman on sick leave reported relying on her local market to mitigate against isolation.

I’ve been off work for a few months now and it’s keeping me in contact with people. So I quite enjoy popping in as frequently as I do at the moment ... it’s nice to come for the bustle and to meet people that you haven’t seen for a long time ... it’s been a really nice place to come, interact with people without it being too long (Ludlow).

A wheel-chair-bound man in Ridley Road similarly enjoyed this experience. Others came accompanied by carers, friends or partners and often bumped into friends there. The ‘form’ occupied by the pensioners in Rotherham also had a constant stream of visitors in wheel chairs. For these shoppers, the width of the aisle or the physical lay out of the cafés, as well as disabled parking, were reported to be of crucial significance.

**Theatre and Performance**

Performance and theatricality were central to the social connections observed, as others have found also (for example, Bridge, 2005, pp. 79–80; Chauncey, 1974, p. 13). In their study of car boot sales, Gregson and Crewe (1997) found that the usual conventions of retailing were suspended and in their place participants came to engage in and produce spectacle and theatre, creating a festive and pleasurable popular space. An equivalent carnivalesque atmosphere (Bakhtin, 1941/1965) pervaded most of the markets studied here.
(St Helen’s was a notable exception, perhaps due to its indoor location and rather run-down feel). Traders thus used banter to construct themselves as amusing performers to attract and bring pleasure to the consumers passing by. Playful speech acts, which were often ostensibly abusive or sexist, were frequently deployed to attract customers to their stall and traders were fully aware of the contribution this theatricality made to the stall’s economic success. In Islington farmers’ market, for example, the sheep farmer who sold lamb and home-made lamb-burgers appeared to take great pleasure in teasing and chiding her customers, who seemed to be equally amused. Thus, forms of communication and roles which may, to the unknowing outsider, appear offensive are played out and performed according to mutually accepted conventions and roles (Goffman, 1967). Simon Quin (chief executive of the Town Centre Initiative) emphasised the point

I think markets should be about theatre and the continental markets are a theatre just because they’re foreign in effect, but some of the traditional markets have that as well. I think interestingly some of that theatre can come through—you know we’re talking continental markets but actually many of our ethnic markets, traditional markets that have become ethnic markets, have really become as foreign as the continental markets ... the ethnic stalls in the traditional markets are there to serve their community apparently, but they’re actually forming a tourist attraction, they benefit tourists in inverted commas or are an attraction for the general population.

Or, as the chair of the traders at Ridley Road put it

If it’s a bubbly, buzzy place and the traders are bubbly and buzzy, then obviously you get customers feeling comfortable

‘Pitching’ is a long-established tradition, now discouraged by many local councils, as this St Helen’s trader regretfully reported

We are not allowed to pitch in the market in the mall. But I do it at the outdoor markets. I like to shout at the girls. So I do pitch. Pitching definitely creates a market atmosphere. There are certain councils and boroughs around the country that allow it. Bolton market is one, so is Leeds. But it can frighten people, especially the elderly.

Whether or not traders are related, the background sound of chatter and banter between traders who are acquainted creates a casual social ambiance enhancing markets as sites of pleasurable encounters.

They’re more personal, personable and you know some people when you talk to them about their produce, or their products, they’re very excited about it, because they’ve really put a lot of effort into it. You go to the lady who sells honey and she’s really into bees and she talks a lot about how to look after the bees, and you know she’s really excited (Afro-Caribbean man, late 40s, Islington).

