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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gerd Baumann. *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London.* New York and Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xiii + 218 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-55482-4; $30.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-55554-8.

Reviewed by David Beriss (Department of Anthropology, University of New Orleans)
Published on H-SAE (December, 1999)

Cultivating the Southall Beat

At its narrowest, this book is about group identities developed by the diverse inhabitants of Southall, a town located within the London Borough of Ealing, near Heathrow Airport. Rather than focus on any one of the groups present in Southall, Gerd Baumann examines the manner in which the very idea of group identities has become central to people's lives there. Drawing on six years of ethnographic research in Southall, as well as on interesting survey data, Baumann develops a rich portrait of the making of cultural identities in Southall. But he also raises important questions about the representation of identities and about the meaning of culture and community for anthropologists and other social scientists working in self-consciously multi-cultural situations.

Southall is apparently the center for much of South Asian life in Britain (p.38). But this observation hides as much as it informs, as Baumann demonstrates throughout the book. The population is in fact quite diverse, although how diverse depends a great deal on how one counts. On one hand, people of Indian, Pakistani and other Asian origins make up sixty percent of the population, while white people (English and Irish origin) make up thirty percent, and Afro-Caribbeans another five (p.48). On the other hand, the Asian category breaks down by religion, caste and, of course, nationality. Sikhs are the dominant group in Southall, but there are significant numbers of Hindus and Muslims there as well. While the central parts of Southall are predominantly Asian, the outer areas are significantly more white. There is a variety of other ways to slice the area up in terms of identities and, as Baumann aptly demonstrates, the closer one examines Southall, the harder it becomes to define it in terms of a particular ethnic group.

It is the culture of this complexity that the book explores. Asserting identities (and differences) among groups is an important feature of Southall (and British) life these days. In fact, the self-conscious making of "culture" and "community" is common in many of the places anthropologists work and, as Baumann observes, this presents a problem. While our work, at its best, highlights the making and use of culture as a resource and a process, the people we study tend to see culture as a thing that one has or belongs to. A wide variety of people and institutions (ethnic activists, but also governments) frequently deploy a kind of reified idea of culture as a measure of who belongs and as a justification for a wide variety of public policies and behaviors. Similarly, the association of culture with the notion of "community" (as in "the Sikh community") tends to assert a uniformity of views and actions that can hide a great deal about people's lives. Like many other anthropologists in recent years, Baumann warns against taking this discourse at face value. At its best, it represents a kind of circular reasoning. Thus, one may choose to study Sikhs in London and simply attribute their thinking and behavior to their "Sikhness." At its worst, this perspective lapses into the kind of culturalism deployed in order to justify exclusion and racism.

Thus, rather than study one particular group's (reified) culture, Baumann examines the interplay of various discourses about culture and community in Southall. These discourses are framed by a dominant discourse that divides Southall itself into five essentialized cultural communities: Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, Afro-Caribbean and white. This discourse is reinforced by widely shared experiences of life in Southall. For instance, most residents identify the area as "grotty" and see moving out as a sign of upward mobility. In addition, many of the administrative structures that have sprung up to meet the needs of Southall's residents are structured to reflect the dominant discourse's version of the area's ethnic diversity. These structures respond to pressure from ethnic and religious leaders in Southall by providing targeted resources and services. At the same time, the existence of such struc-

tures helps bring the organized groups into existence and sustains their leaders.

Interestingly, the dominant discourse does not create only one kind of ethnic difference. Baumann examines how each of the five main communities is fashioned into a distinct and coherent culture. The Sikh community is understood in terms inherited partially from the British colonial history in the Punjab, the history of Sikh immigration from South Asia and East Africa and by British law, as determined through legal battles about the wearing of turbans in schools. The dominant discourse about Hindus in Southall focuses on a stereotype of Hinduism as an ancient sublime religion that promotes wisdom and tolerance (p.80), a stereotype that Hanif Kureishi explored to hilarious effect in "The Buddha of Suburbia" (1990, Penguin). Muslims find themselves marginalized by the history of Muslim relations with other, local, groups, but also by orientalist stereotypes and by events such as the conflict surrounding Salman Rushdie. The dominant discourse unites Afro-Caribbean people by focusing on perceptions of racial distinctiveness, common political experiences and through musical culture. In each of these cases, the dominant discourse works to render culture and community equivalent, so that each community can be expected to act in a way that simply reflects its culture.

Baumann's description of the dominant discourse's treatment of the local white population is considerably murkier. People of Irish origin are seen as having a culture without a community, while English Southallians have trouble identifying exactly what their culture would be. While this uncertainty may be attributed to membership in the unmarked, dominant culture itself, what is striking is that even white Southallians feel a need to try to define a cultural community. It is this concern that seems to characterize Southall culture. Baumann argues that this discourse is effective because it is not simply imposed from the outside of each group, but is in fact also shaped and promoted by members of the groups themselves. Interestingly, he shows that thinking in terms of reified cultural communities begins with children in Southall. By age thirteen, he writes, "one could almost say that having a culture has become second 'nature' to them" (p.106).

