

The public realm is defined as those nonprivate sectors or areas of urban settlements in which individuals in co-presence tend to be personally unknown or only categorically known to one another. Through a review of the largely ethnographic literature on the public realm, this article details the relationship between it and other types of social space, argues for the thoroughly social character of what occurs there, and describes some of its characteristic rules and relationships. A concluding section speculates on the possible functions or social uses of the public realm.

SOCIAL LIFE IN THE PUBLIC REALM

A Review

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URBAN SOCIOLOGISTS in North America have focused predominantly on two clusters of concerns: the dynamics of land use patterning and the fate of community.¹ Relative to the first, researchers have been drawn to the macro-sociological level and toward demographic and economic data. Relative to the second, interest in the social psychological aspects of city living has been restricted to studies of family, neighborhood, and friendship connections. Although both sets of concerns spawn questions that are theoretically and practically important, it is interesting to note that in neither cluster has attention centered on what is *unique* to cities: their generation of an area of social life—the public realm—unknown in other settlement forms.² Yet despite the general disattention of urban sociologists, bits and pieces of largely ethnographic data about the public realm—emerging from a variety of sources and disciplines and accumulated over a period of some 30

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years—do manage to form a somewhat coherent, if unquestionably incomplete, portrait of this quintessentially urban social space. My intent in this review is to provide an introduction both to these accumulated bits and pieces of information and to the sketchy portrait of the public realm which they make possible. I will first describe the thoroughly *social character* of the public realm, then review some of what we know about the *character of its social life*, and finally speculate a bit about its *characteristic social uses*. Before proceeding, however, matters of definition and distinction—or, if you will, of *geography*—are called for.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE PUBLIC REALM

The *public realm* may be defined rather broadly as *those nonprivate sectors or areas of urban settlements in which individuals in co-presence tend to be personally unknown or only categorically known to one another*. Put differently, the public realm is made up of the public places or spaces in a city, which spaces tend to be inhabited by persons who are strangers to one another or who “know” one another only in terms of occupational or other nonpersonal identity categories such as bus driver/customer.

It may help to clarify what is meant by the public realm to think about situations in which it does not exist. For example, if one makes a simple ideal-type contrast between the private and the public (or communal), one can then note that in pre- or nonurban settlements—the tribe, the village, the small town—these conjoin. The characteristic form of social organization in such settings is the community (defined as overlapping geographical, cultural, and acquaintance space; see, for example, Gusfield, 1975). That is, pre- or nonurban settlements are primary groups containing other primary groups. In them, when one leaves one’s immediate personal or private space (if the group even

makes such a distinction) one moves into a world of acquaintances, kin, friends, enemies, and so forth with whom one shares a culture and a history. All relationships are primary, and what is defined as appropriate behavior among various categories of primary group members is as appropriate in "private" as in "public" space. In contrast, in the city, this conjoining disappears. As the city emerges, so does the separate and quite discrete public realm. In the city, when one leaves private space, one moves into a world of many unknown or only categorically known others, large numbers of whom do not share one's values, history, or perspective. The public realm, then, is a different world from the private realm, and its full-blown existence is what differentiates, crucially, the city from other settlement types.³

This simple dichotomy between public and private⁴ is useful in getting a preliminary handle on the phenomena here under review, but it is too simple to avoid distorting the empirical reality it is supposed to illuminate. A trichotomous distinction, though still a long way from matching the complexity of the real world, can provide a significantly greater degree of precision. Following Hunter (1985), one might characterize tribes, villages, and small towns as consisting primarily of the realms of the *private* and the *parochial*. Hunter defines the private realm (order, in his terms) as characterized by ties of intimacy among primary group members who are located within households and personal networks, and the parochial realm (or order) as characterized by a sense of commonality among acquaintances and neighbors who are involved in interpersonal networks that are located within "communities." Again, only with the invention of the city does the public realm⁵ come into existence, but Hunter's distinctions allow us to recognize that cities contain, in addition to this new arena and to a private realm, a parochial realm as well. Thus, ostensibly public areas of a city—the streets, cafes, bars,

and markets of an especially cohesive neighborhood or the sidewalks and streets of a suburban cul de sac, for example—may not be part of the public realm at all.⁶

Recognition that ostensibly public areas may not, in fact, be especially public led Strauss (1961) to distinguish between locations and locales. By location, Strauss meant a street in which the physical segregation of “lifestyles” is maximized—that is, where only persons of similar values and identities are likely to be found. In contrast, a locale is a street that draws to itself different sorts of populations. I shall borrow Strauss’s distinction, but extend it, defining locations as “bounded” or identifiable portions of non-private space in which the inhabitants are likely to be similar and known to one another (a neighborhood bar is an example). Locales, in contrast, are “bounded” or identifiable portions of nonprivate space in which the inhabitants are likely to be dissimilar and to be strangers or merely categorically known to one another (an airport terminal, for example). While locations may be said to be naturally “at home” when surrounded by parochial space, and locales when surrounded by public space, both are quite capable of being “out of place,” as the following diagram suggests.

