

**Globalisation from below: Birmingham –
postcolonial workshop of the world?**

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Summary

Birmingham is re-inventing itself through a strategy of prestige city centre regeneration. The paper puts forward an alternative strategy based on 'globalisation from below'. A range of economic networks and commodities associated with the transnational residential communities of the city are described. We argue for Britain's second city as a working example of multicultural and postcolonial economic development.

Keywords: Globalisation, economic development, postcolonial, Birmingham

Globalisation from below: Birmingham – postcolonial workshop of the world?

From music to dress, from the novel to film, London [Birmingham/any UK city] is being transformed, and ethnicity is central to much of what is happening (Jacques 1997)

...Birmingham - the second largest city in the country - whose future will depend on the immigrants who have made it their home (*The Economist* 8 August 1998)

Introduction

The city of Birmingham is constructing its economic place in the world once again. At the centre of the Fordist heartland region of the West Midlands, deindustrialisation dealt the city and region a devastating blow from the 1970s onwards (Spencer *et al.* 1986). Between 1971 and 1987, Birmingham lost 191,000 jobs, or 29% of all employment, and manufacturing employment virtually halved with the loss of 150,000 jobs.¹ In both the economic statistics and geographical imagination of the country, this period saw the region and the city move from the affluent South to the declining North.

The city's response has been massive investment in service industries, and especially business tourism, mainly delivered through the strategy of prestige city centre

¹ The most recent high profile negotiations over the future of the Longbridge car plant in Birmingham have evoked in many a feeling of watching the final death throes of a Fordist West Midlands.

regeneration. One of the first cities in the UK to ‘swallow the entrepreneurial pill’ (Ward forthcoming), between 1986 and 1992 Birmingham City Council spent an estimated £276 million on a number of ‘flagship’ projects designed to reinvigorate the city’s economy. Examples include the International Convention Centre (ICC) and Symphony Hall, Brindley Place (a major leisure development of clubs, pubs, restaurants, shops, offices and luxury housing in the old canal basin), the National Indoor Arena (NIA), and the National Exhibition Centre (NEC). Redevelopment continues apace today including such schemes as Mailbox, Millennium Point, the Bull Ring and Arena Central involving an estimated committed expenditure in excess of £1billion. In short, Birmingham has been reinventing itself, and its place in the contemporary global economy, assisted by new shopping centres, hotel and leisure complexes, the hosting of international conventions (such as the recent G8 Summit) and marketing campaigns promoting the city as the ‘Meeting Place of Europe’.

Not surprisingly, such a re-invention has been subject to (an increasingly familiar) critique. It is argued that prestige-based regeneration arrives inscribed with a neo-liberal economic agenda and, as a consequence, is associated with the production of social and economic exclusion and polarisation (Christopherson 1994; Fainstein 1994, Sassen 1994; Ward forthcoming; Zukin 1992). Top-down, inward investment schemes are accused of playing to ‘global city’ imaginaries that produce cities with even greater levels of economic and social polarisation. In the case of Birmingham, it is argued that prestige development has failed to provide enough well-paid jobs, that city finances have been diverted from other sectors (such as education and housing) to pay for these projects, and

there have been the inevitable questions about the exclusivity of, and access to, the spaces created (Loftman and Nevin 1996a; 1996b). Moreover, the homogenisation tendencies of prestige regeneration, 'McGeneration' as Quilley (1999) has labelled it, have been commented upon as part of an emergent critique concerning the formulaic nature of much redevelopment and its failure to reflect the full diversity and difference to be found amongst the residential population of the city (Henry forthcoming; Henry and Passmore 1999; see also Bloomfield forthcoming; Bhattacharyya, 1998, 1999; Kofman 1998).

Drawing from these critiques, and from debates on multiculturalism and postcolonialism, this paper starts to re-vision Birmingham's contemporary economic place in the world; it provides one alternative based on the distinctiveness of an economy rooted in multiculturalism and postcolonialism. Through a focus on 'ethnic diversity', and the subsequent distinctiveness of the city's economy, this paper re-visions Birmingham as a 'global' city by taking a rather different angle. It highlights a bottom-up notion of globalisation that draws on the city's residents and their histories. Moreover, it proposes a bottom-up notion of economic globalisation and argues that this is already producing signs of competitive success both for the city and its residents, including some of those groups excluded from both historical and contemporary constructions of Birmingham as a city. Our intention in this paper is, therefore, to signal a rather different understanding of 'global' as it relates to both economic advantage and ethnic diversity within cities in general, and within Birmingham in particular.

