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THE SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW
IMAGE-MAKER IN RESIDENCE

A PHOTOGRAPHIC FOOD TOUR OF LEEDS

VERDINE ETORIA

Meanwood Village

About one mile north of my house in Leeds is Meanwood Village. A neat, bustling suburb with an easy commute to the city centre and an expanding host of amenities. Described as 'up and coming' in the language of estate agents, Meanwood is gentrifying quickly as young professionals and new families are being priced out of neighbouring Headingley and Chapel Allerton. There are also pockets of poverty within the area. Across the whole ward the unemployment rate is 9.9%, nearly 2% higher than the total for Leeds, and 3% higher than the England total; demographically and socio-economically it is relatively diverse.

What is notable about Meanwood is the scope of the food and drink provision for such a small commercial area. I chose to picture a row of units which houses two established 'bacon butty' cafés, an Instagram friendly coffee shop/gallery/lifestyle store Tandem, a popular Chinese takeaway, and what is regarded as one of the best Sushi restaurants in the entire country HanaMatsuri. Opposite this, slightly out of sight, is the locally adored, family run Italian Zucco. As well as popular local pubs like Alfred and Meanwood Brewery; there is a large Waitrose, an Aldi and another parade of small, local restaurants and cafés.

One of the selling points of the area is the archetypal idyll of urban-adjacent diversity perfectly illustrated in this image. It appears like nearly every need is catered to as the provisions for most tastes and budgets nestle together quite happily. As a sociologist of consumption who is interested in inequality, my suspicion is there are more intricate stories underneath all of this. Furthermore, as an ethnographer, it's difficult to put aside my 'local pride' and experience these scenes with a critical eye.

Burmantofts

Geographical and spatial inequality in the UK is some of the harshest of any wealthy country. In more densely populated urban centres, wildly contrasting experiences overlap and rub up against each other. Visually, this is often portrayed and read as metropolitan vibrancy—that is, as long as it aligns with whatever the dominant culture determines as acceptably diverse and vibrant. The Burmantofts area nudges up to the city centre and is gradually being encroached upon by new build flats and renovations to the defunct light industrial units. Alongside Seacroft, Gipton, Harehills and Lincoln Green, Inner East Leeds is in the top 10% most deprived neighbourhoods.

As we'll see throughout this series, this fact in itself contains a range of contrasting food experiences. Burmantofts, specifically, has seen a rapid demographic change. Nearly half the population are BME and 20% of the city's entire African community live in this relatively tiny area. There is a concerning 46% level of child poverty and the same rate again of households experience multiple deprivations (see democracy.leeds.gov.uk). Organisations like touchstonesupport.org.uk undertake vital interventions into the health and wellbeing of the area, much of which addresses food poverty.

Those brutal facts seem jarring on a day like the day this picture was taken. There are two international supermarkets doing bustling trade and people sit outside the coffee shops, pool clubs and internet cafés enjoying the last breaths of summer whilst local restaurants GZING and Laghetto serve some of the best Kurdish and African food in the city.

Laghetto

Around the corner, on the formerly industrial Mabgate, is Laghetto Restaurant. The whole of Mabgate is becoming a site of conflict between developers and local businesses, community organisations and artists who have for years occupied what was a forgotten, unwanted part of the city (see mapcharity.org). As the Covid crisis continues to cloud the restaurant industry in uncertainty, will places like Laghetto be able to survive without the economic force of the middle classes who are perhaps more inclined to divert resources to their own suburban enclaves?

North Street

Less than 5 minutes' walk away from Burmantofts is North Street, home to what are some of the best restaurants and bars in the city: The Brunswick, Wen's Restaurant, The Swine That Dines and The Reliance. The Reliance was my first head chef's job and a place I have returned to work a number of times over the years. Having spent so much time on this street as well as living within a stone's throw, it wasn't until later I apprehended the lava like spread of the city as it leaks into brownfield sites and pushes into some of the poorest areas of the city. North Street is bordered by Burmantofts and, to the other side, Little London, an area which exhibits similarly disturbing statistics (see above). After returning to study sociology, it is these types of contradictions that led me to interrogate not just my own industry, but also the structural context that gives form to what we sometimes innocently describe as culture. The city is committed to imagining itself as a brand that speaks the language of community, inclusivity and diversity. But what happens when these 'values' are turned over to the capricious market of commerce?