	<i>public realm</i>	<i>parochial realm</i>
<i>locale</i>	city center plaza	newly trendy ethnic restaurant in a stable neighborhood
<i>location</i>	exclusive home territory bar in city center	neighborhood bar

Two more complexities must be added to this geography of the public realm, although even then, admittedly, it will be oversimplified. First, I have treated the various distinctions

as between dichotomous categories. They are, in fact, variables. Real places exist in a continuum between private and public, between private and parochial, between parochial and public. Even if we limit our consideration to nonprivate spaces, we must recognize that these exist in a continuum between locations and locales, and the locations and locales are situated amidst surrounding space that is itself on a continuum between the parochial and the public. Additionally, any specific piece of space has a history and may be transformed through time. Second, definitions and evaluations of all these matters are not necessarily shared: what is considered private, parochial or public space; whether a particular space is exclusive or inclusive; and whether what is, should be, may all be matters of conflict and/or negotiation.

THE SOCIAL CHARACTER OF LIFE IN THE PUBLIC REALM

The geography of the public realm, then, is varied and complex. In contrast, one can characterize at least one aspect of the human activity that goes on within it in refreshingly simple terms. Life in the public realm is *thoroughly social*.

This statement may appear to express a mere commonplace, to enunciate the obvious. Yet the fact of the matter is that the rendering "obvious" of this statement was a hard-won victory. Until quite recently, many social scientists dismissed much or all public space activity as thoroughly asocial and, thus, irrelevant and uninteresting. Exactly why this should have been the case is not clear, but it is possible to point to strands of thought that may have contributed to this dismissal.

The first emerges from the work of Mead, especially as that work was interpreted by Blumer. Following Mead, Blumer distinguished between "symbolic" and "non-symbolic" interaction. In his summarizing statement of

“The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism,” he reiterated that classic distinction in these terms:

Non-symbolic interaction takes place when one responds directly to the action of another without interpreting that action; symbolic interaction involves interpretation of the action. Non-symbolic interaction is most readily apparent in reflex responses, as in the case of a boxer who automatically raises his arm to parry a blow. . . . In their association *human beings engage plentifully in non-symbolic interaction as they respond immediately and unreflectively to each other's bodily movements, expressions, and tones of voice*, but their characteristic mode of interaction is on the symbolic level, as they seek to understand the meaning of each other's action [1969: 9-10, emphasis added].

A hefty portion of public space behavior, of course, involves persons responding immediately and apparently unreflectively to one another's bodily movements and expressions (e.g., when crossing through a busy intersection or standing in a crowded subway car). That is, it involves what the Mead-Blumer perspective identifies as nonsymbolic interaction. And while their schema does not actually banish such interaction to the nether regions of asocial behavior, it does suggest that responses that are “immediate and unreflective” are simply not as sociologically relevant as those that are mediated by the interpretive process.

The second strand of thought has its genesis in Simmel's essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1950), is developed further in Wirth's classic “Urbanism as a Way of Life” (1938), and reaches maturity in the work of Milgram, especially in his 1970 essay, “The Experience of Living in Cities.” The essential argument is that the public areas of the city are so densely packed with sights and sounds that they engender “stimulus overload.” Humans cope with this by “shutting down” or “turning off.” Thus, much human activity in these settings is asocial because as a defense against stimulus overload persons are simply ignoring one another. Karp, in an article that argues against it, has nicely summarized this point of view:

The quality of urban life is seen largely as a manifestation of the thorough anonymity of the city. . . . Urbanites are seen as interacting “almost subliminally, demanding nothing of each other, making no contact with each other, merely passing near each other” (Strauss, 1961: 63-64). The city, in short, supports a degree of noninvolvement, impersonality, and aloofness not to be found elsewhere [Karp, 1973: 431].⁷

