The Development of the Subaltern Counter-public Spheres of Brixton

A literature review

About the authors

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a discussion about the importance of 'safe spaces' for dialogue. However, this is often considered in isolation from subaltern counter-public spheres—discursive spaces that have emerged in opposition to official public spheres, where marginalised social groups formulate counter-discourses.

There is a scarcity of literature on the subaltern counter-public spheres of Brixton and the significance of narratives that have emerged offstage, away from dominant discourses related to politics, education, housing, and health.

In Brixton, for instance, there have been mosques, churches, voluntary organisations, charities, soup kitchens, social clubs, Jerk chicken shops, music shops, African-centred community centres, gyms, information shops, vegan eateries, and education centres. All of these establishments have contributed to Brixton's dynamic counterpublic sphere, playing roles in health, wellbeing, socio-economic, psycho-social, and spiritual functions. They have not only served as sources for political, social, and economic advancement but also as arenas for critical discussion, debate, and dialogue within the community.

Habermas and the Development of Counter Public Spheres

Jürgen Habermas originally conceptualised that a 'public sphere' was where 'private people' would liaise in a public discursive space that would then inform critical public opinion regarding government and authorities. Deliberation among intellectuals was on an equal basis regardless of societal position, with an emphasis on the strongest argument possessing power. In 1700, Amsterdam had 32 coffeehouses, whereas by 1734, London had 551, the largest number in all European cities except for Istanbul. Even in the 18th century, coffee drinking was associated with inspiring fruitful discussion contrary to inns and beer. Additionally, news-sheets were part of this early coffeehouse culture, stimulating more lively debate among people from a variety of societal levels.

Coffeehouses grew despite a 1675 edict from Charles II to have them banned as places of malicious sedition, a ruling which failed. Hence, Habermas posited that such spheres, with literary associations, etc., also included, were not restricted to the privileged few. Nevertheless, Nancy Fraser (1993: 130; 2010) advanced a relevant reassessment of the conceptualisation articulated by Habermas. Fraser has noted that the more "official public sphere" was still sullied by exclusionary practices. For instance, the public sphere that Habermas had in mind was not arenas for subordinated groups to also deliberate about their own needs and construct alternative publics. Habermas' notion is therefore seen as a mere bourgeois public sphere and not as truly unique alternative discursive spaces where the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat could disseminate counter-discourses. Further to this, class, gender, and race dynamics lead to the presence of various societal 'public spheres' which can converge, and at times conflict, and become counter-public spheres.

The 20th century saw the emergence of a fledgling feminist counter-public sphere, which had its own publications, conventions, festivals, media, and meeting places. Fraser (1993: 123-124) defines subaltern counter-cultures as:

> **...parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.**

Asen (2000: 438) defined counter-publics as

> **...the collectives that emerge in the recognition of various exclusions from wider publics of potential participants, discursive topics, and speaking styles.**

These counter-publics, Asen posits, are not to be regarded as extensions of a larger public sphere; rather, such counter-spheres should be regarded as 'explicitly articulated alternatives to wider publics'. There is a recognition within counter-public spheres that there is a frayed relationship with the wider public sphere and an unequal positionality. Indeed, there is a conscious focus on trying to shift the power dynamic via constructing a counter-discourse that actively challenges the dominant public sphere. Counter-public spheres are characterized by: 1) being excluded as a precursor to the creation of counter-spheres for critical debate and 2) the hegemonic public sphere holding them in contempt and derision while simultaneously also viewing them as a threat.

Political scientist James Scott (1987, 1990) in the field of critical development studies, offered the canonical theory of subaltern resistance under conditions of socio-economic domination (Scott, 1990) in which “hidden transcripts” and “offstage discourses” abound, via which subordinated groups express a critique of the powerful, as well as their “infrapolitics” – footdragging, gossip and other subversive actions which occur beyond the visible spectrum of political practice.

