

# 15 City Life and Difference\*

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The tolerance, the room for great differences among neighbors – differences that often go far deeper than differences in color – which are possible and normal in intensely urban life, but which are so foreign to suburbs and pseudosuburbs, are possible and normal only when streets of great cities have built-in equipment allowing strangers to dwell in peace together on civilized but essentially dignified and reserved terms.

Jane Jacobs<sup>1</sup>

One important purpose of critical normative theory is to offer an alternative vision of social relations which, in the words of Marcuse, "conceptualizes the stuff of which the experienced world consists . . . with a view to its possibilities, in the light of their actual limitation, suppression, and denial".<sup>2</sup> Such a positive normative vision can inspire hope and imagination that motivate action for social change. It also provides some of the reflective distance necessary for the criticism of existing social circumstances.

Many philosophers and political theorists criticize welfare capitalist society for being atomistic, depoliticized, fostering self-regarding interest-group pluralism and bureaucratic domination. The most common alternative vision offered by such critics is an ideal of community. Spurred by appeals to community as an alternative to liberal individualism made by Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others, in recent years political theorists have debated the virtues and vices of communitarianism as opposed to liberalism.<sup>3</sup> Many socialists, anarchists, feminists, and others critical of welfare capitalist society formulate their vision of a society free from domination and oppression in terms of an ideal of community. Much of this discussion would lead

us to think that liberal individualism and communitarianism exhaust the possibilities for conceiving social relations.

I share many of the communitarian criticisms of welfare capitalist liberal democratic theory and society. I shall argue however that the ideal of community fails to offer an appropriate alternative vision of a democratic polity. This ideal expresses a desire for the fusion of subjects with one another which in practice operates to exclude those with whom the group does not identify. The ideal of community denies and represses social difference, the fact that the polity cannot be thought of as a unity in which all participants share a common experience and common values. In its privileging of face-to-face relations, moreover, the ideal of community denies difference in the form of the temporal and spatial distancing that characterizes social process.

As an alternative to the ideal of community, I propose an ideal of city life as a vision of social relations affirming group difference. As a normative ideal, city life instantiates social relations of difference without exclusion. Different groups dwell in the city alongside one another, of necessity interacting in city spaces. If city politics is to be democratic and not dominated by the point of view of one group, it must be a politics that takes account of and provides voice for the different groups that dwell together in the city without forming a community.

City life as an openness to unassimilated otherness, however, represents only an unrealized social ideal. Many social injustices exist in today's cities. Cities and the people in them are relatively powerless before the domination of corporate capital and state bureaucracy. Privatized decision-making processes in cities and towns reproduce and exacerbate inequalities and oppressions. They also produce or reinforce segregations and exclusions within cities and between cities and towns, which contribute to exploitation, marginalization, and cultural imperialism.

Many democratic theorists respond to these ills of city life by calls for the creation of decentralized autonomous communities where people exercise local control over their lives and neighborhoods on a human scale. Such calls for local autonomy reproduce the problems of exclusion that the ideal of community poses.

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## THE OPPOSITION BETWEEN INDIVIDUALISM AND COMMUNITY

Critics of liberalism frequently invoke a conception of community as an alternative to the individualism and abstract formalism they attribute to liberalism.<sup>4</sup> They reject the image of persons as separate and self-contained atoms, each with the same formal rights, rights to keep others out, separate. For such writers, the ideal of community evokes the absence of the self-interested competitiveness of modern society. In this ideal, critics of liberalism find an alternative to the abstract, formal methodology of liberalism. Existing in community with others entails more than merely respecting their rights; it entails attending to and sharing in the particularity of their needs and interests.

In his rightly celebrated critique of Rawls, for example, Michael Sandel argues that liberalism's emphasis on the primacy of justice presupposes a conception of the self as an antecedent unity existing prior to its desires and goals, whole unto itself, separated and bounded.<sup>5</sup> This is an unreal and incoherent conception of the self, he argues. It would be better replaced by a conception of the self as the product of an identity it shares with others, of values and goals that are not external and willed, as liberalism would have it, but constitutive of the self. This constitutive conception of the self is expressed by the concept of community.

