

Multicultural incarnations: race, class and urban renewal

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Abstract

Drawing on initial original research in two postindustrial, culturally diverse and socially complex Melbourne suburbs both of which are undergoing large state sponsored revitalization programs, this paper suggests that multiculturalism and urban policy are being refashioned in similar and mutually dependent ways. I suggest here that they are being reshaped as objects of pleasure for the middle class, glossed and marketed to appeal to the fantasies of modern mobile subjects. This strategic marketing of cultural diversity as key to vibrant urban economies depends on a particularly circumscribed version of the multicultural, one that emphasises cultural *diversity* at the expense of cultural *difference*. This paper reflects on how studies of the city reveal a current retreat from multiculturalism, as we have known it.

Diversity in the city

In July 2009, the inner western suburb of Footscray celebrated its 150th birthday. It marked the occasion with a festival and party, taking the opportunity to showcase its ethnic and cultural diversity through food, music and performance. The festivities were held in the newly refurbished Nicholson St Mall and Maddern Square, two public spaces in the heart of the suburb. In the weeks before and after the event, local newspapers

reported on the celebrations, highlighting the suburb's history and featuring stories and comments from some of its identities. The city's 'remarkable cultural diversity' dominated the reports and commentaries. The Victorian State Premier, John Brumby commented on the 'waves of immigrants that have shaped Footscray into what it is today', pointing to the 'Italian styled architecture of a building that now houses Vietnamese eateries, Indian supermarkets and African cafes' as evidence of 'just how much of the world calls Footscray home.'

Beyond the souvenir section of one local paper, two major headlines disrupt this festive mood announcing the news issues of the present —*Eyes in the sky 'clean up'* and *Nguyen still our top moniker*. The surname Nguyen remains the number one surname in Footscray with Vietnamese names making up most of the suburb's top 10 names, which also include one Indian name, Singh with Smith and Williams coming in at 8 and 10 respectively. The 'eyes in the sky story' sports a photograph of a new police van that houses five surveillance cameras on its roof, providing a 360 degree view, and announces that 'offenders in Footscray are on notice.' Endorsing the need to clean up the area of its 'anti-social behaviour' a local councilor announces the plan to install surveillance cameras around the central business district over the next year.

This characterization of the city's dual image of cultural diversity and anti-social behaviour, jewels amidst dearth, aptly portrays the contemporary policy preoccupations of urban renewal programs, not just in Australia but throughout the globe, as cities rush to frame and claim their own unique (marketable) character (Zukin, 1995, Ley, 1994, Harvey 1987, 1989, Smith 1992, Lees 1994, 2003, 2008). The emphasis on cultural diversity, and

cleaning up crime is part of the current global trend to makeover, renew or revitalise cities and suburbs (Wacquant, 2008). Rebranding and reimagining once derelict or degenerate urban spaces touched by global forces—migration, gentrification, post-Fordism—are fundamental to the social restructuring that promises future prosperity for cities. Central to the urban regeneration drive is an appropriation of cultural diversity, packaged and marketed to communicate a multicultural urbanity, attractive to the young, mobile urban professionals that the cities aim to attract. In this context cultural diversity is a ‘brand’ and the suburb becomes a ‘lifestyle’ to be sold.

That cultural diversity has become not only desirable but also critical to the rebranding and revitalization of suburbs and cities, rests on a peculiar reworking of multiculturalism today, and suggests that a closer analysis of urban renewal might offer valuable insights into the actually existing status and practice of multiculturalism in Australia today. Drawing on initial original research in two postindustrial, culturally diverse and socially complex Melbourne suburbs both of which are undergoing large state sponsored revitalization programs, this paper suggests that multiculturalism and urban policy are being refashioned in similar and mutually dependent ways. I suggest here that they are being reshaped as objects of pleasure for the middle class, glossed and marketed to appeal to the fantasies of modern mobile subjects. This strategic marketing of cultural diversity as key to vibrant urban economies depends on a particularly circumscribed version of the multicultural—one that emphasises the importance to urban vitality of cultural *diversity*, while also displaying a remarkable aversion to the way that diversity may entail encounters with cultural *differences*, that may be confronting or

unpalatable. I think it useful to explore this schematically through the typology of *diversity* and *difference*.