The—what I take to be successful—challenge to a conception of public realm activity as asocial emerged from a variety of sources, including, importantly, Stone’s seminal essay on “City Shoppers and Urban Identification” (1954) and Jacobs’ discussion of the “uses of the street” in *Death and Life . . .* (1961). But I think it is fair to say that the most grievous blows to that conception came out of the work of Goffman. Most particularly in *Presentation of Self . . .* (1959), *Behavior in Public Places* (1963) and *Relations in Public* (1971), he argued eloquently and persuasively for the view that the interaction between strangers passing on the street is as much symbolic interaction as the conversation between lovers; that the same ritual concerns for the fragility of sacred selves is operating among strangers on a beach and among participants in a family gathering. He rescued both “apparently unreflective” and “anonymous” behavior from dismissal and ensconced them firmly within the social scientific enterprise. Many of the researches to be cited below found their initial inspiration in the Goffmanian insight that life in the public realm is both thoroughly social and sociologically interesting.

THE CHARACTER OF SOCIAL LIFE IN THE PUBLIC REALM

I have argued thus far that the public realm, as a distinct area or arena of human activity, can fruitfully be understood as a thoroughly social setting and as possessing a highly variable and complex “geography.” I want now to review some of what we know about its social life; specifically, to

review what we know about the “rules” that pattern its activities and the relationships that populate its spaces.

RULES

Using the term “rule” in a very broad and general sense,⁸ it seems fair to say that urban public spaces are no more rule-bound than other areas of social life, but they are also no less. While one cannot hope to understand what goes on in the public realm simply by invoking a set of normative principles or behavioral patterns or customs, neither can one get a sociological handle on its “doings” without appreciating that the participants are—symbolically speaking—carrying and consulting multiple guide books to help them define the situation and direct their own conduct. At the risk of belaboring this analogy, let me suggest a few titles for these books. One might be called “Grammars of Motility,” and recommend principles of social and physical movement in the public realm: making one’s way through crowded streets and intersections (e.g., Alexander and Federhar, 1978; Wolff, 1973), choosing a seat in a bar, restaurant, or bus (e.g., Becker, 1973; Cavan, 1966; Davis et al., 1966; Lofland, 1973), escaping unwanted attentions (e.g., Cahill, 1985; Snow et al., 1987), joining or participating in a queue (e.g., Hraba and Siemienska-Zochowsak, 1983; Mann, 1969), achieving social invisibility (e.g., Henderson, 1975; Karp, 1973; Lilly and Ball, 1981; Sundholm, 1973), driving on relatively modern road systems (e.g., Richman, 1972; Shor, 1964; Wallace, 1973) or through the narrow streets of a third-world city (e.g., Gregory, 1985), going to the assistance of a stranger in minor or major trouble (e.g., Latané and Darley, 1970, 1973; Messer, 1982; Pearce, 1980) or avoiding what appears to be a dangerous scene (e.g., Latané and Darley, 1970, 1973; Milgram, 1977; Solomon et al., 1981). In this regard, Goffman (1963) and, more particularly, (1971), may be read as legal textbooks in the microinteraction of public motility.

Another possible title might be "Urban Visual Aids: Rules for Coding Space, Appearance, and Behavior," a book devoted to detailing the "interpretation principles" by which urbanites "make sense of" the raw data emanating from their physical and social environment and thus define the situations in which they find themselves. My own earlier work on urban public space (1973) is concerned importantly with this topic (see also Jackson and Johnston, 1972). Denizens of the city's public places probably also carry "Verbal Sociability Customs," a volume that assists them in determining when, with whom, and how they may or may try to engage their fellow urbanites in direct conversation. (See, for example, Britton, 1983; Brooks-Gardner, 1980, 1986; Cloyd, 1976; Corzine and Kirby, 1977; Gmelch and Gmelch, 1978; Kenen, 1982; Khuri, 1968; Whyte, 1980; Wiseman, 1979.)

A close inspection of these (and other) interrelated normative areas would certainly tell us much about social life in public place. But rather than focus on these "regulatory minutiae," I want to propose that the "rules" of the public realm are best understood in terms of three broad interactional principles that overarch the more particular and specific clusters of guidelines that I have already identified. These are the principles of civil inattention, audience role prominence, and civility towards diversity.

Civil inattention. In *Behavior in Public Places*, Goffman introduced the concept of civil inattention as follows:

When persons are mutually present and not involved together in conversation or other focused interaction, it is possible for one person to stare openly and fixedly at others, gleaning what he can about them while frankly expressing on his face his response to what he sees—for example, the "hate stare" that a Southern white sometimes gratuitously gives to Negroes walking past him. It is also possible for one person to treat others as if they were not there at all, as objects not worthy of a glance, let alone close scrutiny. Moreover, it is possible for the individual by his staring or "not seeing," to alter his own appearance hardly at all in consequence of the presence of the others. Here we have "nonperson" treatment, it

may be seen in our society in the way we sometimes treat children, servants, Negroes, and mental patients.

