

PRACTICE AND PLACE:

MAKING SENSE OF BANTER IN A BUTCHER'S SHOP IN WOLVERHAMPTON

Alexander Brennan

‘J Whitten Traditional Butchers’ is the sign that greets you as you visit John Whitten at his workplace, a butcher’s in the suburb of Tettenhall, Wolverhampton. His butcher’s shop is small, but welcoming; a space of about four square metres, lined with shelves of sauces and seasonings, greets customers as they enter through the Dutch door. The large display cabinet of meat, with John’s friendly figure stood behind it, is the unavoidable view that meets customers in the shop. The butcher’s is also home to a meat display behind the window, a walk-in fridge and a preparation room in the back of the shop. The shop is cold, smelling mildly of meat, and is filled with the sound of John’s welcoming voice, whether he is talking to customers or to his assistant. Following a period during which John had sold the shop to his friend and briefly gave up butchery, he has recently retaken ownership. The butcher’s is situated between a small pharmacy on one side and a cobbler and dry cleaner’s on the other. The street is in what many would describe as the centre of Tettenhall. John believes that Tettenhall is an ‘in-between place’; it used to be a village, but unlike many other villages that got disconnected as cities expanded, Tettenhall remained connected to Wolverhampton as it grew. As a result, John says he serves a plethora of customers. In most cases, however, they fall into two categories: older customers who want to talk, and younger families.

I chose a butcher’s as a place to carry out ethnographic fieldwork because I have always been interested in vegetarianism and attitudes towards meat. I originally thought observing a person that has dedicated their life to providing meat for human consumption would be the best way to study this. Being a friend of my Father’s and having been our family butcher for some time, convincing John to allow me to carry out my research in his shop was not difficult, and was helped too by his generous and friendly personality.

Methodology

All conversations between John and me were recorded on paper after they happened. I consciously decided against using a voice recording device because awareness of it may have affected the types of conversation John initiated and the language that he used. Most

conversations were initiated by the questions that I asked, after which John controlled the topic. As such, I consciously avoided asking him leading questions or questions that challenged his life decisions; opting to start conversations, for example, with 'how did you become a butcher?' rather than 'why did you become a butcher?'. Furthermore, because of the space constraints within the shop and the time demands of his job, all conversations between John and me occurred across the counter, with me in the position of a customer. This was beneficial in the sense that all conversations were situational, influenced by the context of our surroundings and informal compared to a traditional interview. It was also beneficial in order to observe John interact with his customers. As I was stood alongside all the customers that entered, not one remarked on my presence because they thought I was another customer waiting in line. I would only be acknowledged if John introduced me into the conversation, but this was only after the customer had bought their meat or had fulfilled the objective of their visit. As John was comfortable with me interviewing him and observing interactions in the shop for the purposes of this project, his name and personal information have not been anonymised with his permission. Not all customers were aware of my objectives in the shop, for that reason all of their identities have been anonymised.

First Encounters

Upon my first visit to J. Whitten Butchers I quickly understood that attitudes towards meat consumption was not a viable topic for my project. Watching John interact with his customers, I realised that none of them had come into the shop ready to pose themselves with an ethical dilemma; they were there to buy meat, and eat it. Investigating a person's decision to eat meat would involve me asking many leading questions concerning animal slaughter and morality. This would mean I would be dictating my perception of meat consumption, rather than objectively capturing John's or his customers'. Questions about meat consumption could not simply be sprung upon customers during their daily trip to the shops, it was a topic that needed deep reflection of actions and ethics. Furthermore, quizzing customers about this topic would more than likely be a deterrent to business, as the customers may be put off buying meat, which was the main stipulation John had stated upon agreeing to let me carry out fieldwork in his workplace. As a result, my focus shifted.

From this shift, I began to realise that if I was to go into the field with certain expectations of or motives behind my research, it could prove problematic. Not problematic

in the sense that my research would be inaccurate or conjectural, but that it would be partial. If I were to conduct my research on the foundations of a particular motive, certain observations would appear more important to me than others, meaning I would give a warped perspective of my circumstances (Cameron 1997 cited in Blum 2009: 328). As such, I conducted the rest of my research with a much more observational and pragmatic approach, deciding on a theme and argument for the project once I was able to digest all of my notes at once.

