Hopeful Sociology

How to Become Cosmopolitan in Urban Public Space

Stéphane TONNELAT

An ethnography of Philadelphia takes up a problem rarely addressed by the social sciences: how to account for events that do not take place? In his latest opus, sociologist Elijah Anderson examines the absence of discrimination in a city market and looks at the conditions of possibility of cosmopolitanism.

Reviewed: Elijah Anderson, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy. Race and Civility in Everyday Life*, Norton Books, 2011.

The social sciences have a difficult time identifying and studying positive trends affecting our urban society. And a city like Philadelphia, the setting for the book under review, seems particularly ill-suited to the task. The white middle class and businesses have long fled the inner city, encouraged by a federal policy which favored suburban development. Since the 1950s, the poor, mostly African Americans, have been left stranded in a city plagued by shrunken fiscal revenues. Today, Philadelphia is still suffering from deindustrialization and the current economic crisis is taking its toll. The social upward mobility of lower class people, again mostly African Americans, is severely impaired by poor public services (education, public transportation…) and a lack of blue-collar employment opportunities (see the Pew Report (2009) cited by Anderson).

Elijah Anderson, an African American sociologist formerly at the University of Pennsylvania and now at Yale University, has built his sociological career in the steps of W. E.

B. Du Bois (1899), documenting, in excruciating detail, in several landmark books (Anderson 1976, 1990; 1999; 2008), the struggles of everyday life in poor black inner city neighborhoods. In these areas, plagued by intractable economic conditions and institutionalized racism, violent behavior comes to dominate the streets and social relations. This not only reinforces the stigmatization of African Americans in the larger society, but also participates in establishing a self-reproducing "code of the street" within the community.

Anderson has been one of the leaders of the renaissance of urban ethnography in the last twenty years, reviving and improving, with many others, the fieldwork tradition of the Chicago School of Sociology (Anderson 2009). Having refined both inductive and deductive scientific analysis, thanks to debates within the discipline (see for example the discussion in the American Journal of Sociology launched by Wacquant about the work of Anderson and two other ethnographers (Wacquant 2002; Duneier 2002; Newman 2002; Anderson 2002), ethnographers have gained a new respectability in sociology, which allows them to reach an audience beyond their academic turf and to explore new concepts.

Anderson's latest book, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life*, seems on the surface to be breaking away from his previous work, since it explores a more encouraging social phenomenon in Philadelphia: civil encounters across the color line. But there is an obstacle to studying positive trends: they are difficult to document and analyze. Indeed, most positive events are in fact non-events. One can compile statistics and show that the rate of major crimes has been slowly but steadily going down in Philadelphia (-15% in the last decade), or elsewhere. But it is more difficult to understand why a crime has not been committed. How does one observe and understand a situation when there is no discrimination, in other words, when nothing notable seems to be happening? The author offers solutions to this problem.

The cosmopolitan canopy

For Anderson, the improved standing of African Americans in society since the civil rights movements and the end of the Jim Crow era is visible in the many public spaces of the city center. There, visible minorities can partake in mundane activities without being cast aside or

even looked down upon. The Reading Terminal, an indoor market in a converted train shed occupying a whole city block, stands as the epitome of cosmopolitanism. "The terminal is a neutral place in which people who behave civilly, whatever their ethnicity, usually will not be scrutinized, as would likely happen in the city's ethnic neighborhoods if an unknown person were to pass through. In those neighborhoods taking keen notice of strangers is the first line of defense, but the Terminal is not defended in this manner." (p. 34) In the terminal, people are on their best behavior. They can let down their guard and even start to observe one another in a relaxed atmosphere. "People watching" is a widespread activity. Anderson argues that this kind of observation helps a wide diversity of people to practice a "folk ethnography" through which they build a stock of knowledge about "the others" and which may even help them revise stereotypical views imported from their respective, more homogeneous, home territory.

Here is a typical situation described by Anderson in the chapter devoted to the Reading Terminal:

"An elderly black woman aided by a walker appeared at the entrance door of the Terminal and began negotiating the heavy double doors. Clearly she was having trouble. […] Before I could offer assistance, a young white man with strawberry-blond hair and dressed in construction clothes who was dining with a friend sprang to his feet and offered the old woman a hand, helping her through the large doors. Once she and her bags where safely inside, I overheard him ask, 'Are you allright? You OK?' He wondered whether he could be of further assistance. 'Yes, son, thank you,' she murmured, as she ambled off the aisles of the Terminal. As I looked around, I saw that everyone's eyes were on this interaction, a model of public race relations characteristic of the Reading Terminal. The young man seemed to know that all eyes were on them, as he looked back at the woman a few times, completing his 'performance.' Then, as quickly as this incident began, it was over. But it likely made an impression on observers and for the moment, reinforced the public definition of affairs in this space: kindness and civility were the order of the day, regardless of color, gender, or age" (p. 37).

