

Long nights on Brick Lane

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Riad Azar on ethnographic research in London's Brick Lane

"...and then I realised that time was circular", a friend told me after reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel *100 Years of Solitude*. Our discussion was stubborn, returning to me time and again during my first few weeks in London. I was about to begin an MSc programme in Political Sociology; it was time to think like a social scientist. But it must be possible, I thought to myself, to find a way to describe changes not only in time, but also in space. Physicists agreed that space-time was a curvature; linearity might only be a constraining factor on our human perspective. My ethnographic fieldwork on Brick Lane served as the lab to test out this idea, to counterpose the variables of time and space in order to describe social change in an urban environment, and to allow literature to inspire my epistemological foundations.

Five years ago I cycled off the ferry from Liverpool and found myself in Dublin. I had my bicycle, a tent strapped to its frame and £100 I made busking in Cambridge. James Joyce's *Ulysses* took up half of the pannier bag; its dual function as a pillow helped me justify the added weight. Living Joyce's classic on the streets of the Irish capital made a notable impression on the way I thought about time. I recognised the streets and neighbourhoods, and gawked at the McDonalds that stood in the place of Bloom's infamous morning butcher. Perhaps the scents were similar.

Social theorists from Aristotle to Hegel have always held the *telos* as sacrosanct; the progression of time as the driver of change. But what about space? And perspective? 100 years on and the alley I stood in had been completely redrawn.

Fast forward a few months and I came across *Justine*, one of four novellas that makes up Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. In these pages, I was introduced to the Egyptian port city, and through each novella I experienced space and place from the perspective of the rotating protagonists. Time held a secondary function as the vignettes were laid out in the order of importance to the narrator, rather than chronologically.

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These literary musings served as the starting point for thinking about my research on Brick Lane, the busy street in East London that has captured the hearts of London's immigrants, tourists, bankers, workers, and curious characters since the 17th century. The street has been studied through a variety of lenses: from social scientists to film makers and novelists, some of whose works have angered the subjects they were studying so deeply that the ashes of their books are a reminder that the work of depiction is always political. Ethnographic methodology allowed my colleagues and I to think about Brick Lane from the lens of those who inhabited the space. Taking our inspiration from Joyce's use of time, and Durrell's use of space, our research centred around the construction of social identity through the organisation of time and space.

We sought to discover the impact of the time of day on the domination of specific spaces of Brick Lane by different social groups. We were also curious about how spatial hegemony by social groups was used to redraw boundaries – the divisions on the street in the afternoon were radically different to those in the evening and night. To do this we decided to organise our research temporally; each of us was given a specific timeframe to conduct participant observations and interviews. Our participant observation served the goal of establishing which social groups were present, whether they were weekend food market workers, hipster thrift store shoppers,

businesswomen rushing on their commute, or the midnight drug dealers. Our interviews allowed us to access their perspective on how the street was organised during our allotted timeframes. Areas which were encouraged to visit by the curryhouse owner on a Saturday afternoon were frowned upon by the panhandlers of Wednesday evening. Ethnography allowed us the freedom to traverse this dense mix of social relations; documenting and understanding how specific social groups were empowered to dominate space and lay claims upon territory that would not even exist six hours before or after our conversations.

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My timeframe was late night, between 10pm and 6am. My research subjects were the homeless, drug dealers, party goers stopping in for a beigal at the two competing 24 hour shops. Through them I discovered the night time economy. The Beigal shops served as the attractor that brought in capital in the form of late nighters, some of them stumbling, slurring their speech, and singing. The homeless and the drug dealers used this potential resource base to their advantage, the former soliciting spare change in order to secure a room at the nearby shelter, the latter to peddle their wares. Both were drawn by the potential of accumulation, a potentiality which existed because of the interplay of time and space on the darkened street.

I looked through the field notes of my colleagues, and discovered that they had observed similar tensions. The domination of space seemed to always be based upon some type of capital accumulation. By being acquainted with a specific slice of Brick Lane in space/time, we were able to conclude that the time of day has a profound effect on which social groups feel empowered and therefore dominate Brick Lane. I depart from my group members in hypothesising that this is due to the competition for consumers, and therefore a drive towards the monopolisation of the accumulation of capital (Harvey, 2006; Marx, 1990). Through our study of the commodification of culture (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002) and tourism (MacCannell, 1999), and our witnessing of periods of group 'accentuation' and dominance, I believe we were observing a transition in accumulated capital on behalf of the tourists from the curryhouses to the food market and hipster-sites. As curryhouses are losing out on potential customers and focus shifts to the food market, Bengalis feel that they are losing their hold on the space, as the food market (understood as the materialisation of the gentrification process) is commanding the accumulation of capital; the data regarding the tax-free nature of the market further emphasises the structural nature of this movement. This can be seen in the Bengali's lack of presence – and concerns over the safety of 'their' group – during times when either (a) the food market is dominating the street, or (b) the morning and evening rush-hour commuter traffic is at its peak.

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An interpretivist and impressionistic appreciation in ethnography methodology guided the writing process. I was able to add a spatial element to the paper by dividing the document in half. I saw this as a demonstration of the intimate relation between classroom and site, theory and practice, speculation and observation. The left column documented the discussion within the classroom where the research and observations were analysed and framed, particularly during 'key events' and 'epiphanies'. The right column contained our story on Brick Lane: field notes, interview transcripts, spatial representations and photos.

While the process came to few 'conclusions', as each formulation was met with a new series of questions, I took away a few lessons. The breadth of the human experience and the depth of subjectivity are infinite, maybe even containing multiple dimensions. Therefore in studying social life we should be equally diverse in our sources of inspiration. But while our interests may be diverse and many the researcher must always keep her single responsibility in mind: to do justice to those who we study.

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