

## **Guest editor's introduction: a comparison of ethnic minorities in London and New York**

What is the experience of ethnic minorities in London and New York in the late twentieth century? This is the question with which this collection of articles in *New Community* is concerned. The impetus for organising this issue, in addition to the general recognition of the value of comparative research, was the sense that the case for contrasting London with New York had a compelling logic of its own. Part of our thinking was that both cities have played somewhat similar roles in the absorption of immigrant populations: if New York is still America's quintessential immigrant city – with almost a quarter of all New Yorkers foreign-born and virtually half classified as 'non-white' – London has also been the principal magnet for immigrants to Britain and the main locus of non-white concentration.

A more important consideration was that both cities sit astride the top of the hierarchy of world cities and have therefore been remade by the wrenching economic changes of the past two decades in strikingly similar ways. Manufacturing centres not so long ago (it was only in 1959 that Harvard University Press published a study of New York's manufacturing industries entitled *One-tenth of a Nation*), their base in goods production and distribution has given way massively to the activities of financing, coordinating and servicing the largest economic organisations, whose lines of business are increasingly international and diversified in scope.

London and New York have also seen their physical landscapes redrawn in the course of their post-industrial transitions. To serve the growing office complexes have come the often stigmatised 'young urban professionals' or yuppies. In contrast to earlier patterns, they are now the huddled masses piled up in the neighbourhoods in and about the central business district, from which lower-income residents and the jobs that once employed them have been expelled. Meanwhile, those inner-area neighbourhoods which have not yet experienced gentrification have in many cases been depleted of jobs, people, and housing in good condition – leaving a residual population still too large for the weakened economic base which might have supported it and for the housing infrastructure that might shelter it. Hence, in their economic function and built environment, London and New York seemed to be closer to one another than either was with, say, Birmingham or Detroit; and the presence of large minority populations drawn in for a mix of economic opportunities very different from the types of jobs and activities presently extant appeared to crystallise the dilemmas of ethnic minorities in both countries today. For these reasons, a London–New York comparison promised to shed new light on the specificities of the situation of ethnic minorities in Britain and in the United States.

That contrast would best be advanced by a systematic comparative approach. Our own, admittedly informal, survey of the field indicated little such comparative work under way. Consequently, we chose to examine three dimensions of the experience of ethnic minorities in London and New York which seemed to capture the essentials of the broad social structure which minorities confront and the

responses to the mix of opportunities and constraints that they adopt: the dimensions of labour markets, housing, and politics. For each dimension, we have included two articles, one focusing on New York, the other on London, but complementing each other in scope and approach as closely as possible. Hence, the comparison is left for the reader to make on his or her own; to facilitate that task, the remainder of this introduction seeks to distil from the conclusions of the six articles some suggestions as to how a comparative understanding of the situation of ethnic minorities in these two world cities might begin.

### The labour market

The question motivating both the Hamnett and Randolph (London) and the Waldinger (New York) articles is the relationship between the urban post-industrial economy and the minority population. Research on this issue generally falls into one of two camps. One argument offers a 'tale of two cities', according to which the city's advanced service base has rendered useless those minority residents with low skills who had earlier been recruited for inner-city manufacturing jobs, now irrevocably gone. The second argument contends that the middle of the labour market is disappearing; what remains is a polarised arrangement in which growth is concentrated in either high-level jobs requiring university education or in low-level positions in services, retailing, and the remnants of a depressed manufacturing sector; it is in the latter, lowest tier that minorities are largely confined.

The answers provided by Hamnett and Randolph for London and Waldinger for New York provide support for neither of these two perspectives; instead they suggest that a different process of labour market incorporation is under way. Using data from the OPCS Longitudinal Study, which links a 1 per cent sample of records from the 1971 UK census to the 1981 census, Hamnett and Randolph trace the industry and occupation of Asians, West Indians, and whites over this ten-year period. What they find is considerable change over the decade: not simply dispersion out of the original job segments, but ample evidence of upward job mobility and growing divergence between Asians and West Indians. In contrast to Hamnett and Randolph, Waldinger's data base, which consists of samples from the 1970 and 1980 US Censuses of Population, shows cross-sectional changes for eight different ethnic groups. Despite the difference in approach, similar conclusions emerge: minorities made significant job gains over the period; their share of service and white-collar jobs also increased; yet in the process, the pattern was one of ethnic niches, with native blacks, in particular, diverging from other, more heavily immigrant, minority groups.

