

Classed Spaces – Harry Anderson

On Tuesday 7th February, our 'Class, Politics and Culture' seminar group set off exploring London's East End. Led by Liza Mckenzie, the aim of the ethnographic walk to take us out the classroom to see the how London is changing, and look at how such changes impact on ideas of space, place, identity and belonging within the East End.

With a couple of local residents to help show us around and fill in the story, we explored all around Whitechapel and the surrounding area, with our journey split in two – firstly visiting various new developments and fancy flats, before ending up along Cable Street, stopping off to look at the Cable Street mural depicting the defeat of fascism in the East End, and also paying a visit to a local anarchist centre trying to resist the changes going on around it.

One thing that was immediately clear as we walked around was the pace of change. Not only were there several sites currently under construction, with our guides having to shout over the noise of workers on site of the latest new multi-storey flats, but we were also informed that many of the developments around us had gone up in the past year or two. The result was a strange landscape, with small brick houses nestled in amongst plate-glass skyscrapers.

Having lived in in Liverpool before coming down to study at LSE, I'm used to a city changing rapidly. The EU has been instrumental in pouring money into Merseyside over the years to aid with its regeneration and, since the Capital of Culture in 2008, the city

has changed dramatically. The change going on around the East End seems different though – much faster, more money involved and far more cut throat for those living amongst the changes. Walking around we were reminded of those who have been left out of the processes going on around them, with homelessness and poverty visible on the streets. For every person on the street too, no doubt there'll be more who have been forced to move elsewhere; think Katie, the single mother from Ken Loach's film *I, Daniel Blake* but real and a thousand times over.

What's more is that the previous sense of working class community that our guides referred to has now become a commodity in itself. One of the places we stopped off at was Goodman's Field, once a place where Mr. Goodman leased out the fields for London's livery horses. Nowadays, however, it is the site of a new development by Berkeley, with a three-bed flat costing upwards of £2m. The sculptures of horses in the square of the new flats pay homage to the place's history, but the development marks further gentrification of this area and an act of symbolic violence. The boarding around the new development promises to 'create community', but in pricing out locals, Berkeley themselves are part of a group helping to erode the existing community around Whitechapel.

The gentrification of this area and creation of more and more luxury flats is a reminder of the extent to which London is not just a capital city, but increasingly a global city. As numerous economists and political scientists have demonstrated (Piketty and Atkinson to name just a couple) there is an increasing amount of wealth going to those at the top of the distribution, with many of these flats being bought by global millionaires. As we looked at some of the buildings, we heard about how some flats were being marketed purely as investment opportunities, with many being sold long before being built, meaning the initial investors had already made a profit given ever-increasing house prices and were set to make more before the flats had been completed (see Battersea Power Station flats for a similar story).

Admittedly, we did visit some housing association homes as well which had been built by the philanthropist George Peabody. Some of these homes still included life tenancies as well, providing the security and stability which is too often missing from modern tenant contracts. The

extent to which such affordable properties will remain available for the residents of the East End is debatable though. The government have recently announced their intention to extend the 'Right To Buy' scheme to housing association properties meaning that these could soon be bought up and sold off, and when affordable housing means 80% of the original market value, the time left in which people can insulate themselves against these global market forces is rapidly diminishing.

To me, what this all demonstrates is that the threat now facing the local residents of the East End is not fascism, as it was in the 1930s, but the global plutocracy. As Mike Savage has argued, our analysis of class is ultimately still embedded in an industrialist paradigm which needs to be overhauled given the growth in the super-affluent who now dominate many aspects of society (Savage, 2015). Only when such thinking enters into our analysis will we be able to understand the context in which these changes are taking place. What's left in the meantime is those at the top buying up the area, others trying to get by, and some people trying to resist. If this is not a form of social cleansing, then I don't know what is.

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