Michael Dawson (1995), in his monograph "A Black Counterpublic? Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics," explains that a Black Public Sphere is:

> **...a set of institutions, communication networks, and practices that facilitate debate on the causes and remedies for the current combination of political setbacks and economic devastation facing major segments of the Black community and the creation of oppositional formations and sites.**

Dawson locates these publics as far back as Antebellum America and "as recently as the early 1970s." For Dawson (1995), a black public sphere did not emerge in America until the 1990s due to a lack of relevant resources, networks, and bodies to promote deliberation of issues pertinent to the black community. Conversely, Harris-Lacewell highlights that African-Americans did construct hidden transcripts exploring ideological alternatives to dominant white discourses, and that these gathering places provide space for black people to discuss. Harris-Lacewell interestingly regards barbershops and hair salons as representative of black public spheres. The relevance of a black counterpublic sphere functioning away from the surveillance of the dominant classes has been highlighted by Harris-Lacewell (2004: 7).

Hence, Brixton, with its black public sphere, activist public sphere, black feminist public sphere, various religious public spheres, and even a gang sphere (which Danquah has addressed), has been home to manifold counter-public spheres as outlined by Fraser and ideas which have been regarded as both radical and resistant. It was within such a milieu that health activism developed in Brixton.

Brixton as an Arena of Black Activism, Radical Exchange, Subaltern Counter-Spheres, and Health Activism

The position of Brixton as a centre for myriad discursive spaces of radical ideological activities has been largely shunned and frowned upon by the hegemonic forces. This has been witnessed since 1968. Indeed, McLeod (2004: 131) in "Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis" revealed that when Tariq Ali was a member of the International Marxist Group (IMG), he suggested that Brixton could be a "revolutionary base area" and that the American Black Panther Party should consider establishing a chapter on Shakespeare Road in Brixton in 1968.

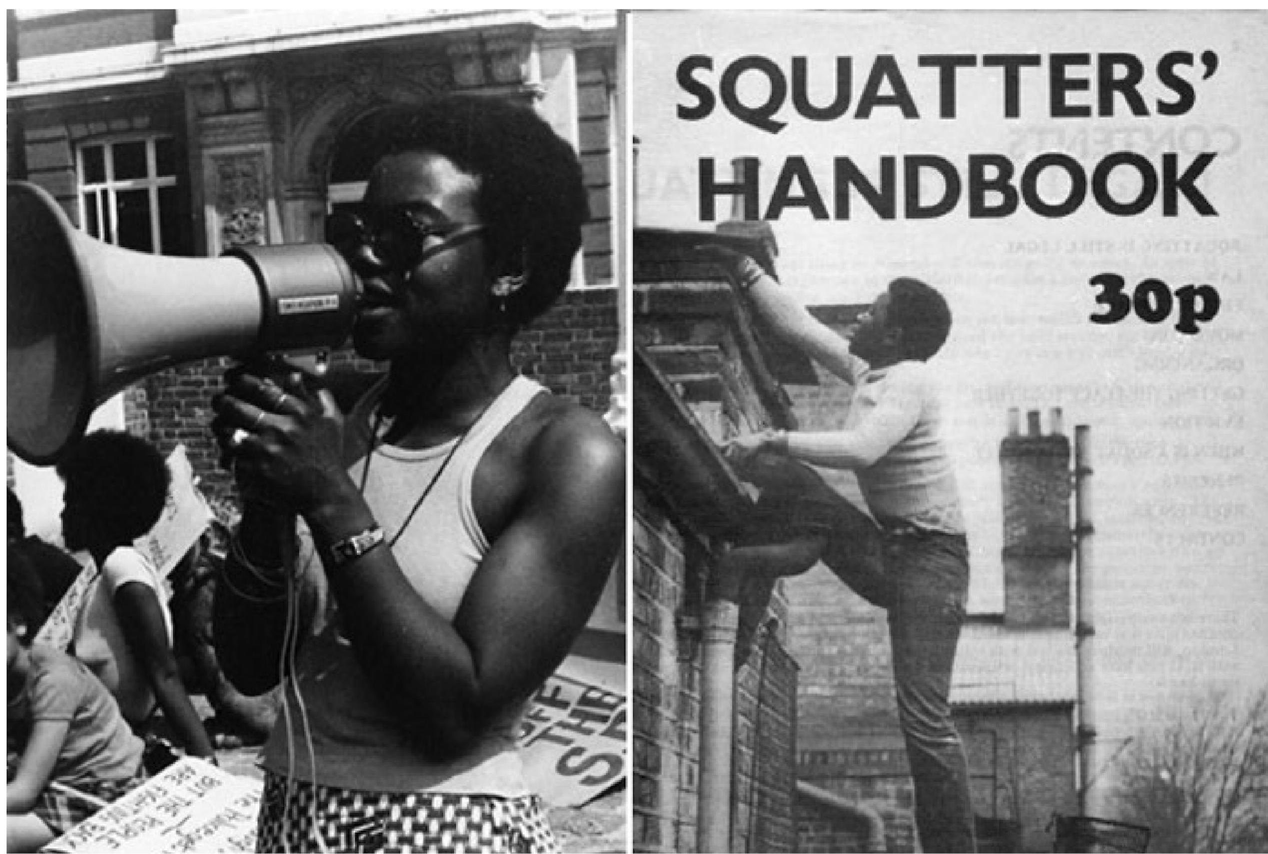
Tensions between black youth and the police already by 1974 led to the formation of a Home Office Memo which had predicted that Brixton, other parts of London, Birmingham, and Manchester would all pose problems to the police with challenges. The riots of the 1980s therefore did not occur within a vacuum (Dancygier, 2010: 90), and it was in such a milieu that resistance identities formed in Brixton along with counter-cultural elements. In 1973, a counter-public sphere was formed when the 'Race Today Collective', with its own publication "Race Today," began by Darcus Howe, splintered off from the Institute of Race Relations.

