

The Decomposed Passerby

by Clément Rivière

Carole Gayet-Viaud's ethnographic study shows that city dwellers are far from always indifferent to their public environment. They sometimes interact with it, either by giving to beggars, getting into disputes, engaging in pure sociability, or perpetuating (but also combating) discrimination.

About: Carole Gayet-Viaud, *La civilité urbaine. Les formes élémentaires de la coexistence démocratique*, Economica, 2022, 240 p., 27 €.

Carole Gayet-Viaud's recent book, *La civilité urbaine* (Urban Civility), addresses a central question of sociology, namely, "the nature of the bond that unites and holds together the members of a society" (p. 5). Based on a long-term ethnographic study, the book explores "the ways in which people behave towards others in ordinary situations of public life" (p. 8) that take place in the "world of strangers" known as the city (Lofland, 1973). Gayet-Viaud's interest in "ordinary conditions of coexistence" (p. 5) between individuals who do not know each other led her to examine a range of interaction situations that allowed for capturing and describing the norms of coexistence in urban space—for instance, encounters between passersby and beggars or "disputes" between strangers which are frequent in urban public space.

According to Gayet-Viaud, this approach consists in "reconsidering the urban figure *par excellence*: the passerby" (p. 6). In other words, it entails going beyond the classic descriptions of city dwellers as "*blasé*" individuals who can only survive the flux of stimulations and heterogeneous encounters by adopting an attitude of "reserve" and exercising a "right to distrust" (Simmel, 1903). Georg Simmel argued

that the adoption and dissemination of this attitude of “reserve” is a necessary condition for the metropolitan way of life, as it produces “the sort of distantiation and deflection” without which this way of life would be impossible. In Simmel’s perspective, it is indifference that allows passersby to move in the anonymous crowd of the metropolis. This theme was later developed by sociologists of the University of Chicago (see, in particular, Wirth, 1938), and, to some extent, the “civil inattention” described by Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1963) can be considered a distant heir to Simmel’s account of “reserve.”

Without denying the contributions of these classic approaches, Gayet-Viaud invites us to examine instead what does not leave city dwellers indifferent. In her view, “civility,” defined as “the processual work whereby ordinary citizens determine how to relate to one another” (p. 7), is “far from being reducible to the absence of clashes” (p. 10).

An Ethnographic Investigation of Urban Public Spaces

The investigation draws on direct observations conducted in public spaces and on a corpus of more than 300 ethnographic scenes, all of which were transcribed by the author. The field study was performed mainly in Paris—initially in five sites selected to explore spaces characterized by a high diversity of uses and users (Champs-Élysées, Châtelet-Les Halles, Montparnasse, Saint-Lazare, and Place de Clichy) and located along public transport lines (bus and metro), and then later in a more circumscribed manner around Place de Clichy. To clarify the meaning of the scenes observed, the ethnographic reports were gradually—and increasingly closely—associated with interviews aimed at gathering accounts of experience (with respondents recruited directly in public spaces after a scene or through a network of acquaintances).

The rich and abundant empirical material is frequently mobilized to enrich the analyses, making the book a particularly lively read filled with a variety of fine-grained ethnographic descriptions. It is clear that the book benefited greatly from the long-term fieldwork (fifteen years in all), a further proof of the value of giving researchers sufficient time to investigate and write. In particular, we can clearly see how the object of study was defined and redefined throughout the investigation, but also as a function of events, with categorizations based on religious or ethno-racial

affiliation becoming much more apparent from 2015 onwards, in the wake of the Islamist attacks that plunged Paris into mourning: “Over time, the initial figure—the ordinary, generic ‘passerby’—was decomposed into multiple types and characters, each deserving of specific attention” (p. 222).

Are Passersby Really Indifferent?

Gayet-Viaud’s lengthy investigation was initially designed to answer the question of how passersby and beggars interact in the urban space of Paris (Chapter 1). Indeed, if strangers in the city were completely indifferent to one another, there would hardly be any giving, and consequently probably no begging. To gain a better understanding of the passerby-beggar relationship, Gayet-Viaud observed and described the practices of beggars in great detail. This led her to distinguish between different types of beggars according to the place where they operate and the way in which they present themselves. Highlighting the relational dimension of begging, she focuses specifically on the “panhandlers” who roam the Paris metro and the arguments they use to “prompt people to give” (p. 23). In her view, “what lies in the background of the speech and actions of panhandlers, the purpose and justification for requesting, and sometimes giving, ‘a few coins,’ is the civil bond” (p. 23), the expression of a public culture. The challenge for the panhandler is, in particular, to “become a fellow human again” (p. 31) by distancing himself precisely from what he is doing, and to make sure that nothing in his speech will stop passersby from giving, thus instilling feelings of shame in those who might be reluctant to do so.