Yet the interplay of these cultural communities is not the only identity game in town. Other forms of identity, some within the five main communities, some cutting across them, are also available to residents. The dominant Sikh community, for instance, is split by caste, history and religious belief. Hindu identity, on the other hand, proves to be expansive and, following a logic of encompassment, is defined in ways that incorporate many of the other communities present in Southall. The Muslim community finds itself divided by national origin, language and varied religious practices. A variety of ethnic identity strategies, ranging from Pan-Africanism to identification with particular island cultures, characterize the Afro-Caribbean community. Finally, white Southallians have developed strategies that include claiming minority status, identification as a particular ethnic community or identification with some of the other local groups. White minority status is particularly attractive to Southall whites in circumstances where they feel they have been excluded from public policies favoring other communities (p. 138). Identification with other communities, on the other hand, seems useful in making sense of daily experiences. Thus, a young white Southallian might identify his culture as "English/Black" because most of his friends are not white (p. 141).

Further alternative discourses cut across the dominant community identities. Young Southallians have developed a critical approach to an idea of "Asian" culture, refashioning ideas about marriage, caste and class in ways that are distinct from their parents. In fact, as Baumann points out, the very notion of one Asian culture seems to be a self-conscious creation of young Southallians (p.154), one often expressed to contrast with the (supposed) unity of Afro-Caribbeans and through the assertion of musical forms such as the Bhangra beat (which Baumann notes was originally known as the Southall Beat, p. 156). Socialist and feminist networks and organizations also exist in Southall, providing bases for dissent from dominant ideas about culture and for the assertion of coherent alternatives. This form of dissent is especially evident in debates around the use of the term "black" to assert unity among all minority populations in Britain, a debate that seems to have been particularly heated in Southall during Baumann's research.

All of this makes for a very messy portrait of the culture of Southall. Baumann's analysis of all the cross-cutting varieties of identity discourses available to the residents of Southall certainly renders suspect any attempt to characterize cultural groups in Britain as coherent communities. Yet, as Baumann argues, this portrait does not undermine the utility of the culture concept for anthropologists. Instead, it points to the need to conceive of the interplay between dominant and local (or "demotic," as Baumann terms them) discourses of identity as a patterned form of culture itself. The dominant discourse provides a framework within and against which many of the other identities are asserted (p. 195). This is

a persuasive argument, but it would have been more persuasive if Baumann had provided a more in-depth analysis of the dominant discourse itself. Along with ideas about the linkage of culture and community for the various groups in Southall, it seems likely that the dominant discourse provides a sense of what it means to be British. The terms of debate - the manner in which people form identities - are central to Baumann's argument. But the dominant discourse is not shaped in abstract terms about identity. It is formed specifically to determine who is British and who is not. Analysis of national debates around immigration, ethnicity and national identity would have helped contextualize Southall's debates more effectively.

From a methodological point of view, Baumann's approach raises some interesting problems. Although the focus on a neighborhood rather than on a group is a nice way of avoiding the reification of the dominant discourse, in many ways Baumann's approach represents a return to traditional community studies of the variety practiced by anthropologists in rural villages. He draws a picture of this particular village, Southall, as if it were very isolated, capable of defining its own identities almost free from outside influence. While the Southall framework allows him to make his theoretical point rather elegantly, it also limits the ethnographic picture. Are the people of Southall exposed to the national media in Britain, or do they only read the local press (assuming such exists)? Clearly Southall's experiments in culture have had an impact beyond its borders (the rise of Bhangra music, for instance, which is now popular among some of my students here in New Orleans). But do cultural materials also flow into Southall, even from sources outside of the cultural communities already present? Baumann does discuss a few incidents, such as the Rushdie affair, as interpreted by his informants in Southall. But, one wonders, is Southall sufficiently distinct so that local processes are truly local or does Baumann's data reflect broader debates that might seem familiar to people elsewhere in Britain?

Finally, this book focuses almost exclusively on what people say (discourses, of course, are in the title) about their identities, but it leaves relatively unexplored some of the basic questions of social structure that might frame or even determine their understanding of things. We are exposed to some of the ideas people, especially, teens, have about traditional marriage practices, but who do people marry and when they do, do they remain in Southall? We discover that Heathrow is a major employer of Southallians, but what do they do there? What does this employment mean for their status, lifestyle, income, etc.? While Baumann explores the implications of prayer in schools, he does not examine at all the impact of attending British state schools. This seems like it would be a primary site for the creation of identities and certainly worthy of more thought. Finally, while some of the important structural changes made by Margaret Thatcher's governments are noted, the ideas of neoliberalism appear not at all.

Baumann's ethnography leaves many questions unanswered and raises others. Yet given his broader theoretical argument, perhaps that is as it should be. This is not, after all, a traditional ethnography. Instead of providing the reader with an account of the customs of the natives of Southall, which could only be a problematic construct anyhow, Baumann defines the central terms and concepts with which Southallians make their culture. In addition, his analysis shows some of the practices that put those terms and concepts into use. In this way, as Baumann notes, he can show how "Southallians produce culture as a process of meaning-making, rather than 'have' a culture as an ethnic heirloom" (p. 109). There have been many other ethnographies in the last few years that take a similarly critical stance toward the representation of culture, too many, in fact, to begin citing them here. Baumann's contribution is nevertheless important for at least two reasons. First, it is extremely readable, something that is of course rather rare in anthropology, especially for works with an explicitly theoretical focus. Second, precisely because of its readability, this book provides one of the better starting points for discussions of ethnicity in contemporary Europe. I strongly recommend it both for course adoption (I am currently using it in a course on ethnicity) and for anyone interested in current theories of ethnicity.

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Citation: David Beriss. Review of Baumann, Gerd, *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London.* H-SAE, H-Net Reviews. December, 1999.

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