Mediating Differences

As processes of globalisation, particularly diverse patterns of migration, have come to affect all parts of the world, many cities, both large and small, are increasingly characterised by ethnic and racial differences (Fincher and Jacobs, 1998). Everyday spaces of the multicultural city are sites of cross-cultural relationships and connections, which are variously characterised by friction, marginality and division or easy quotidian cultural exchange depending on the specificity of the local socio-historical context (Bridge and Watson, 2000). Differences, not only of race and ethnicity but also of class, gender and sexuality, and identities are thus constituted in multiple and complex ways in the various spaces of the city which shift and change producing different city spaces, imaginaries and associations across different times of the day and night (Schlor, 1998) and different days of the week. Markets—like Crawford’s
(1999) garage sales on the front lawns in Los Angeles—are one such place, mixing people up and representing a space of co-mingling and the meeting of strangers (Young, 1990) during market days which often revert to empty, run-down, barren and wind-swept-looking sites on days of no trading. Four markets in this study served ethnically mixed communities to a lesser—Milton Keynes, Preston and Rotherham—or greater—Ridley Road—extent. This latter market was a striking spectacle of multiethnic mixing and intercultural connections. Here, the display of products from all over the world, from tropical fish and goat, to spices and vegetables from the Caribbean, Africa, India and Pakistan—had transformed a traditional predominantly Jewish market into a highly diverse social hub, where Afro-Caribbean, African, eastern European, Latin American and Chinese shoppers and traders forged intercultural connections. According to one trader

You get a lot of Jamaicans, Africans, Nigerians. They all live in the area. It’s the old famous Ridley Road. This is like a meeting-point for a lot of them. There are people down here who haven’t seen each other for 20 years and they have met in Ridley Road. You know, no other market but Ridley (trader, Ridley Road).

And

There are lots of South American people down here now. Spanish, Brazilian, Cuban ... there’s a big community of South Americans coming up now. Chinese, you get a lot of Chinese people now. And Polish. Lots of Russians. Lots of different people shop here (egg-stall trader).

Sociable? Yeah!!! I come down here on a Saturday because I know if I’m going to bump into someone you can bump into them here on a Saturday. That used to be a big pub ... and on a Saturday, I’ll tell you what ... they’d all be there and you could have a laugh and you used to meet your uncle there, your brother (Afro-Caribbean shopper, 37 years).

The closure of the long-established Ridley Arms pub in the middle of the market was mourned by many traders and shoppers as the loss of a social meeting-place for visitors from far and wide. Many described how the market functioned to create social bonds across different ethnicities, particularly between the old Jewish families and more recent Afro-Caribbean and Asian traders. Few tensions were reported, with the greatest negative effect attached to the more recent arrival of eastern European traders and traders who did not share the English language. This reflected an implicit racist discourse which derived from an Anglophonic dominance, where English-speaking traders were disparaging about those who could not speak the language, which was similarly observed by researchers in another London market (Wells and Watson, 2005).

Racial and ethnic differences were mediated with greater tension in localities where non-White shoppers and traders constituted a small minority and where the traders came from a long-established White working-class community. In Rotherham, for example, the market manager said

There have been quite a lot of asylum-seekers in Rotherham, mostly eastern Europeans. They tend to congregate and chat. Some of the people in the market find that quite intimidating.

One Asian woman approached the interviewer voluntarily and reported experiencing such high levels of antagonistic attitudes from the fruit and vegetable traders that she refused to visit these stalls, sending her White husband to shop in her place. This comment from a White woman shopper confirmed her point

How can I put it without being rude? They let coloured people play with the food ... the English people aren’t allowed to touch it. So George won’t go to that stall because he simply doesn’t want his food mauled.
In Milton Keynes, there appeared to be a limited engagement across ethnic differences with groups keeping to themselves and no interethnic tension reported. These different accounts of intercultural relations in the markets of the study illustrate the local sociocultural and historical specificity of living with difference in urban public space.

In relation to class, the economic and physical attributes of markets clearly distributed people between, more clearly than within, markets in differentiated ways constituting specific subjectivities and social connections. The look of a market, its materiality and the products sold convey certain social meanings which attract some individuals while disinclining others from entering that space. So much about markets seems to reflect Bourdieu’s *habitus* (1984) as an “array of inherited dispositions that condition bodily movement, tastes and judgements, according to class position” (Bridge, 2005, p. 113). Thus middle-class people were rarely seen in the poorer markets of St Helen’s and Rotherham, while Islington farmers’ market and Ladbou market attracted predominantly middle-class shoppers. Practices that are more typically performed in European markets, such as opportunities to sample food, had been adopted to attract customers to these sites who are thereby constructed as discerning (and travelled) consumers who will only accept the ‘best’. Notions of healthy and organic food are further mediated through labelling the provenance of produce, which is also celebrated as having a limited ecological footprint—sourced, as is required by farmers’ market regulation, from within a 30-mile radius. This growing interest in food, embodied in the figure of Jamie Oliver and others, was referred to frequently by the traders on the more ‘up-market’ sites. These markets thus have come to define a middle-class almost exclusively White clientele who engage in regular social encounters at the market. The manager of Islington farmers’ market put it this way:

I think they knew each other already but then they meet friends of friends or they bring their grown-up daughter or their grown-up daughter brings their mum from the country that kind of thing. So it is very sociable. I have to keep saying ’Excuse me, I can’t get past’ because they’re all stopping chatting in the aisle and they have interesting conversations.

Market practices of on-site food provision similarly distributed bodies along age and gender differences. Crucial here was the presence of cheap cafés on site, serving traditional ‘English’ café food of eggs, chips, beans, bacon sandwiches and mugs of hot tea, which attracted an older generation of mainly women shoppers who would spend several hours there. In St Helen’s, for example, where the majority of stalls in the market were reporting difficulties, the café at the centre was full throughout the day with older people chatting sometimes for hours (see Figure 3). The fact that the café occupied a key central location meant it offered views across the entire site and enough activity to make for interest to the people sitting there without the more frantic atmosphere in the adjacent shopping centre. One trader reported:

A lot of elderly people use this market. Because they are a bit more frail or fragile or frightened, they find the ‘multinational’ too busy, too rushed. Because this market is quieter they can feel more at ease.

Markets for young people, with some exceptions, appeared to hold much less attraction. For working people, the growth of Internet shopping, and supermarket technologies (credit card facilities, pre-cooked meals, etc) combined with the ease of parking militated against young people making much use of markets. They are also associated with a lack
of glamour. As one local official (Preston) explained:

We’ve missed a generation. The young generation aren’t using the market. They go down to Next and whatever. And a lot of our customers are the elderly. They still come faithfully to Preston market, come rain or shine. They’ll be here every Friday morning at nine o’clock come what may. And when they die, nobody is going to replace them. But that type of person is now literally on their last legs.

The exceptions were stalls which catered to younger people’s tastes, such as the Goth stall in Rotherham or the make-up stall in Lowestoft, which operated as social hubs for youth in the locality.

Markets are also sites of gendered differentiation, with a far higher proportion of women shoppers overall who tended to linger longer than men at the stalls chatting and interacting with others. During weekdays, women on their own with pre-school children were observed to use the markets as a space to meet other women in a similar position or to spend time with their mothers. This group also typically used the market cafés which represented an easy, cheap and flexible social space to pass the time. These respondents were difficult to interview since they were usually preoccupied with childcare activities. Shopping for them appeared to be a more functional activity, particularly amongst poorer women searching for cheaper commodities. Neither the women themselves, nor the traders, in any of the markets commented on the shopper–trader relationship as of much significance; more important was the space of the market as safe and distracting for their small children in tow. However, there were exceptions. The owner of the make-up stall in St Helen’s market frequently kept an eye on the children while their mothers, who were regular patrons, ducked across the aisle to look at clothes in Girl Talk.