In what follows, we explore both the diversity and significance of minority ethnic economic activity within Birmingham, and the potential this holds for future economic development in the city. We conclude with some suggestions for further research on

Britain's second city as a working example of multicultural and postcolonial economic development. In so doing, we aim to encourage a more relational way of thinking about cities like Birmingham, a strategy which also has the potential for advancing social wellbeing by influencing socio-economic policy and practice. We use the example of Birmingham, therefore, to relate to broader debates about alternative paths of 'global', social and cultural investment for UK (and other) cities. In the realm of city (and national politics) the argument that postcolonialism and multiculturalism can mean wealth creation is, we believe, of the utmost significance.

Birmingham as a multicultural city

Both as a destination for overseas investment and through its historical (colonial) links as the 'workshop of the world' (Bryson *et al.* 1996), Birmingham can claim to be a 'multicultural city'. The 1991 census revealed that 21.5% of Birmingham's population categorised themselves as other than 'white' (Slater 1996). The largest recognised groups such as Black Caribbean and the Pakistani populations (4.7% and 6.9% of total population respectively) are complemented by other minority ethnic communities including Chinese, Irish, Italian, Cypriot, Polish, Hungarian and Yemeni (Chinn 1994; Slater 1996). Birmingham's ethnic and racial diversity is not especially new. What is new, as the opening quotes suggest, is how this diversity can be interpreted. For much of the recent past, Birmingham's multicultural credentials have been a source of infamy and not a claim to fame. Yet what may once have been viewed as a weakness may now be recognised as a strength; ethnic diversity may be a route to economic development (Henry 1998; Henry and Passmore 1999). In 1998, for example, the residents of

Birmingham received a gift of a Pagoda from the Chinese businessman Wing Yip. The Pagoda, shipped from China, serves as a gateway to Birmingham City Council's Chinese Quarter. The idea of Birmingham's Chinese Quarter is clearly fused with the traditional route of early Hong Kong Chinese migrants into the catering industry during the 1950s and 1960s. Yet as this transnational community expands its economic horizons into areas such as property development, so Birmingham is experiencing new forms of investment and new forms of global linkage. Along with Wing Yip's Supermarket and branches of the Bank of China and the Bank of East Asia, the Pagoda advertises the presence and importance of the Chinese community in Birmingham (Dean 1997).

Birmingham has not been alone in its experience of such investment; one of the most documented examples is Vancouver (Anderson 1988; 1990; 1991; Li 1994; Mitchell 1997; Olds 1996). The growing presence of Chinese-based investment in a number of world sites has led to a new label, 'overseas Chinese', being used to describe an ethnic community-based economic network with an increasingly visible position within global labour, business and commodity markets (Seagrave 1995; Yeung and Olds 2000). Moreover, it is the ethnic basis of this economic force that is being stressed. Concepts like the 'bamboo network', 'guanxi' and 'cultural capitalism' highlight how the economic activities of this group are socially embedded in, and predicated upon, ethnic ties (Redding 1990; Thrift and Olds 1996; Weidenbaum and Hughes 1996, Yeung 1998; Yeung and Olds, 2000). In essence, ethnicity has been turned to economic advantage (successful ways of doing business) in a global economy which itself implies a growing diversity of economic relationships around an interconnected world (Mitchell 1993). The example of the overseas Chinese illustrates two things. First, that forms of capital

investment, like labour, are (multi)cultural. Second, that a key element of the investment strategies of certain forms of (multicultural) capital is the 'diaspora'; in other words, investment through global ethnic community-based networks. Birmingham, as a multicultural city, is one such meeting place of the global diaspora(s). Thus Birmingham is already distinctive. This distinctiveness is not based on prestige projects or even its role as 'The Meeting Place of Europe'; it is based on the city's diasporic and transnational roots extending across Europe into Asia and the Pacific Rim. In other words, Birmingham is already a global city by dint of its diversity.

Multicultural city, multicultural economy?