Benjamin Barber<sup>6</sup> also uses the idea of community to evoke a vision of social life that does not conceive of the person as an atomistic, separated individual. Liberal political theory represents individuals as occupying private and separate spaces, as propelled only by their own private desires. This is a consumer-oriented conception of human nature, in which social and political relations can be understood only as goods instrumental to the achievement of individual desires, and not as intrinsic goods. This atomistic conception generates of political theory that presumes conflict and competition as characteristic modes of interaction. Like Sandel, Barber appeals to an ideal of community to invoke a conception of the person as socially constituted, actively oriented toward affirming relations of mutuality, rather than oriented solely toward satisfying private needs and desires.<sup>7</sup>

I share these critiques of liberalism. Liberal social ontology has no place for a concept of social groups. I have characterized a social group as the relational outcome of interactions, meanings, and affinities according to which people identify one another. The self is indeed a product of social relations in profound and often contradictory ways. A person's social group identities, moreover, are in some meaningful sense shared with others of the group.

I have also criticized liberalism's consumer-oriented presuppositions about human nature, and agree with Barber that these lead to an instrumentalist understanding of the function of politics. With Barber and other new republican theorists, I too reject the privatization of politics in liberal pluralist processes, and call for the institution of democratic publics. I think, however, that all these criticisms of liberalism can and should be made without embracing community as a political ideal.

Too often contemporary discussion of these issues sets up an exhaustive dichotomy between individualism and community. Community appears in the oppositions individualism/community, separated self/shared self, private/public. But like most such terms, individualism and community have a common logic underlying their polarity, which makes it possible for them to define each other negatively. Each entails a denial of difference and a desire to bring multiplicity and heterogeneity into unity, though in opposing ways. Liberal individualism denies difference by positing the self as a solid, self-sufficient unity, not defined by anything or anyone other than itself. Its formalistic ethic of rights also denies difference by bringing all such separated individuals under a common measure of rights. Proponents of community, on the other hand, deny difference by positing fusion rather than separation as the social ideal. They conceive the social subject as a relation of unity or mutuality composed by identification and symmetry among individuals within a totality. Communitarianism represents an urge to see persons in unity with one another in a shared whole.

For many writers, the rejection of individualism logically entails the assertion of community, and conversely any rejection of community entails that one necessarily supports

individualism. In their discussion of a debate between Jean Elshtain and Barbara Ehrenreich, for example, Harry Boyte and Sara Evans<sup>8</sup> claim that Ehrenreich promotes individualism because she rejects the appeal to community that Elshtain makes. Recent accounts of the debate among political theorists generated by communitarian critiques of Rawls all couch that debate in terms of a dichotomy between liberal individualism and community, suggesting that these two categories are indeed mutually exclusive and exhaust all possible social ontologies and conceptions of the self.<sup>9</sup> Thus even when the discussants recognize the totalizing and circular character of this debate, and seek to take a position outside its terms, they tend to slide into affirming one or the other "side" of the dichotomy because that dichotomy, like the dichotomy *a/not-a*, is conceived as exhausting all logical possibilities.

### THE ROUSSEAUIST DREAM

The ideal of community expresses a longing for harmony among persons, for consensus and mutual understanding, for what Foucault calls the Rousseauist dream of

a transparent society, visible and legible in each of its parts, the dream of there no longer existing any zones of darkness, zones established by the privileges of royal power or the prerogative of some corporation, zones of disorder. It was the dream that each individual, whatever position he occupied, might be able to see the whole of society, that men's hearts should communicate, their vision be unobstructed by obstacles, and that the opinion of all reign over each.<sup>10</sup>

Whether expressed as shared subjectivity or common consciousness, or as relations of mutuality and reciprocity, the ideal of community denies, devalues, or represses the ontological difference of subjects, and seeks to dissolve social inexhaustibility into the comfort of a self-enclosed whole.