The Marxist mentor of the collective, C.L.R. James, spent his last years housed at a building run by the Race Today Collective. Other black-led publishing houses were New Beacon Books and Bogle L'Ouverture, the latter of which was founded by Guyanese-born Eric and Jessica Huntley in 1967, who also both ran the Walter Rodney Bookshop and were part of the Race Today Collective (Alleyne, 2002: 58; Williams, 2015: 277).

Olive Morris, the black feminist anti-racist activist, also in 1973, founded the Brixton Black Women's Group (BBWG) to address issues affecting black communities in Britain building on a longer black radical tradition in Britain (Fisher, 2012: 75-77). So significant is she within the Brixton locale that a building in Brixton was named after her, and the independent local currency, the Brixton Pound, had printed notes with her image. Hence, even before the 1981 Brixton riots, a radical tradition and conducive environment were formed which facilitated counter-hegemonic discourses. Morris also founded London's first Black Women's Centre and was key in heading the first South London-based squatting movements (Mackay, 2015).

[1] This was relayed by the ex-mayor of London Ken Livingstone in his memoirs You Can't Say That.

The iconic image of Morris' image is renowned in Brixton and among London squatters where she can be seen scaling a wall in Brixton featured on the cover of the 1979 Squatters Handbook:



Since the late 1960s, Brixton has been regarded as the Black British hub of urban black resistance. This came to a head in the 1981 Brixton Riots, wherein local black residents became embroiled in confrontations with London's Metropolitan Police. The Met Police at the time were entrenched in 'institutional racism,' a term now so pervasive that one would forget that it was originally applied to the Met Police, and regurgitated stereotypes of black males and youth (McLeod, 2004: 131). There was no 'community accountable' during this epoch, no 'community consultation,' and no such thing as 'community listening and feedback.' The Met Police operated with total impunity, often with the tacit approval of superiors; this created the circumstances for direct conflict with black youth in Brixton.

A menagerie of radical networking laid the foundations for Brixton's inculcation of subaltern counter-cultural narratives. The squatting movement, leftist politics, anarchist bookstores found an environment conducive to their activities in light of the presence of black radical ideologues, Rastafarianism, black British feminism, and pan-Africanism.

The Tory Government at the time gave sanction to the police to stop and search individuals based on suspicion that a crime had taken place, the infamous 'Sus laws.' Margaret Thatcher in the late 1970s and early 1980s had spoken about Britain being swamped. The Met Police in Brixton in 1981, conversely, conducted a new exercise which they had code-named 'Operation Swamp 81,' in which over a thousand young black men were stopped and searched in a six-day period. Unsurprisingly, day 7 came to a head and what followed was the most destructive scenes of rioting ever known in the history of the United Kingdom. Over fifty police cars were set ablaze, 279 police officers were injured, 45 people were injured, and over five thousand people took to Brixton streets.