What struck me the most, when I visited John for the first time, was how he was in complete control of the shop and every conversation that occurred within it. His voice filled all corners of the room and his wit kept everybody engaged. The long conversations between John and his customers showed that they come to visit him as much as they come to buy meat. After reflecting on all of my observations, I came to realise that this, which may have been passively overlooked had I investigated a specific topic, is the defining aspect of the shop. John and the things that he does within the shop, define the place called 'J. Whitten Traditional Butchers', rather than the place defining his practice. It is for this reason I have decided to investigate how practices of exchange and performance create the place called 'J. Whitten Traditional Butchers'.

'A sprat to catch a mackerel'

A few hours into my first visit to John's, a conversation we were having was interrupted by a customer entering the shop. The customer was a man who John had not seen in some time; not since John had retaken ownership of the butcher's after selling it to his friend and giving up his practice. The customer made it clear that he had no intention of buying anything but was 'just popping [his] head in to say hello'. The pair spoke for over 20 minutes, talking about new life developments and issues with their teenage children. Eventually, the customer asked for half a pork pie, which John gave to him for free. After a short deliberation about paying for the pie, the customer accepted it and left. A little later, a woman came into the shop, asking if John had some jerk seasoning, which he again gave to her for free. John said it was common to give insignificant bits of produce like these away for free.

A more significant example, though, took place last Christmas. John recounted how he would play a game on Christmas Eve. John told one customer, as he had with all others

that day, that if he guessed the price of the meat, which is priced by weight, to the nearest 50 pence he could have it for free. The meat was a prime cut of beef priced over £100. The customer guessed correctly. John honoured the promise; however, after leaving, the customer returned to gift John with an expensive bottle of whisky as a thank-you. John explained how the thought of the gesture, and its price, fully made up for his economic blunder. It seemed to me that J. Whitten Butchers was a place where sharing and the sense of community were just as important as economic profit. John reiterates this when speaking about the demographic makeup of his customers and the detrimental impact of supermarkets: 'when Merry Hill [shopping centre] opened in Dudley, it sucked the lifeblood out of the community, it forced local shops to close having priced them out of the market. The young generation don't mind, but for the older generation shopping is a big part of their day, especially if they live alone. They would rather spend time going to all the individual shops and interacting with the shopkeepers than to a faceless supermarket'. I began to realise that for many, the social interaction in the butcher's was just as important as the produce they needed from it.

I asked John about the free produce he gave to customers. He responded by saying that it is about 'share and share alike', noting how a customer may buy a chicken in order to make a chicken curry, and then may come back and give him some of the curry to try. Similarly, he might give a customer a steak and tell them to take it for free and if they like it, to come back and pay for it. The other reason John gave was the idea of 'a sprat to catch a mackerel', which means that he may give a customer half a pork pie for free, but as a result they will come back a few days later and spend £20 on steak. Whilst this justification can appear economically focused, the 'sprat to catch a mackerel' idea can be seen as the way in which social relationships that transcend the butcher-customer dynamic are reaffirmed. By giving certain bits of produce away for free, John, consciously or unconsciously, creates a debt between himself and the customer. This debt can only be repaid when the customer revisits the shop with chicken curry or money for sirloin steaks, for example. This is because 'when gift is met with counter-gift or money changes hands and there is no further debt or obligation - each party is free to walk away' (Graeber 2010: 10-11). Graeber notes that '[w]ithin communities, there is usually a reluctance ... to allow things to cancel out' (2010: 10-11). By sustaining debt obligations, John not only creates a customer base, but also establishes friendships.

Another form of exchange, but a more important one according to John, is the exchange of what he termed banter, between himself and customers in his shop. After a few hours of observing John serve and speak to customers I began to notice a routine in most, but definitely not all, of their interactions. It started with the exchange of a few rude comments about one another, which were clearly meant in a friendly way. After the customer placed their order, the banter would continue but conversation would slowly turn to recent events or more serious matters as John was fetching and packaging the produce. After paying for the meat, the customer would maybe exchange some more banter with John, say some friendly goodbyes, and then leave. After one customer, who fitted this model had left, John told me: 'that [the exchange of banter], is what it's all about. That's why I do it; why I came back.', then explaining the model I have just described. After observing an interaction between John and one of his customers, where I was also brought into the conversation, I was able to see the link between exchange and the reaffirmation of social relationships in the butcher's more clearly. John told the customer that I was doing research in his shop. After being greeted with expletives, the customer explained to me, 'it's what we like from our local butcher'. In an identical situation that occurred a few hours later, another customer again told me that John 'is the only butcher we come to for abuse and we keep coming back'. For customers here, a trip to the shop does not just conclude in material gain, but is also a way, and a motive, to reconnect with friends. Through exchanges of gifts and banter, John establishes a strong and faithful customer base, who in turn recognise him as their local butcher. Customers characterise John's identity through the banter he exchanges with them. Therefore, John's practice carves out his identity, and thus the identity of the place in which he practises.