Currently in our society, this kind of treatment is to be contrasted with the kind generally felt to be more proper in most situations, which will here be called "civil inattention." What seems to be involved is that one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design [1963: 83-84].

Whether or not the principle of civil inattention is exactly as Goffman describes it here,⁹ there can be no question of its existence and power. It makes possible co-presence without co-mingling, awareness without engrossment, courtesy without conversation. It is, perhaps, the absolute *sine qua non* of city life.¹¹

Like most broad social principles, civil inattention is surrounded by exceptions and variations (see, e.g., Brooks-Gardner, 1981). In the quotation above, Goffman himself makes note of "nonperson treatment" and the "hate stare" as exceptions that prove the rule and the remaining few pages of his discussion of the topic provide further qualifications and elaborations. There are also cultural, sub-cultural, and situational variations in the applicability and appropriateness of the general principle. Russian youth, for example, are not at all shy about approaching total strangers whom they identify as Westerners, fingering their clothing and making offers to purchase one or another garment. Persons who have staked out "home territories" in public places, as another example, appear to feel little reticence about intruding upon the privacy of anyone who enters their space (Cavan, 1963; Gmelch and Gmelch, 1978; Hong and Dearman, 1977; Lofland, 1973). And Cahill describes a situation where the general principle of civil inattention requires that it be violated.

Although masculine clothing permits males to urinate without noticeably disturbing their clothed appearance, they must still partially expose their external genitalia in order to do so. Clearly, the standards of modesty that govern public behavior prohibit even such limited exposure of the external genitalia. Although the sides of some urinals and the urinating individual's back provide partial barriers to perception, they do not provide protection against the glances of someone occupying an adjacent urinal. In our society, however, "when bodies are naked, glances are clothed" (Goffman 1971: 46). What men typically give one another when using adjacent urinals is not, therefore, civil inattention but "nonperson treatment" . . . [Cahill, 1985: 41].

Audience role prominence. As Goffman made clear in his initial statement, civil inattention is not disattention. The principle of civil inattention may require that one not be obviously interested in the affairs of the other, but it does not require that one not be interested at all. As such, this first principle is fully compatible with the second: Inhabitants of public settings act primarily as audience to the activities which surround them.

Given this pattern, it is not surprising that descriptions of public space are often clothed in the language of the theater. One example can stand for many.

It has long been assumed that public life, just like a theatrical production, requires actors and audience, a stage and a theater. . . . Public life may take place on center stage where the actors are clearly visible to most of the audience, or in more secluded areas visible only to a few. A public space, however, is at once both stage and theater, for in public the spectators may at any moment choose to become actors themselves. . . . Successful public places accentuate the dramatic qualities of personal and family life. They make visible certain tragic, comic and tender aspects of relationships among friends, neighbors, relatives or lovers. They also provide settings for a gamut of human activities [Lennard & Lennard, 1984: 21-22; see also Cahill, 1985; Gross, 1986; Hannerz, 1980: Chapter 6; MacCannell, 1973; Seamon and Nordin, 1980; Silverman, 1982; Snow et al., 1981; Tilly, 1984: 130-131].

Just *how much* will be available for the voyeuristic pleasures of the audience is quite variable. Certainly the modern city is outclassed by its preindustrial predecessor in the amount of public realm activity (Lofland, 1973: Ch. 2) and among modern cities, newer, automobile-oriented settlements like Brasilia, Houston, and Phoenix are no match for older, denser, more walkable places like London, New York, or San Francisco. Similarly, what will be available—the range or diversity of the theatrical performances presented—also varies across time and space. For the average urbanite in 20th century North America the dramaturgic menu would appear to include intentional performances by street musicians, mimes, jugglers, magicians, and others (Harrison, 1984); accidents and other health emergencies (Palmer, 1983);¹¹ commercial and sexual exchanges—legal and illegal (Cloyd, 1976; Delph, 1978; Fields, 1984; Kornblum, 1978; Maisel, 1974; Wiedman and Page, 1982); presumptively private acts (Feigelman, 1974); love scenes and fight scenes among dyads (McPhail, 1987); and the mundane ballet created when aggregates of people walk, sit, converse, sleep, read, and watch their watchers (Love, 1973; Whyte, 1980).