York Road Flyover

If you build it, they will come! Huge cranes and obscene skyward developments are now as permanent a feature of Leeds as they are London. The unfinished building in the middle is to be the highest block of student accommodation in the city, to its right is another student high rise, and the gold building in the foreground is the recently finished St. Albans luxury student accommodation. Leeds now has 4 universities with an estimated 70,000 students. This has a cyclical effect on the local economy by pushing leisure and night-time economies to the fore whilst simultaneously providing a good deal of cheap, casual labour to facilitate those industries. Throughout my ethnographic research into restaurants, I encountered many students. Some brazenly acknowledged they didn't really need the money (it was just a bit extra), and others who genuinely did need the money found themselves pitched against their colleagues for 'more' or 'better' shifts. I also discovered similar findings to those of Richard Ocejo's excellent 'Masters of Craft'—middle class young people colonising formerly working class jobs and sectors as their own white collar pathways erode or becoming less desirable. Crudely put, it is much easier to get a job in a restaurant if you already come from the 'dining classes.' On a night out in Leeds, reflect on how many times you are served by someone with a Leeds accent.

Templar Hotel

One place you definitely will hear a Leeds accent is in the Templar Hotel. A grade 2 listed building constructed in the early 19th century and decoratively fronted in Burmantofts Tile, named for the area where it was famously manufactured (see earlier post). In a delicious juxtaposition, the Templar sits alongside Thai A Roy Dee, another extremely popular Leeds restaurant. Always crammed, with a brisk and sometimes unpredictable canteen like service and atmosphere, Thai A Roy Dee is seemingly loved by everyone for its reliable, cheap and authentic food. Hipsters can't get enough of its refreshing 'unhipness', theatre goers appreciate the speed and families like the price and the variety. As we start to move into the city centre proper, there will be less of these juxtapositions that give a city real texture and character. Great passages of the CBD have been surrendered to identikit casual dining chains who, it turns out, were locked in an unsustainable race to the bottom. Many of these have already gone and many won't be far behind. When high profile heads like Jamie Oliver's ignominiously roll, there is a certain kind of acrid tasting schadenfreude. People forget that Oliver loses a relatively small amount of his fortune whilst his low waged and unprotected workforce is turned out onto the street. Not only does this create an oversupply of labour that keeps wages depressed, it undermines the chance for solidarity to form between workers in different branches of the sector. Think of it like this: Is working in Costa really that different from working in the hippest coffee shop in town? They both demand something of your subjective core, they probably both pay the same, and a zero hour contract is a zero hour contract. In my research I ask: Can a meaningful labour movement emerge in the restaurant sector when there seems to be such confusion about the meanings of 'a restaurant'?

George Street

Continue walking down Vicar Lane and you cross the Headrow. On the right is the now established Victoria Quarter, home to Harvey Nichols and other flagship luxury retailers. To the left is the newer Victoria Gate development containing a huge John Lewis and other premium retail. This runs right alongside Kirkgate Market. Opened in 1857 it is the largest covered market in Europe. The market is an architectural wonder both externally and internally (perhaps discounting the 1975 hall extension). Steeped in history and significance, Kirkgate market was the beating heart of the city for a century and a half—for many it still is. It would be hard to think of something you couldn't buy in Leeds market and over the years the space has tracked with the changing textures of diversity to incorporate traders from every cultural and ethnic group in the city. Whether or not this will continue is a prickly matter as the market finds itself at the centre of an entrenched battle over what the future of retail in Leeds should look like. The vision for the regeneration of the site is determined by the economic and aesthetic heft of the adjacent Victoria Gate, perfectly juxtaposed in this image. In the words of Gonzales and Waley (2012), the market is becoming a shop window for a particular type of 'gentrified authenticity.' Long-time traders are forced to migrate around the building or retreat forever to accommodate this vision. These shuttered units on the outside of the market used to house a fish and chip shop, a cobbler and a workwear (not that type of 'workwear') shop where I used to by my chef whites. It's now planned to house more premium retail and sit under a fancy hotel.

Butcher's Row

The interior facing rear of the façade used to house Butcher's Row. Now evacuated, this stretch was loud, raucous and tinged with a sweet sanguine odour; the traders used to stand blood splattered outside their units bellowing the offers of the day. It was cheap, fun and even a little bit exciting. But as Georg Simmel noted over a century ago, bourgeois sensibilities around food consumption have always tried to erase the carnality and corporeal messiness of eating.

