

Book Review: City, Street and Citizen: the Measure of the Ordinary

by Blog Admin

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*Though authorised surveys, media representations and the current political dogma around multiculturalism have tended to produce a portrayal that purports cultural containment and social division, the speed of change in the contemporary city has never been more accelerated, nor has its populations been more variegated. Based on two years of ethnographic research in London, **Suzanne Hall** offers a nuanced account of urban life, alongside the underlying economic and political structure of society. **Ben Campkin** admires the book's ethnographic-architectural approach.*

City, Street and Citizen: the Measure of the Ordinary. Suzanne Hall. Routledge. April 2012.

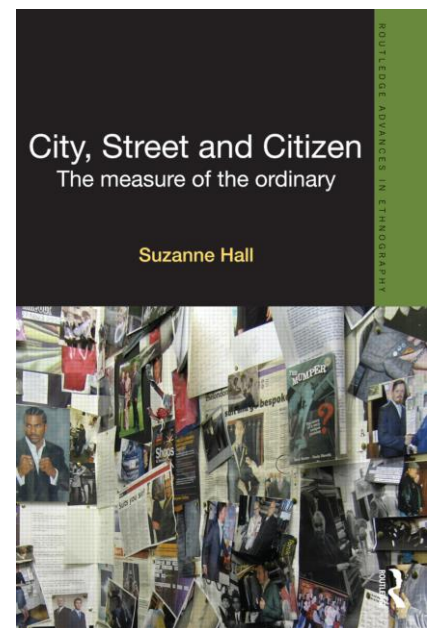
(http://www.amazon.co.uk/City-Street-Citizen-Measure-Ordinary/dp/0415528178/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1352735952&sr=8-1) (http://www.amazon.co.uk/City-Street-Citizen-Ethnography-ebook/dp/B008FYT7KC/ref=dp_kinw_strp_1)

Suzanne Hall

(<http://www2.lse.ac.uk/sociology/whoswho/academic/hall.aspx>) makes explicit that her excellent new book, *City, Street and Citizen: the Measure of the Ordinary*, reflects her own biographical story in its subject, methods and preoccupations. Having trained and worked as an architect in South Africa in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Hall moved to London to embark on a career as an urban ethnographer at the LSE. Responding to London's social diversity, and heightened to questions of difference and its spatialisation because of her background, Hall's research sought to understand how multiculturalism operates. Rather than consider this at the macro scale, however, she chooses to examine 'urban multicultural' at the humble scale of streets and shops. The Walworth Road, the south-east London street Hall selected, she construes as 'at once a global and local street' (31). Emphatically ordinary, exceptionally diverse, its evident promise as the site for the research was first realized by Hall as she looked out through the bus window on her way to the LSE each day. How is social diversity reflected and expressed within the everyday settings and encounters of this street and its workspaces? This is the key question the ensuing research asked, and which its final output, this book, articulates and explores engagingly.

In the book Hall gives a meticulous account of her careful methodology, outlining how she creatively combined her newly acquired 'fine grained' and up-close ethnographic research skills with her training in visual and spatial analysis from architecture. She makes a convincing case as to why such an approach is appropriate and timely: we need to rethink multiculturalism through focusing on the boundaries and spaces of everyday urbanism rather than the nation; and to reconfigure policy debates through evidence gleaned from observing the street, and listening to people as they go about their daily lives.

Moreover, if we are to speak meaningfully of diversity and migration, Hall argues, we need to focus on the 'urban margins' – 'locales that are physically proximate to but culturally distant from [...] symbolically dominant and prestigious landscapes on which the narrative of a 'world class' city is conferred' (5). For there is an obvious correlation between those areas structurally associated with poverty, and those that are most ethnically diverse. This is what makes the Walworth Road such a brilliant example – geographically central and functionally important, yet socially and economically other, and with a long history of being



constructed as such, from the area's earliest urbanization to its most recent 'regeneration'. In this densely populated district, at the time the research was undertaken the UK census reported 48% of residents as other than 'white British' – a coarse classification as the author points out. Since then Southwark has seen a 12.3% rise in total population.

Hall's project is to de-centre wider debates about multiculturalism while simultaneously *re-centring* Walworth Road – and by implication other urban margins – as important sites of enquiry. In so doing she draws on the heritage of cultural studies – Raymond Williams – in privileging the ordinary. The book also seems to respond to the recent call by geographer Jennifer Robinson for all cities to be considered ordinary. Such a move, Robinson argues, is necessary in a postcolonial critique of the classifications that have traditionally structured urban theory and analysis.

Another parallel would be Patrick Wright's *A Journey Through Ruins: the Last Days of London* (1991), which takes its reader around the world in 300-yards, touring the equally ordinary – and run-down – streets of Dalston in the north-east of the city, and observing its fabric and occupants with an ethnographer's eye. Yet the ambling narrative of Wright's book could not be in starker contrast to the neat structure of Hall's sociological and architectural framing of Walworth Road.

The visual components of *City, Street and Citizen* include photographic documentation of street signs and the micro interventions made by the local population as they go about their lives 'making do and getting by'. The latter phrase, used by Hall, evokes the series of photographs of another London street, the Caledonian Road, taken by artist-ethnographer of King's Cross, Richard Wentworth. It also recalls the wider 'ethnographic turn' in art of the late-twentieth century identified by critic Hal Foster (http://www.corner-college.com/udb/cpro2ZgGKfArtist_As_Ethnographer.pdf): a preoccupation with ethnographic modes of gathering and representing information. An example would be the work of Gillian Wearing who shares Hall's interest in south-east London, and uses the same specific setting in her video piece *Homage to the woman with the bandaged face who I saw down Walworth Road* (1995). South-east London, by virtue of its poverty, 'otherness', and ordinariness has long been a source for the sociological imagination, and this has been manifest in both academic texts and wider culture. Hall's book makes an important, rigorously researched, and thoughtfully structured contribution.

As well as its subject matter, the methods of Hall's book will interest a wide-range of researchers, and in particular emerging urban and architectural researchers who are combining architectural and ethnographic techniques in innovative ways. Whether drawing on anthropology and material culture studies, or sociology, a wave of new researchers are developing participatory and ethnographic methods in combination with practice-led architectural research to productively challenge and re-think more traditional methods in understanding questions central to contemporary policy debates. In such research, architecture is not seen in terms of form, and buildings are not objects but rather settings for social interaction, and reflective of and active within social processes.

Hall's book embodies a creative intersection between architecture and ethnography at its heart. The author uses computer drawings to create polemic images that support her arguments: one sees the River Thames portrayed as a wall, another aligns a map of the Walworth Road and a map of the world, showing the countries from which the road's occupants originated. These are an excellent way of developing and reinforcing the ideas in the text, although the reproduction quality of the maps, diagrams and photographs is unfortunately low. The two sets of methods also remain rather distinct, and so the architectural aspects are inevitably presented as illustrative and secondary. This combination of methods could have been even more powerful if the transformations of each mode relative to the other had been made more evident in the book's final presentation. Hopefully this is something we will see in Hall's future work. Certainly, readers of *City, Street and Citizen* will be convinced of the potential of such an ethnographic-architectural approach, which grounds architecture itself in the everyday, and is insightful and evocative in its presentation of urban multiculturalism from the bottom up.

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