If we begin to think of Birmingham as a locus of ethnic community-based economic networks, then a rather different picture of economic life in the city can be drawn. Birmingham's economic position can be viewed as constructed through, and interwoven with, *numerous* ethnic networks, some more visible than others. In addition to the overseas Chinese there are other economic networks in the city that can be identified through their association with minority ethnicity. The areas of Sparkbrook and Sparkhill, for example, include Pakistani banks operating within the usury laws of Islam. Recently, a new set of mortgages were launched by the Islamic Investment Banking Unit (United Bank of Kuwait) aimed at the UK's 1.5 million practising Muslims (Stuart 1999). Most recently, the bank has introduced *Manzil Ijara*, a remortgaging product that does not require life insurance.

The formation of Britain's first Irish Business Association in Birmingham is another example of how some of Birmingham's economic networks are being identified

primarily by their ethnicity (Griffin 1998). Although 'white' business groups do not usually identify themselves in racialised terms, the Irish business community in Birmingham is unique in that it is constructing an ethnic identity based on 'minority white' experiences. It is explicit about Irishness and economic advantage, and includes any business of Irish origin or with trading or cultural links with Ireland.

Another entry point into Birmingham's ethnicity-based economic networks is through looking at particular *commodities* that have become associated with (minority) ethnicity. For example, one commodity attracting attention at the moment is British Bhangra music, a product based on the fusion of Asian (specifically Punjabi), western and broader styles of music (such as ragga, reggae, soul, jazzfunk, rock, hip-hop, pop). This is now so popular within Birmingham that the city is recognised as the centre for Bhangra music in Britain (Kumar 1998; 2000). Although this music genre is enjoyed by numerous British South Asians in other cities (especially London), Birmingham is by far the cultural capital for Bhangra music. This can be seen in terms of the large number of bands in the city, several recording and distribution companies (such as Oriental Star Agency on Moseley Road, Nachural records at Ladypool Road, Roma Music Bank in Handsworth), the steady production of new albums, and the growing number of live DJs. Kumar (1988, 20-21) has argued that such a collection of artists, musical talent and expertise, as well as the increasing live performance of British Bhangra at gigs and private celebratory parties, helps to constitute a unique form of cultural production and music industry. Birmingham-based Apache Indian was the first South Asian British musician to break into the mainstream British charts in 1993, and he is now an

international star. His music epitomises the hybrid nature of the fusion musical scene in Birmingham. As Back and Nayak (1993, 141-3) have argued:

Apache's music is a crossroads, a meeting place where the languages and rhythms of the Caribbean, North America and India intermingle in the context of Europe. Apache himself was raised in the multi-ethnic area of Handsworth, Birmingham, born of Hindu Punjabi parents. He performs and expresses himself through snatches of Jamaican patois, Punjabi and a culturally diverse vernacular English. This language is part of a wider urban experience and symbolizes the dynamic culture of Birmingham.

Evidence suggests that this cultural industry is expanding more widely into various forms of media. One example is Asia 1 TV studios, which opened recently in Soho Road in Birmingham. This is a digital television channel aimed at the Punjabi-speaking communities of Europe, and is run by Amrik Singh Sahota who has lived for the past 40 years in Birmingham. The potential for this venture, which is in partnership with ANI/Reuters in Delhi and Star (India), B-Sky-B's sister company, is considerable (*Birmingham Voice* 1999a).

Other features of Birmingham's multicultural and transnational economic activity extend across a range of economic activities and products, some more readily associated with the city than others. For example, the Sparkhill area is also the centre for the South Asian jewellery quarter, the retailing of clothing, sarees and other textiles. Perhaps less well-known is the fact that the city has a Greek-Cypriot fish-frying network, which

constitutes 25% of the city's 300 fish and chip shops (Stewart 1989), as well as more than fifty halal butchers. Birmingham's National Halal Centre is growing through demand from non-Muslims and is exporting goods such as halal baby food throughout Europe. More widely celebrated is the success of the 'Birmingham balti'. Birmingham and the West Midlands region is now world famous for its Kashmiri balti which, like Bhangra music, is a hybrid product of British Asian cultures. There are endless arguments as to whether or not this product is 'authentic' to the West Midlands, Birmingham or the Punjab. What *is* significant is the fact that it is identified with a particular set of migrants to, and residents of, Birmingham and its region. These migrants have redefined this traditional dish into something unique which combines their ethnic roots with living in a Western city called Birmingham.