Men often appeared to be awkward with the informality of social encounters and quick to
leave the market having done their shopping. In some markets, the social spaces were also highly gendered in their use. For example, in the informal seating areas at Rotherham market, the majority occupying ‘the form’ on the upstairs balcony were men, while downstairs, on the blue seats in the ‘smoking corner’, women in their 60s and 70s gossiped with others who shared the space on a regular basis. They said they knew each others’ faces but not necessarily their names.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the potentiality for markets as a space of multiple forms of sociality in cities and towns in the UK and to consider the implications of market sociality for understandings of public space more broadly. The ethnographic material collected here clearly demonstrated that markets played a significant role as a social space. This sociality took a variety of forms for different groups. In the more successful sites, where affordable and/or sought-after produce attracted large numbers of shoppers, vibrant social encounters between shoppers, between shoppers and traders and amongst traders themselves were enacted on each market day. In these markets, the role of the traders in providing ‘social glue’ was revealed as central to the sense of a buzz permeating the site. Of equal importance, in these and the less economically successful and more neglected sites, markets were revealed to perform a further significant social function—one which policy-makers have tended to ignore. This was the function of social inclusion and the care of others. For older people, in particular, and other groups also, the market, particularly the space of the café, food van or seating areas, represented a place for sitting with others and passing the time of day. At the same time, traders were found to play a significant role in keeping an eye on their customers, taking an interest in their lives and acting as a focal point for the local community. At a more subtle level, daily observations of the markets revealed a plethora of fleeting forms of ‘rubbing along’, connecting, lingering and taking pleasure in a shared space for everyone in the market including those who are often marginalised elsewhere.

This study contributes to the debates on public space in a number of ways. First, I suggest that the different forms of sociality enacted in markets, particularly their role as a space for informal care of others, represents an important counter-point to Putnam’s (2000) pessimistic conclusions on the decline of social association and social capital in the contemporary period. In *Bowling Alone* Putnam mourns the decline in formal social organisations across the US. Although a powerful source of data and argument, what are ignored in his study are the less formal and visible forms of social connection that occur outside the more commonly recognised sites of social encounter. What we see in markets is precisely their unrecognised role as a site of social association and inclusion, enacted through sharing a space not specifically designated for a social purpose, but which nevertheless functions as such.

Secondly, the findings from this study confirm the argument proposed in *City Publics* (Watson, 2006), that public space can offer the potential for the performance and co-mingling of differences (Young, 1990) in the form of casual encounters—‘rubbing along’—in a period when differences are increasingly relegated to privatised and separate spheres such as residential enclaves in the city. Very little antagonism or hostility to different others was expressed in these public spaces, reinforcing their importance in challenging the fear of unknown others and the construction of stereotypes. Although the claim that the space of the market can be connected to the notion of democracy or can be generative of urban politics might be too grand, markets can nevertheless serve to dissolve some of
the predictable boundaries and divisions and open up new possibilities for sociality and engagement in everyday public space (as Crawford, 1999, also found).

Thirdly, returning to Goss’s (1993, p. 40) critique of the shopping mall as a simulated public space, contrived as such by spatial and capitalist economic strategies, markets, I suggest, have the potential to offer an alternative to these sometimes alienated spaces for shopping. In his conclusion, Goss suggests that we must realise that the nostalgia we experience for authenticity, commerce, and carnival lies precisely in the loss of our ability to collectively create meaning by occupying and using social spaces for ourselves (Goss, 1993, p. 43).

Our “real desire”, he suggests, is “for community and social space free from the instrumental calculus of design” (p. 43). My point is that in many respects, markets have the potential to offer precisely such a space, in their haphazardness, serendipity, physical openness, a typically long local association with a local community and place, the lack of a profit-driven company in charge and an often-limited overarching design or strategy. Following Simmel’s (1903/1948) claims of the increasing impersonality and rationality of social relations in the modern metropolis, where the advanced money economy has contributed to the blase attitude of the urban citizen, perhaps the very informality of market economies, the often less-fixed prices of goods—such as end-of-day bargains, buckets of fruit and so on—enable a more engaged urban subject to emerge in these spaces. The absence of local strategy and policy can create enormous problems for markets, as this research found reflected in their off-and on-site management, in the absence of connection between the market and local facilities and amenities such as parking and public transport, and in terms of lack of investment. Nevertheless, what the research did reveal was that markets in many respects are precisely the kind of space that Goss, amongst others, sees as crucial for city life and everyday co-existence. The challenge for policy-makers, local and national, is thus to enhance the viability of markets in towns and cities—to make the most of their magic, rather than precipitate their demise through neglect and lack of vision. Without strategic thinking at local and national levels, markets are unlikely to remain part of the rich tapestry of urban and rural public space.

Note

1. The title of this paper was inspired by Goss’s (1993) ‘The magic of the mall’.

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References