What accounts for the emergence of ethnic niches in both London and New York? Waldinger, focusing on the contrast between native minorities (blacks and Hispanics) and new immigrants (blacks, Hispanics, and Asians), argues for a sorting process in which a complex of factors – skills, predispositions, and informal networks of information and assistance – has interacted with the demand for non-white labour to disperse ethnic groups into distinct concentrations. Thus, the public sector has become a stronghold of native blacks but an area of little immigrant employment, in part because discrimination is less pervasive than in the private sector, but also because black political mobilisation has gained institutional access to public sector jobs. Among the self-employed, by contrast, immigrants are over-represented, whereas the rates for native blacks are below the average for the local economy: in this case, the impetus for the immigrant thrust towards self-employment stems from their concentration in small business industries and their lack of alternative opportunities for mobility.

Whether similar factors account for the differentiation of employment observed in London, Hamnett and Randolph do not venture to say. Some of their findings suggest, however, that a comparable sorting process may be involved. For example, the fact that Asian males made disproportionate gains in construction,

distribution, and transport, a sector of stable employment for whites and diminishing employment for West Indians, may well be attributable to an increase in opportunities for self-employment in retailing, made possible by the existence of ethnic markets on the one hand, and prior experience in business on the other. In another case, Asian women failed to gain low-level non-manual work as replacement jobs opened up for departing white males, in contrast to West Indian females, who made very large gains. The explanation for this disparity may be linked to language problems, which might block employment in situations dependent on inter-personal communication, as well as to cultural considerations, which would impede Asian women from taking jobs outside the ethnic community.

Despite these similarities, important differences between London and New York obtain. Most striking is the extent of net white out-migration in the New York case and the occupational repositioning of those whites who remain. These patterns reflect the extraordinary improvement in living standards experienced by the white population in the United States since the Second World War – not fully paralleled in the United Kingdom. In the labour market, the consequences are that the impact of local economic decline is largely offset by the still greater decline in the size of the white population and that continuing upward movement by whites has resulted in a sustained demand for non-white replacement labour. The implications of white population loss emerge again in the discussions of politics and of housing.

### Politics

The theme of these two essays is sounded most explicitly by Marian FitzGerald, who argues that the political development of the Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities has led them irrevocably into politics, but along 'different roads'. In both London and New York, political divergence is in part a product of the original characteristics of the ethnic minorities themselves. As FitzGerald points out, the differences in the timing of migration, in original English language facility, and in organisational resources, have distinguished Asian and Afro-Caribbean political involvement from the start. Angelo Falcón's essay shows that similar factors also divide New York's native blacks from Hispanics, though in this case, there is also the enduring legacy of the very different race relations patterns of the southern United States, on the one hand, and the Hispanic Caribbean, on the other.

Both societal responses and situational factors have served to widen these disparities. Thus, in London, Asian political involvement has focused on immigration issues, while for the Afro-Caribbean community conflict over policing and harassment has provided a chief impetus for political mobilisation. Similarly, in New York, different issues dominate the concerns of blacks and Hispanics: this is most notable in the areas of immigration and bilingual education, in which Hispanics have organised around questions of at best peripheral concern to blacks. Societal responses have also diverged: thus the black quest for equality has not yielded much political power, but it has at least produced jobs; by contrast, the local state response to Hispanic protest has been to ease restrictions on public assistance.

But if the experience of travelling along different roads holds true for minorities on both sides of the Atlantic, the Falcón and FitzGerald essays also underline how very distinct the overall political situations are. The most important contrast stands out at the very start of Falcón's paper: New York is on the verge of becoming a 'majority minority' city, whereas, in London, minorities, if numerically important in certain wards and boroughs, do not have the quantitative edge enjoyed by their New York counterparts. Similarly, the structure of politics diverges markedly, in ways that correspond to the different political systems of the two countries. New York, as Falcón notes, is essentially a

one-party city, whereas in London, competition among the parties remains keen. The implications can be seen in the behaviour of the Labour Party, which initially did little to justify the support of minorities, but which has become increasingly solicitous about minority concerns out of its need to bolster its otherwise sagging sources of support. By contrast, the New York minority vote is so strongly tied to the Democrats that local political leaders need not worry about disregarding minority concerns for fear of losing votes to the Republicans. Furthermore, the absence of party competition has made it difficult for minorities to make organisational ties with potential allies and has accelerated the destructive cycle of intra- and inter-ethnic factionalism which Falcón discusses in detail.

