

Urban Sociology and the Stranger

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Abstract

The paper investigates the extent to which urban sociology has neglected the analytical potential of the stranger and puts forward an interpretative model that can broaden and deepen our understanding of the relationship between urbanity and difference. The interpretative model adopts a typology of the stranger consisting of three types of strangers: pre-modern, modern and post-modern. These three types of strangers are abstract descriptions constructed by accentuating certain features of real individuals. They are 'ideal types' and not intended as a reflection of urban realities but as a way of interpreting them. In addition, they are not mutually exclusive and may in some cases overlap, interconnect and complement each other. Finally, this typology is neither comprehensive nor definitive; rather, through an analysis of the modern city, the post-modern city I and post-modern city II, the paper demonstrates its exploratory power.

Introduction

Historically, western scholars and thinkers have provided an ambivalent description of the modern city. It has been perceived both as a site of moral decay and as a source of freedom and innovation (Lees 1984). The modern city celebrates, but it also fears difference. The effect of rapid urbanization, famines, civil wars in many parts of the world, and the globalisation of the world economy, has seen a substantial increase in transnational migration. The consequence of this massive movement of people has seen a rapid increase in the visibility of difference and hence the increasing presence of strangers. The presence of culturally and visible different people have raised fears and anxieties. Recently, global terrorism has heightened these fears and anxieties. Who are these people? Why have they come here? Can they be trusted? In this new type of urban milieu, the imagined order and certainty of previous times feels like a distant and secure past. Difference is now seen as "overwhelming and dangerous, to be excluded and segregated where possible – indeed, something to be afraid of" (Bannister and Fyfe 2001: 807). The stranger has become the source of this fear.

Urban Sociology and Social Theory

The development of urban sociology has traditionally coincided with the “concerns of social theory, particularly the attempt to understand the nature of modern, individual and collective identity” (Savage and Warde 1993: 32). Urban sociology continually responds to the issues raised in social theory. The importance of the stranger in understanding the human condition and cross-cultural interaction has recently become a focus of social and cultural theory (Agger 1998; Bhabha 1994; Fay 1996; Hall 1989, 1991 and 1996; Harman 1988; Lemert 2001; Marotta 2000; Stichweh 1997; Tabboni 1995). The stranger has become the paradigmatic figure for contemporary society, a society that, depending on the theoretical and conceptual framework that one adopts, has been categorized as ‘high modern’, ‘second modernity’ or ‘post-modern’. The stranger can also illuminate issues to do with hermeneutics and the sociology of knowledge (Jansen, 1980; Dessewffy, 1996). These accounts juxtapose a descriptive account of the stranger with an analytical approach. In the latter approach, the stranger becomes an object of critical reflection. Although there has been some discussion on the idea of difference and the stranger in urban sociology (Bannister and Fyfe 2001; Diken 1998; Ellen 1997; Pile et al. 1999; Smith 1980), this has not addressed specific theoretical and conceptual issues; thus the important link between social theory and urban sociology that Savage and Warde (1993) have identified, at least in terms of the idea of the stranger, has been weakened. The following analysis attempts to reverse this trend.

***Gemeinschaft* and the pre-modern stranger**

Pre-modern strangers are those who are culturally and socially distant, but they are also physically distant. Pre-modern strangers experience a particular type of spatial arrangement in which distance prevails at the physical, social and symbolic level. In contrast to *Gesellschaft* (modern) social arrangements, face-to-face interaction in *Gemeinschaft* (pre-modern) societies is associated with common ways of life, common beliefs, familiarity, emotional bonds and on concentrated and frequent interaction with a small number of people (Tönnies 1974). The social and physical distances between people in this social arrangement are not the subject of conjecture because those who are socially and emotionally close are also those who live in close proximity. In turn, those who are physically distant are also socially and culturally

distant. In this type of social milieu, spatial and social distances between different social actors are not the source of self-reflection or anxiety. From the perspective of community (*Gemeinschaft*), the pre-modern stranger signifies those who are both physically and socially distant. The construction of walls in the medieval city came to symbolize not only spatial closure but the processes of inclusion and exclusion. Excluded were the 'outlaws', those strangers that did not belong (McLaughlin and Muncie 1999). Although pre-modern strangers were generally excluded from the everyday lives of people, some interaction did occur. This interaction, however, was limited to markets and with passing traders (Redfield 1971) and rarely threatened the take-for-granted world of the host.

The modern, metropolitan stranger

The rise of modern global cities and the spread of colonialism significantly reduced the spatial distance between the self and Other. The migration of people to great cities drastically changed the relationship between the stranger and the host. In the social modality of modernity, those who are socially and culturally distant are now physically close. The modern stranger, in contrast to the pre-modern type, destabilizes the boundary between proximity and distance and has become the paradigmatic symbol of the modern city (Simmel 1964; 1971).

