Lecture 2: The figures of the city, 1: interactions

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Introduction: Interactions?

"Symbolic Interactionism" is an intellectual movement, coming from Chicago School and developed more recently by sociologists such as Erving Goffman and Howard Becker. The common point that links them is considering social groups under the aspect of individual interactions. The actors' representations are active factors in these interactions, as the place (the "Stage") itself and its qualities. "Located actions" represent the units to be analyzed; the observation focuses on "moments and their men" rather than "men and their moments".

I. Moral density

Cities have often been defined as the more appropriated disposition to facilitate different types of relations and exchanges between people. There is a great amount of possible encounters and contacts; potentially, cities offer a great amount of opportunities.

This is precisely the point that devises cities from villages. That is why cities attract migrants.

A large range of means of transport, allowing contacts and transactions, is the condition of urbanity.

Density, co-presence, opportunities

Generally, material density goes with means of circulation density, and "moral density" (contacts and relations between people, involvement in common interest). Nevertheless it would be wrong to consider the "moral concentration" of a society according to its level of material concentration. Roads, railways etc. can serve business movement rather than population fusion. *« Comme les rapports purement économiques laissent les hommes en dehors les uns des autres, on peut en avoir de très suivis sans participer à la même existence collective ».* (Emile Durkheim, 1895, *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique*).

In other words, city is something more than material concentration; conversely, cities link men between them beyond material frame.

Serendipity

City is the place of non planed occurrences. If each occurrence would be planned and expectable, it would be the death of the city. Actions taking place in the city are partly planned, partly uncertain and random.

*« L'accessibilité urbaine, aujourd'hui comme par le passé, est partiellement planifiée mais aussi partiellement aléatoire. **Bousculer quelqu'un qu'on n'a pas vu, assister à des scènes***

*qu'on n'a pas prévues, voilà des expériences qui ne sont sans doute ni utiles ni agréables, mais qui ont peut-être leurs conséquences particulières sur le plan personnel ou sur le plan social et culturel… **Le flair (serendipity),** le fait de découvrir quelque chose par hasard alors qu'on en cherchait une autre, est peut-être une aptitude que privilégie la vie urbaine ».* Ulf Hannerz, *Explorer la ville*, 1980, traduit et présenté par Isaac Joseph, Minuit, 1983, p. 154.

Proximities can be desirable or undesirable. They are mainly casual. The control of proximities is not equivalent in the different social groups.

- Exercice: *Moving in the city: write a short narrative about an "urban experience" you had last week. Try to remember at least one unexpected occurrence.*

II. Social position and social identities

Common definition of social groups

To study social facts, one can define social actors as members of pre-defined groups.

These groups are usually pre-defined starting from economical and demographical criterions, such as age, profession, income, households' structure etc.

These groups can be also re-defined by a range of common characteristics: location of residence, shared experience (generation), etc.

Social structure as a structure of domination

This structural approach of social morphology is very useful. It allows the study of structural evolution by time, and geographical comparisons (How many skilled workers in this neighbourhood? How many children under 6 years old etc.). It is also useful for local policies. Structuralism is based on the identification of underlying structures. Domination's structure can be considered as fundamental (P.Bourdieu)

Spatial and social

But such point of view leads to consider urban space as the reflect of social structure

In the context of urban studies, this approach can be criticized. Let's take two points:

   1. Considering urban spaces: the relation between social groups and urban spaces has its own independency.

2. Considering social groups: being part of the same group doesn't mean that these persons know each other, or have the feeling that they belong to the same group.

Approach by relations instead of positions

One can also choose a different analytical point of view and consider *Relations* as the starting point instead of *Positions*.

Relations as (definitions): sustainable links; common belongings; shared identities

Relations can be approached by different ways:

Networks Studies (further lecture)

Milieu Studies (further lecture)

Interaction studies

III. Interaction studies

Main figures of social interactions

Relations can also have a different definition and refer to unstable and ephemeral communication situation.

These ephemeral situations are the material of micro sociology and interaction studies

"Situated actions" analysis reveals performance of social identities.

They can be considered as opposite to socio-economic structural approaches.

E. Goffman delineates 3 main interaction's figures among social interaction rituals corresponding to 3 main actions: to avoid, to repair, to brave

Face-work: different resources mobilised in order to avoid to loose one's face. Face-work is the condition for the interaction to carry on. *"La visibilité mutuelle spécifie un ordre de la vie publique et, pour nos sociétés, signifie que les rites positifs ou confirmatifs les plus ordinaires sont des salutations et des adieux. Le principe fondamental de cet ordre veut que chaque participant se garde de détruire la face des autres".* (I. Joseph, 1998)

Text: E. Goffman. *Interactions rituals*

The question being *"How does an individual in everyday situations present himself in the presence of people?"* micro sociology's answer uses the metaphor of Theatrical Performance: people are constantly involved in different dramas, changing their roles and performances in different situations.

The control of oneself expression and "face" in public is constantly at stake. This provides a useful framework for examining the structure of social interactions in public.

How micro sociology can be useful for urban studies?

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Social Interactions logics transcend milieu or class logics.

They are ephemeral but they can be generalized

They characterize "moments rather than men": the permanent element is the situation, not the person

Consequently, social actors have quite a large range of possibilities to adapt themselves to different situations.

Interaction theory and language are particularly adapted to study social behaviours and the production of norms in public spaces.

Public spaces as "emblematic expression of urbanity"

"A public space is totally the opposite of a milieu or an articulation of milieus. It exists *di per se* only if it is able to blur the equivalence's relation between a collective identity (either social or cultural) and a territory" (I. Joseph)

No correspondence between social structure and spatial structure of public space: none of the different social groups can pretend to appropriate privately the public space.

Public spaces have their own regulations rules. Micro sociology gives the necessary tools to describe them.

Actually its problematic character comes from its lack of definition, precisely – it is never defined once for all – but at the contrary it is always in construction. Free access allows free

interactions. People can meet (or not), all kind of people with diverse identities (according to Y. Grafmeyer, 1994). Conflicts are occurring when a group tends to appropriate and use public space for its own and exclusive benefit, using it as a private space.

Public spaces are "emblematic expression of urbanity"

Public places allow cities to be "something more than a neighbourhoods' mosaic and a simple aggregate of small tight world" (Y. Grafmeyer, 1994).

Consequently, it is also a big stake in the context of "struggle for space" and for predominant position in the city.

Public spaces being open spaces, they offer guarantee for hospitality and play against segregation (linked to social position, age, sex, origin etc.). Their function is understandable through the interactions which take place in such places.