

Book Review

Ruth Fincher, Kurt Iveson, Helga Leitner, and Valerie Preston, *Everyday Equalities: Making multicultures in settler colonial cities*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019, 264+viii pp. ISBN: 9780816694648, £21.99 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Danny Dorling, University of Oxford, UK (3 November 2019)

This book is a collection of chapters each originally written by one of the four authors and then edited by the others to blend well. It begins with an explanation that ‘Everyday Equalities’ is the cumulation of five years of work; and explains that Helga, Valerie and Ruth produced the book proposal while staying at the Rockefeller Centre in Bellagio, Italy, in 2012 (occasionally phoning the ‘envious’ fourth author, Kurt, who could not be with them). The Rockefeller centre is not somewhere you drop into every day. It is based on the shore of lake Como it has been described as one of the most beautiful places in the world. A large staff ensure that the fifty acres of gardens look beautiful all year round.¹

The first two chapters discuss how a ‘relational approach’ to equality was developed for this book and introduce the concept of ‘being together in difference as equals’. The relational approach the authors have constructed is made up of two elements: ‘First, we situate encounters and their participants in the space and time of the urban everyday, highlighting how encounters shape and are being shaped by distinct spaces and times in which they take place. To participate in urban life is to engage in a diverse range of activities that involve others—like traveling...’. Thus being relational is partly about meeting people. Second, it is about: ‘the significance of multiculturalism, neoliberalism, and neoconservatism as influential rationalities in the actions of state and nonstate actors that shape the context in which encounters unfold.’ (page 31). This, it is said, is ‘theorizing’.

The key concept that the authors develop of ‘being together in difference as equals’ in their words means ‘living together with culturally and racially different others in our daily life and in the collectivity of communities and neighborhoods without either losing our identities or having some identities privileged over others. A political and practical commitment to equality is a prerequisite for realizing this way of being together in difference. To live and work in difference as equals is an alternative to dealing with our differences through either assimilation or status hierarchies.’ (page 33-34). Assimilation is the opposite to multicultures, the creation of a single culture through the assimilation of those who are different to that, usually dominant culture. The authors suggest that it is possible to be aware of others and live among them as equals without having to deal with status hierocracies. A critic might point out that such an approach is more appealing to someone being paid to sip the wine and think about the meaning of life at the Rockefeller Centre villa in Bellagio, as opposed to those who are cutting the bushes on the lawn below the veranda.

The authors of this book do suggest ‘...that the work of “being together in difference as equals” may also involve agitation and its associated conflict.’ (page 50), but note the use of the word ‘may’. Agitation is presented as optional – understanding is (apparently) enough; or as Edward Foster put it in the one phrase from his book *Howard’s End* (1910) that has been so often quoted before to excuse the disconnect of the English upper classes: ‘*Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height.*’ ‘Only connect’ was triumphed in the novel by its main character, Margaret Schlegel.

And, as any search of this famous epitaph will tell you: ‘She [Margaret] longs for people to be able to reach out to each other and truly communicate – beyond superficial barriers like class or gender – and, as she says, "Only connect."’ There is something very Margaret Schlegel about this book. It aims to break conventions, but only ever so gently.

Multiculturalism is rejected by the authors of *Everyday Equality* as being too much a programme of the state. Instead they say: “We use the idea of “multicultures” (plural) to signal our view that the “being together of strangers” will take diverse forms across different time-spaces. Our interest in the fortunes and fate of urban multiculturalities is inspired by our observations and involvements in the cities where we live and work”. The next four chapters give vignettes from each of these cities in order: Melbourne, Toronto, Sydney and Los Angeles. Each of these four chapters includes one or two bar charts (or a table) showing the relationship between ethnicity and tenure (pages 65/66) neighbourhood, nationality, ethnicity and income (on pages 101, 103, 145), the routes taken by ‘freedom ride’ buses to Washington D.C. in 2003 (on page 182) and some nice photographs. The word ‘scholar’, ‘scholarly’ and ‘scholarship’ appears often in the book, about two dozen times. A great deal of the book is about the practice of serious academic study, more so than it is about equality or the everyday.