Civility toward diversity. The third major principle, civility toward diversity, specifies that in face-to-face exchanges, confronted with what may be personally offensive visible variations in physical abilities, beauty, skin color and hair texture, dress style, demeanor, income, sexual preference, and so forth, the urbanite, will act in a civil manner; that is, will act “decently” vis-à-vis diversity. As with the other principles, there are, of course, innumerable variations and exceptions. But the sense of freedom from judgment which many people report (personal interviews) as a major pleasure of being “out in public” testifies to the principle’s operation.

Let me be clear. To be civil toward diversity is not necessarily to act in a manner that will be defined as nice or

pleasant. The fabled rudeness of New York City service personnel can be as expressive of civility as the pseudo-gemeinschaftlich smiles and the entreaties to "have a nice day" emanating from their California counterparts. The crux of this principle is evenhandedness and universality of treatment, not demonstrations of friendliness or fellow-feeling. Civility probably emerges more from indifference to diversity than from any appreciation of it.

One of the more interesting aspects of this principle is that it seems to excite remark only in its breach. As an example, I have spent many hundreds of hours making observations in public spaces and have observed thousands of instances of civility toward diversity. Yet almost without exception, these have gone unrecorded.¹² Only the very few instances of observed incivility made it into my notes. Similarly, the social science literature dealing with the topic tends to assume the normality or unremarkability of the principle's operation and to focus either on general conditions which support it, or create it in the first place (e.g., Becker and Horowitz, 1972; Cherney, 1986; De Puymège, 1971; Fischer, 1983; Gold, 1982; Issel, 1986; Lofland, 1971, 1983) or on instances of its breakdown (e.g., Gold, 1982; Karp et al., 1977).

The topic of breakdown, of breach in the operation of the principle of civility towards diversity, brings us back to a distinction made earlier (in the discussion of the geography of the public realm) and takes us toward a generalization that applies to public realm rules more generally. The applicability and appropriateness of the three principles¹³ I have outlined here, as well as of the regulatory minutiae which they overarch, does not extend into the territory of the parochial or of the private. Where the boundaries between the three realms are unclear or disputed or, even more simply, at border points between them, ruptures in the moral order are not only possible, but under some conditions, probable. One of the excitements, but also one of

the dangers, of the urban environment is the uncertainty of knowing exactly where one is and, thus, of knowing exactly what rules apply.

RELATIONSHIPS

To assert that life in the public realm is thoroughly social is to imply not only that its interactions are rule-patterned but also that the human inhabitants of the realm relate to one another. Some of these relationships, of course, are formed and have their anchorage in the private or parochial realms, as when lovers attend the theater or neighbors sit in the park. For purposes of this review, however, these may be set aside. What is of concern here are those relationships which particularly belong to the public spaces of urban settlements. Even after such narrowing of focus, the number of relational types that could be discussed is quite large. I shall further limit the current discussion, then, by considering only three: fleeting relationships, segmental relationships, and unpersonal/bounded relationships.

Fleeting relationships. In terms of sheer volume, fleeting relationships are the most representative of public realm associational forms. Occurring between or among persons who are personally unknown to one another, they have, as the name implies, a very brief duration—from seconds to minutes. Characteristically, although not necessarily, fleeting relationships involve no spoken exchanges and when such exchanges do occur, they are, by definition, brief and likely to be in the form of inquiry/reply (for example: “Can you tell me the time?”/“It’s just noon.” “Is this where you catch the bus to Stone Park?”/“Yes.” “Are you finished with that newspaper?”/“Help yourself.” “Is this seat taken?”/“Sorry, it’s saved.”).

The fleeting character of so much public realm social life is, in part, a function of who is to be found there. Having reviewed the empirical research on the character of that

population, McPhail describes the findings from some representative studies.

John James (1951, 1953) recorded the distribution of individuals and "withs" among 22,625 persons in a variety of public places in Portland, Oregon. He reported that approximately 45% of the members of those gatherings were alone and 55% were "withs," ranging in size from two to six. James Coleman (1962) recorded the distribution of singles and "withs" among 2,897 pedestrians in Seoul, Korea and reported that approximately 59% were alone and 41% were "withs," ranging in size from two to five. William Berkowitz (1971) recorded the distribution of 21,163 pedestrians in 17 cities around the world and reported that 43% were individuals and 57% were "withs." William H. Whyte's (1980) study of persons in New York City plazas and parks established that approximately 61% of the occupants were alone, 39% were "with others" [McPhail, 1987: 4; see also Edgerton, 1979].

