

Cosmopolitanism in a Global City: Inclusive Ideals, Exclusive Realities?¹

The political participation of immigrants in European cities

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ECPR conference, Pisa, 6-8 September 2007

ABSTRACT

Cosmopolitanism is described as the *cultural habitus* of globalization. London is framed in public documents and theoretical literature as a ‘global city’, ‘a world in a city’ and ‘a symbolic microcosm of the globe’. This – in part – stems from the city’s ethnic diversity relative to the rest of Britain; almost half of the country’s ethnic minorities reside there. Indeed, ethnic diversity is celebrated in the capital, and cited as evidence of its cultural vibrancy and its place in the global economy. It thus provides an ideal context for the study of how cosmopolitanism – both politically and discursively – shapes people’s lives and their participation in public life.

Studies of gentrification in inner London demonstrate that middle-class, white ‘gentrifiers’ appropriate a discourse of diversity whilst describing their attachment to urban living. These ‘cosmopolitans’ are characterised by a feeling of openness to the richness of human alternatives and egalitarian values. Elsewhere, however, white residents’ engagement with the presence of visible minorities is described as primarily aesthetic, as ‘a kind of social wallpaper’. Thus, in ethnically mixed neighbourhoods there is a disjuncture between inclusive ideals and socially exclusive realities which culminates in ambivalence. This paper explores whether the celebration of ethnic diversity in rhetoric concerning the capital has material consequences in terms of civic engagement. The resonance and perceived legitimacy of minority claims is likely to be erratic in a public arena if diversity is valued aesthetically yet not in ways which present a material challenge to existing social hierarchies.

The paper examines the discourses which are appropriated by three local authorities in North London and the processes by which they engage with ethnic minority and immigrants’ organisations in the voluntary and community sector.

¹ Results presented in this paper have been obtained within the project *Multicultural Democracy and Immigrants’ Social Capital in Europe: Participation, Organisational Networks, and Public Policies at the Local Level* (LOCALMULTIDEM). This project is funded by the European Commission under the 6th Framework Programme’s Priority 7 ‘Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge-Based Society’ as a STREP instrument (contract no. CIT5-CT-2005-028802). The LOCALMULTIDEM consortium is coordinated by the University of Murcia (Dr. Laura Morales), and is formed, additionally, by the University of Geneva (Dr. Marco Giugni), the University of Trento (Dr. Mario Diani), the University of Bristol (Dr. Paul Statham), the CEVIPOF-Sciences Po Paris (Dr. Manlio Cinalli), and the MTAKI (Dr. Endre Sik).

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Cosmopolitanism is described as the *cultural habitus* of globalization and London as a 'global city' (Sassen 1991; 1994) is thought to epitomise a cosmopolitan habitat, where 'the interweaving of global and local developments is intense' (Eade 1997: 3). Although recent decades are associated with the intensification of processes of globalisation, a cosmopolitan orientation to the world has long been associated with city living. Richard Sennett (1974) notes, in its early French usage, the *cosmopolite* denotes 'a man who moves comfortably in diversity; he is comfortable in situations which have no links or parallels to what is familiar to him'. Thus, cosmopolitanism is linked with the *experience of diversity* – in the city – and this is, notably, a bourgeois male pastime. Peter L. Berger (1966) identifies the 'cosmopolitan consciousness' of the city dweller as a distinctive 'characteristic of city culture'.

The individual, then, who is not only urban but urbane is one who, however passionately he may be attached to his own city, roams through the whole wide world in his intellectual voyages.

Berger (1966: 66)

Yet whilst some commentators accentuate the aesthetic, privileged and masculine aspects of a cosmopolitan identity (Walkowitz 1992) others point to its political implications as a social movement. Martha Nussbaum (1994) draws on the ancient Stoic concept *kosmou politês* or world citizen, and the work of Kant, to advocate a world citizenship which involves treating with equal respect 'the dignity of reason and moral choice of every human being'. She describes the 'cosmopolitan as a person whose primary allegiance is to the community of human beings in the entire world' and calls for 'making all human beings part of our community of dialogue and concern'. Accordingly, the development of a cosmopolitan identity or stance is particularly linked with multicultural contexts and 'global cities'. In London, whether this extends beyond an aesthetic appreciation of diversity and encompasses a political commitment to treating ethnic minorities with equal respect is the question under consideration here.