Tabloid press pundits, so long apologists for racist depictions during the early 1980s, erupted with sanctimony over the events, helping to etch the image of Brixton, and the urban locale, into the minds of the wider public. "The day the blacks went crazy" were the words sprawled over one of the national newspapers in the aftermath of the Brixton Riots. Newspaper columnists pontificated about:

> **Appalling scenes of violence and mayhem in Brixton...as if we were brought to the edge of an abyss, beyond which lay anarchy, the breakdown of law and social catastrophe. (Downing, 1985: 316).**

Darcus Howe at the time penned that:

> **This revolt assumed serious insurrectionary proportions...not since the insurrection of 1830 – the Chartist movement - has English society experienced such extensive revolt.**

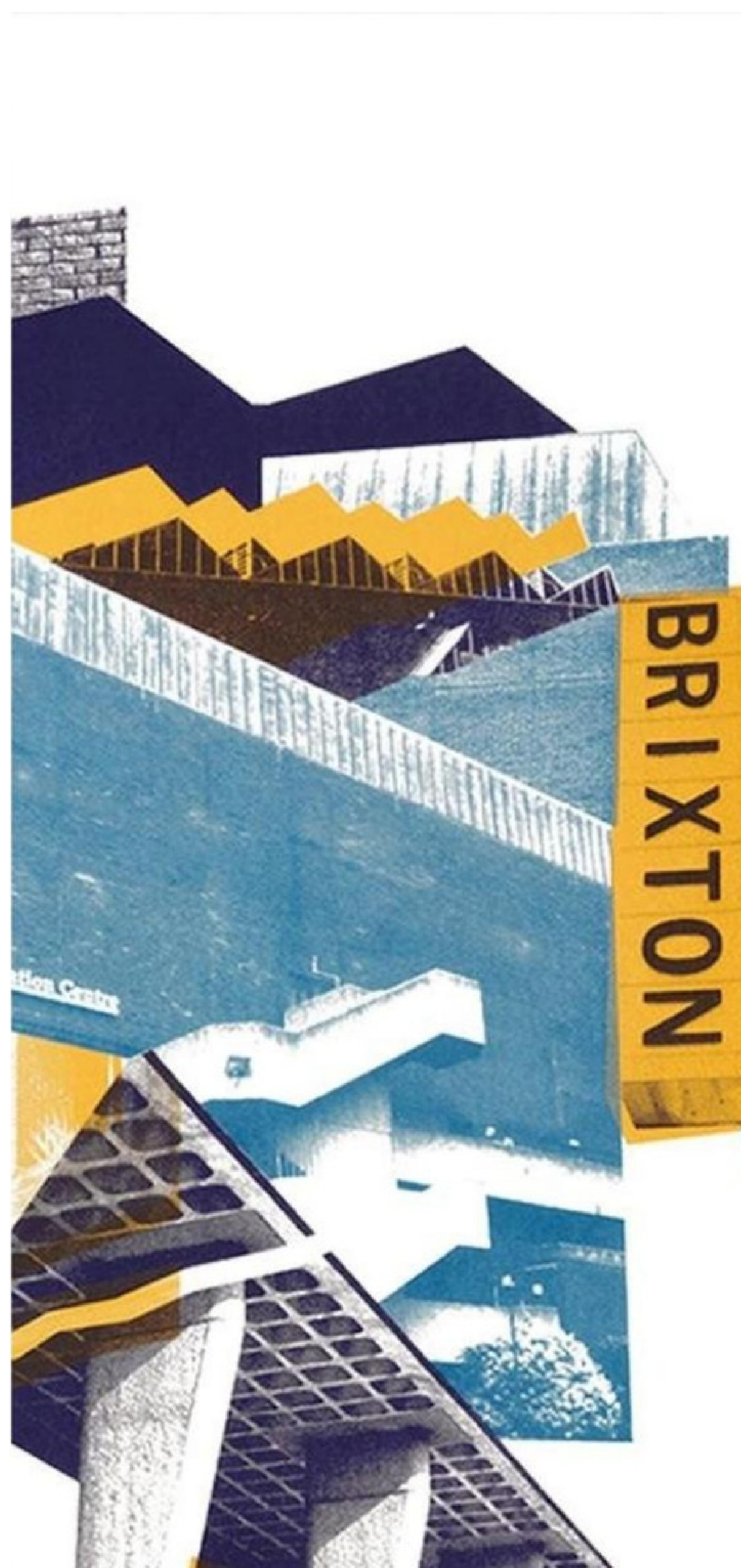
The policing in Brixton and other urban conurbations during the 1980s was regarded as the discriminatory icing on the cake. The London Borough of Lambeth, where Brixton is located, already at this time had the highest number of mental health hospital admissions and the highest number of individuals deemed as homeless. Di Lorenzo (1985: 39) noted that from 1981 to 1985 unemployment in Brixton had doubled and the rate of house-building halved. At the same time, the Tory government had slashed funding for housing by a third. Discrimination in education, housing, and employment were factors that contributed to the bleak race relations landscape leading up to the riots. Hence, riots also took place in the early 1980s in Tottenham in North London, St Pauls in Bristol, Toxteth in Liverpool, Moss Side in Manchester, Handsworth in Birmingham, and Highfields in Leicester – all of which appeared to typify declining race relations in the UK.