Typically then, in the public realm large numbers of persons, alone or in small groups, are encountering large numbers of other persons, also alone or in small groups and having, somehow, to manage those encounters. Almost all of the literature cited above in the "Rules" section has to do with interactional strategies for coping with the problematics of fleeting relationships: how to get through an intersection; how to choose a seat; how to queue, how to communicate civil inattention, and so forth. Additionally, one can point to Walum's work on door opening (1974); LeJeune's on mugging and being mugged (1973, 1977), Levine, Vinson & Wood's on "subway behavior" (1973) and Newman and McCauley's on eye contact (1977), among a myriad of studies detailing the micro management that is involved when "ships pass in the dark."

Segmental relationships. Segmental relationships are what sociologists are referring to when they reiterate the classic distinction between primary and secondary. Primary relationships involve the sharing of personal, biographical, idiosyncratic, often emotional aspects of self; in secondary relationships, only very limited segments of self (an occu-

pational-instrumental role or identity, for example) are brought in to participate in the interaction. Despite the frequent assertion by social scientists that segmental (or secondary) relationships are particularly characteristic of urban settlements, especially of urban settlements in industrialized economies, the number of studies which have focused on them directly is not very large. What work has been done has tended to look at service occupations and their characteristic interactions with customers. Davis's study of cab drivers (1959), Whyte's work on waitresses (1973), Slosar's analysis of metropolitan bus drivers (1973), Valdez's research on used car salesmen (1984), and Jackall's explication of expression control among commercial bureaucrats (1977) are fine representatives of this surprisingly sparse literature. One possible explanation for the scarcity may lie in the tendency of "primary features to erupt into secondary relationships"—to reverse Lopata's (1965) original insight. Purely segmental relationships seem to be rather unstable; certainly when they persist through time, but even when they are quite short-term, biographical, emotional, and idiosyncratic elements compete with—sometimes even overwhelm—the singularly instrumental tone of their interactions (see, for example, Farberman and Weinstein, 1970; Prus, 1986-87; Stone, 1954). What is initially intended as a study of "cold-blooded urban exchanges," then, may be transformed by the character of the data into a study of patron, home territory (see, for example, Anderson, 1978; Cavan, 1963; Katovich and Reese, 1987; LeMasters, 1973; Lofland, 1973: Ch. 6; Nathe, 1976; Richards, 1963-64), or the less intense, unpersonal/bounded relationships instead.

Unpersonal/bounded relationships. The existence of fleeting and segmental relationships in the public realm, and the unquestioned dominance of the former, fit very well with the popular image of the city as "cold," "inhospitable," "impersonal," "unfriendly" (see, for example, Fischer, 1976; Hollister and Rodwin, 1984; Hummon, 1986; Schorske,

1968; Strauss, 1961; White and White, 1962). But as noted, there may be "less to" the solidity of segmental relationships than sociological and literary stereotypes of urban life would lead one to believe. Additionally, fleeting relationships are continually being transformed into more sociable forms. And what is absolutely clear from study after study of various segments of the public realm is the significant presence there of types of relationships which, while not intimate or primary, are also neither fleeting nor segmental. I will conclude this section on relationships with a discussion of only one of these, that which I am calling unpersonal/bounded.

I use the term *unpersonal* rather than impersonal, to describe a relationship that is simultaneously characterized both by social distance and by closeness. Persons in these relationships may share little, if any, intimate information about themselves (they may not know each others' names, for example) or if they share such information, they do so with the understanding that no relational intimacy is implied. At the same time, the relationship is experienced as "friendly" or "sociable"—its emotional temperature as being "warm." I use the term *bounded* to convey the restriction of the relationship to public space. Unpersonal/bounded relationships, by definition, do not "leak over" into the parochial or private realms.

To review the literature depicting unpersonal/bounded relationships is to confront head-on the extreme oversimplification and distortion inherent in discussions of the "anonymous city" and in the classical contrasts between primary and secondary, *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. The literature tells of elderly persons who tend to congregate in, and to enjoy encounters with, the other customers of downtown restaurants (Pratt, 1986). It describes short-term, highly circumscribed, but friendlike relations that emerge again and again in second-hand clothing stores (Wiseman, 1979) and in laundromats (Kenen, 1982). It portrays an unexpected "community on wheels" that

developed among riders and with the driver of a suburban commuter bus (Nash, 1975). It reports the delimited closeness among airplane passengers (Greenblat, Stein & Gagnon, 1983) and the similar, but longer-term relations among "racetrack buddies" (Rosecrance, 1986). It speaks of "cafe friends" (Haine, 1985), of "tavern sociability" (Kingsdale, 1973; Kotarba, 1977; Thomas, 1978), and of restroom lounge "support systems" (Brent, 1981). In sum, the literature on unpersonal/bounded relations enriches and enlarges our understanding of where, how, and under what conditions meaningful encounters between and among humans can occur.

