

'Divercities': place-focused public policy and its impact on perceptions of diversity



What does diversity actually mean to citizens in different places, and how are these views influenced by policy choices? [Mike Raco](#) focuses on the importance of place in diversity politics and explains why public policy should focus far more on the creation of effective communities.

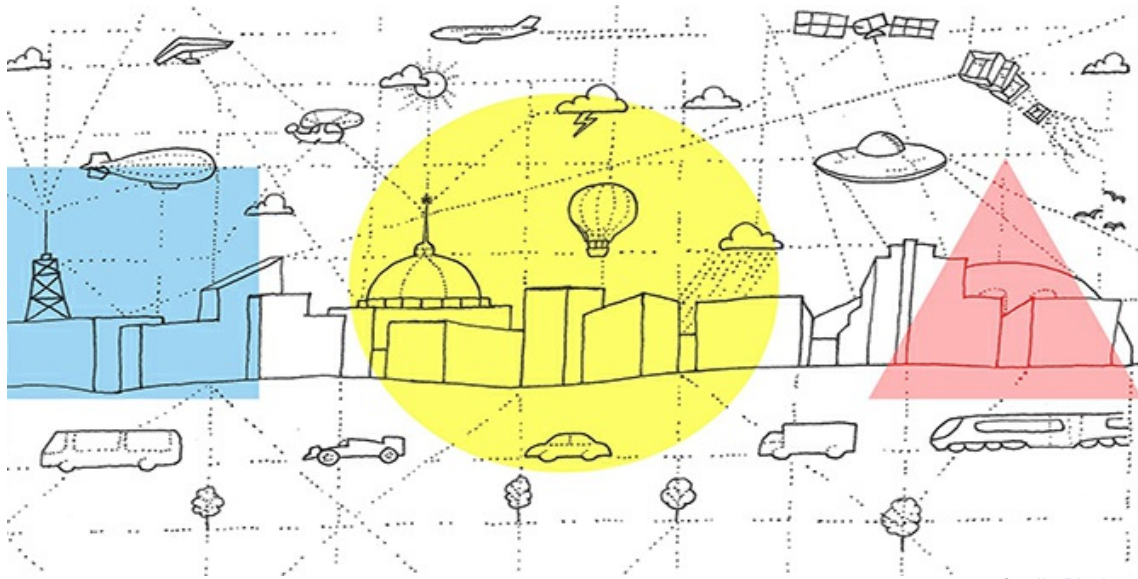
There is a growing sense of urgency to public policy discussions over diversity and migration in western countries. Commentators have been queueing up to provide broad-brush explanations for the rise of Brexit Britain, the dangers posed by Europe's 'migration crisis', and Trump's election victory. David Goodhardt's book [The Road to Somewhere](#) has become particularly influential with its imaginations of societies divided between 'somewheres', who are rooted in places and hostile to globalisation and migration, and 'anywheres', economic and social elites whose members are outward-looking and tolerant and have benefited from globalisation and economic growth.

However, the danger of such sweeping approaches is their tendency to look for 'big' explanations of change, whilst downplaying the importance of everyday experiences and the effects of public policy choices. If we really want to understand how 'somewheres' think and how they view the presence of migrants and diversity, then it is to experiences and understandings generated in places at the local level that we need to turn our attention. We should think more about the conditions that support the creation of more tolerant and welcoming outlooks towards diversity and, conversely, the conditions that generate greater hostility and tension.

What creates a welcoming or hostile place?

Evidence from in-depth work carried out [in diverse neighbourhoods in London](#) shows that a focus on places takes us away from simple binaries and self-evident truths and opens up new ways to understand and explain broader trends. The good news is that much is already known about the conditions that create or placate tensions between diverse groups in cities. [Decades of research](#) have shown that tensions increase when housing becomes scarce; where public services are weak and poorly resourced; where urban environments are poorly maintained, segregated and threatening; and where individuals and communities feel a sense of 'loss' and perceived threats from social and/or economic changes.

Conversely, tensions are reduced in places with: well-functioning community infrastructure, such as schools and social centres, where people with different backgrounds encounter each other in regular and repeated ways; open and accessible public spaces that feel inclusive; small shops, cafes, and meeting places for locals; and housing and employment opportunities that cater for the needs of a range of groups and help to generate a stronger sense of place attachment and wellbeing.



Credit: Pixabay (Public Domain).

Austerity cuts and place dynamics

And yet despite these well-known elements, government policies since the global financial crisis of 2008 have moved towards [unprecedented austerity programmes](#) that are damaging the very fabric of places, at the same time as their social diversity is growing. In response to funding crises, many local authorities are having to [cut back on key public services and infrastructure](#), such as libraries and community centres, just when their role in bringing communities together has taken on a new degree of importance.

Austerity is also having other effects beyond funding cuts. Local authorities are [being forced to promote development or 'regeneration'](#) in their areas to raise money. In major cities, particularly London, this is leading to a frenzy of urban development and rapid, disorientating change for residents. New housing is being targeted at affluent groups, at the expense of affordable housing. Worse, the types of development being promoted are limiting opportunities for small businesses and local entrepreneurs to flourish. Many of the [cafes and shops that support everyday encounters](#) between different groups are being lost and replaced with shiny new developments, often directed towards up-market shoppers. These changes are strongest in neighbourhoods subject to regeneration; places that contain the highest proportion of ethnic minorities and recent migrants.

The danger is that views towards the presence of diversity can change quickly, particularly under conditions of transformation. Local experiences over living in areas with overcrowded housing, seeing large numbers of marginalised young migrants with little to do in public spaces, or the perceived impact of new groups on over-stretched public services, can quickly generate feelings of hostility and resentment. It is through these local experiences that border political views take shape. It becomes easier to blame visible migrants for urban stresses than abstract changes in local government finance under austerity.

The local scale and a politics of hope

Despite these trends, our research indicates that there are [grounds for hope](#). By recognising the importance of the local scale, planning and welfare policies could and should focus more on the creation of more cohesive places. It is notable that in [London, longer-term counter-austerity investments in schools](#) have had a positive effect not only educational attainment but also in generating positive encounters between diverse groups. Schools and other welfare services including health and social care, or public infrastructure such as libraries, can, if funded properly, act as bonding agents, bringing very different people together in ways that generate long-term friendships and changing views.

Planning policies might also be more ambitious in creating the conditions for functioning places and in enabling communities to flourish. Less reliance on major urban development projects to fund local programmes would help. More imaginative programmes to support local private-sector businesses could also play an important role. They could learn from countries such as France, where [subsidies](#) are given to small shops and cafes that are deemed to provide a 'community benefit' and whose loss would damage the quality of life of local people. In other countries, housing policies guarantee housing as a right and support this through significant public investment. In the longer term, more interventionist housing policies that provide a broader range of housing types and opportunities could also help build more cohesive places.

It is therefore imperative that explanations for the rise of diversity politics move away from simple binaries: 'anywheres' versus 'somewheres', or 'out of touch elites' versus 'the people'. Our research shows that, in reality, individuals' perspectives are much more fluid and open. It is possible for citizens to be concerned with the speed and scale of changes taking place in communities *and* celebrate the presence of greater diversity, as well as the ways in which it had enriched their lives and given them broader outlooks. So whilst living with diversity can generate tensions and concerns, it is the material conditions of places, housing, and employment markets that have a substantial impact on perceptions and views.

Note: read more about the EUFP7-funded project *Divercities*, on which the above draws on, [here](#).

About the Author



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