Sandel is explicit about defining community as shared subjectivity. The difference between his own constitutive meaning of community and the instrumental and sentimental

meanings he finds in Rawls is precisely that in constitutive community subjects share a common self-understanding.<sup>11</sup> He is also explicit about social transparency as the meaning and goal of community:

And in so far as our constitutive self-understandings comprehend a wider subject than the individual alone, whether a family or tribe or city or class or nation or people, to this extent they define a community in the constitutive sense. And what marks such a community is not merely a spirit of benevolence, or the prevalence of communitarian values, or even certain 'shared final ends' alone, but a common vocabulary of discourse and a background of implicit practices and understandings within which the opacity of the participants is reduced if never finally dissolved. In so far as justice depends for its pre-eminence on the separatedness or boundedness of persons in the cognitive sense, its priority would diminish as that opacity faded and this community deepened.<sup>12</sup>

Barber also takes shared subjectivity as the meaning of community. Through political participation individuals confront one another and adjust their wants and desires, creating a "common ordering of individual needs and wants into a single vision of the future in which all can share." Strong democracy seeks to reach a "creative consensus" which through common talk and common work creates a "common consciousness and political judgment".<sup>13</sup>

Some theorists of community, on the other hand, replace commonness in the meaning of community with mutuality and reciprocity, the recognition by each individual of the individuality of all the others.<sup>14</sup> Seyla Benhabib, for example, regards a standpoint that emphasizes the commonness of persons as that of an ethic of rights and justice of the sort that Rawls represents, which she calls the standpoint of the "generalized other." Moral theory must also express a complementary point of view what Benhabib calls the standpoint of the "concrete other." Benhabib refers to this as a vision of a community of needs and solidarity, in contrast with the community of rights and entitlements envisaged by liberalism:

The standpoint of the "concrete other," by contrast, requires us to view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity, and affective-emotional constitution. In assuming this standpoint, we abstract from what constitutes our commonality and seek to understand the distinctiveness of the other. We seek to comprehend the needs of the other, their motivations, what they search for, and what they desire. Our relation to the other is governed by the norm of *complementary reciprocity*: each is entitled to expect and to assume from the other forms of behavior through which the other feels recognized and confirmed as a concrete, individual being with specific needs, talents, and capacities. . . . The moral categories that accompany such interactions are those of responsibility, bonding, and sharing. The corresponding moral feelings are those of love, care, sympathy, and solidarity, and the vision of community is one of needs and solidarity.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the apparent divergence of Sandel's and Barber's language of shared subjectivity and Benhabib's language of complementary reciprocity, I think all three express a similar ideal of social relations as the *copresence of subjects*.<sup>16</sup> Whether expressed as common consciousness or as mutual understanding, the ideal is one of the transparency of subjects to one another. In this ideal each understands the others and recognizes the others in the same way that they understand themselves, and all recognize that the others understand them as they understand themselves. This ideal thus submits to what Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence, which seeks to collapse the temporal difference inherent in language and experience into a totality that can be comprehended in one view. This ideal of community denies the ontological difference within and between subjects.

In community persons cease to be other, opaque, not understood, and instead become mutually sympathetic, understanding one another as they understand themselves, fused. Such an ideal of the transparency of subjects to one another denies the difference, or basic asymmetry, of subjects. As Hegel first brought out and Sartre's analysis deepened, persons necessarily transcend one another because subjectivity is negativity. The regard of the other is always objectifying.

Other persons never see the world from my perspective, and in witnessing the other's objective grasp of my body, actions, and words, I am always faced with an experience of myself different from the one I have.