While the speech of beggars reflects, in this sense, contemporary social norms, passerby-beggar interactions reveal, according to Gayet-Viaud, “the inadequacy of perspectives that make civil indifference the core of urban sociability, culminating in respect for the right to tranquility, and that view the desire to circulate as prevailing over any consideration of justice” (p. 42). The author also describes several “trajectories of engagement” (p. 38) born of interactions between passersby and beggars.

Disputes between strangers in public spaces (Chapters 2 and 3) are also of particular interest in that they provide insight into “civil norms, which are recalled because they were not respected” (p. 51). These disputes constitute “voluntary breaks in the order of interaction, whereby consensus is sacrificed and ‘representation’ is interrupted in the name of something more important or pressing, even irrepressible”

(p. 47). Disputes typically unfold as follows: Behavior deemed improper is pointed out as such, and “the designated offender returns the criticism instead of repairing the wrong” (p. 50), giving rise to a series of more or less heated and tense exchanges. Technical innovations often lead to new difficulties, as they challenge the modalities of circulation in spaces that are open to all: This is the case, for instance, with smartphones and electric scooters.

The study of disputes also “leads to qualifying some of the diagnoses of generalized apathy. No, people are not completely indifferent to common life. No, they do not always prefer to circulate than to come to an agreement as to what has happened” (p. 69). These “civil interventions,” which, as the author convincingly suggests, are one of the manifestations of the “eyes on the street” described by American urban theorist Jane Jacobs (Jacobs, 1961), challenge the model of civil indifference. The detailed description of these interventions gives new meaning to Manuel Delgado’s definition of public spaces as “territory(ies) of exposure, in the double sense of exhibition and risk” (Delgado, 2018). Indeed, in calling others to order, people expose both them and themselves (in particular to verbal and physical violence) in the name of respect for principles they hold dear. One of the book’s main findings is that civil intercourse can take on a political dimension. This is revealed by the ordinary practices of many city dwellers, who can intervene in an interaction deemed problematic or strive to set an example—“omnipresent signs, albeit variously expressed, of genuine concern” (p. 210) with what goes on in urban public space.

The Illusion of Urban Anonymity

The book then looks at the “normativity of civil intercourse” through the lens of age (Chapter 4), gender (Chapter 5), and minority affiliation (Chapter 6). Not only are passersby not always indifferent to what is going on around them in urban public spaces, they consider or approach the various users they encounter in very different ways.

To begin, Gayet-Viaud shows that age is an “important criterion in how strangers perceive each other and determine how they ought to interact” (p. 107). On the one hand, “old age seems to be associated with harmlessness, which may be explained by the vulnerability of the elderly” (p. 109). On the other hand, the baby is a remarkable figure who gives rise to a “unique sociability” (p. 110). Strangers stare at babies, smile at them, talk to them, sometimes even touch them, and, for the most part,

their caretakers tolerate these practices, which would be completely unthinkable for children just a few years older (Rivière, 2021). Some passersby do not hesitate to offer advice to young parents, who sometimes listen to them attentively or else perceive their comments “as an intolerable form of interference and intrusion” (p. 115).

Regardless of whether or not they are mothers, women (Chapter 5) are more likely to receive unwanted compliments and comments, a “distinctive feature” (p. 132) of their experience of urban public space. They are overexposed in these spaces, and therefore “do not enjoy the benefits that civil indifference offers to other city dwellers” (p. 134). This leads many of them to adopt avoidance tactics (see also Lieber, 2008), including the use of accessories (phone, headphones, etc.) that make them unavailable (or at least less available) for interaction. Gayet-Viaud gives a very detailed description of the “interactional traps set for women,” and shows how their functioning rests on the fact that “conforming to classic interactional expectations (answering questions, giving the benefit of the doubt, offering trust, etc.) is tantamount to exposing oneself to forms of abuse which can only be ended through the sometimes brutal violation of the norms of civil intercourse” (p. 149-150).

