

London Voices, London Lives: Tales from a Working Capital. By Peter Hall. Bristol: Policy Press, 2007. 498 pages. £24.99 (Paperback).

In other parts of the UK, London is often subject to a particular form of orientalism, with stories built upon its position as a seat of national and international power; as Capital, World City, and the UK's 'centre point'; a melting pot of people, culture(s) and creativity; an unceasing and unfolding event in itself. The introduction to *London Voices, London Lives* begins by playing up these issues, in particular taking Steen Eiler Rasmussen's definition of London as "the unique city" (p5) in terms of its physical, economic and cultural development as a place. But, significantly, this book looks beyond London as centre-of-the-universe to London as a place in which real lives are lived, where deep polarities, contradictions and struggles are embedded within the seeming banality of day-to-day existence.

Peter Hall describes this book as a "sort of by-product" (p8) of *Working Capital* (Buck et al, 2002), itself a product of the ESRC *Cities: Competitiveness and Cohesion* programme. However, while *Working Capital* is an unashamedly academic tome, this book seeks to avoid over-analysis or unnecessary description, instead relying on transcripts - taken from over 100 interviews carried out as part of the ESRC programme - to provide a more organic, grounded account of every-day life in London: the conceit being to let its inhabitants speak for themselves.

London is often envisioned as a sprawling conurbation made up of a myriad of interlinked urban villages, each with its own physical, social, economic and cultural uniqueness, but somehow also combining to form a vaguely cohesive spatial gestalt. Accordingly, this book is separated into two main parts for analysis: *London Voices* and *London Lives*. A third part, *London Futures*, explores respondents' civic engagement and then provides a final summary of the book. *London Voices* focuses on the individuals' accounts of living in different areas of London. Seven localities are represented, taking a chapter each, with the aim being to show the heterogeneity of London's geography: chapter titles include 'New Melting Pot: Battersea', and 'Pressured Proletarian Island: Bermondsey'. Dividing the respondents according to where they live is a natural way of attempting to show the social geography of London as experienced by its inhabitants. However, conversely, this section shows a quite static account of London: the majority of people appearing to operate within a limited geographical and social sphere within the city. This ties in with a general undercurrent of inertia, of people either actively seeking a quiet life, or of those battling against the weight of emotional, psychological, economic and societal baggage to simply stay afloat: "yeah it's just a question of just keeping your head above water all the time, just, [...] not waving, drowning" (Joan, Battersea p278).

There are some deeply poignant passages within *London Voices*, particularly those that express not just the different external issues that people face, but also offer a deeper insight into different individuals' backgrounds and personalities.

Adeola (p153-158), stands out as one such instance. The extracts from her interview chart a life of downhill social mobility; a relatively privileged upbringing in Nigeria, followed by a less comfortable time in Chiswick, a divorce and then finding herself in near penury in a housing association flat in Heston. This is interspersed with introspective moments where she questions the decisions she has made in life and her general disposition: "I as you can see I'm very idle, you know..."

At the other end of the scale, Henrietta, in Bermondsey, gave a startling glimpse into the life of the mobile young professionals living in central London. The term 'yuppie' is used quite liberally in discussing these individuals, which at first jarred as a seemingly anachronistic term, but actually is probably the best way to describe a certain section of society in London, who - in this case at least - live a life of conspicuous consumption without responsibilities, and are able to remain utterly oblivious to the poverty always just a short walk away:

Interviewer: You mean you are not really aware of the estates in the area?

Henrietta: Not at all (p78)

While *London Voices* contains the longest sections of uninterrupted transcript, sadly, such illuminating passages are relatively rare; occurring at most once per study area. Perhaps this is more a reflection of the disadvantages of presenting a book in this way, than of the interviewees themselves: the lack of narrative and description mean that only the longer passages of transcript allow any real insight into the deeper levels of individual personalities or experiences. Also, while Hall is understandably keen to include as many of the interviews as possible, in order to give a real sense of the variety of lives lived in London, the sheer number of voices presented here result in a degree of fragmentation in this section, with up to 24 different characters per chapter being presented.

For me, the abiding memory of living in London is of unceasing travel between work and home, from home to leisure spaces and moving home; ninety-nine per cent of the time by foot and/or public transport. Part 3, *London Lives*, turns to such issues, but what *London Voices* reminds us of is that, on the whole, London is populated by individuals living a deeply humdrum existence, a life of creeping ennui and little hope for the future. In this sense, perhaps Hall over-emphasises the uniqueness of London: people remain pretty much the same, whether their voices happen to be recorded in London, or any other town or city.

London Lives draws together the pervasive themes in *London Voices*: those of 'Making Ends Meet', 'Finding a Place', 'Getting There', 'Fearing Crime, Avoiding Crime', and 'Melting the Pot'. These chapters cover the issues that would be expected, such as the difficulties caused by the vagaries of the benefits system ('Making Ends Meet'), the issues caused by so many people, often of different cultural backgrounds living cheek-by-jowl ('Melting the Pot'), and, as previously mentioned, the obsession with travel that is an inevitable part of London life. This provides a more cohesive account than *London Voices*, although on the downside

the themes highlighted are perhaps nothing that might not be predicted at the outset.

In reading the book I looked forward most to the final section, *London Futures*, anticipating excerpts and discussion of the participants' ambitions, hopes and fears for their individual futures: themes that fleetingly but repeatedly creep up in *London Voices*. However, what in fact ensues is a discussion of Londoners' civic and political involvement - or predictably, lack thereof - before the concluding chapter, which, generally, puts forward positive hopes for the future of London's increasingly multicultural society, as well as some reflection on the importance of locality to people's lives. The book provides "perhaps a case of social research proving the obvious" (p472), particularly with regard to a common theme in the book: that of the tendency of humans to view change negatively.

Although this book was published in 2007, the interviews used were carried out over a number of years prior to 2001. As such, events and trends over the last six years mean that this book already feels slightly out of date. Of course 9/11 and 7/7 stand out as obvious events that have affected life in London more than any other city in Europe (Madrid being the only possible exception). But also the arrival of economic migrants from Poland and the other recent EU accession states bring a new dimension to life in the capital, which is inevitably not reflected here: in fact there is a dearth of interviews with recently arrived immigrants (from both within the UK and elsewhere) in the book, which is acknowledged by Hall. Similarly, almost all of the interviews with first generation immigrants are from former British colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and southern Asia, none from Europe.

In terms of layout, the book follows a simple format, with the text interrupted by the use of just one map (in the introduction) and one or two photographs per chapter, which may perhaps limit the 'crossover' appeal of this book, but also makes it harder for readers to acquaint themselves sufficiently with the study areas. The use of contextual maps for each chapter within *London Voices* would be a useful inclusion, and more widely, greater use of photography and other 'sensual data' (such as some attempt of 'thick' description of the estates, homes and people involved) to allow a deeper penetration of the lives and areas represented here. Similarly, it would be helpful to include the interview schedule/s used in collecting the data to give some idea of the extent and ways in which interviewees were guided or constrained by the interview structure.

The scope of the book is ambitious, attempting to draw together a wide range of aspects of life in London, and in places perfectly captures the issues faced by its inhabitants. However, at times it feels like reading an overlong annex to a more in depth study (i.e. *Working Capital*), whilst the length and fragmented nature of the writing make it difficult to read as a complete 'story' of London. As such, this may work best as a book to 'dip into' from time to time; there is plenty of interest here, but the individual voices sometimes get crowded out by the variety of other stories being told when read one straight after the other. In summary then, the qualities of this book somewhat appropriately mirror life in London: deeply fragmented but somehow clinging together as a whole, at once everything and nothing.

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References:

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