



# Living with diversity: Local social imaginaries and the politics of intersectionality in a super-diverse city

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## 1. Introduction

According to the philosopher Charles Taylor (2002) the growing presence of socio-cultural diversity in western countries is generating new 'social imaginaries' in which individuals, groups, and governmental institutions are having to reconsider 'the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations' (p.106). The growing presence and juxtaposition of diversity, it is argued, encourages the formation of more relational world views that look beyond the bounded politics of territories. These new imaginaries are particularly significant in 'super-diverse' cities (cf. Vertovec, 2012) in which the visible presence of diversity has become 'commonplace' and is increasingly 'experienced as a normal part of social life and not as something particularly special' (Wessendorf, 2014, p. 407). Such proclamations are underpinned by implicit forms of 'contact theory' in which it is assumed that contacts between 'different' groups generate subjectivities founded on the principles of mutual tolerance and understanding (see Pettigrew, 1998). At the same time there is a growing trend within urban and social policy agendas to curate progressive representations of diversity within cities in order to make them more marketable and attractive to inward investors and skilled, 'creative', workers. Much of the writing on these topics in the urban studies literature is framed at a relatively high level of abstraction and discusses wider

'social trends' and 'ways of thinking' amongst population groups. Time-frames are (re)presented in a linear, diachronic fashion with implicit and explicit assumptions that, despite moments of disruption, the politics of diversity awareness and inclusion in 'western' cities is moving towards a new era of greater pluralism and openness.

However, such approaches often remain disconnected from recent writings in geography that have shed light on the diverse forms of encounter found in cities (and elsewhere) and the spatial and temporal settings in which imaginaries, identities, and reflexive modes of thinking emerge, evolve, and take on political forms (see Waite, Valentine, & Lewis, 2014; Wilson, 2016). As Matejskova and Leitner (2011) point out 'real life contact between members of different social groups is always structurally mediated and embedded in particular historical and geographical contexts' (p.721). There is thus an innate openness, rather than a set of normative tendencies, to encounters and their outcomes, with the possibility that in certain settings new forms of conflict and hostility emerge rather than a more pluralist set of imaginaries. As Thrift (2005) notes cities are characterised as much by maliciousness and the jarring of juxtaposed subjectivities as they are by social imaginaries of tolerance and openness towards the presence of diversity and 'strangers'. Moreover, critics have associated the rise of identity-based diversity politics and imaginations with heightened individualism, the breakdown of collective identities, and a fragmented politics of cultural division and separation (see Bauman, 2003). Some have even aligned the rise of simple narratives of change with the growth of reactionary politics across Europe and elsewhere (see Lilla, 2016; Žižek, 2016).

It is in this wider context that the paper, drawing on in-depth ethnographic evidence from London, argues that there is much to be gained from combining more normative insights on changing social imaginaries with recent writings in geography on the importance of spatio-temporal settings in shaping encounters. The former provides a series of propositions over the changing form and character of contemporary political change but lack a broader spatial and temporal sensitivity to the embedded nature of social imaginaries and how these challenge, or may even undermine, broader generalisations. The latter open up new terrains for empirical analysis by challenging generalised diachronic accounts, but their public policy implications often remain implicit, rather

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than explicit. There is frequently a focus on, or even celebration of, the openness and relationality of encounters, their endless variety, and their ability to surprise and generate multiple outcomes. What is less clear, however, are the *conditions that underpin the articulation of social imaginaries*, how such imaginaries come into being in specific geographical contexts, and how they are produced and with what effects. In the period following the global financial crisis of 2007/8 these conditions have been subject to rapid changes. In larger cities, with higher levels of socio-cultural diversity, urban environments have undergone new rounds of intense property-led development at the same time as the welfare budgets of government agencies have been drastically reduced in the name of austerity urbanism (Peck & Theodore, 2015).

Whilst it is imperative to avoid simple prescriptions for public policy, this paper explores some of core conditions in and through which urban subjectivities and what might be termed *Local Social Imaginaries* [LSIs] are emerging and evolving in contemporary urban contexts. It argues that recent orthodoxies surrounding the 'unstoppable' nature of globalisation and cultural diversification are challenged and enriched by an understanding of the particular intersections of social, economic, and political processes that make-up (diverse) places. It will take as its starting point Delanty's (2012) claim that contemporary imaginations of diversity represent 'both a normative theory (which makes cognitive claims) and also a particular kind of social phenomenon' (p.334). The co-presence and juxtaposition of imagined diversities thus becomes both 'an experience of reality - in the sense of a lived experience and measurable empirical condition - and an interpretation of such experiences ... that does not counter-oppose the normative and the empirical' (p.335). LSIs are thus continually (re)shaped by reflexive subjects through processes of interaction, engagement and encounter in places and can take on a variety of forms, ranging from enhanced mutual understanding and collective social imaginaries to hostility and reinforced senses of 'otherness' and distrust. But the paper goes further. It makes direct connections between the conditions of encounter(s) that are being created in cities by waves of neo-liberal austerity and property-led developments and the ways in which these influence the LSIs of citizens. The study shows how and in what ways they create and exacerbate tensions between different social groups by shrinking the spaces and temporalities in which more sustained forms of encounter can take place.