Multiculturalism and urban renewal both market cultural diversity, while deliberately playing down, even repudiating the cultural differences and the social inequalities obtaining to many of the ethnic and marginalised groups who comprise the diversity being sold. This entangled avowal of diversity and disavowal of difference exposes current visions of multiculturalism and revitalized cities as sites of *display* rather than sites of *dwelling*. The marketing of diversity has altered the status of those who physically *dwell* in the suburbs, particularly those who have found a dwelling space within multiculturalism, while also reducing and regulating multiculturalism to *display* a kind of harmonious cosmopolitan chic.

Method

In late 2008 I began research in two Melbourne ‘multicultural’ suburbs focusing on the intersections between multiculturalism and the urban everyday, exploring the characteristics of urban public space that are associated with ongoing everyday encounters between and within groups and among individuals, taking account of patterns and differences for and among young people women, men those from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and the length of time people have been connected to the suburbs. I am also analysing how and in what ways official policies and understandings of multiculturalism have meaning for different people and institutions, and how they relate to or regulate everyday life in these suburbs.

Because no single discipline can lay claim to the city as its object of study (Tonkiss, 2005:2), my research draws on urban sociology, anthropology and geography as well as social and cultural theory to investigate intercultural encounters and multicultural urban experiences. To date I have undertaken preliminary ethnographic work in several designated spaces in the suburbs, observing and participating in the daily rhythms of each, as well as conducting extended conversations and interviews with those who work, reside or visit these places. I have also interviewed key people in local and state government, urban planners and designers focusing on the activities and influences that shape policy decisions and their implementation. Analysis of policy and program documents, advertising and promotional material and local media to unpack the representational discourses that promote and regulate life in the suburbs has begun to reveal how policy and public discourse have combined to create and new categories of people and newly imagined spaces to be governed.

While this research is in its early stages I take the opportunity here to theoretically reflect on the discursive splits that have begun to emerge. This reflective piece focuses on four words and how the tensions entwined in them speak on many levels to the altered landscapes of urban multiculturalism and multicultural urbanism in Australia today. The four words I work with here are *diversity, difference, dwelling and display*.

Diversity, Difference, Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism as official policy, introduced in Australia in the 1970s recognised that previous demands for immigrants to assimilate were both unrealistic and a failure. By this time the terms of immigrant inclusion in Australia had moved from

White Australia, assimilation, integration through to multiculturalism which presented itself as a policy framework that would provide services and planning for immigrant inclusion but importantly would value the development of a multicultural society as something that ‘will benefit all Australians’ (Galbally, 1978:10). This distinguished Australian multiculturalism from those in Europe and elsewhere that always framed multiculturalism as a program directed only towards immigrants. In Australia multiculturalism became linked to nation building and presented itself as an identity option for all Australians. It emphasised the right to cultural and religious maintenance and instituted programs and policies to facilitate access and equity for immigrants to all national and state institutions, most notably education and the media.

While multiculturalism in Australia has always been contested, the late 1990s marked a significant state ‘retreat’ (Poynting and Mason, 2008) or ‘downscaling’ (Joppke, 2005) from it as a characteristic of Australian identity, preferring instead to emphasise Australia’s ‘core’ identity and identifying multiculturalism as one among many characteristics of the Australian nation (see Fitzgerald 1989 and Australian Government, 1999).

Significant pressure to ‘globalise’ economies, drove the economic restructuring of the national economy in 1980s and 1990s and with it came a retreat from the language of multiculturalism that had until shaped the nation’s engagement with it. The drive for success in the global economy began to link cultural diversity with economic efficiency. ‘Productive diversity’ reframed multiculturalism as a framework for managing and marketing, shifting it away from its previous emphasis on funding and programs for

access and equity. Multiculturalism marched to the tune of marketability, selling and promoting the nation's diversity. This new dimension of multiculturalism stressed 'the positive market value of diversity rather than attempting to define rights and wrongs, and dealing with diversity as a central management issue rather than as a kind of remedial action to incorporate marginalized groups' (Cope and Kalantzis, 2001:818).