'The day he retires he's getting a short back and sides'.

The concept of banter, as the locus of 'John the butcher's' identity, interested me in relation to its performative nature. I wondered whether the loud and witty banter that was always present in his shop characterised John *the butcher*, or John *the person* as well. The second time I visited the butchers, Ken, the cobbler who had worked in the neighbouring shop for many years, came to the door and asked me, in a jokingly disbelieving manner: 'are you still here?'. As a result of my perseverance, he volunteered what he thought was the most important aspect of John and his vocation: 'a butcher said to me when I was starting out,

you've got to be something different, a character. Meat is meat and there are hundreds of butchers. You've got to be something that brings people back, and John lives up to that'. After exchanging more banter and expletives with Ken, John added, 'even Ken has his hair combed back and big moustache so people would remember him. The day he retires he's getting a short back and sides'. Ken adds: 'so people won't recognise me; the other day, in the middle of B&Q, a customer stopped me and took their shoe off to show me its damage'. Ken politely told the customer bring it to the shop on Monday, so not to dishearten the customer and keep business. Both John and Ken concluded that the shop might be closed, but their customers do not believe that the shopkeeper's 'character', or their job, is something confined to the building.

On my next visit, I asked John about what Ken had said a few days previously about having to be 'a character' and whether he thought his job was performative in any way. He replied: 'you kind of have to label yourself... I'm different to neighbouring shops... People like caricatures in the village, a shop keeper is different to a supermarket manager, who is different to a hairdresser. You pigeon-hole personalities and you expect the butcher to be jolly'. He stresses, though, that he doesn't try to be the way he is. Yet, when I asked him if he is the loud and animated butcher all the time, or when he is by himself at home, he says he is not. He then qualifies this evaluation by saying 'being this way isn't a choice, we all do it, it's just human nature'. The subconscious performance that John displays in his shop can therefore be defined as what Goffman calls a front - 'that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance' (1959: 32). Thus, the practice of banter and exchange, which John himself called a label, 'define the situation for those who observe the performance' (*ibid.*), with situation here signifying the butcher's shop and the observers, its customers. With both John and his customers expecting John to be 'the jolly butcher', a self-fulfilling prophecy is created, whereby John's 'social front tends to become institutionalised in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise and tends to take on a meaning and stability' (Goffman 1959: 37). In other words, John's practice makes place.

An interesting reflection, to see how John's specific practice constitutes the place 'J. Whitten Traditional Butchers', is hearing the stories customers told him about the practice of the butcher he had sold the shop to, after a career hiatus. Many customers I observed had not seen John since he had retaken ownership and volunteered information about how

'it wasn't the same when [the previous butcher] was here'. 'The problem was', said one customer, 'he was trying to be you. You know people really well, and you know when you can push it and when to take a step back'. Thus, many customers felt that the shop, as a place, was not the same entity when John was not in control of it and practising his trade.

Conclusion: the complexity of place

By analysing both John's and his customers' perspectives of the shop, I arrive at a contradiction. I have found that customers believe that John, and what he does, constitutes the place 'J. Whitten butchers'. Yet when he is at home, John says he is not loud or witty; this is only a character trait he employs within the shop, albeit unconsciously. John acknowledges his 'performance', and in doing so, believes only when in a certain place will he perform his practices. In other words, John believes that place dictates practice, whereas his customers think John's practice constitutes place. We arrive then, at the problems and complexity of the notion of place, and the discrepancies between certain conceptualisations of it. However, to debate which comes first, practices or place, would be misleading. As Sarah Pink notes, '[n]either precedes the other. Both are theoretical constructs that have been developed to understand things that are *already happening*... There is no 'real' or correct empirical starting point' (2012: 29). So here is where I must be reflexive, as I was at the beginning of this essay. Just like all anthropological pursuits, these two themes are not clear, identifiable, autonomous structures governing John's livelihood. Instead they are an inextricable part of everyday life that only rise to the surface from subjective interests. Attempting to theorise social life is difficult, but whichever way the butcher's shop is conceptualised, the most crucial point is that it is a space where social relations are made and reaffirmed through practices specific to a butcher called John.

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