Classical sociologists compared "small town life" to "city life", and illustrated that the metropolis encouraged the emergence of the 'metropolitan type' who was an isolated, blasé urban dweller. In "small and isolated worlds", the stranger was the exception rather than the rule, but with the emergence of the modern city, and the increase in both the quantity and diversity of the population, being a stranger" was no longer the exception but the rule (Lofland 1973: 4-10 and Bauman 1995a: 126). The attraction and repulsion of city life was reinforced by how the modern, metropolitan strangers were experienced both as a source of pleasure and fear. The ambivalence of strangers was particularly evident for the *flâneur* or stroller of modern city life. The *flâneur* constructed the social and cultural Other both as a threat and a source of gratification. The close, physical presence of culturally and socially diverse metropolitan subjects characterizes modern cities and the idea of the modern stranger encapsulates this new spatial relationship.

Post-modern cities and post-modern strangers

A new type of urban milieu has been conceptualized which has necessitated a rethinking of the relationship between modern strangers and the new post-modern urban landscape. According to Bauman, modern strangers were excluded or exterminated and signified modernity's social, cultural and national boundaries. Post-modern strangers, on the other hand, are 'protected' because they symbolize the fluid and porous nature of post-modern life (Bauman 1995b: 13). Modernity's will-to-order, which also underlines modernist urban planning, attempted to expunge any individual or group who upset or questioned the boundaries between self and Other. Modernity, argues Bauman, needs modern strangers so that it could justify its war against ambivalence and chaos. Post-modernity, on the other hand, is less interested in imposing a universal order and thus difference and strangers become a source of curiosity and pleasure rather than fear. The acceptance of post-modern strangers reflects the new social modality of contingency, diversity and instability. Post-modern strangers, however, not only destabilize the boundary between proximity and distance, but they also reinforce this boundary. This paradoxical position of post-modern strangers reveals itself in the multiple constructions of the post-modern city.

Post-modern city I: the city of fear

One version of the 'post-modern city' depicts post-modern spaces, such as 'gated communities' and shopping malls as places of exclusion and control. In post-modern city I, the post-modern stranger experiences modern forms of marginalization. Post-modern urban spaces are sites of oppression and control. The designs of post-modern urban spaces are simulations of the past where there is a loosening of ties to any specific place. These post-modern spaces are obsessed with surveillance and security, and post-modern landscapes are urban spaces that no longer arise in any organic fashion, but are artificially inserted (Hannigan 1995: 160-161). They exclude post-modern strangers from these aesthetic and fragmented spaces. These defensible urban centres, such as the "panopticon Mall" and "fortress cities", exclude outsiders by using "an architectural language warning the underclass Other" to keep out. In western cities these 'underclass others' are usually young racially or culturally

different men, poor immigrants, or elderly homeless white females (Davis 1995). The impulse to privatize, to enclose oneself are a manifestation of post-modern fears in which the search for roots, the desire for familiarity and escapist mentality take hold. This impulse characterizes the “inward-turning shopping malls” and gated communities. This type of post-modern urbanism fosters horizontal segregation which “allows a certain ignorance regarding social differences, which in turn, allows for the generation of myths, and negative stereotypes about people who are not familiar” (Ellin 1997: 34). In contrast to the ‘modern city’ where there are arcades that the pleasure seeking *flâneur* could stroll down, the post-modern streets are more of a jungle than a theatre. The pleasure seeking activity has moved indoors because shopping malls now provide the ‘theatre’ for homesick wanderers.

In ‘post-modern city I’ the modern stranger no longer captures the spatial dimension of the urban environment. The modern stranger describes a process in which physical distance between self and other slowly dissolves. Post-modern strangers, whether they be ‘flawed consumers’ or the outsiders of the ‘gated communities’ and shopping malls, are kept apart through physical boundaries. Boundaries, whether expressed through walls around the gated cities or through signs and property prices, signify the social distinction and physical separation between self and Other. The exclusionary and marginalizing practices of post-modern city I attempt to restore a sense of security and order. These practices, however, reveal an ambivalent position because they may provide a sense of identity, but they also reflect the insecurity and the vulnerability of the self (Marcuse 1997: 112). There is an attempt to distant the Other so that little or no interaction occurs and this situation is reminiscent of the spatial position of pre-modern strangers. This blurs the distinction between pre-modern and post-modern strangers and paradoxically, the spatial experience of pre-modern strangers has reappeared in a post-modern form.