Fresh Produce

Many of the fresh produce vendors still here have been moved to what used to be Fish Row. The market takes on a more familiar tone to me now. I still recognise many of the faces and some of the customers. My first chef job in Leeds was around the corner from here and we used to regularly come over here to buy our fish for specials. When I lived in town, the traders would recognise me and give me little discounts even after I stopped coming for work. This aisle has always been popular with children who marvel at otherworldly creatures like live lobster, eels and gaping mouthed whole grouper. Slightly out of sight, on the bottom right, is a fairly recent edition called 'The Owl', Leeds market's first licensed pub and eatery. Predictably pored over in a review by the Guardian, the food is very good. Although this didn't stop locals bristling at the voguish stance and high price point that many thought was a divisive affront to the pockets of the average market customer. Echoing a point I made earlier, these skirmishes are interpreted as aesthetic, or cultural, when they are really about the base economic substructure. Groups and individuals are sometimes accused of being resistant to change, anachronistic or unadventurous. This doesn't acknowledge the simple fact that it often costs money to embrace change. Moreover, if you haven't been consulted about the nature and direction of the transformation, if you don't see yourself reflected in the consequences, projects like this come to represent significant symbolic barriers and sources of chastisement.

Outdoor Market

The indoor market is such a contained theatre where many key concerns of my research play out in tight focus, it's really an entire sociological project in itself. Continuing the theme of motion and change, this image is the outdoor section at the rear of the market. Covered stalls and makeshift benches used to spill out on to ground space with all kinds of bric a brac. A much more chaotic scene than what goes on inside, you wouldn't go to the outdoor section for something you wanted, you'd go for something you weren't expecting to find— except for the outer perimeter flanks that have always been the territory of fresh fruit and veg day traders. As loud, if not louder, than Butcher's Row, this section has more of a street market feel and at the end of the day you will often get more produce than you can carry for a fiver. The twisted metal façade of the John Lewis car park looms menacingly. Out here, disgruntled traders say they are being forced from their pitches to make way for yet more planned car parking space. Aside from everything else, this is symbolic of Leeds' absurd approach to planning and infrastructure. Public transport is inadequate, expensive and loathed by residents, ingress and egress to the city centre at peak times is turgid and uncomfortable. Turning more prime land into car parking space is both environmentally tone deaf and seems more geared towards attracting wealthy shoppers than providing urban adjacent locals with affordable, reliable and environmentally friendly access to essential resources.

Hungry Harry's

Moving out of the city, looping back and heading east, the York Road is a monstrous vein pumping in and out of the city. A terrifying mish mash of confusing exits, guided bus lanes, monkey puzzle crossings and hastily jerry rigged cycle lanes (see above). Very close to the city centre, it is actually quite hard to navigate as a pedestrian. Hungry Harry's is a sandwich shop on York Road itself that sits on the outside of an area called East End Park. They serve hearty, fresh and colourful sandwiches and salads at decent prices. This wouldn't be news except that East End Park, along with neighbouring Gipton and Seacroft were identified as 'food deserts' in a 2003 study into 'Deprivation, Diet and Food-Retail Access (Wrigley et al. 2003). Less diverse than North and North East Leeds, these vast sprawling estates are largely home to the 'traditional white working class.' Food deserts are parts of a city where cheap and nutritious food is hard to obtain. Residents without cars and other access impediments cannot reach larger supermarkets and rely for provisions on local corner shops and takeaways; the former carrying very little or no fresh produce and the latter being nutritionally insufficient. Harry's seems to be an exception to this rule. Walking around the rest of the area, into Gipton and Seacroft itself, you can go for 10 or more minutes without seeing a shop; and then only scattered parades of franchise convenience stores and takeaways.. Like York Road itself, the civic design and traffic planning of east Leeds is complex and uncomfortable. Outsiders often choose to fixate on the high rise flats and the more dilapidated features of the environment, they always seem to overlook the many well-manicured gardens and the colourful, inventive house decorations. There is a strong sense of place in East Leeds, and pride that goes with that. My partner has worked in the area for years and sums it up like this, 'they slag it off it all the time to each other, but as an outsider, you better not get caught doing the same.'

Harry's roller blind is freshly painted with a vibrant Leeds United mural to mark the return of the club to topflight football after a 16 year absence. When I first moved to Leeds in 1997, United were flying high in the premiership and competing in Europe. The city was buzzing with regeneration, riding Tony Blair's wave of economic and cultural 'Cool Britannia.' The subsequent years of stagnation and decline didn't touch the city centre as much, but it has certainly wreaked havoc in the poorer outlying areas. United's success was a big part of the city's brand identity during the first rehabilitation of its image—perhaps the club's renaissance will see another, more inclusive, wave of civic reconstruction?

Creative Cuisine

Cross York Road from East End Park, or head back westwards from Gipton, the tone and composition of the urban environment change within one street. Leeds United banners and the odd fluttering St. George's Cross give way to a cacophony of brightly fronted local business. Harehills is the most diverse area of the city. 71% minority ethnic, compared to 19% for Leeds as a whole; English is not the main language for over 20% of households. Formerly home to textile, brick and mining industries, most of the housing stock is narrow, Victorian era 'back to backs.' In decline since the 1950s Harehills has seen virtually no redevelopment. The area has a persistently poor reputation in Leeds. The crime rate is high, but it is worth mentioning there are 7 more areas with a higher crime rate and Harehills is perhaps not deserving of its fearsome reputation. Nevertheless, this has conspired to drive down the price of housing which, in turn, has always made the area attractive to subsequent waves of immigrants. Every new influx also brings their own food and drink culture that is reflected in the many restaurants, takeaways, butchers and grocers. Recent and established businesses advertise their origin and heritage with pride and do a bustling trade to locals and more well-heeled foodies willing to cross town for an 'authentic' experience.

