

## Are We Living In An Urban Vortex? An Interview With Suzi Hall (1 of 2)



Last week **Maria-Christina Vogkli** met with Dr **Suzi Hall**, an urban ethnographer within the Sociology department at the LSE, to talk about London, the housing crisis, and all things urban.

**Maria-Christina:** *To what extent has London changed throughout recent years? What role has super-diversity played when it comes to how migrant participation has shaped London's urban space and life?*

**Suzi:** London has changed most notably since 2008 following the global financial crisis. There has been a profound organization of capital which has meant that we've seen a real exacerbation of inequality and this plays out in a number of respects but probably the most notable is the urban land market. London is now becoming a very safe place to secure international capital, but that means that land values are being driven up and that poor people are being pushed further and further away. In fact, it's not only the poor but the middle class too.

This has very, very particular implications for immigration. We've been studying immigration not only in London but in four cities across the UK. These include Birmingham, Bristol, Leicester and Manchester. And we've noticed that since 2008 what's called super-diversity has increased. So, it's not just that the number of migrants has accelerated but the range. So we're beginning to see on our streets people who've come in through conventional migration routes, namely economic migrants; we see people on our streets who've been come in through some kind of connection with colonial histories and empires, so people from some parts of Africa, India and South East Asia. We also see people who've come through asylum routes, people from Iraq, Kurdistan, Somalia, Eritrea.

And we've seen two interesting phenomena there with respect to inequalities. One, that the hurdles or the regulatory regimes are becoming much tougher and much more elaborate, and this means that the migrants are developing capacities or competencies to circumvent these regimes and these elaborations. And so for example, we're seeing that, on the one hand, migrants while they move around the globe to come to the UK, they're picking up language skills, new qualifications and proficiencies. And this is both a process of skilling and de-skilling. So, when a migrant moves they may sometimes need to learn a new language that may not be required in the space they move to after that. But it also means that a lot of the qualifications become redundant.

So, I'll give you an example. Someone arrives in Bristol from Somalia having come via the Netherlands. They leave Somalia as a teacher, they go to the Netherlands and take the upgrade exam to become a teacher in the Netherlands but they can't get a job. So they then take onboard other courses but they still remain redundant in the formal employment sector, so they then go up to independent employment and they go into retail. But the laws around independent employment and retail in the Netherlands are very strict so they move to the UK and they open up a shop. So, in that whole process of moving through and across borders they require many skills, many occupations, many languages, which arguably someone with a white skin, who's affluent and privileged would not have to go through the same level of elaborating their skills base. We're also seeing that despite where certain migrants come from they all tend to land to certain places in the city. We have these drawings and it doesn't matter if they are in Bristol or London that show where the migrants come from.

They all come from a huge variety of places but they all end up opening their shops on these streets. But what become really interesting when you look at these maps is that you understand

there is an enduring embedded inequality in both the structure of the globe and the structure of the street. This means that only certain migrants land up in certain places. So, in the streets we look at which are always multiethnic but also deprived urban spaces you tend to get migrants who come from the developing world from places that were former colonies of the British Empire or from environments where there has been some kind of catastrophe, usually political catastrophe.

**MC:** *Would you say that migrants coming from a specific country tend to congregate in a specific area or place?*

**S:** Not through choice. Through the structure of the city. The structure of the city makes people go to some places, while others can't.

**MC:** *In your recent journal article co-authored with Prof. Mike Savage, you make extensive use and establish the term "urban vortex" to analyse how a volatile, intense and centralized dynamism can bring about forms of social change. Additionally, you introduce a planetary dimension to it. How is this relevant to how cities form themselves in an era of political and financial crises that have occurred after 2008?*

**S:** Ultimately, the urban vortex was essentially conceptualized in order to think of the city as a fundamentally de-stable form of organization and in many of the urban sociology literatures and specifically the ones that came from the Chicago school, the kind of ecological notion of the city was based on the premise that the city was a stable and coherent form of organization. The vortex, in our way of thinking, was to fundamentally challenge that and to begin to think of the city as destabilizing and it has a kind of energy that capital accumulates. This means that certain people, some ideas, some ideologies surface to the top and the rest either fall to the bottom or are expelled from the vortex.

We are also trying to show that the city is a dynamic formation, not just a physical one, and it has quite extreme sorting effects. We are saying that the vortex becomes most extreme when the process of capitalization such the one that happened in 2008 make for a very volatile, a very exclusionary form of social order. That was our intention.

We were also interested in introducing a planetary dimension into our analysis because there is an overarching current in economic geography that applies a very western-centric logic to what constitutes economic order of the city. And we wanted to particularly draw to thinkers like Gilroy in order to show how we are in many ways interconnected and interdependent, but also to show how there are multiple planetary formations that span the world beginning to make themselves visible in London, not as western formations but as reconfigurations of one world or one system – meeting another rather than dominating another.

I guess the planetary term is a respect for multiple urbanisms that migrants bring in their bodies and reinstitute in the space and life of the city, like London. And it also to acknowledge that despite the context of prevailing inequality there is significant capacity and agency in the body of the migrant and that we have to look at their resourcing mechanisms very seriously, because if we simply describe their conditions of their inequality, it's like we're enacting a form of double discrimination, because we are not acknowledging their capacities and their agencies to reconfigure and remake parts of London in important ways.

For instance, when we survey the traders on the street we ask two related questions. We ask what kind of qualifications do the traders have and what form of job did they do before they set up shop and around 50%, approximately half of the people we interview have some form of significant education and on top of that they have done some form of job before setting up shop. So, class is a feature of the migrant body but it is much more variegated.

**MC:** *Would you say that London's current housing crisis could also be analyzed as a form of urban vortex and as an outcome of planetary organization?*

**S:** I don't think that the housing crisis is an outcome of planetary organization or of sharing and intersecting ideas, which is the planetary. Planetary is the opposite articulation to global. It's much more about ways of being in the world that are interested in intersecting and sharing ideas. It's not about domination, whereas the moment you go into trading for profit, you're into a form of domination. Although it's not my area of work, my understanding of London's land market is a form of safe holding. It's not just the prerogative of the elites, it has become a land market that's been into many middle class people from across the world. There is lots of evidence that much of the housing within the range within the 200,000-400,000 is being bought up by middle class individual investors in the Far East and particularly in China, as a way of securing their saving and trying to secure some pension for their future.

However, I do think it does come out of the vortex. So, I think when there are pressures on the profit making mechanism of capital, when people want to secure the profit that they make in relatively stable holding, then land becomes one of these stable holdings and in particular, in a city like London, it has become a secure form of holding and gaining profit especially over the last 7 years; much less volatile than the stock exchange than trading. This has had a fundamental effect on the supply of housing and on the appetite for certain elected officials, particularly in the conservative government in order to benefit from this increase in this land value and to sell off basically to the highest bidder rather than to think that housing is an asset that needs to be retained for wellbeing. So, this is a notion that housing is something for wellbeing versus something for profit has never been more exaggerated than in the post-2008 period.

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