While rape is the “dreaded horizon of any troubling encounter” (p. 156), which “often contributes [...] to inhibiting any reaction” (p. 142), it nevertheless seems that “the victim who holds the offender to account for the way he spoke to her can [...] obtain, in a significant number of cases, an apology” (p. 147). In any case, it appears that this type of reaction is becoming increasingly common as the problem of “street harassment” gains attention: Women feel more and more justified in combating this problem and in “developing politicized forms of urban interaction aimed at reforming the public norms of gender relations” (p. 160). Thus, the study convincingly suggests that the politicization of street harassment has contributed to “disrupting gender norms in public in the name of equality” (p. 170).

Like women, members of minority groups (Chapter 6) can face “a number of situational disadvantages” that expose them “to typical interactions, some of which are very distressing” (p. 174). The author rightly points out that the Roma are one of the main targets of stigmatization and discrimination. Yet, she also highlights that issues linked to ethnic and religious categorization have become increasingly salient after the Islamist attacks of 2015, and she describes how “the focusing of public attention on Islamist radicalization, and by extension on the Muslim community as a whole, has produced noticeable effects in urban interactions” (p. 179). Here again, city dwellers are (clearly) not always indifferent to difference.

Might the Fear of Public Space Pose a Threat to Democracy?

The last phase of the study reveals that the wearing of the headscarf is increasingly perceived as a “visible assertion” of Muslim identity, or even as a form of “provocation” (p. 194). And yet, “to ask minority practices (and populations) to ‘stay in their place,’ that is, to engage in the forms of restraint, modesty, and even deference expected of people who are perceived as guests, is to place those concerned by these norms in a subaltern position. In other words, it is to advocate the maintenance of a hierarchy that runs counter to the demands of equality” (p. 194), in clear contradiction with the French Republican motto “*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité.*”

Civil interactions, which were put to the test by the terrorist attacks, reflect the risk that logics of distrust and suspicion may be gaining ground. More generally, “by encouraging people to relate more and more to one another as potential threats, public authorities have contributed to fostering mistrust rather than solidarity” (p. 204). Gayet-Viaud draws our attention to the fact that “the presumption of trust is being reframed as culpable irresponsibility and as recklessness” (p. 205), which has implications for the modalities—and ultimately for the very possibility—of civil and civic engagement. In recalling that “it is through the building of citizen relationships marked by systematic suspicion and mistrust, by the impossibility of knowing whom and what to trust, that totalitarian regimes are established and perpetuated” (p. 206), she identifies a major threat for democracy, one that “urban life in Covid times” (p. 214)—characterized by an obsessive focus on risk and danger—may have foreshadowed.

One of the major strengths of the book is that it highlights the role sociologists have played (and to some extent continue to play) in disseminating a gloomy vision of urban public space. Gayet-Viaud rightly points to the “emphasis [...] that has been placed, from Simmel to Goffman, on negative rituals” and to the “tendency to neglect positive (non-defensive) forms of sociability” (p. 119). In her view, these approaches have helped to legitimize “the idea that others are primarily a threat and that exposure to others in public (*a fortiori* among strangers) is a risk rather than an opportunity” (p. 121).

The wealth of theoretical and empirical contributions in *La civilité urbaine* makes it difficult to offer an exhaustive account of all the issues covered. The only criticism one might make is that the analysis of categorization processes pays little attention to the conflictual dynamics linked to social class, even as the study of spaces characterized by the spatial proximity of socially distant individuals and groups lent itself ideally to the study of class relations (Chamboredon and Lemaire, 1970). With this caveat in mind, one can only recommend this erudite and fascinating work, a must-read for anyone interested in urban public spaces and in what goes on within them.

Further reading:

- Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Madeleine Lemaire, "Proximité spatiale et distance sociale. Les grands ensembles et leur peuplement," *Revue Française de Sociologie*, 11(1), 1970, pp. 3-33.
- Manuel Delgado, *El Espacio Público como Ideología*, Madrid, Catarata, 2011.
- Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organizations of Gatherings*, New York, The Free Press, 1963.
- Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities. The Failure of Town Planning*, New York, Random House, 1961.
- Marylène Lieber, *Genre, violences et espaces publics: La vulnérabilité des femmes en question*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2008.
- Lyn Lofland, *A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space*, New York, Basic Books, 1973.
- Clément Rivière, *Leurs enfants dans la ville: Enquête auprès de parents à Paris et à Milan*, Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2021.
- Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in D. N. Levine (ed.), *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1971 (orig. 1903), pp. 324-39.
- Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a way of life," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 44(1), 1938, pp. 1-24.

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