We Buy Property

Of the problems faced by local Harehills residents, lack of access to fresh nutritious food perhaps isn't one of them. There are different health issues compounded by social exclusion, stigmatisation, poverty and housing. Harehills is overcrowded and there are many multi-occupancy, multi-generational households that have made the area a Covid 'hotspot.' Earlier, I mentioned that Harehills has seen very little regeneration and much of the housing stock is dilapidated. This has been further exacerbated by a vampiric private Landlord culture. Over 73% of Harehills residents are "transient renters" (see observatory.leeds.gov). These individuals and groups are more likely to be in precarious, insecure employment and they contend with converging multiple pressures further exacerbated by the Covid crisis.

Polski Sklep

After Germany, the UK is home to the second largest population of EU migrants, 15,000 of whom are employed in Leeds. Generally, immigrants from the EU tend to be younger, more highly educated and more economically active (by proportion) than the local Leeds population (see 'Socio Economic Inclusion of Migrants in Four UK Cities', 2015). However, it should be noted there are some discrepancies and inconsistencies between sub-groups. Harehills has become home to many Eastern European immigrants since the 2004 accession. These communities have become an integral part of the workforce in Leeds restaurants over the years. Curiously, unlike other immigrant groups, there hasn't been an accompanying increase in Eastern European restaurants. There are market stalls and convenience shops that cater to these communities, but it seems they would rather work in restaurants than choose to open them. Of course, this assumes there is free reflexive choice and unconstrained agency behind the economic choices of immigrants. Throughout my research in restaurants, I've encountered lots of Eastern European workers who all have different biographies and motivations. So much so that I consider it sociologically inaccurate to try and lump immigrant groups together as single analytical categories. I have worked with Polish chefs in Michelin starred kitchens that have desires to go home and use their skills to improve the gastronomic reputation of their indigenous restaurants. I have worked with Lithuanians that have toiled under questionably legal scenarios in car washes and Chinese buffets whilst improving their English enough to get a job in better restaurants. And I have worked with others who take deep pride and job satisfaction in chain restaurant labour that many chefs would view as deskilled 'cooking by numbers' work. Getting underneath all of these individual experiences is a research project in its own right. I've always acknowledged this as a woeful omission in my own research thus far. It is something I am currently

working to redress, especially considering the Covid crisis has forced us to reconsider what we deem 'essential' labour. Not to mention that the future of our role in the European project is deeply unstable. Will the significant amount of 2004 accession labour that buoys the service sector remain, or will they elect to cut their losses and follow pockets of growth and employment elsewhere on the continent?

Banstead Park

My research is focussed on my own occupational sector and I've found it essential to make persistent recourse to autoethnographic reflections. I always try and ask myself: 'What is my position in this field?', 'Has my presence in the field changed it in anyway?', 'How has the field changed me?', and 'Would another person have the same responses as me?' Whilst walking around Harehills, East End Park, Burmantofts and Gipton to take the pictures in this series, I tried to do the same thing. In Harehills, specifically, I was forced to do so. Regardless of the aforementioned bad reputation, I have personally never felt 'unsafe' or 'unwelcome' in Harehills. However, walking around with a digital SLR camera and a perhaps more conspicuous gait behind my purpose, my presence clearly aroused suspicion. What could I possibly be doing there? Communities of any kind can become insular and self-protective, especially areas of deprivation that are often studied and prodded like curious sources of data by (albeit well meaning) social researchers. They are viewed as problematic areas for intervention by councils and other outside agencies, and they are disproportionately over-policed. Consequently, the residents are suspicious of official bodies and bureaucratic agencies. This leads me to raise a persistent question of discipline: Who is sociology for? Often our work is obscure and inscrutable to outsiders. We turn issues like poverty and social exclusion into statistics, we create multiplying definitions and interpretations that are increasingly distant to the actual lived experience. I wonder if, for the residents, when they read about themselves in newspapers as statistics, it feels like this view from Banstead Park? In the distance, Leeds Beckett University media building, University of Leeds famous Parkinson Tower, countless prestige high rises being built to house wealthy students. You might look at these and say, as I've heard said before, "Leeds isn't for people like me anymore."