The 'Iron Lady' Margaret Thatcher, apprehensive that the UK's inner cities could possibly pose a more long-term threat if black activists in Brixton were not afforded an avenue to express themselves to power, launched a wave of investment in the locale. While Sir George Young, Britain's first 'Minister for Race Relations,' stated in 1981 that the aim was to "back the good guys away from the militants."

The riots were also seized upon by opportunist Trotskyist Socialist and anarchist elements; they were in no way agitators, but they did attempt to gain currency for their own causes off the back of the disturbances. The Socialist Workers Party newspaper Socialist Worker described the riots as "an insurrection" and "a festival of the oppressed" (Ward, 2011), seeking to capitalise on the nomenclature of radical politics which had already grown and developed organically in Brixton. Without any involvement of these political elements, Brixton had undergone its own politicisation, and Rex (1982: 103) suggested the entirety of the Brixton "local community had been radicalised", independent of anarchist provocateurs.

Further to this, the Revolutionary Workers Party, although heavily campaigning in Brixton before, during, and after the riots, was regarded with cynicism by young black Brixton residents. Race Today musings and articles published at the time reveal this mistrust (Dancygier, 2010: 68). Claire Doyle, of the Trotskyist Militant tendency, was often heckled by black youth of Brixton and Toxteth as their activities were seen as encroaching on local community activity to promote the formation of their Labour Committee and also assume political leadership of these locales (Wise and Wise, 2015).

Brixton, with its accommodation of subaltern counter-cultural spheres, a notion which will be explored later in this chapter, was also home to a chapter of the Earth First! Movement. This was a Green campaign group founded by Shane Collins to promote environmental awareness and radical protest. He also had a role as a network figure in early '90s Brixton involved in squatting and providing office space for other protest movements at various locations in Brixton such as the Cooltan Arts Centre. Cooltan was the name of a former disused suntan lotion factory that Collins had opened in June 1991 as a squatted centre for green activity and was utilised by the 'Freedom Network' as a protest movement hub in Brixton (Wall, 1999:108). It became an alternative countercultural centre and ran gigs which brought the protest movement together. A café was set up with jazz bands playing there regularly along with other music events, raves, and acid house parties contributing to the emerging ecstasy and acid house culture of the 1990s.