This rather long description, a trademark of Anderson's unobtrusive observation, illustrates well the ambitions carried by the concept of the cosmopolitan canopy, defined as "a setting that offers a respite from the lingering tensions of urban life and an opportunity for diverse peoples to come together" (p. xiv). First, such places are ends in themselves. People patronize them precisely to enjoy their civil atmosphere and to partake in the public life of their

city. Second, and this is where Anderson's claims are more hopeful, the interactions taking place under the canopy may transform the mentality of its actors who, progressively, will bring back home a new cosmopolitan orientation (read: tolerant and open minded), which they may transmit to their peers and families. These two claims raise interesting questions regarding urban public spaces and race relations.

Why are there so few cosmopolitan canopies in the city?

As illustrated in the quote above, the Reading Terminal market is nothing less than a successful urban public space as it was defined by a long line of sociologists going back to Simmel (1950), Wirth (1938), Goffman (1971; 1963), Joseph (1991), and more recently Lyn Lofland (1998). According to Lofland, public space in western cities is governed by a set of normative patterns that contribute to giving it a specific social order. She identifies five principles at the basis of this order: cooperative mobility (the necessity to move through public space without bumping into one another), civil inattention (the necessity to respect everyone's privacy in a context of close physical distance), restrained helpfulness (the necessity to give small services without engaging oneself beyond the immediate interaction), audience role prominence (the necessity to behave as a spectator of a public scene) and last but not least, civility towards diversity (the necessity not to discriminate according to categories such as race, ethnicity, age or gender). Interestingly, the example above illustrates every single one of these normative principles. Is the Terminal just a regular public space? Other chapters in the book describe Rittenhouse Square, a public garden surrounded by upper and middle class housing and restaurants, and The Gallery, a shopping mall patronized by African Americans from all over the city, as places where people also put on their best behavior. But other likely places discussed more cursorily in the book seem more fraught with difficulty. In the more anonymous places such as the Septa suburban trains and 30th Street station, black people can often feel discriminated against, for example when white people prefer to stand rather than sit next to them. In the more private places such as restaurants, black people often risk being looked at with suspicion or are given the worst table (as Anderson recalls from personal experience). What is remarkable in Anderson's book then, is not so much the fact that the market is a true public space, but the actual scarcity of public spaces elsewhere in Philadelphia. Even though Anderson

4

writes that the city center is dotted with cosmopolitan canopies, very few seem readily available to observation.

Despite obvious progress, the question of race is still extremely sensitive in American cities. Black people, although more accepted in public space, only enjoy a "provisional status." It can be revoked at any time, often in a sudden and dramatic manner, as illustrated in vivid tones in a chapter entitled "The Nigger Moment." Remarkably, discrimination is all the more traumatic because its victims have been believing that race did not matter anymore. "The most problematic aspect of social relations under the cosmopolitan canopy appears when the color line is suddenly drawn, and an issue that people assumed mattered little comes to dominate the whole situation." (p. 154) Although it does not happen very often in the canopy, this situation is usually so damaging that its victim not only stops patronizing the place but may adopt or confirm a well-shared attitude among black people, that whites are only pretending, that they are still racists. This is what Anderson calls the "ethnocentric" or "ethno" orientation in contrast to the "cosmopolitan" or "cosmo" orientation of trust across the color line. In order to observe these orientations, he led a long inquiry in a large company in Philadelphia where he conducted many interviews with workers, black and white. Although the book does not develop the results of this study in detail, Anderson found that racial distrust is firmly anchored among black people, even those who reached relatively high levels in the corporate hierarchy. But he also believes that it can be overcome over time, thanks to positive interactions under the canopy.

Anderson is familiar with this polar way of thinking, opposing "cosmo" and "ethno", which brings this new book closer than expected to his previous work. This division is indeed reminiscent of the "street" versus the "decent" families and codes with which he analyzed the social dynamics at work in the poor black neighborhoods of Philadelphia in *the Code of the Street* (1999). "Ethno" as well as "Street" orientations stem from the ongoing underclass situation of black people in America. People adopting them are realistic. They do not want to risk a "nigger moment", or they simply have not been in contact with white people enough to know how to deal with them. Thus "street" and "ethno" function as refuge values adopted for lack of a better alternative. But Anderson is optimistic. "As we move toward a day when these

particularities matter less and less, the ethno perspective may lose its force and cosmopolitan tolerance may take its place." (p. 198)

This belief places Anderson firmly in the camp of "contact theory" proponents within interethnic studies: more contact yields less conflict (Brewer and Gaertner 2001; Miller 2002). But as already discussed, the scarcity of cosmopolitan canopies combined with the setbacks occasioned by discrimination in public leaves little room for such hope. And yet, it is true that the Reading Market Terminal is an exceptionally enjoyable place for all sorts of people.

