Claiming Brixton, Reclaiming Brixton

A member of the regeneration team at Lambeth Borough Council described the challenge that faced Brixton this way: "How do we retain our unique character and continue to grow". Brixton is a neighbourhood that might be characterised by the diverse cultural, social, and ethnic identities associated with it. Today Brixton has become a byword for gentrification in London and many people within and outside of the neighbourhood fear that heterogeneity of the neighbourhood is now under threat from a wave of middle class people and the businesses that serve them. Arguably the notion of growth is anathema to the neighbourhoods 'character'.

This paper will attempt to move beyond the binary discourse that can surround gentrification. It will depict the process of change in Brixton as a messy one full of conflicts occurring at multiple scales of observation. Participant observation carried out during 2015 in a restaurant and a soup kitchen has allowed me to gain a close up view of the responses to the neighbourhoods changing face.

The paper will focus on the Reclaim Brixton protest in April 2015. The protest's title implies a desire to return to something people fear is being lost. I will suggest that during the protest it was possible to identify a wealth of conflicting positions that fell under this rallying call. The question of what to reclaim was a point of conflict in itself. The complexity of Brixton, and the way that people have responded to the way it is changing was manifest in the twists and turns of the protest as groups splintered off and returned to the group in the main square.

The process of neighbourhood change that Brixton has undergone can be characterised in terms of authenticity and alienation. Multiple conflicting claims to authenticity produce experiences of alienation as they rub up against one another. It is in this relationship between the claim of authenticity and the experience of alienation that the politics of neighbourhood becomes most intensely felt, and most animating. This register of politics can be overlooked in favour of a logic that occurs at a larger scale of observation, that of capital and of the state. With Brixton as my example I will suggest that through closely observing complex urban conflict we can learn about the visceral and embodied politics of the city, and perhaps construct a field of debate that diminishes the gulf between state, institution, and community.

Key References: Ruth Glass, Liz Bondi, Bev Skeggs, John Law, Les Back, Michel de Certeau, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall

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