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978-0-521-55554-8 - Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-ethnic London

Gerd Baumann

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This innovative study presents an account of the interaction of people from different ethnic backgrounds who live in Southall, the most densely populated multi-ethnic ghetto of London. Breaking with the tradition of studying a single ethnic community, Gerd Baumann treats Southall as a single social field in which various immigrant groups come to terms both with one another and with the dominant culture of England. The people of Southall affirm ethnic distinctiveness in some contexts, but they are also engaged in rethinking their identities and in debating the meanings of their cultural heritage. This book is at once a vivid ethnographic account of an aspect of contemporary British life, and a challenge to the conventional discourse of community studies.

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CONTESTING CULTURE

*Discourses of identity in
multi-ethnic London*

GERD BAUMANN

University of Amsterdam



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Acknowledgements

'Doing ethnography', as it is sometimes called, is not, of course, one process, but at least two. Fieldwork one lives, ethnographies are written. I re-state the obvious here, both to remark on its strange absence in some literary critiques of ethnographic texts, and to help me pull out at least some threads from a fabric of favours so dense that it resists narrative ordering.

First, one settles *on* a place, and it was Adam Kuper who, knowing my intention to 'work among (other) immigrants', pointed me to Southall and suggested that I move there. I might have settled for something less complicated and quicker without him. Throughout the next seven years, Adam Kuper has encouraged my research with a commitment, trust, and critical support that defy any written expression of thanks.

Then, one settles *into* the place. It was Southallians like Narinder Ghattoura and 'Uncle Syd', Balbir Nandra and Floyd Wilson, my neighbours Shiv and Ram Singhji and their families, who made me feel at home and involved in Southall. Along with Kirpal Marwaha, Graham Jimpson, David Baldwin, and many of their friends, they made the difference between living fieldwork and doing some piece of research. The research, however, needed more time than I initially had, and it was the Leverhulme Trust that bailed me out. After two years of fieldwork alongside work, the Leverhulme Trust awarded me a nine months' grant that, effectively, took me out of teaching for fifteen months, and allowed three final-year students to supplement my fieldwork with their own. Hazel Yabsley, Barbara Hawkes, and Teresa McGarry are quoted as ethnographic authorities in this book, for that is what they became. So is Richard Hundleby, a student and friend who had worked with me before, when the going was toughest. Their contributions, and the ways in which I have drawn on them, are detailed in the Introduction on 'the process of research'.

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At about the same time, I met Marie Gillespie, then engaged in her own research about Southallians' uses of the media (Gillespie 1995). To acknowledge academic co-operation would, in this case, be a private joke. Between the synergy of sharing fieldworks and the love of friends, I can think of nothing that has not, then or since, enhanced our lives. One of our joint madresses, a qualitatively conceived mass survey among young Southallians, came near to spelling disaster: 350 young people volunteered 5 million bytes of data. What little of this untapped resource the book can present, I owe to the tireless exertions of Lynette Clarke and Mozy Hajian. We would have given up on the data without them.

When it came to writing, it was again Adam Kuper who arranged an almost care-free year for me through a reciprocal teaching exchange with the University of New Mexico. The resulting first draft was read closely by colleagues and friends. I thank especially Marie and Tom Cheesman, Rick Hundleby, and Hazel Yabsley. The second draft, written when back in Southall again, was improved with the generous and painstaking help of Peter Seglow and Charles Stewart. Steven Vertovec, who also read this second draft, continued to point me to crucial further reading. An incisive revision was inspired by Chris Fuller and produced a third draft, followed by a fourth which took account of further criticisms by Readers for the Press. This last stage was the hardest, and I could not have coped with it but for the reassuring support of my new colleagues at Amsterdam, Peter van der Veer, Patricia Spyer, and Peter van Rooden. Finally, I owe thanks to Rick Hundleby who put enormous effort and skill into a last round of editing the text, and to Peter Seglow who went out of his way to take the photographs for all the plates.

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Note on the text

As usual in ethnographies, vernacular terms are printed in *italics*. This applies not only to words taken from Punjabi, Urdu or Hindi, but, more importantly, to two English key words.

The terms *culture* and *community* form part of the Southall vernacular. Wherever they are cited to reflect local meanings and usages, they thus appear *italicized*.

In other places, they appear in quotation marks or with qualifiers such as ‘putative’, ‘assumed’, or ‘ascribed’. This is when they are quoted or paraphrased from what I have called the dominant discourse about ‘ethnic’ minorities. This discourse envisages minorities as forming homogeneous ‘communities’ defined by an inherited ‘culture’ thought, in a circular fashion, to be based on their ‘ethnic’ identity. Since ‘ethnic’ is the crucial cipher of the dominant discourse, it, too, should appear in quotation marks throughout. In order not to annoy the reader with unnecessary ‘stumbling blocks’, however, I have used quotation marks only in cases of possible doubt.

A distinction between the dominant discourse and the vernacular usages, which in some contexts endorse it and in others deny it, is essential to the argument that the book puts forth.