During the late 1990s a sharp increase in the global movement of asylum seekers combined with the geopolitical tensions that were framed as a clash between Islam and the West. The climax of the 9/11 bombing of the world trade centre in New York unleashed a battery of extreme policy responses to this global insecurity. Further bombings in London, Bali, Spain and India firmly ensnared multiculturalism as a prime suspect in the logic of global in/security, apprehended as a potential breeding ground for those involved in perpetrating or supporting terrorist acts. Local multiculturalisms have in some cases become construed or interpreted as potential breeding grounds and/or battlegrounds in the new global insecurity. A key strategy in mitigating the threat of multiculturalism has been to draw attention to particular cultural differences of immigrants that are deemed incompatible with or a challenge to the national 'core values'. Demands to adhere to national or core values has in political terms resulted in the replacement of the term multiculturalism with citizenship. In 2007 the government department responsible for multicultural affairs dropped 'multicultural' from its name.

This discursive focus on cultural difference as problematic has situated multiculturalism as a program failing to reconcile diversity with social solidarity (Hall, 2000). Some argue that multiculturalism in Australia today has become coercive and

shaped by assimilative management through ‘new integrationism’ (Poynting and Mason, 2008). This is not in the form of programs and services to assist integration but is integration as command. Immigrants are to demonstrate their commitment to Australian values, many being required to sign a values statement when they apply for visas, pass a test as part of citizenship, learn English (even while language services have been cut), demonstrate their commitment to women’s rights and teach ‘Australian values’ at ethnic or religious schools.

Yet, while *difference* is problematic and seen as the main cause of social problems associated with immigrants and their children, *diversity* is more popular than ever, enjoying considerable support in the public sphere. Diversity as aesthetic comprises rituals, food, folktales, legend, arts, crafts and festivals. It enriches the national culture and is politically and morally neutral. Difference however is revealed by morally objectionable, politically challenging or ethically questionable beliefs and practices of immigrant minorities. These differences are deemed to create conflict with the majority, weaken or challenge social cohesion, or lead to unacceptable human rights violations. So while the ‘presence’ of immigrants is highly valued for the way it enriches the national culture, the ‘practices’ of immigrants may be cause for concern. Diversity is seen as a good thing while difference is not. Multiculturalism then becomes a double gesture of endorsing diversity and rejecting difference.

Where is the boundary between diversity and difference and what are its effects on the people who are governed through such categories? Anthropologist Thomas Hyland Eriksen (2006) suggests that the boundary between diversity and difference is the

boundary between acceptable and unacceptable differences. This token boundary however conceals conflicts of another order to do with class and politics. Where diversity is good and difference is bad, culture is reduced to something that adds value to or enriches the social milieu. Inequality and marginalization are effaced in this narrative, yet as we will see class is the undeclared thread refashioning multiculturalism and driving urban renewal.

Urban renewal, diversity and class

Economic and cultural diversity have become crucial for success in the global economy. Economic diversity enables movement between markets and attempts to underwrite sudden market shifts and fluctuations. Cultural diversity contributes to an economy's efficiency through its workforce and diverse consumption opportunities, while also promoting the nation's cosmopolitan image. Diversity operates here as a symbol of progress and both multiculturalism and cities are caught up in and being remade by and for a 'real global economy' but the remaking occurs through a symbolic economy. Zukin (1995) suggests that, 'The look and feel of cities reflect decisions about what and who should be visible and what should not, concepts of order and disorder, and on uses of aesthetic power' (ibid: 7). It is in the realm of visibility and image that this symbolic economy should also be read as moral economy governing subjects through a class aesthetic that delineates who is entitled and who should be excluded from dwelling in multicultural urban space.

It is in this context that multiculturalism is packaged as a pleasure object for the middle class as ethnic diversity is incorporated to provide vibrant urban economies and

spaces for them. Thus diversity becomes valued only insofar as it enriches or adds value to the city. At the local level who belongs depends on their capacity to 'add value' and this process of identifying and judging is occurring apace in Footscray at the moment. The moral economies of urban renewal and multiculturalism are renewing their dependence on class as they engage in practices and languages that seek to replace the 'value-less' with the 'valued' (Skeggs, 2005). For Skeggs, this is class in the making. She suggests that class is made through cultural values of personhood that are realized as property value in symbolic systems of exchange (ibid: 969). It is thus the *exchange* value of person and places that makes contemporary class relations. Thus, in this race to secure competitive city status discursive regimes of surveillance and judgement evaluate and authorize the production of subjectivity, and importantly as subjects to be governed. Subjects become embodied as commodified diversity that adds value or alternatively are embodied as subjects who will diminish value. As Loic Wacquant (2008) argues, in these times it is 'your diversity' not your 'socio-economic status' that will determine your value as cities become engaged in processes to replace the valueless with the valued. Multiculturalism and urban renewal programs actually *create* the people and places they seek to govern.