Perhaps a more subtle expression of these transnational links is the growth of Wing Yip's Chinese supermarkets around the country, which draw on import/export linkages with China and its surrounding regions (Keating 2000). In addition, there are many other Birmingham-based examples of ethnic food industries that have proliferated during the 1990s. These include East End Foods of Smethwick, which was set up in 1969 and is now one of the largest importers/exporters of Indian foods in the UK (Ind 1998). Another example is Wine and Dine, which supplies 40% of the UK retail chilled salad dressings market. This was originally a Greek restaurant that started making dishes and dips in response to customer demand. It now concentrates on manufacturing and employs a workforce of nearly 100 people. Its turnover increased from £2.9 million in 1996 to £6 million in 1999 (*Birmingham Voice* 1999b). Other emerging food producers in Birmingham include Spice Time (producers of fresh and frozen ready meals), Eastern

Foods (nan and pitta bread makers), King Spice, Cleone Foods (manufacturers of Caribbean savoury patties), Chocolate Temptations, BABA enterprises (the UK's largest manufacturer of fresh poppadums), Bakes (a specialist in Caribbean sweet breads and snacks), Raja Frozen Foods, Euro Ice Cream (creators of the world's largest balti ice cream range) and Giro Foods (importers of exotic spices and ingredients) (*Birmingham Voice* 1999c). As Paul Spooner, Director of Economic Development in Birmingham, argues, 'Birmingham is fast becoming known as a world-class centre of excellence for ethnic food production' (*Birmingham Voice* 2000, 3).

Ethnicity and competitive advantage: a postcolonial economic future for Birmingham?

Birmingham's roots are born from its centrality within a (European) colonial past. The question this raises is should its economic future then not be drawn from its postcolonialism and multiculturalism (Henry 1998; Jacobs 1996; Fincher and Jacobs 1998; Sandercock 1998)? The example of the overseas Chinese is one case in point. If analyses of other contexts are any indication (Anderson, 1991; Thrift and Olds 1996; Yeung 1998), the success of Birmingham's Chinese community is based upon an element of competitive advantage that is derived from ethnicity and transnational trading links. But what of the other diverse and multiple transnational communities of Birmingham? Does the city hide within its borders a diversity of ethnic-based transnational economic networks? Do these imply a multitude of dense and far-flung sets of trade links, which imply also a very different set of relationships to the national economy? Is Birmingham

home to a diversity of cultural capitalisms? The varied anecdotal evidence presented above suggests to us that the answer to these questions may, increasingly, be 'yes'.

Some of these business networks in Birmingham have been the subject of study, often under the more traditional rubric of 'ethnic entrepreneurship'. The theoretical models of 'replacement labour', 'ethnic niche/enclave' and 'middleman minority' amongst others have highlighted the 'marginality' and 'sub-optimal' operation of many businesses formed through ethnic entrepreneurship (Aldrich *et al.* 1984; Ward and Jenkins 1984; Ward 1985; Wilson and Portes 1980). In addition, a more recent version of this has been work around the 'informal sector', often couched in the terms of 'the third world comes to the first' (Portes *et al.* 1989; Waldinger and Lapp 1993; Sassen 1994)². We wish to argue that the evidence from Birmingham presents a rather different picture. It reveals economic activities drawing on diasporic networks, both local and global, to create unique and highly competitive products and services. In this sense we want to move away from notions of ethnic entrepreneurialism and emphasise that these networks are increasingly *business as usual* in Birmingham. This is not 'third world comes to first' through ethnic entrepreneurial sweatshops; rather these economic activities should be framed within the literatures of economic geography concerned with 'new industrial spaces' and 'networks', and the production of new hybrid products, with very different geographies.

Although these are early days, recent figures, which use the limited, rigid framework of Census ethnic descriptions, suggest that up to 33% of Birmingham's business activity is within minority ethnic owned enterprises (*The Economist* 1998). The possibilities for future development of this business activity are myriad. One recent

example is the launch, by Eastern Foods, of a range of halal Chinese meals for British Muslims who otherwise cannot eat in Chinese restaurants (*Birmingham Voice* 2000). Another example might be the establishment since 1993 of the Birmingham/Mirpur Friendship Association as part of the twinning process between Birmingham and the Mirpur district of Kashmir (around 90,000 people in Birmingham originate from Mirpur) (*Birmingham Voice* 1998). This Association has moved as far as the respective Chambers of Commerce who are now in active collaboration. Moreover, after highly successful local consultation, the recognition of this particular migratory path has seen ‘fusion housing’ – highly flexible panel and frame concrete structures - proposed by the architectural practice Shillam and Smith for development in Birmingham’s predominantly Kashmiri-populated districts of Saltley and Small Heath (Glancey 1999).