The idea of the post-modern stranger may resonate with the category of the pre-modern stranger, but there are significant differences between them. The post-modern stranger calls forth issues to do with agency and resistance that is lacking with the category of the pre-modern stranger. The contact between the dominant culture and pre-modern and modern strangers is usually understood as a process which victimises and oppresses voiceless others. The more powerful binary self imposes itself on pre-

modern and modern strangers. Recent accounts of marginality and post-modern marginal spaces avoid conceptualizing post-modern strangers as victims who lack agency. Soja and Hooper (1993) and Smith (1995), for example, argue that post-modern marginal spaces are spaces that are both central and marginal; they are filled with contradiction and ambivalence and thus are sites of resistance and empowerment. Thus while post-modern strangers experience the pre-modern spatial dimension of strangeness, they bring to the typology of the stranger a critical paradigm. The idea of the post-modern stranger destabilizes the categories of pre-modern and modern strangers.

Post-modern city II: the city of difference

While some scholars conceive of post-modern cities as sites of new forms of oppression and control, other scholars provide a more positive depiction of post-modern cities. From a post-modern perspective which seeks to question essentialism, foundationalism and universalism, the modern city, and the modernism which sustains it, is driven by universal forces that deny, suppress and marginalize difference. Consequently, the modernist city is a mechanism of spatial exclusion, surveillance and social control and this is achieved through a rationalistic and scientific approach to designing and maintaining urban spaces (Robins 1993; Smith 1992 and 1995). New Urbanism has been particularly critical of the rationalism in modern urban planning. New Urbanism is a refutation of International Modernism and attempts to reassert the public realm and reinvigorate street life and the civic arena (Schuyler 1997). New Urbanism, with its 'post-modern architecture', attempts to reinstate the lost 'community' and thus adds quality, identity and focus to our metropolitan lives. This "reinvigorated sense of community" entails mixed use neighbourhoods, with diverse populations which reflect differences of race, ethnicity, income and age (Schuyler 1997: 357). New urbanism assumes that a sense of community emerges in public spaces which encourage diversity. In other words, these post-modern urban spaces support particularity and heterogeneous social interaction. The emphasis is to reduce physical distances and increase social contact amongst socially and culturally diverse people (Talen 1999). As Cooke argues, "the local dimension has been for too long neglected by an overcentralised, dominating and exclusive modernist culture". Post-modern architecture and planning therefore "seeks to restore identity to local cultures

swamped hitherto by austere universalism and modernist aesthetics” (1988: 114-115). In post-modern city I, the post-modern stranger represents both the physical and social distance from the self. In post-modern city II, the post-modern stranger, like the modern stranger is physically close; but unlike the modern stranger, there is an attempt to reduce the social distance between self and Other by creating multicultural urban spaces which encourage cross-cultural interaction.

In post-modern city II difference is seen as a dynamic and innovative feature of urban places. In a modern metropolis, the modern stranger is one who is physically close but socially distant; however, in the metropolitan landscape of New Urbanism the post-modern stranger dissolves the spatial, social and cultural boundaries between people. New Urbanism advocates urban places which dissolve the boundary between proximity and distance. Nonetheless, as Robins perceptively notes, this post-modern urban sensibility is, in essence, a new form of Romanticism. This new urban romanticism “seems to want a cosy and cleaned-up version of city life, one which avoids the real conflicts and stresses of urban life” (Robins 1993: 321). The post-modern stranger, under the theoretical framework of New Urbanism, promotes the dissolution of cultural and physical distances. The post-modern stranger in post-modern city II does not capture the spatial dimension of the pre-modern and modern stranger; rather, it fosters a new form of spatial interaction where the Other is both physically and socially close.

Conclusion: the borderland of strangeness

Although the typology of the stranger has shed light on the spatial and cultural dimension of specific societal configurations, this is a tenuous causal relationship. To assert that we can comprehend historical change in terms of three societal types and that there has been a linear progression from a traditional society to a post-modern society assumes a static view of these societies and the type of stranger they foster. Different types of strangers move in and out of these societal borderlands and thus reflect the fluid boundaries between traditional, modern and post-modern societies. These excursions into the nature of the stranger have highlighted its multifaceted and contradictory status. In addition, this inquiry has demonstrated that the ideal types of strangers at times overlap and may co-exist in a variety of social and urban

configurations. A social theory of the stranger needs to acknowledge that there are differences across and within these ideal types, but one also needs to be sensitive to the slippages between these categories. Urban sociology needs to investigate the idea of the stranger in a more systematic manner. Such an examination can provide us with a different exploratory and analytical framework to understand the relationship between the city and difference.

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