In the case of Footscray value is attached to particular embodied forms of diversity. At this moment subjects are being judged and created as being either *too different* or *not multicultural enough*, thereby inhibiting a new urban multicultural modernity. Some sections of the community must therefore become invisibilised. The newspaper articles that report on diversity alongside crime speak to the rhythms of the

streets where Vietnamese traders add value through the vibrancy they create in restaurants, markets and a host of other outlets. This occurs alongside other street cultures that are inhabited by the socially and culturally different—the drug users and sellers, the unemployed and public drinkers. They congregate in their self-assigned spaces and they move through the suburb daily. While the drug users and sellers are usually mobile, walking the streets or resting in the mall, the drinkers are more sedentary and tend to congregate in a street they share with a burgeoning street café scene populated largely by coffee drinking men from Africa. These people are problematic for the diversity that needs to be displayed. They are, some of them too black. The men who populate the strip of African street cafes that have emerged in close proximity to each other and who spend time on the footpaths drinking coffee and mingling with each other, are deemed by some to make the street ‘dangerous’. Other people, those we might say are a grubby kind of white, are not considered to have any ‘diversity’ thus have nothing of cultural value offer. These are the bodies marginalised by the current love of diversity and disdain for difference. The presence of immigrants become desirable element of urban space, while the place-making practices of those same people are deemed dangerous but their The socio-economic conditions of their existence—poverty, unemployment, poor health, crime, addictions—are converted into problems of character in the moral and symbolic economies of multiculturalism and urban renewal. They are the unproductive, the problematic the culturally defunct bodies (Haylett 2001:359) of the present day. As Wacquant (2008) notes, unlike past concerns about gentrification and dislocation, today’s urban polices no longer focus on displacement but in ‘making the dangerous and dirty

classes invisible'. This, he argues is 'leading to a cleansing of the urban environment and the streets from the physical and human detritus wrought by economic deregulation and welfare retrenchment' (ibid: 198).

Cultural, social and ethnic diversity are in the process of being reduced to aesthetics, while social conflict or human suffering is marketed as spectacle or ambience (Smith, 1992). This has emerged in both the publicity material advertising or promoting Footscray and is also evident in the said and unsaid, or the speakable and unspeakable, parts of interviews with state government planners, social planners and urban designers working in the area. Where difference is either castigated or transformed into diversity as a selling point in the marketing of places to the new middle class, the negative impact on marginalized bodies is ignored.

Dwelling and display

Urban renewal programs disclose and perpetuate the shifting state discourse on multiculturalism and its withdrawal of support for newly arrived refugees and immigrants and lower income people in favour of investing in conditions to enhance business and services for the middle class. In the urban setting this means packaging and marketing diversity and making suburbs visibly pleasant and exotically enticing. Urban renewal and multiculturalism begin to look like accomplices in a neoliberal scheme for selling a *sense* of diversity by eradicating the *grime* of social inequality, while leaving in tact and fortifying the processes of power and ideology that create them.

Multicultural urbanism and urban multiculturalism are a paradox of dwelling and display. *Dwelling* refers here to the relations between people and the spaces they inhabit, drawing on Heidegger idea of ‘being’ dwelling is the means by which people define themselves in relation to the material world and their socio-spatial environment. People make themselves and their worlds in the spaces they inhabit and through the relations they engage in those spaces. Place in this sense is much more than urban form; it is the space of dwelling—being in the world, in relation to others, sharing and contesting space, engaging and ignoring each other, living with both conflict and in accord. Display on the other hand occurs through the symbolic creation and representation of place and institutions. It is about image, branding, exhibiting and promoting. This occurs through language, publications, and programs that seek to enact the image desired. I am suggesting here that the paradoxical relation between dwelling and display saturates the discourse of urban renewal and expressed in a modern form of multiculturalism which privileges diversity over difference.

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