This mutual intersubjective transcendence, of course, makes sharing between us possible, a fact that Sartre notices less than Hegel. The sharing, however, is never complete mutual understanding and reciprocity. Sharing, moreover, is fragile. At the next moment the other person may understand my words differently from the way I meant them, or carry my actions to consequences I do not intend. The same difference that makes sharing between us possible also makes misunderstanding, rejection, withdrawal, and conflict always possible conditions of social being.

Because the subject is not a unity, it cannot be present to itself, know itself. I do not always know what I mean, need, want, desire, because meanings, needs, and desires do not arise from an origin in some transparent ego. Often I express my desire in gesture or tone of voice, without meaning to do so. Consciousness, speech, expressiveness, are possible only if the subject always surpasses itself, and is thus necessarily unable to comprehend itself. Subjects all have multiple desires that do not cohere; they attach layers of meanings to objects without always being aware of each layer or the connections between them. Consequently, any individual subject is a play of difference that cannot be completely comprehended.

If the subject is heterogeneous process, never fully present to itself, then it follows that subjects cannot make themselves transparent, wholly present to one another. Consequently the subject also eludes sympathetic comprehension by others. I cannot understand others as they understand themselves, because they do not completely understand themselves. Indeed, because the meanings and desires they express may outrun their own awareness or intention, I may understand their words or actions more fully than they.

The ideal of community expresses a desire for social wholeness, symmetry, a security and solid identity which is objectified because affirmed by others unambiguously. This is an understandable dream, but a dream nevertheless, and, as I shall now argue, one with serious political consequences.

## PRIVILEGING FACE-TO-FACE RELATIONS

The ideal of community as a pure copresence of subjects to one another receives political expression in a vision of political life that privileges local face-to-face direct democracy. Critics of welfare capitalist society repeatedly invoke such a model of small group relations as a political ideal. The anarchist tradition expresses these values most systematically, but they retain their form in other political soils as well. This model of politics as founded in face-to-face relations poses as the alternative to the impersonality, alienation, commodification, and bureaucratization of governance in existing mass societies.

The incarnation of this project is the immediate, indeed unmediated, community that enters so profoundly into the fashioning of our humanity. This is the community in which we genuinely encounter each other, the public world that is only a bare step above our private world, in short, our towns, neighborhoods, and municipalities.<sup>17</sup>

Several problems arise when a community that privileges face-to-face relations is taken as the ideal of the polity. The ideal presumes a myth of unmediated social relations, and wrongly identifies mediation with alienation. It denies difference in the sense of temporal and spatial distancing. It implies a model of the good society as consisting of decentralized small units which is both unrealistic and politically undesirable, and which avoids the political question of just relations among such decentralized communities.

As the above quotation indicates, theorists of community privilege face-to-face relations because they conceive them as *immediate*. Immediacy is better than mediation because immediate relations have the purity and security longed for in the Rousseauist dream: we are transparent to one another, purely copresent in the same time and space, close enough to touch, and nothing comes between us to obstruct our vision of one another.

This ideal of the immediate copresence of subjects, however, is a metaphysical illusion. Even face-to-face relations between two people is mediated by voice and gesture, spacing and temporality. As soon as a third person enters the in-

teraction the possibility arises of the relations between the first two being mediated through the third, and so on. The mediation of relations among persons by the speech and actions of other persons is a fundamental condition of sociality. The richness, creativity, diversity, and potential of a society expand with growth in the scope and means of its media, linking persons across time and distance. The greater the time and distance, however, the greater the number of persons who stand between other persons.

I am not arguing that there is no difference between small groups in which persons relate to one another face-to-face and other social relations, nor am I denying a unique value to such face-to-face groups. Just as the intimacy of living with a few others in the same household has unique dimensions that are humanly valuable, so existing with others in communities of mutual regard has specific characteristics of warmth and sharing that are humanly valuable. There is no question either that bureaucratized, capitalist, patriarchal society discourages and destroys such communities of mutual friendship, just as it pressures and fragments families. A vision of the good society surely should include institutional arrangements that nurture the specific experience of mutual friendship which only relatively small groups interacting in a plurality of contexts can produce. But recognizing the value and specificity of such face-to-face relations is different from privileging them and positing them as a model for the institutional relations of a whole society.