The book ends with a chapters concerning six propositions the authors make.

Proposition 1: Being together in difference as equals—or the enactment of equality in urban multiculturalities—involves resisting and struggling against dominant modes of conduct, through new practices that transgress those normalized ways of doing things.

Proposition 2: Much of the collective practice that emerges from experiences of marginalization and crisis is realized through enormous hard work, determination, learning, and ethical and political commitment on the part of participants.

Proposition 3: New organizational infrastructures promote and support practices that enact equality from the bottom up.

Proposition 4: Enacting equality requires the creation and observance of codes of conduct, especially prescriptions about respect and openness toward difference in speech, and about the way we talk about others in public, as well as in our written documents.

Proposition 5: Enacting a politics of encounter that promotes being together in difference as equals entails distinct temporalities. (Establishing trust and a mutual recognition of equality with those who may at first appear to embody the stranger requires time and endurance.)

Proposition 6: Spatialities and material infrastructures matter in facilitating being together in difference as equals. (People use, create, and appropriate spaces in order to enact a politics of equality. Physical spaces are important sites for coming together; in coffee shops, community centers, worker centers, and on sports fields,...)

The authors conclude: ‘We have seen in our case studies that such equality does not depend on conformity to ethno-nationalist or racialized identities, but rather can be premised on shared inhabitation and/or shared commitments and participation in urban routines and activities like making a home, working, moving around, or making publics.’

I would like to end this review by suggesting a seventh proposition

Proposition 7: Equality is fundamentally about income and wealth. Without greater equality of income and wealth no amount of being together can be being together as equals. Whatever you do that you think is transgressive, if you are much richer than others then you are not transgressing – you are playing ('slumming it' as it was once called). You may think you are a participant, but you do not have skin the game. Equality is normally won from the bottom up, occasionally with help from a few higher up, not least when they are concerned that without greater equality everything they know will fall apart. Codes of conduct are all very well and good, but if they, and their enforcement, are used as a substitute for action, then they help preserve existing inequalities. Claiming that a slow process of the better-off getting to better know the worse-off is what is needed may satisfy the better-off, who superficially benefit the longer changes takes, but is unlikely to be attractive to the worse-off person that the better-off person is engaging with in their everyday encounter. If something of significance is happening, it may well not be happening in any encounter you are involved in.

This is an interesting book. However, having read it I came to the conclusion that it is most interesting for what it reveals about the beliefs of these and probably many other academics living in three very unequal states: Australia, Canada and the USA. Like the UK (where I live and work) these places are not at all normal among rich nations. Academics in all four of these states tend to be remarkably well paid in contrast to academics elsewhere in the rich world, because they live in such unequal societies. They also often complain they are not well paid. In more equal societies it is common for much more to be demanded than the greater accommodation of others suggested in this book. That is partly why more equal societies are more equal.

There is much more you can do than 'only connect', but in times and places of greater inequality such actions can be hard to imagine. As I write people are taking such actions in Chile, a country far more unequal than almost any other among all OECD countries.² Some of the most equal of affluent of large nations in the world today are Denmark, France, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. We may not find the solutions to what can increase everyday equalities by looking within the cities of the most unequal of affluent states. We may find them in the most unequal of states such as in Chile, where people have been driven to act; and in the most equal of countries today – where whatever it was that they did – it worked.

¹ <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/our-work/bellagio-center/about-bellagio/>

² Maolis Castro, Ryan Dube and Juan Forero (2019) In Chile, Peaceful Protests Turn Violent by Night: President Sebastian Piñera last week cancelled two international summits as authorities lose control of capital's streets, *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 November, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-chile-peaceful-protests-turn-violent-by-night-11572777000>