Conclusions

In more recent work on ethnic entrepreneurship, ethnicity is either explicitly or implicitly defined as ‘a possible outcome of the patterns by which intra- and inter-group interactions are structured’ (Waldinger *et al.* 1990: 32). The emphasis is often on sources of competitive advantage (networks, friendship, family, shared value systems, etc.), which are derived from spatial concentration (for a recent example see Greene 1997). As Albrow argues, however, the competitive advantage of ethnic businesses may in fact be derived from their ability to draw upon networks which ‘extend as far as their resources and will to use the communication at their disposal’ (Albrow 1997: 51). In this sense, competitive advantage can be as much a product of international and global links as of agglomeration. In the case of transnational communities, the possible resources at their

² For an excellent review of this whole literature see Ram and Jones (1998)

disposal are both global and local (as is their ethnic definition). The question remains, however, is it possible to create competitive advantage that is less exclusionary and that translates into material gain for working class and minority ethnic communities? This is of critical importance to a multicultural and postcolonial city such as Birmingham, which is still struggling against the social and economic effects of declining manufacturing (the recent problems with car manufacturing at Longbridge are but one, well-publicised, example).³

Birmingham is already global as a consequence of its multicultural nature, but this is a form of global that is *distinctive to, and rooted within*, Birmingham. Furthermore, these roots may well be producing distinctive competitive advantage for the city (as they continue to go global) in a way that combats the current social and economic polarisation that has accompanied the ‘globalisation from above’ scenarios of the ‘flagship’ projects. What is different about the networks discussed in this paper is that they are using diasporic links to create mainstream but unique products in terms of innovation, production and consumption. In both academic and policy-related terms, there is a need for further research to chart various commodities and their circuitry⁴. This research should explore the ways in which such transnational commodity spaces can be inhabited in multiple ways, as well as the ways in which the different dimensions of the commodity

³ Birmingham’s multiculturalism and its position within postcolonial and transnational economic networks is rapidly being recognised as crucial to continued economic development within the city. The City Council has been at the centre of the construction of the Chinese Quarter in the Hurst Street area of the city and the proposed Balti Quarter in Sparkbrook/Sparkhill. Similarly, a number of ethnic community forums have been developed inclusive of Economic Development Officers. In early 2000, the city appointed its first development manager for African Caribbean businesses. Such initiatives reflect the first explicit statement on multicultural economic development in the City Council’s Economic Strategy Vision Document in 1998. Nevertheless, concerns exist over the potential of such policy initiatives to create particular, and fixed, versions of ethnicity and multiculturalism.

⁴ An early, if limited, example based on an ‘ethnic niche’ market is that by Hardill and Raghuram (1998) but see, also, Crang *et al.* (2000).

(and especially its relations of value, see Smith *et al.* 1999) engender different spatialities. Theoretically, therefore, exploring such networks can point to a rather novel, more relational, way of thinking about Birmingham as a city and its insertion into the 'national/global' economy (Allen *et al.* 1998; Sandercock 1998).⁵

Our argument has been that the majority of forms of (public and private) investment in 'prestige regeneration', in Birmingham and in cities elsewhere, are culturally inscribed with a neo-liberal economic agenda, almost inevitably producing social exclusion and polarisation. To countervail these tendencies, cities such as Birmingham need to embrace more fully the notion of multicultural economic development. This is about recognising the cultural diversity of economic activity in policy terms and encouraging it in the expectation that such diversity brings with it a broadening of the economic base (Henry forthcoming). To this end, Birmingham has a rich and unique cultural base upon which to draw. The precise contribution of these networks to the city's economic base is still a matter of conjecture, but we suggest that further research into examples of 'globalisation from below' within the city might reveal how to, '...mobilise diversity as a source of both social cohesion and urban economic competitiveness' (Amin 1997, 134). Indeed, our explicit aim in future research is to 're-vision' Birmingham as a working example of multicultural economic development - 'the postcolonial workshop of the world'.

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⁵ We believe also that thinking about Birmingham as a postcolonial economy might provide an example for Roger Lee's (2000) highly suggestive work on 'rethinking the economic' and the social construction of economic geographies. As he has argued '...economies are revealed as the continuously re-defined and re-generated outcomes of the geographies through which they take place...The point about economies, then, is

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that they are economic geographies: they are the hard-won product of real material and social processes.' (op.cit., p.142).

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