The unaccounted importance of "public characters"

In the conclusion of the book, Anderson defines the cosmopolitan canopy by two characteristics: physical separation from the surrounding streetscapes and freedom of movement through the space it encloses. The second point is typical of urban public space. One should be able to move freely within it. The first point however, raises the important question of accessibility to the canopy (Joseph 1992). Where is the entry and how does one gain access to it? Crucial actors who act as the formal or informal guardians of these spaces control all physical limits of the canopies described by Anderson. Guards, shopkeepers, doormen, wait staff, conductors, or even regulars, including homeless people, all behave as "public characters" (Jacobs 1961; Duneier 1999) and tend to give each place a specific welcoming or discriminating atmosphere. But it is the places where these characters are the least formally visible, the Market, the Square and the Gallery, that are the most successful. On the contrary, when they are either absent (on the public bus), or too present (at the restaurant), the canopy seems more vulnerable, respectively to offense by members of the public or to abuse of power by the person in charge. In fact, it seems that the more the responsibility of a place is shared among a wide range of public characters, the more its atmosphere will be of the cosmopolitan type described by Anderson. This is perhaps why he wrote, in a 2004 eponymous article preceding this publication, that cosmopolitan canopies can produce "instantaneous communities of strangers" (Anderson 2004, 15). In this case, studies of urban public space and interethnic relations should turn a more attuned eye not only to the design and property status of space but also to its oftentimes unnoticed management by a range of actors, from workers to users, who make the space public

as they themselves acquire a public role. In this way, studies of urban public space would get closer to another conception of public space, more common in political philosophy, that of a space of inquiry, debate and discussion. The detour via the commensality of a food counter at the Philadelphia Reading Market is well worth the price.

References

Anderson, Elijah. 1976. *A place on the corner*. University of Chicago Press.

———. 1990. *Streetwise: race, class, and change in an urban community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1999. *Code of the street: decency, violence, and the moral life of the inner city*. New York: W.W Norton.

——— 2002. "The Ideologically Driven Critique." *American Journal of Sociology* 107 (6): 1533-50.

———. 2004. "The Cosmopolitan Canopy." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 595 (September): 14-31.

———. 2008. *Against the wall: poor, young, Black, and male*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

———. 2009. "Introduction." *Ethnography* 10 (4). Special Double Issue (Part One) – Urban Ethnography: Its Traditions And Its Future. Special Issue Editor: Elijah Anderson: 371 -374.

Brewer, M. B, and S. L Gaertner. 2001. Toward reduction of prejudice: Intergroup contact and social categorization. In *Blackwell handbook of social psychology: Intergroup processes*, 451-472.

Du Bois, W. E.B. 1899. *The Philadelphia Negro*. New York: Lippincott.

Duneier, M. 1999. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux.

——— 2002. "What Kind of Combat Sport Is Sociology?" *American Journal of Sociology* 107 (6) (May): 1551-1576.

Goffman, E. 1963. *Behavior in public places; notes on the social organization of gatherings*. New York, NY: Free Press of Glencoe.

———. 1971. *Relations in public; microstudies of the public order*. New York,: Basic Books.

Jacobs, J. 1961. *The death and life of great American cities*. New York: Random House.

Joseph, I. 1992. Accessibilité et situations d'urgence. Paris: Plan Urbain, DRAST, RATP.,.

Joseph, Isaac, ed. 1991. L'espace du public. Les compétences du citadin. Plan Urbain, Editions Recherches.

Lofland, L.H. 1998. *The public realm: exploring the city's quintessential social territory*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

Miller, N. 2002. "Personalization and the promise of contact theory." *Journal of Social Issues* 58 (2): 387-410.

Newman, K. 2002. "No shame: The view from the left bank." *American Journal of Sociology*: 1577-1599.

Pew Charitable Trusts. 2009. *Philadelphia 2009: The State of the City*. www.pewtrusts.org/our_work_report_detail.aspx?id=50478

Simmel, G., and K. H Wolff. 1950. The metropolis and mental life. In *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Free Press.

Wacquant, Loïc. 2002. "Review: Scrutinizing the Street: Poverty, Morality, and the Pitfalls of Urban Ethnography." *The American Journal of Sociology* 107 (6) (May): 1468-1532.

Wirth, Louis. 1938. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology* 44 (1) (July): 1-24.