Negotiating Boundaries in the City: Migration, Ethnicity, and Gender in Britain

Joanna Herbert; Studies in migration and diaspora, Interdisciplinary Research Series in Ethnic Gender and Class Relations; Aldershot; Ashgate; 2008; Hardback 230 pages; £55.00; ISBN 9780754646778

Negotiating Boundaries is a welcome addition to the ever decreasing number of monographs published in the field of ethnic and community studies. Coming at a point where the global has a profound impact on local production, this book highlights the advantages of a locally focused study in recording and understanding the peculiarities of the contemporary everyday life experience. The book presents a single case study of Leicester, held up since 2001 as a city which has overcome racial tensions to become a beacon for the subsequent community cohesion agenda. The study examines how the city achieved these remarkable accolades, looking at transitions through the lens of life history narratives of white and ‘non-white’ residents. It is fitting that, early in the book, Herbert presents a discussion of how whiteness has been constructed in the city in relations between ‘white’ and migrant residents. However, the overall perspective is informed by South Asian settlement and includes very little reference to the precedent black population of the city. Numerically, this makes sense: by 1991, South Asians made up 25 percent of the city’s population, whilst the black Caribbean and African populations together barely constituted two percent. Herbert essentially engages with the question raised by the Times headline of December 2000, which predicted ‘Leicester to be the first city with an ethnic majority’. This headline, when read carefully, may cause students of ethnic relations to chuckle, but reveals implicit racialised (and racist) narratives in the presentation and understanding of demographic trends.

The book sets out to examine the constructions of ethnicity around the South Asian migration to Leicester in relation to various everyday contexts, namely, the household, neighbourhood, educational institutions and workplaces. In documenting the interactions of neighbourhood in this way, Herbert steps away from much of the literature in this field, which is dominated by analyses of community organisations and activism, social networks and the active construction of ethnicity by organised groups in relation to real social, economic and sectarian divisions, and anti-racist movements. Privileging individual narratives, as she does, this case study offers a different angle from which to look at ethnic relations and divisions, selecting a range of South Asian and older white individuals through whose frames we can see the changing landscape of the city. For the scholar of ethnic relations, however, it is in the chapter on neighbourhood that Herbert’s study really comes into its own, drawing together accounts of experiencing the communal gaze. The selection of respondents is a more curious aspect of the study. Herbert chooses a ‘white’ group aged 60-80 only, in order to explore the development of early racial narratives in the city, whilst paying only slight attention to the ways in which these are received by younger generations of white residents. Acknowledgement of these latter processes, at least, would have been welcome to round out the study.

Negotiating Boundaries is, thus, a neat analysis of the city’s ethnic relations; however, by demonstrating its similarity to other cities who have yet to achieve such racial harmony, the author repeats at length themes raised in other local studies. This is particularly the case in the chapter examining the role of the household in creating and maintaining identity and relationships along ethnic lines. The reader should indeed be convinced that there are few differences which mark Leicester out in terms of migration patterns or post-migration everyday life, and it serves as a useful introduction to such studies for the undergraduate student. This reader, in any case, has already recommended several chapters to a class of students as just such an introduction. A policy audience, too, would find its forensic examination of the constructions of ethnicity most informative. For the expert reader,
however, the similarity to other local studies of this kind allows for thorough, but not excited, comparisons. Nonetheless, *Negotiating Boundaries* should be commended for the clarity with which it is written, not least because it demonstrates to students and other readers the skill and vocation of the academic writer.

That skill is demonstrated particularly in the way that Herbert has revised her doctoral work for publication. Academics publishing in this field post-2001 have frequently engaged with the popular policy and academic debates on social capital and Herbert does so in this study with a light touch. This approach is to her credit, since it creates a study with more longstanding appeal, truer to the data than to the policy agenda. The impact of the debate is certainly visible in the discussions of neighbourhood and community, but its visibility helps to place the study in the proper temporal context, rather than detracting from the long-term usefulness of Herbert’s accounts. It is the wider resonance of the narratives that truly holds up Herbert’s study, and rescues it from being trapped in its own timeliness.

The aim of the book, she points out, is to demonstrate the resonance of her findings with wider considerations of community cohesion, beyond the boundaries of the city of Leicester. Whilst, at times, this gives the impression of a struggle to match other studies (such as in Bradford, Manchester, Oxford and so on), the effect is that the overall findings cannot be dismissed in terms of local peculiarities. In this aim, therefore, Herbert achieves success. It is in terms of success, however, that Herbert’s most acute point is made, since, ultimately, Herbert questions Leicester’s own ‘success’. The accolades which the city received, she points out, should more properly raise questions about the costs of community cohesion to post-migration populations, both in social and economic terms, and not be received uncritically as an example of good practice.