In my view, a model of the good society as composed of decentralized, economically self-sufficient, face-to-face communities functioning as autonomous political entities does not purify politics, as its proponents think, but rather avoids politics. First, it is wildly utopian. To bring it into being would require dismantling the urban character of modern society, a gargantuan overhaul of living space, workplaces, places of trade and commerce. A model of a transformed society must begin from the material structures that are given to us at this time in history, and in the United States those are large-scale industry and urban centers.

More importantly, however, this model of the good society as usually articulated leaves completely unaddressed the

question of how such small communities relate to one another. Frequently the ideal projects a level of self-sufficiency and decentralization which suggests that proponents envision few relations among these communities except occasional friendly visits. Surely it is unrealistic, however, to assume that such decentralized communities need not engage in extensive relations of exchange of resources, goods, and culture.

Proponents frequently privilege face-to-face relations in reaction to the alienation and domination produced by huge, faceless bureaucracies and corporations, whose actions and decisions affect most people, but are out of their control. Appeals to community envision more local and direct control. A more participatory democratic society should indeed encourage active publics at the local levels of neighborhood and workplace. But the important political question is how relations among these locales can be organized so as to foster justice and minimize domination and oppression. Invoking a mystical ideal of community does not address this question, but rather obscures it. Politics must be conceived as a relationship of strangers who do not understand one another in a subjective and immediate sense, relating across time and distance.

#### UNDESIRABLE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE IDEAL OF COMMUNITY

I have argued that the ideal of community denies the difference between subjects and the social differentiation of temporal and spatial distancing. The most serious political consequence of the desire for community, or for copresence and mutual identification with others, is that it often operates to exclude or oppress those experienced as different. Commitment to an ideal of community tends to value and enforce homogeneity.<sup>18</sup>

In ordinary speech in the United States, the term community refers to the people with whom one identifies in a specific locale. It refers to neighborhood, church, schools. It also carries connotations of ethnicity, race, and other group identifications. For most people, insofar as they consider themselves members of communities at all, a com-

munity is a group that shares specific heritage – a common self-identification, a common culture and set of norms. Self-identification as a member of such a community also often occurs as an oppositional differentiation from other groups, who are feared, despised, or at best devalued. Persons feel a sense of mutual identification only with some persons, feel in community only with those, and fear the difference others confront them with because they identify with a different culture, history, and point of view on the world. The ideal of community, I suggest, validates and reinforces the fear and aversion some social groups exhibit toward others. If community is a positive norm, that is, if existing together with others in relations of mutual understanding and reciprocity is the goal, then it is understandable that we exclude and avoid those with whom we do not or cannot identify.

Richard Sennett<sup>19</sup> discusses how a "myth of community" operates perpetually in American society to produce and implicitly legitimate racist and classist behavior and policy. In many towns, suburbs, and neighborhoods people do have an image of their locale as one in which people all know one another, have the same values and life-style, and relate with feelings of mutuality and love. In modern American society such an image is almost always false; while there may be a dominant group with a distinct set of values and life style, within any locale one can usually find deviant individuals and groups. Yet the myth of community operates strongly to produce defensive exclusionary behavior: pressuring the Black family that buys a house on the block to leave, beating up the Black youths who come into "our" neighborhood, zoning against the construction of multiunit dwellings.

The exclusionary consequences of valuing community, moreover, are not restricted to bigots and conservatives. Many radical political organizations founder on the desire for community. Too often people in groups working for social change take mutual friendship to be a goal of the group, and thus judge themselves wanting as a group when they do not achieve such commonality.<sup>20</sup> Such a desire for community often channels energy away from the political goals of the group, and also produces a clique atmosphere which keeps groups small and turns potential members away.