London is presented in public and policy documents, media images and academic literature as a 'global city', 'a world in a city', a 'cosmopolitan space' and a 'symbolic microcosm of the globe' which is characterised by its ethnic diversity (Sassen 1991; Macintosh 2005; Eade 1997). The 'We are Londoners, We are one' campaign launched after the July 7 bombings in 2005 pointedly 'celebrates the fact that London is one of the most diverse cities in the world' and, critically, is united.³ London is the only British city to have an elected mayor and executive (the London Assembly) collectively forming the Greater London Authority (GLA). In recent media coverage of the run up to the next mayoral election in 2008, the prospective Conservative candidate Boris Johnson has faced opposition primarily on the grounds that he is 'right wing and regressive' and thus poses a threat to the ethos of this otherwise tolerant, multicultural city (*The Guardian*, 21 August 2007). Thus, ethnic diversity is seen as emblematic of the city and this is presented as a matter of pride. At the local level this is equally pronounced. The London borough of Hackney is described on its local authority website as 'one of the most vibrant and diverse places in the world' and Islington council asserts 'it has a proud history in celebrating diversity and challenging discrimination in all its forms', whilst several other boroughs make similar claims. Furthermore, evidence suggests this is not only the rhetoric of a political elite, but also reflects grassroots feeling. White unemployed residents of

³ <http://www.london.gov.uk/onelondon/>

social housing distance themselves from racist BNP (British National Party) attitudes towards asylum seekers, despite facing housing shortages themselves (*The Guardian*, 22 May 2007). Studies of gentrification in North London describes how middle-class urban ‘gentrifiers’ appropriate a discourse of belonging which accentuates and celebrates diversity (Butler 2003). Nonetheless what the consequences of this are for ethnic minorities – in terms of the equal opportunities, access to services, representation and political participation – is far from being clear cut.

There is a growing theoretical literature about the politics of place, which considers how place identities intertwine with social divisions of class and ethnicity (Butler 2003; May 1996). Yet whilst this research engages with significant aspects of identity construction in everyday life and the meanings people invest in the places in which they live, it often fails to take account of with the local political context, and how local institutions engage with residents to promote or inhibit civic engagement. The Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000) makes it a statutory requirement of local authorities, in particular, to counter ethnic discrimination and disadvantage. Thus each London borough has a race equality plan or strategy, which is set out on its council website. Thus, the language of equality and diversity features in most public policy documents and strategic plans at the local government level. Furthermore, local strategic partnerships have been established in recent years with a view to promoting civic engagement and improve local democracy by engaging grassroot organisations in decision-making processes. Engaging ethnic minority organisations with local strategic partnerships is key element of this.

This paper examines local government practices in three London boroughs – Hackney, Haringey and Islington – with a focus on attempts to enhance democracy and promote civic engagement. It reveals how the political histories and social divisions within the boroughs persist in structuring the ways in which local strategic partnerships operate; this in turn has particular consequences for the ways in which equality and diversity are interpreted in the boroughs. This analysis draws on semi-structured interviews with key informants – council employees and representatives from the community and voluntary sector – and public documents, in order to examine the implications of new forms of governance for ethnic minorities in the capital.

How local authorities engage with ethnic diversity, tackle inequalities and provide arenas for dialogue and representation are key questions here. Each of the selected boroughs is ethnically diverse and socially polarised in a sense which is regarded as ‘classic London’. There are wide income differentials between residents, and these have marked spatial manifestation: between west and east Haringey; between commercial, gentrified centres of Stoke Newington and Shoreditch in Hackney and the east of the borough; and in Islington these divisions are demarcated by contrasts between the down-at-heal Caledonian Road area and the prosperous, consumer-oriented ‘Upper Street’. Preliminary findings suggest that there is significant variation in the ways in which diversity is interpreted and accommodated within local structures which, in turn, reflects social and spatial divisions within the boroughs.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the efficacy of each local authorities’ equalities’ policies and practice in its entirety. Instead I focus on one aspect of council policy, namely its engagement with the voluntary and community sector – in

particular ethnic minority organisations – and how these are supported by local authorities as an indication of how their strategic vision statements are borne out. This paper draws on a range of sources, including interviews with key informants and publicly available documents to set out contrasting practices in each local authority. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of the preliminary fieldwork for the European Commission funded *Local Multidem* study. However since fieldwork is in its preliminary stages, and strictly comparable data is not yet available for each borough, initial conclusions are tentatively made here.

The following section describes the relationship between the local authorities in each borough and the ethnic-minority led voluntary and community sector, alongside descriptions of the relevant racial equality and diversity policies.

Haringey

Haringey has one of the most ethnically diverse populations in London and in Britain. Almost half of its residents are from ethnic minority backgrounds. It has a vibrant voluntary and community sector with a range of structures to foster inter-community connections (Hudson *et al* 2007). These include Peace Alliance and the Interfaith Forum which promote social cohesion. One of the main functions of Haringey Association of Voluntary and Community Organisations (HAVCO) is to build capacity in this sector and promote engagement with black and ethnic minority communities. Almost 800 organisations are registered with HAVCO of which a significant proportion are ethnic-minority led.