The paper begins by examining the relationships between diversity, in different forms, and LSIs. It then turns to case study work in London that explores transformative identities, governmentalities, and ways of thinking associated with diverse urban living and the conditions in and through which different forms of imaginations emerge and are given expression in calls for (political) action and intervention. The analysis provides empirical evidence that documents and describes a dialectical picture in which diversity is simultaneously celebrated as an everyday phenomenon that helps to bring about new progressive imaginaries at the same time as, under certain conditions, its presence leads to new forms of hostility towards groups that do not 'fit in' with prescribed local social imaginaries. These imaginaries, the paper argues, are catalysed and reinforced by *intersectional (re)combinations* of cultural and material processes that are, in turn, shaped by structured and increasingly rapid transformations to the built environment and the effects of welfare cuts and demographic policies. Urban stresses relating to swingeing austerity cuts to welfare, overcrowding, the growing cost of living, changes in labour markets, and globally-oriented urban development programmes shape and influence imaginaries in ways that go beyond simple accounts of the impacts of globalisation and de-territorialised identities. The paper argues that recent policy orthodoxies on 'social mixing' that implicitly or explicitly draw on the assumptions embedded in social contact

theories, fail to adequately address these intersections and inter-relationships. It calls for greater awareness of the impacts of contemporary forms of urban policy and austerity cuts on forms of encounter and diversity politics and the ways in which these might be used to mobilise alternative and more critical political agendas in cities.

## 2. Diversity, intersectionality and the emergence of new social imaginaries

For Vertovec (2012), drawing on the writings of Charles Taylor (2003), changes in the socio-cultural composition of cities and populations are leading to the formation of new social imaginaries, defined as the common understandings and presumptions that individuals and citizens possess about their collective social life. Diversity, in this sense, has become a new norm that 'began as a kind of social engineering idea advocated by specialists, and has eventually been elaborated, promoted and codified to the point that it is now part of everyday understanding ... integral to the way that everybody treats each other in society' (p.306). In Taylor's (2002) terms, contemporary modernity is infused with complex new imaginaries that relate to the 'way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings' and the 'common understanding[s] that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy' (p.106). It is claimed that in an era of difference, a quiet revolution is taking place in the ways in which individuals see themselves and the world around them (see Beck & Grandes, 2007). Post-national discourses, problems, and agendas are being identified and translated into new programmes of political action requiring policy-makers and citizens to 'suspend the assumption of the nation-state ... [to] make the empirical investigation of local-global phenomena possible' (Beck & Sznaider, 2006, p. 9).

Such narratives underpin a wide range of policy interventions and programmes towards the management of socio-cultural diversity in cities. Many policies implicitly and/or explicitly draw on concepts of 'contact theory' from social psychology that, in Blokland's (2003) terms, represents the 'hypothesis that when the frequency of interactions between groups increases, they will understand and therefore like and respect each other better' (p.6). In other words, encounters and contacts in places assume a 'cultural transformation through mixing ... [that] stands as a valorised sign of reified diversity' (Keith, 2005, p. 48; see also: Fincher & Iveson, 2008). The 'normalisation' of diversity is given a political subjectivity in that it acts on the governmentalities of citizens in a mutually-reinforcing way; its presence encourages the formation of common understanding, practices, and social imaginaries and this in turn generates political agendas that encourage and welcome more diversity and more relational understandings of place. The perceived co-presence of diversity thus sustains and establishes a degree of political legitimacy towards more open and pluralist policy interventions as 'ordinary' citizens come to accept the new 'realities' of a globally-connected world in which belonging and attachments are stretched out over space (see Massey, 2007). This is reflected in a range of urban policy interventions that promote mixed and sustainable forms of neighbourhood planning (see Casey, 2016).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The UK government's recent review into social integration, for instance, argues forcefully that a failure to bring about mixing and social contacts has negative social and economic consequences: 'where communities live separately, with fewer interactions between people from different backgrounds, mistrust, anxiety, and prejudice grow. Conversely, social mixing and interactions between people from a wider range of backgrounds can have positive impacts; not just in reducing anxiety and prejudice, but also in enabling people to get on better in employment and social mobility' (Casey, 2016, p. 8).

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