Mutual identification as an implicit group ideal can reproduce a homogeneity that usually conflicts with the organization's stated commitment to diversity. In recent years most socialist and feminist organizations, for example, have taken racial, class, age, and sexual diversity as an important criterion according to which the success of political organizations should be evaluated. To the degree that they take mutual understanding and identification as a goal, they may be deflected from this goal of diversity.

The exclusionary implications of a desire for face-to-face relations of mutual identification and sharing present a problem for movements asserting positive group difference. I argue that the effort of oppressed groups to reclaim their group identity, and to form with one another bonds of positive cultural affirmation around their group specificity, constitutes an important resistance to the oppression of cultural imperialism. It shifts the meaning of difference from otherness and exclusion to variation and specificity, and forces dominant groups to acknowledge their own group specificity. But does not such affirmation of group identity itself express an ideal of community, and is it not subject to exclusionary impulses?

Some social movements asserting positive group difference have found through painful confrontation that an urge to unity and mutual identification does indeed have exclusionary implications. Feminist efforts to create women's spaces and women's culture, for example, have often assumed the perspective of only a particular subgroup of women – white, or middle class, or lesbian, or straight – thus implicitly excluding or rendering invisible those women among them with differing identifications and experiences.<sup>21</sup> Similar problems arise for any movement of group identification, because in our society most people have multiple group identifications, and thus group differences cut across every social group.

These arguments against community are not arguments against the political project of constructing and affirming a positive group identity and relations of group solidarity, as a means of confronting cultural imperialism and discovering things about oneself and others with whom one feels an affinity. Critique of the ideal of community, how-

ever, reveals that even in such group-specific contexts affinity cannot mean the transparency of selves to one another. If in their zeal to affirm a positive meaning of group specificity people seek or try to enforce a strong sense of mutual identification, they are likely to reproduce exclusions similar to those they confront. Those affirming the specificity of a group affinity should at the same time recognize and affirm the group and individual differences within the group.

### CITY LIFE AS A NORMATIVE IDEAL

Appeals to community are usually antiurban. Much sociological literature diagnoses modern history as a movement to the dangerous bureaucratized *Gesellschaft* from the manageable and safe *Gemeinschaft*, nostalgically reconstructed as a world of lost origins.<sup>22</sup> Many others follow Rousseau in romanticizing the ancient *polis* and the medieval Swiss *Bürger*, deploring the commerce, disorder, and unmanageable mass character of the modern city.<sup>23</sup> Throughout the modern period, the city has often been decried as embodying immorality, artificiality, disorder, and danger – as the site of treasonous conspiracies, illicit sex, crime, deviance, and disease.<sup>24</sup> The typical image of the modern city finds it expressing all the disvalues that a reinstantiation of community would eliminate.

Yet urbanity is the horizon of the modern, not to mention the postmodern, condition. Contemporary political theory must accept urbanity as a material given for those who live in advanced industrial societies. Urban relations define the lives not only of those who live in the huge metropolises, but also of those who live in suburbs and large towns. Our social life is structured by vast networks of temporal and spatial mediation among persons, so that nearly everyone depends on the activities of seen and unseen strangers who mediate between oneself and one's associates, between oneself and one's objects of desire. Urbanites find themselves relating geographically to increasingly large regions, thinking little of traveling seventy miles to work or an hour's drive for an evening's entertainment. Most people frequently and casually encounter strangers in their daily activities. The

material surroundings and structures available to us define and presuppose urban relationships. The very size of populations in our society and most other nations of the world, coupled with a continuing sense of national or ethnic identity with millions of other people, supports the conclusion that a vision of dismantling the city is hopelessly utopian.

Starting from the given of modern urban life is not simply necessary, moreover; it is desirable. Even for many of those who decry the alienation, bureaucratization, and mass character of capitalist patriarchal society, city life exerts a powerful attraction. Modern literature, art, and film have celebrated city life, its energy, and cultural diversity, technological complexity, and the multiplicity of its activities. Even many of the most staunch proponents of decentralized community love to show visiting friends around the Boston or San Francisco or New York in or near which they live, climbing up towers to see the glitter of lights and sampling the fare at the best ethnic restaurants.