The availability of community premises emerges as a significant issue affecting the voluntary and community sector in each of the boroughs. A number of community centres were established in Haringey in the 1970s: the Asian Centre, the West Indian Cultural Centre and the Irish Centre among others; these were given premises and a significant proportion of their funding derives from the local authority. Representatives from these centres and other ethnic minority organisations form the REJCC (Race Equality Joint Consultative Committee) which is a board of representatives from each of the main ethnic minority groups in the borough. The REJCC has been an integral part of decision-making in the borough for thirty years. It was formed as part of a radical left-wing movement to counter the lack of representation amongst minority groups. It aims to provide ethnic minority groups with high level access to the council and its executive. One member of the REJCC is on the local strategic partnership. Historically, this has provided a channel for people from ethnic minority backgrounds to gain access to local government. It has also provided a route for some individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds to enter local politics and become councillors.

Thus, the vibrant voluntary and community sector and the local authorities' long-established engagement with its ethnic minorities continue to shape decision-making processes in the borough. Furthermore, since the REJCC predates the local strategic partnership and the contemporary policy focus on equality and diversity, it seems to successfully and meaningfully engage with certain minority organisations rather than being perfunctory in its efforts.

Hackney

Hackney also houses one of the most ethnically diverse populations in London, and – according to claims on its website – the world. Almost forty per cent of its population are from ethnic minority groups. It is one of the most deprived boroughs in London, although now being one of the five ‘Olympic boroughs’ is set to attract sizeable inward investment and further in-migration, potentially displacing the local established population. Historically, Hackney – like Haringey – has attracted a diverse range of immigrants; a significant Jewish population has been resident in the north of the borough since 1684; post-War migrants include, Africans, Caribbean people, South Asians, Turkish Cypriots, Turks, Kurds and Vietnamese.

One of the issues facing the ethnic minority voluntary and community sector in Hackney is the lack of affordable premises. Many organisations which had been using council property for years were forced to leave as the council sought to maximise revenue through renting or the sale of properties. Organisations which carry influence in the borough politically tend to lobby from a religious base; the orthodox Jewish community and members of the Muslim community are most active in this respect. Hackney Racial Equality Council was closed down in the 1980s, and Hackney Action for Racial Equality lacks funding and resources to fulfil its remit. A report published by the Hackney Council for Voluntary Service suggests that ‘there is no distinct strategy or commitment from the Local Authority . . . or other statutory-led bodies which specifically addresses the BME⁴ communities’ needs. Hence the sector “survives” rather than develops’ (HCVS 2003: 7). It is even argued that there is hostility to the development of this sector in the higher echelons of the Hackney council. It goes on to assert ‘champions of the BME sector are vilified’, seen as ‘radical agitators’, and their respective organisations penalised.

Despite central government’s emphasis on social cohesion and communities, and its particular focus on provision for minorities, the amount of funding to ethnic minority organisations and service providers has depleted in recent years. These cuts further disadvantage organisations who are seeking other sources of funding, for example from the Neighbourhood Renewal programme (NRF). In a striking indictment of local policy, HCVS (2003) states:

. . . every bid that is made for funding in Hackney uses the deprivation of the Borough and the needs of BME communities to justify the receipt of funds. However, a sort of “haze of amnesia” comes over the same people when it comes to the distribution of these funds.

In addition, there is a lack of representation of minorities in local authority decision-making processes, and the few networks which exist and could provide an arena for collective action have also suffered from cutbacks. Although there are local councillors from ethnic minority backgrounds, they lack the mandate to act on behalf of ethnic minority needs or organisations – which are fragmented – given the weakened voluntary and community sector.

Hackney Council’s vision statement is:

⁴ BME is the standard acronym for ‘black and minority ethnic’ people in the public sector.

To achieve balanced, sustainable communities and neighbourhoods which celebrate their diversity and share in London's growing prosperity, to enable a good quality of life for all.

But the picture which emerges is one which suggests that the local authority lacks the political will to engage with or support ethnic minority organisations, despite appropriating the rhetoric of inclusion.

