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FAMILY, COMMUNITY RELATIONS AND MULTICULTURALISM IN LONDON'S EAST END

Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron and (the late) Michael Young

The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict

London: Profile Books, 2006, 288 pp., ISBN 1861979282

The New East End is both a fascinating and frustrating book since, as the two surviving authors – Geoff Dench and Kate Gavron – acknowledge at the outset, 'it is neither an academic text book nor a government report' and yet it has been read and treated as both by many commentators. It is written in a lively and lucid fashion and provides an interesting and innovative social history of the challenging multiculturalism and changing patterns of family and kinship in the post-war London East End. It does so through the prism of a study of a small section of Bethnal Green now in the London borough of Tower Hamlets although it would be hard to argue that it is an evidence-based piece of reportage. This study was originally intended as a sequel to the late Michael Young's pioneering study, *Family and Kinship in East London*, co-authored with the late Peter Willmott and published in 1957.

The study on which the book is loosely based began in 1992, using virtually the same questionnaire and methods that Young and Willmott had devised for their inaugural study at the newly established Institute of Community Studies in Bethnal Green, London in 1953. Some additional questions were added about the extent of social change that had taken place over the 40-year period and some additional methods were used, incorporating some of the changes that have been developed in social research methods over this period. The random sample that the authors drew for this new study replicated the population survey of adults that had lived in the old borough of Bethnal Green. The sample thus produced a total of 799 interviews with adults between 18 and 94 years old, and data on 2565 people living in these households and relatives living away from these households. The researchers also acquired data on 8000 people with further intensive sampling of a much smaller number of 51 respondents with dependent children, namely 33 white and 18 Bangladeshi parents, and some further 'Bangladeshi informants, mainly young women' (p. 236). These data are for the most part over 10 years old, having been collected by the mid-1990s with a mix of intensive and survey techniques.

Curiously, however, the authors do not acknowledge how the original study became a classic of social research in this country and has been part of a burgeoning tradition of imaginative social research methods. Indeed, it could be said that ethnographic methods of social research have grown out of this original research centre, established by the pioneering and innovative social entrepreneur Michael Young, who subsequently became Lord Young of Dartington and chair of the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Moreover, the book neither builds upon nor bears the hallmarks of the imaginative and creative ethnographic studies that have emerged over the last two or three decades. It does not take much account of the methodological shifts in the way we, as social scientists, have changed the ways that we study, understand and reflect upon societal change through the uses of personal experience and narrative

accounts. It also does not reflect what has been called the 'biographical turn' in social science and welfare policies, with an increasing focus on the so-called project of the personal.

Instead, the authors – both of whom are social anthropologists – use the data they have collected rather loosely, liberally peppering their fascinating story with a smattering of anecdotes from a very small number of their respondents. Their story is also not the one that they set out to revise some 15 years ago now, but a different story that they have decided to tell, taking account of what they as authors, without too much reflection, believe to be the major changes in social and economic lives in the East End. Rather than tracing changes in family lives and forms of so-called kinship, or the relations between men and women and changing forms of work/paid employment, they decide to focus on one aspect of what they call 'the importance of community relations as matters occupying people's attention and concern. The problem of ethnic conflict could not be avoided' (p. 2).

Indeed, the book focuses almost entirely on this question and sets up an argument about two almost completely separate communities, namely what they call the white working classes and the growing immigrant families from what was originally the Indian subcontinent but became Bangladesh in 1971. According to this account, families from this area began settling in Spitalfields, 'straddling the boundary between the former boroughs of Stepney and Bethnal Green and the area of communal conflict coincided with the borough of Tower Hamlets' (p. 2).

Dench and Gavron present their story about the origins of this conflict by exploring first a brief history of Bethnal Green from the world originally described by Young and Willmott, in the context of media stories of the period, with a small sprinkling of stories about Jewish immigration to the area at the turn of the 20th century. They also provide thumbnail sketches of seven (four women and three men) of their so-called 'characters', who include older members of each community, middle aged members, including one white man from the aspiring middle class, and a young school girl of Bangladeshi origin. While these stories provide very interesting reading, they are not sustained throughout the book and it is unclear why they are provided in this form early on in the account.

This illustrates the problem with the book; since it is neither an academic account nor a government policy document, it plays around with ideas and then leaves them unfinished and unresolved, apart from the thread of the problem with the welfare state. The story then moves on to a very thorough analysis of immigration from Bangladesh, and how the numbers of families, gradually at first, more rapidly later, began to grow throughout the period, and what kinds of Bangladeshi life emerged in London. They closely document aspects of education (and to my mind this is the best chapter) and housing to demonstrate precisely the growth of the size of the Bangladeshi community. Here the focus is on what might be considered to be gender relations, although there is very little reflection on the term they use for this, namely 'sexual difference and family life' (p. 83).

Indeed, they present a very stereotypical account of two different forms of family life in the two contrasting communities. The white working classes are represented as all being typified by family breakdown, while the Bangladeshis are represented as being very traditional patriarchal families, in which men hold all the power.