[2] Young black males were disproportionately targeted by the police in the urban conurbations and summary beatings, assaults and death in custody were commonplace, with largely black and Irish people dying in police custody in the UK. The report published in the wake of the riots by Lord Scarman led to new codes for police behaviour exemplified in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and also the formation of the Police Complaints Authority in 1985. Yet even though there were no black police officers in Brixton in 1985, Scarman at the time rejected the idea that it was 'institutionally racist'. Nevertheless, the first Brixton Riots of November 1981 set the ball rolling for Met Police reform and action on racial discrimination. Scarman deemed intricate socio-economic dynamics has facilitating the violent protests in Brixton. Further to the Scarman Report, in the aftermath of the Broadwater Farm Estate disturbances in North London Lord Gifford in 1985 conducted an enquiry. While the Bradford Commission was undertaken in the wake of the 1995 Bradford riots.

[3] Audit cultures and associated metrics compel organisations to be accountable more to funders than to the communities they serve. This can be an issue, as Poyntz notes (2018: 293):

The Cooltan Collective was also home to a range of campaign groups, including Families of Travellers, the London Green Party, London Friends, the Green Party, Freedom Network, Earth First!, and Reclaim the Streets. Urban leftists and green environmental activists united against the Criminal Justice Bill of the early 1990s (North, 2006: 61). Eventually, the squatters were evicted in February 1992, and the building was destroyed, although the land remained disused for over ten years. The Cooltan Collective then moved to another location and then in September 1993 moved onto Coldharbour Lane and the old Benefit Office building, from which they were again evicted in September 1995.

Cooltan Centre in 1995:

After the eviction and it's condition in 2003:

Conclusion

Counter-discourse traditions were already well-rooted in Brixton, due to the radical undertones that had already set foot in Brixton from the 1960s. There has been, in Gramscian terms, a counter-hegemonic theme with the use of spaces in Brixton that were home to resistant ideas and facilitated a deliberative arena for health-related issues. Manuel Castells in Power of Identity (1997: 9) posits that a 'resistance identity'

> **...constructs forms of resistance against otherwise unbearable oppression on the basis of clearly defined identities making it easier to essentialize the boundaries of resistance.**

Defensive and resistance identities manifested, flourished, and found fertile ground within Brixton. Castells suggested that as people rejected contemporary individualism, there was a move towards finding identity within cultural communities with defensive identities in the face of globalization. Within such a rubric, the notion of 'community' serves as a reaction to the crisis of modernization and also represents the possibility of a defensive communal utopia. Meaning, according to Castells (1997: 11), cannot be found in wealth and power and so may rather be explored "in the reconstruction of defensive identities around communal principles."
In this way, defensive identities driven by initiatives on the collective level are examples of "the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded" (Castells, 1997: 11). Importantly, for Castells (1997: 65), defensive identities operate "as a refuge and solidarity to protect against a hostile, outside world." A thriving and flourishing environment for intellectual exchange and discussion is how Brixton could be characterized by the mid-1990s, with there being a particular scope for debate on a range of subversive and radical ideas. In this way, Brixton's subaltern counter-public spheres also reflect the black identity nexus in the UK locale, and Pough (2015: 35), for instance, notes that:

> **By complicating and further nuancing the notion of subaltern counterpublic spheres, we are able to break apart notions of a monolithic Black community that has one set of goals and one set of means by which to obtain these goals. We are able to see not only difference within Black communities but also the ways in which the various factions of Black communities sometimes oppress one another.**

Brixton has been home to individuals who have been cultivated into resistance identities, largely developed out of experiences in the 1960s through to the 1980s which led to opportunities to become familiar with other narratives of resistance that had similar sentiments to associated discourses around equality, belonging, accommodation, employment, police brutality, institutional racism, and marginalization. In this way, subaltern counterpublic health spheres have flourished as it converges with broader resistance perspectives which people residing in Brixton have been both accustomed to and have had to adopt to navigate wider racism, discrimination, and inequality.

The spread of radical traditions within Brixton meant that by the mid-1990s it had become recognized across the globe as a locale open to discursive spheres across a plethora of ideas where discussion was commonplace. In the 1980s, the below the radar radical discussions on the Brixton streets may have been about police brutality, black radical politics, squatting in disused council properties, and the applicability of Trotskyist notions. In the mid to late 1990s, Brixton streets were discussing the applicability of a range of global narratives. Lately, health is now providing a discursive space with ethnomedical traditions and medical pluralist approaches now occupying its own thriving subaltern counterpublic sphere.

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