The three types of relationships reviewed here represent, as I have said, only a small sample of the relational forms which, including those that emerge from private and parochial space, can be found in the public realm. *And it is the proportions and densities of relationship types present in any given space which give that space its identity as fully private, as location, or as locale—as part of the private, parochial or public realm.* Changes in these proportions and densities change the identity of the space itself, and the processes of such replacements or transformations deserve serious study in their own right. Similarly, even within a public realm that doesn't change, the relationship types to be found there do, either through transformations in type of extant relationships or through the replacement of persons involved in one relational type with persons involved in another: fleeting relationships become unpersonal/bounded (McPhail, 1987; Whyte, 1980); unpersonal/bounded ones complicate themselves by adding private space to their locational maps; home territory relationships disintegrate; segmental linkages are flooded with sentiment. It seems reasonable to describe the public realm in terms of the relationship forms which populate it; but it is reasonable to do so only if one keeps in mind that while the forms themselves may persist unchanged through time, any actual instances of them may not.

CHARACTERISTIC SOCIAL USES OF THE PUBLIC REALM

In the foregoing pages I have attempted to relate something of what we know about the public realm—about its geography, its character, its social life. My “tour of the realm” has necessarily been incomplete, but I hope that what I have said has conveyed something of the challenges, pleasures, dangers, and comforts that humans seem to find there.

Let me conclude this review with a very brief look at what some writers have had to say, not about individual experiences in the public realm, but about its possible social uses. We credit the private realm with socializing our young and providing us emotional sustenance; we look to the parochial realm to give us a degree of physical safety and to reinforce our sense of ourselves. With what do we credit the public realm? What “good” do we assume it performs?

In the same way that many sociologists 25 years ago tended to dismiss activity in the public realm as being of no scholarly interest, many sociologists today would answer that the public realm has *no social import*. They would argue that the quality of our lives is deeply affected by the macroforces of political and economic systems and by the microforces of family, neighborhood, and work interaction (the private and parochial realms), but that what happens on the street, in bars, in plazas, in laundromats, and so on, while interesting and fun to read about, is largely irrelevant.

There is, however, a small but growing body of sociologists, environmental psychologists, political activists, geographers, and especially urban designers and planners, who would argue otherwise. The work on which they base their arguments is frankly speculative, but it is also intriguing in its implications and strongly suggestive of a need for more than speculation. The public realm, they argue (although they would not, of course, use that term) may be, because of its stimulus complexity, crucial for *intellectual*

development (Parr, 1967); because of the freedom it allows from the demands and judgments of family, work, and community life, crucial for physical, mental, and emotional health (Lindheim, 1985; Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982; Parr, 1968; Van Dresser, 1961); because of its openness and the diversity of its inhabitants, crucial for the learning of civility and tolerance (Jacobs, 1961; Lofland, 1983); because of the intricacy of its normative structure, crucial for physical safety (Jacobs, 1961); and because of the simultaneous distance and interdependence among persons which it promotes, crucial for the development of political action capabilities (Sennett, 1977).

Even if there is only a modicum of truth in these assertions, given what we know about the numbers of persons who move through, and/or spend significant time in, public space, surely the public realm as the focus of a self-conscious and intentional research interest is fully justified. I intend this review to contribute, at least in a small way, to that end.

NOTES

1. Traditionally the land-use question was answered by researchers working within the human ecology perspective (see, for example, Guest and Lee, 1983; Hawley, 1950; Kasarda, 1978; Lee, 1985). Of late, scholars of political-economy have offered a serious challenge to the dominant ecological explanatory schema (see, for example, Harvey, 1973, 1985; Logan, 1976; Logan and Molotch, 1987; Molotch, 1976; Walton, 1979, 1981; Zukin, 1980, 1982, 1987). The community question is as old as sociology itself, both being the products of attempts to describe and understand the transformations in social life engendered by the industrial and associated "revolutions." The community question asks whether communal sentiments can survive urbanization on a large scale, and was initially answered with a resounding *no* (Durkheim, 1947; Milgram, 1970; Tonnies, 1940; Wirth, 1938). More recent work (e.g., Hunter, 1974, 1975, 1978; Olson, 1982; Suttles, 1968, 1972; Unruh, 1979, 1980; Wellman, 1979; Wellman and Leighton, 1979) convincingly contradicts that negative assessment, demonstrating that such sentiments can be found in, among other sites, locality groups, personal networks, and social worlds (transpersonal networks).

