

**Jeevendrampillai, David. Citizenship, democracy and belonging in suburban Britain: making the local. xviii, 210 pp., illus., bibliogr. London: UCL Press, 2021. £25.00 (paper) (Book review)**

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David Jeevendrampillai

Citizenship, democracy and belonging in suburban Britain: Making the local

A PhD researcher is sent out to engage with community members as part of a big academic research project. Part of the job is to solicit contributions to a map which purports to show significant community locations. The contributions pose a dilemma for the academics because they consist of stories that have no basis in 'historical fact'.

This 'ethnographic moment' of rejected stories, and the conflicting sensemaking practices of local residents and researchers, are the fulcrums on which David Jeevendrampillai's engagingly narrated account of citizenship in late liberal suburbia balances. In the making of a map that is never used, in constructed and rejected accounts of place and community, the author raises important questions about local identity and knowledge, citizenship and community-building in contemporary Britain. Drawing on Foucault, his concern is to identify how 'processes associated with "making the local" are typical of the subjectification associated with late liberalism' (p.7).

Jeevendrampillai takes us through personal encounters of embedded research and collectively-invented 'stupid' stories that manifest 'utopian' ideas of suburban life, revealing in successive layers the volume and toll of the labour involved in acting as a citizen. Contrary to readings of citizenship as a challenge to capitalist society, he argues that 'the labour associated with community building does not counter neoliberal social organisation but rather supports it' (p.xiii).

This is an important counterweight to the valorisation and romanticisation of citizenship sometimes found in accounts of community activism. With attention to detail and extended engagement with place and people, Jeevendrampillai details the costs and moral dilemmas but also the humour and creative potential in 'making the local'.

The site of his inquiry is Surbiton, a London suburb often used as a signifier of mundanity. He focuses on the 'Seething Villagers', a rather unusual community group that celebrates local identity by creating fictitious accounts of local history that playfully undermine practices of local governance.

The book begins by situating the idea of citizenship within the location of Surbiton/Seething, sketching out the wider themes of representation and inclusion, democracy and citizenship, material and meaning that the author seeks to address. Chapter 2 takes us through the theoretical frames being used – methods of 'edge anthropology' (a concern with 'moments of attritions, contestations and exclusions' (p.28)) and a focus on how 'the practice of making yourself a morally engaged citizen ... can mark your life as socially valid' (p.37). The next two chapters turn to the 'ethnographic moment' of map-making, where the map itself – part of a university-led project on 'adaptable suburbs' - becomes 'an emblematic tool of late liberal governance' (p.48) in which academic experts determine which accounts of place are acceptable or not.

This conflict sets up a wider exploration of the paradoxical nature of citizenship in Surbiton/Seething. Chapter 5 presents Seething as a utopian project, designed to foster values of kindness and 'resilience' in opposition to practices of competition and exploitation, crafted through a consciously apolitical reliance on story and humour. The jokes have a serious point, though, as the next chapter highlights: by creating alternative forms and frames for knowledge, such as enrolling the author in the 'Free University of Seething', residents assert the validity of their own ways of knowing.

For all their playfulness, though, the 'Seethingers' become enrolled in practices of local governance that exact an emotional and physical toll when they seek to preserve a water filtration site, a historic element of London's sewage system that is slated for development as luxury flats.

Localism, Jeevendrampillai observes, places a 'negative burden of action on local communities and particular individuals' (p.183). Active citizenship carries a 'moral weight' which threatens to crush those who engage in it.

Jeevendrampillai's conclusion is that the search for a 'politically qualified life' that grants a seat at decision-making tables in a late liberal context is hard labour. Residents haul emotional weight as they seek a voice and a hearing. But by drawing attention to such work, and those who undertake it, the author argues that anthropological practice can open up new spaces for collaboration.

While the book clearly stems from a PhD thesis, it is more than simply a doctoral publication. Its wider significance is in drawing attention to the practical labour and contested knowledges that are intrinsic to community-building. It is evident that the author hugely enjoyed the research, but also that he developed a deep empathy with and respect for his interlocutors. His account will appeal to a broad audience of readers engaged in community practice as well as to those seeking theoretical insights.

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