I propose to construct a normative ideal of city life as an alternative to both the ideal of community and the liberal individualism it criticizes as asocial. By "city life" I mean a form of social relations which I define as the being together of strangers. In the city persons and groups interact within spaces and institutions they all experience themselves as belonging to, but without those interactions dissolving into unity or commonness. City life is composed of clusters of people with affinities – families, social group networks, voluntary associations, neighborhood networks, a vast array of small "communities." City dwellers frequently venture beyond such familiar enclaves, however, to the more open public of politics, commerce, and festival, where strangers meet and interact. City dwelling situates one's own identity and activity in relation to a horizon of a vast variety of other activities, and the awareness of these unknown, unfamiliar activities affects the conditions of one's own.

City life is a vast, even infinite, economic network of production, distribution, transportation, exchange, communication, service provision, and amusement. City dwellers depend on the mediation of thousands of other people and vast organizational resources in order to accomplish their

individual ends. City dwellers are thus together, bound to one another, in what should be and sometimes is a single polity. Their being together entails some common problems and common interests, but they do not create a community of shared final ends, of mutual identification and reciprocity.

A normative ideal of city life must begin with our given experience of cities, and look there for the virtues of this form of social relations. Defining an ideal as unrealized possibilities of the actual, I extrapolate from that experience four such virtues.

### **Social Differentiation Without Exclusion**

City life in urban mass society is not inconsistent with supportive social networks and subcultural communities. Indeed, for many it is their necessary condition. In the city social group differences flourish. Modernization theory predicted a decline in local, ethnic, and other group affiliations as universalist state institutions touch people's lives more directly and as people encounter many others with identifications and life styles different from their own. There is considerable evidence, however, that group differences are often reinforced by city life, and that the city even encourages the formation of new social group affinities.<sup>25</sup> Deviant or minority groups find in the city both a cover of anonymity and a critical mass unavailable in the smaller town. It is hard to imagine the formation of gay or lesbian group affinities, for example, without the conditions of the modern city.<sup>26</sup> While city dwelling as opposed to rural life has changed the lives and self-concepts of Chicanos, to take another example, city life encourages group identification and a desire for cultural nationalism at the same time that it may dissolve some traditional practices or promote assimilation to Anglo language and values.<sup>27</sup> In actual cities many people express violent aversions to members of groups with which they do not identify. More than those who live in small towns, however, they tend to recognize social group difference as a given, something they must live with.<sup>28</sup>

In the ideal of city life freedom leads to group differentiation, to the formation of affinity groups, but this social and spatial differentiation of groups is without exclusion.



The urban ideal expresses difference as a side-by-side particularity neither reducible to identity nor completely other. In this ideal groups do not stand in relations of inclusions and exclusion, but overlap and intermingle without becoming homogeneous. Though city life as we now experience it has many borders and exclusions, even our actual experience of the city also gives hints of what differentiation without exclusion can be. Many city neighborhoods have a distinct ethnic identity, but members of other groups also dwell in them. In the good city one crosses from one distinct neighborhood to another without knowing precisely where one ended and the other began. In the normative ideal of city life, borders are open and undecidable.