Therein, partly, lie the roots of the conflict between these two communities. The white working class believe that the Bangladeshi families come and breed and do not earn their entitlement to social welfare, while the working-class families are the victims of a corrosive and centralizing social welfare system that leaves them with no entitlements to housing or education. While four different white working-class perspectives on the Bangladeshis are presented, harking back to the founding of the welfare state at the end of the Second World War, no similar account is provided of the views that the Bangladeshi families hold of the white community. Yet the account concludes that the real problem of the conflict is how the white working classes feel deprived of their rights and entitlements to social welfare, stemming from the post-war welfare state settlement. The authors argue that it is indeed the fault of the form of welfare state devised that lies at the heart of the problem and they propose a return to a form of reciprocal social and family relations, redolent of the pre-Second World War as the basis for a new social democracy.

What the authors fail to acknowledge, however, is the underside of traditional family life. Indeed, it is a matter of some surprise that their respondents did not mention the hidden side of family life and of domestic violence, since this is a strong feature of another non-academic, autobiographical and personal account of the same area of London, *Behind Closed Doors* (Tomlin, 2005). Tomlin's book is almost entirely an account of family and childhood sexual abuse in the 1950s East End by the mother of a former star of the UK soap opera *EastEnders*, 'Tiffany'. However, Tomlin's story would have been inconceivable without the work of social scientists and feminists especially over the last 30 years. Its tale of domestic violence and child sexual abuse, related in very direct style, reveals an underside of East End family life that appears nowhere in *The New East End*. It is underpinned by feminist insights regarding domestic violence, as is the placement of these issues on the public agenda.

Clearly the intention of Dench et al. is to put what they consider an entirely different matter on the public agenda, namely the issue of the future of social welfare policies and multiculturalism. They have been very successful in this respect as this agenda has been taken up across the political spectrum in many European countries. For instance, commenting on contemporary immigration policies and providing advice to the New Labour government on communities and families, David Goodhart, editor of *Prospect*, has drawn upon *The New East End* in constructing his 'progressive nationalism' as a so-called progressive liberal ideal.

Arguably, Dench et al.'s stereotypes of both white working-class families and immigrants from Bangladesh as discrete and monolithic groups neglect complexities and personal experiences. The dangers entailed in drawing selectively on interview transcripts and neglecting material changes are acute. Notably, there is no attempt to explore changes in the lives of Bangladeshi or white working-class women. Nor is there any discussion of Irish or Jewish immigration in previous years; of the complexities of life pre and post the Second World War, or in general, of the multifaceted nature of the community and families within the East End. Nevertheless, the importance of the study in discussing how 'multiculturalism' has failed to deliver for working-class communities is not in dispute.

In reviewing any historical accounts, it is vital to think about methodological understandings, the complexities of community life and the sociopolitical context. There can be no simplistic reading of the relationship between politics, policies for

families and communities and history, and there is a continued need to air crucial questions of gender as embedded within past and contemporary 21st-century policies on welfare and community.

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'I'M A FEMINIST BUT . . .'

Rosalind Gill
Gender and the Media
Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007, vi + 291 pp., ISBN 0745619150

At a recent Canadian media studies conference, a senior academic speaker was talking despondently about a visit she'd taken with her daughter to a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* convention. 'God!' she said wryly, with reference to the marketing of the femininity and related products on show, 'I felt like Adorno!' Her sentiment, presumably that it made her feel like an 'authoritarian personality', evokes the pessimism often articulated by feminists of a 'certain generation', when discussing representations of femininity within today's western media culture.

While avoiding many of the potential pitfalls of feminist pessimism regarding such imagery, Gill's book, *Gender and the Media*, sets out to unravel the conundrums of contemporary postfeminist media studies against the changing backdrop of a consumer culture, where the neoliberal values and practices of consumption have become dominant. Gill argues that, within this setting, representations of gender – and femininity in particular – have become increasingly defined in terms of the body and its reification as a reflexive project. In the contemporary climate, the body becomes something to be continually worked on and improved in line with the impossible aesthetic ideals of the mostly white, slender airbrushed bodies of youthful celebrities. Using the language of Foucault, Gill suggests that the external tyranny of the male gaze has been replaced by the internal, self-regulatory gaze of the subject herself. The second transformation of the media she addresses is the sexualization of bodies within popular culture, thus evoking debates about 'raunch culture' and the pervasive aesthetics of 'porn-chic' for girls and young women. Gill argues that within such a culture, young girls are sexualized through the marketing of clothes and goods and, in an inverted version of embracing their inner child, grown women are encouraged to outwardly embrace a culture of pink 'girlification' and the pursuit of youthful sexiness through punishing exercise regimes and the consumption of youth-enhancing body products.

So, Gill asks, how should feminist researchers respond to and analyse such imagery? And can the research methods of the past suffice? Focusing on issues of