Islington

The London borough of Islington is now renowned for gentrification and its middle-class ambience. Since the 1960s middle-class in-movers began to move into the borough and now much of its private housing is occupied by a high-income earning, highly educated elite. The borough also houses a significant proportion of social housing, including some of the most deprived estates in the country, and a long-established Bangladeshi population, yet these are marginalised and spatially peripheral in the borough. About a quarter of its residents are from ethnic minority backgrounds. The main street in central Islington, Upper Street, is described as a hub or 'honey pot' for a global, cosmopolitan elite (Butler 2003). Thus, the social divisions in the borough are particularly pronounced; the average private household income is in the region of £50, 000 whilst the average social housing resident has an income of £6, 000.

As in Hackney, premises which were used by ethnic minority and other organisations (e.g. the Bangladeshi Women's Association) have been sold to raise council revenue. Thus, dramatic inflation in property prices in recent years serves to disadvantage, rather than benefit, the local community and voluntary sector. Lack of permanent premises in which to meet hinders collective action amongst ethnic minorities in the borough; although some inter-faith activity facilitates the continuation of certain groups, the Catholic and Methodist churches allow Muslim and youth organisations to use their premises. Thus, the voluntary and community sector regards the Islington Council's slogan 'Dignity for All' with some scepticism, since cutbacks have led to the closure of 70-80 voluntary and community organisations in recent years. In particular, the Islington Citizens' Advice Bureau, which had been established for forty years, was closed and this had formed the hub for a number of community activities including the Black and Ethnic Minority Forum.

Islington Voluntary Action Council's (IVAC) role is to build capacity in the borough, but has limited political influence; it cannot adequately to represent the voluntary and community sector since only a fifth of existing organisations are linked with them. Lesbian and gay organisations and disabled groups are fairly effective at representing their views locally, whereas those who are marginalised due to poverty, residents of social housing and ethnic minorities tend to lack effective representation. Thus, the council is described as paying 'lip service' to equality and diversity matters, but lacking the political will to engage with the grassroots and effectively promote civic engagement amongst its marginalised population.

The local authorities' vision for a 'safer, more inclusive Islington' reads as the description of a utopian future, rather than reflecting current possibilities or practice:

... an increased sense of community, with improved private and public behaviour, greater integration of minority groups, greater recognition and tolerance of social diversity.

Concluding remarks

London, as a multicultural, global city, is theorised as providing an arena for cosmopolitanism to flourish. Yet in studies of gentrification in North London ‘the cosmopolitan’ is presented as White and middle-class standing out because of their whiteness within a multiethnic city (Butler 2003: 2484). Butler contends, ‘disadvantaged’ minorities are ‘valued as a kind of social wallpaper’ by middle-class residents who imagine and idealise diversity (2003: 2484). Initial findings from this study suggest that an aesthetic appreciation of visible ethnic minorities and the discourse of ‘celebrating diversity’ also abounds in local government public and policy documents in North London, however, this does not approximate to Nussbaum’s cosmopolitan vision of an inclusive ‘community of dialogue and concern’. Instead marked social divisions within the boroughs and cuts in voluntary and community sector funding mean that ethnic minority organisations and networks tend to remain marginalised in the local polity.

The three London boroughs, used as case studies here, serve to illustrate wide disparities in the ways in which ‘equality and diversity’ are interpreted in local government. The salience of these themes varies significantly according to the local political context, the existing voluntary and community sector infrastructure and social divisions within the boroughs. It seems that a ‘top-down’ agenda to actively engage with ethnic minority organisations is required for them to flourish – as Haringey’s vibrant voluntary and community sector demonstrates. However, in the contemporary climate of public sector cuts, policies and slogans often appear to be perfunctory, paying ‘lip service’ to the discourse of diversity, yet failing to demonstrate a substantive commitment to ethnic minority organisations’ participation in local decision-making processes.

Local strategic partnerships (LSPs) were created to foster civic engagement and particularly participation of grassroots organisations in higher level decision making processes of local government. However, in practice access to the LSP is often extremely constrained. Where established structures exist which predate the creation of the local strategic partnership, for example the Race Equality Joint Consultative Committee (REJCC) in Haringey – and collective provision for minorities is embedded into council policy and practice – the voice of ethnic minority organisations has greater political resonance. The active promotion and investment in community organisations and the voluntary sector requires a financial commitment by local government in the value of such organisations; thus, typically, this kind of investment is associated with historically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. London borough councils, like Haringey, which have had to deal with poverty, high levels of unemployment and immigration have recognised the importance of investing in social infrastructure and resources for communities, rather than relying on private commercial interests to provide for individuals needs. In contrast, areas which benefit from commercial investment and tight property markets like Islington, for example, lack the social infrastructure of neighbouring boroughs. Here residents who do not possess the economic and cultural capital of middle-class ‘gentrifiers’ – including ethnic minorities and residents of social housing – are particularly marginalised politically.

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