Both the structure and history of politics explain another divergence between London and New York: in London, as FitzGerald notes, party loyalty is valued, and an ethnic politics, which would sanction some sort of exchange of services and positions for electoral support, is in bad repute. By contrast, such ethnic politics are the order of the day in New York and the weakening of the parties is so far advanced that party loyalty is honoured only in the breach. Still, Falcón's essay suggests that the openness of ethnic politics in New York may be too much of a good thing. In part, competition for a bigger slice of the pie is an encouragement to co-optation (of suitable newcomers) – an issue of no small concern in London, as FitzGerald notes and an outcome noticeable in New York, where, as Falcón concludes: '... black and Latino faces replace white ones in the political system without major changes in policy'. It is also the case that ethnic loyalties are not always over-riding; more importantly, a politics of ethnicity has tended to accentuate the very significant differences between blacks and Hispanics, thus blunting the thrust towards minority empowerment.

## Housing

In the articles on housing, the focus narrows from the metropolis to the neighbourhood, but the accounts of London's Tower Hamlets (Deborah Phillips) and Brownsville, a neighbourhood in Brooklyn, one of New York's five boroughs (Sharon Zukin and Gilda Zwerman), are strikingly similar. Both were once heavily industrial neighbourhoods, now decimated by the decline of manufacturing (and in Tower Hamlets, of the docks); and in turn depleted of the masses of low-income workers who previously congregated there to live in close proximity to their jobs. Despite massive population declines, good housing is in desperately short supply: much of the old stock has been abandoned or destroyed; what remains consists of buildings that are below standard and deteriorating; construction of public housing has been halted or drastically curtailed; and mass joblessness and low-wage employment freeze many residents out of the private housing market.

But thereafter, the parallels stop; the crucial intervening factor is the point noted earlier – namely the much greater social and geographic mobility of New York's white population. In Brownsville, a kind of Jewish factory town which was established when mass transit allowed Jewish immigrants (and their employers) to escape their initial area of settlement on Manhattan's Lower East Side, the Jewish population began to depart with the onset of post-war prosperity, to be replaced by blacks. Meanwhile, the public housing projects, the first of which was not completed until 1948, rapidly attracted a large majority of black tenants and then stayed that way. Conflict between Jews and blacks focused on the informal division of public space and on the allocation of education resources – not on the distribution of housing opportunities; with the integration of the schools, the last tie linking the Jewish population and the neighbourhood was severed and the Jewish population drastically declined. Tower Hamlets, once also an area of Jewish concentration, is less segregated than Brownsville: both whites and Asians (as well as a sprinkling of older immigrant groups) live in the area. Housing allocation is the locus of conflict: Asians suffer from bias in the housing allocation

procedure as well as from severe hostility on predominantly white estates, which of course is extended into the allocation procedure itself.

Another major difference underlined by the case study is, of course, the relative size of the public housing sectors. In Brownsville, the construction of public housing virtually came to a halt by the early 1970s; the sole existing housing initiative, described by Zukin and Zwerman, is a venture designed to build low-cost, suburban-style private housing. To be sure, there is a parallel in the constriction of the public housing sector in Tower Hamlets, but even the current trends towards privatisation and the channelling of investments out of housing are unlikely to reduce the relative importance of public housing to the standards of Brownsville.

## Some avenues for further comparative research

How might comparative research on London and New York proceed from here? One possibility would be to explore some of the dimensions neglected in this issue: education is the most obvious lacuna, and the development (or underdevelopment?) of bilingual and bicultural programmes in both cities suggests that this would be a particularly fruitful field. Contrasting the situation of those ethnic minorities which are to be found on both sides of the Atlantic would be another possibility: the fact that to New York's long-established West Indian community has now been added a growing East Asian community, as well as a sizeable population of ethnic Indians from the Caribbean, suggests that this comparison has yet to be fully explored. A third avenue for research might be the impact of the very different immigration and labour market policies of the two countries on local economic outcomes. A fourth approach would consist of a systematic comparison of the progress made by different minorities in London and New York through actions organised within the ethnic community: owner-occupied housing or ethnic housing associations, ethnic businesses, separate schools and political parties (or black 'sections' within existing parties). An examination of trends towards (or away from) reliance on community resources and initiatives to secure ethnic advance would yield valuable insights into ways in which public policy can be of most effect.

Of course, this list just begins to skim the potential research projects, yet even so it suggests that the efforts at contrasting ethnic minorities in London and New York published in this issue represent only a beginning. But if these articles have succeeded in indicating the promise of comparative work on these two cities, then they have undoubtedly done their job.