2. Social scientists who most consistently have shown some interest in public realm related matters are those who identify themselves as students of the built environment. Many of these are geographers, environmental psychologists, and urban designers/planners (see, for example, Francis, 1987a, 1987b; Francis et al., 1981; Moudon, 1987; Proshansky et al., 1976; Rogers and Ittelson, 1978; Seamon, 1979). Among sociologists, the work of Cranz (1982) and Michelson (1970, 1977, forthcoming) is especially relevant.

3. This argument—that the city should crucially be understood as a “world of strangers”—is made in greater detail in Lofland (1973). The term “public realm” is sometimes used in the restrictive sense I am employing here but more frequently it is used as a synonym for “public order,” “public sphere,” or “public life” with the attendant implication of political and economic activity (see, for example, Arendt, 1958; Fischer, 1981; Habermas, 1974; Hohendahl, 1974; Hunter, 1985).

4. What is meant by public and private is, of course, highly variable across time and space. I recognize that the distinction, as I draw it, while relatively commonsensical for modern Westerners, would seem nonsensical to many other persons in many other times and places. See, for example, Benn and Gaus (1983); Bensman and Lilienfield (1979).

5. Among nonurban peoples, the public realm experience may well have been intermittently available, as in the markets and fairs of an agrarian economy. What is unique about the city is that it transforms intermittent availability into permanence.

6. Interestingly enough, most classic ethnographies of city life—older and modern—are studies of the parochial realm. From Whyte (1943) to Gans (1962, 1967), to Suttles (1968) and Liebow (1967), to Horowitz (1983) and Rieder (1985), it is the world of neighborhood, of friend and kin networks, and of acquaintances that has been lovingly documented by urban sociologists and anthropologists. Presumably, problems of access account for the absence of a comparable number of works on the private realm (but see Handel, 1986, for a somewhat different view). And disattention to the public realm is quite reasonable, given the belief that nothing social occurs there.

7. Fischer (1981) and House and Wolf (1978) importantly qualify the basic arguments of this line of thought, while Karp et al. (1977) and Wallace (1980) provide strong critiques of what they judge to be its unsupportable antiurbanism.

8. In everyday speech as well as in social science, the term *rule* has a variety of meanings. Many arguments in sociology over whether certain human conduct is or is not “rule guided” seem as often the result of varying parties defining the word differently as of genuine theoretical conflict. My dictionary provides many definitions of rule, including: a prescribed *guide* for conduct or action; and an accepted *procedure, custom* or *habit* (*Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1971, emphasis added). Neither of these definitions implies rigid control; both are perfectly compatible with a view of social life as negotiated and emergent and of social actors as constructors and strategists. When I speak of public realm rules, then, it is with these relatively loose meanings of the term.

9. Goffman made the error of defining aspects of the civil inattention principle too specifically, as in his assertion that when passing another on the street “civil inattention may take a special form of eyeing the other up to

approximately eight feet, during which times the sides of the street are apportioned by gesture, and then casting the eyes down as the other passes—a kind of dimming of the lights” (1963:84). Such specificity has generated a virtual cottage industry devoted to proving that “it ain’t exactly so.” See, for example, Cary (1978); Collett and Marsch (1974); Hall (1974); Schefflen (1972); Wolff (1973).

10. Let me emphasize that the concept of civil inattention stands in stark contrast to the Simmel-Wirth-Milgram visions of “stimulus overload” and “psychological shutdown” with their consequent presumed “typical” urban attitudes of emotional coldness and unconcern. Civil inattention suggests that when humans in the public realm appear to ignore one another, they do so not out of psychological distress but out of ritual regard, and their response is not the asocial one of “shut down” but the fully social one of politeness.

11. The fact that humans often quite enthusiastically assume the audience role in the face of what are for individuals serious problems or even catastrophes provides repeated occasions for moralistic hair tearing and teeth gnashing. As should be clear from the context, I see such behavior not as evidence of human perfidy, but as normal and natural within the “rule-structure” of the public realm.

12. The exceptions were instances of civility in the face of quite extreme behavioral “eccentricities.” See Lofland (1973: Ch. 8).

13. Taken together, these three principles provide an alternative to popular explanations and a supplement to more scholarly explanations of so-called “bystander apathy.” Operating simultaneously, they are powerful disincentives to involvement in other people’s business.

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