### **Variety**

The interfusion of groups in the city occurs partly because of the multiuse differentiation of social space. What makes urban spaces interesting, draws people out in public to them, gives people pleasure and excitement, is the diversity of activities they support. When stores, restaurants, bars, clubs, parks, and offices are sprinkled among residences, people have a neighborly feeling about their neighborhood, they go out and encounter one another on the streets and chat. They have a sense of their neighborhood as a "spot" or "place," because of that bar's distinctive clientele, or the citywide reputation of the pizzas at that restaurant. Both business people and residents tend to have more commitment to and care for such neighborhoods than they do for single-use neighborhoods. Multifunctional streets, parks, and neighborhoods are also much safer than single-use functionalized spaces because people are out on the streets during most hours, and have a commitment to the place.<sup>29</sup>

### **Eroticism**

City life also instantiates difference as the erotic, in the wide sense of an attraction to the other, the pleasure and excitement of being drawn out of one's secure routine to encounter the novel, strange, and surprising.<sup>30</sup> The erotic dimension of the city has always been an aspect of its fear-

fulness, for it holds out the possibility that one will lose one's identity, will fall. But we also take pleasure in being open to and interested in people we experience as different. We spend a Sunday afternoon walking through Chinatown, or checking out this week's eccentric players in the park. We look for restaurants, stores, and clubs with something new for us, a new ethnic food, a different atmosphere, a different crowd of people. We walk through sections of the city that we experience as having unique characters which are not ours, where people from diverse places mingle and then go home.

The erotic attraction here is precisely the obverse of community. In the ideal of community people feel affirmed because those with whom they share experiences, perceptions, and goals recognize and are recognized by them; one sees oneself reflected in the others. There is another kind of pleasure, however, in coming to encounter a subjectivity, a set of meanings, that is different, unfamiliar. One takes pleasure in being drawn out of oneself to understand that there are other meanings, practices, perspectives on the city, and that one could learn or experience something more and different by interacting with them.

The city's eroticism also derives from the aesthetics of its material being: the bright and colored lights, the grandeur of its buildings, the juxtaposition of architecture of different times, styles, and purposes. City space offers delights and surprises. Walk around the corner, or over a few blocks, and you encounter a different spatial mood, a new play of sight and sound, and new interactive movement. The erotic meaning of the city arises from its social and spatial inexhaustibility. A place of many places, the city folds over on itself in so many layers and relationships that it is incomprehensible. One cannot "take it in," one never feels as though there is nothing new and interesting to explore, no new and interesting people to meet.

### **Publicity**

Political theorists who extol the value of community often construe the public as a realm of unity and mutual understanding, but this does not cohere with our actual experience

of public spaces. Because by definition a public space is a place accessible to anyone, where anyone can participate and witness, in entering the public one always risks encountering those who are different, those who identify with different groups and have different opinions or different forms of life. The group diversity of the city is most often apparent in public spaces. This helps account for their vitality and excitement. Cities provide important public spaces – streets, parks, and plazas – where people stand and sit together, interact and mingle, or simply witness one another, without becoming unified in a community of “shared final ends.”

Politics, the critical activity of raising issues and deciding how institutional and social relations should be organized, crucially depends on the existence of spaces and forums to which everyone has access. In such public spaces people encounter other people, meanings, expressions, issues, which they may not understand or with which they do not identify. The force of public demonstrations, for example, often consists in bringing to people who pass through public spaces those issues, demands, and people they might otherwise avoid. As a normative ideal, city life provides public places and forums where anyone can speak and anyone can listen.

Because city life is a being together of strangers, diverse and overlapping neighbors, social justice cannot issue from the institution of an Enlightenment universal public. On the contrary, social justice in the city requires the realization of a politics of difference. This politics lays down institutional and ideological means for recognizing and affirming diverse social groups by giving political representation to these groups, and celebrating their distinctive characteristics and cultures. In the unoppressive city people open to unassimilated otherness. We all have our familiar relations and affinities, the people to whom we feel close and with whom we share daily life. These familial and social groups open onto a public in which all participate, and that public must be open and accessible to all. Contrary to the communitarian tradition, however, that public cannot be conceived as a unity transcending group differences, nor as entailing complete mutual understanding. In public life the differences remain unassimilated, but each participating group acknowledges and is open to listening to the others. The pub-

lic is heterogeneous, plural, and playful, a place where people witness and appreciate diverse cultural expressions that they do not share and do not fully understand.

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## Part IV

### Social Relations and Public Places