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# Everyday Globalization

A Spatial Semiotics of Immigrant  
Neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Paris

Timothy Shortell



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# Everyday Globalization

*Everyday Globalization* is a micro-sociological study of immigrant neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Paris. Global flows of people bring together cultural practices from distant places and urban dwellers in global cities interpret the signs of collective identity in ascribing particular places as "immigrant neighborhoods." This book examines the spatial semiotics of identity in urban public space that make this possible. Unlike other studies of globalization and cities, this work brings together research on the social psychology of groups, linguistic landscapes, and quotidian mobility to explain how urban dwellers encounter cultural differences. Signs of social identity are always interpreted in the context of group boundaries and the appropriation of public space. The breadth of this analysis contributes to the literature in human geography on the meaningfulness of places. This book will also be of interest to scholars and students in visual sociology. In addition, this research demonstrates an innovative method for studying everyday urban experience.

Timothy Shortell is professor of sociology at Brooklyn College, City University of New York.

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# 1 Introduction

## Everyday Globalization

People who live in cities are used to being in the company of strangers. The presence of strangers—people unknown to us personally—is so ubiquitous that in normal circumstances it is seldom consciously thought of as we go through our daily routines. It is part of the background noise and motion of urban life. At the same time, though, urban dwellers are usually quite good at reading identity information in strangers and unfamiliar places. We routinely make judgments about other people and about urban spaces: whether or not they are safe, interesting, attractive, similar, etc. These judgments are based, in part, on our interpretation of both the built environment and the social landscape, including material culture and the people who are present. We read people based on their appearance and the ways they behave and interact with others who are similar and different.

One of the key ideas of the symbolic interactionist theory in sociology is that we act in the social world based on interpretations of others and our anticipated interpretations by others of our own characteristics and behavior: the way we see them and the way we think they see us. Simply put, we are interpretable objects for each other. This is critically important in urban environments, where we share space with strangers. All we have to go on is our interpretation of the signs of collective identity in other people—their appearance, their behavior, the objects they produce and use—and the ways that people change public space to suit their needs.<sup>1</sup> Because we generally do not know the people we share urban spaces with, we do not have the narrative data that derive from more intimate interactions; we normally do not have access to others' life stories.<sup>2</sup>

Our interpretations of people and the visible signs of culture they embed in the built and social environments are the basis of the affective bonds we form with specific places. This is how we recognize particular places as “home” and other places as not our home—that is, as belonging to others. Urban dwellers learn to read these signs just as they learn the implicit rules of public and semi-public spaces, through formal and informal socialization processes. We engage in this interpretation almost automatically and are usually not aware that we are reading space in this way. (This is not to say that we are always accurate in our interpretations. Misattributions are

## 2 Introduction: *Everyday Globalization*

common.) It is possible, then, to study the nature of urban spaces and urban culture by investigating the signs of collective identity in public space.

This research begins with a question: what do immigrant neighborhoods in global cities look like? To answer this question, we must examine closely the nature, distribution, and relative frequency of signs of collective identity, which are embedded in—and therefore visible in—public spaces in urban neighborhoods. This involves both moving around a neighborhood in a systematic fashion and using visual data, including photographs, video, and observations, to see with a sociological eye things that we usually take for granted.

The answer to this question is somewhat surprising when applied in a comparative manner. Immigrant neighborhoods in global cities tend to look alike, even when the cities themselves have very different appearances, and even when the people living in particular immigrant neighborhoods come from different parts of the world. This suggests that “immigrant spaces” have a distinctive appearance that follows from the fact that immigrants live in or occupy the spaces in significant numbers.

In this book, I attempt to explain the essential features of “immigrant spaces” using visual spatial analysis. To demonstrate how immigrant neighborhoods look alike, and how they look different, I will present analysis of data from studies of two cities, Brooklyn and Paris. Both places are global in the sense of population flows.<sup>3</sup> Urban dwellers in Brooklyn and Paris, including the ethnic majority, minorities, and immigrants, know that they share the city with “cultural strangers,” even if they mainly keep to segregated spaces. For this reason, in both cities, urban dwellers know how to read public space that can be described as culturally diverse or polyglot. In my analysis, I will try to explain how signs of collective identity mark certain places as “immigrant spaces,” how they may be seen differently from different group perspectives (social locations and group identities), and suggest what it might mean for life in global cities.<sup>4</sup>

### SOCIOLOGY AND THE “EVERYDAY”

Sociology and the other human sciences have paid attention to the “everyday” in various ways and to various degrees from the founding of these disciplines. When sociology has focused on the “big” or the “formal”—institutions, structures, ideologies, etc.—the contents of everyday life have tended to be dismissed as trivial or too messy for serious investigation. But at other times, when fashion swings back toward micro-sociological phenomena, “everyday life” and the “habitual”—and, we might add, the “vernacular landscape”—become the subjects of innovative social thought.

As Jacobsen (2009) notes, there has tended to be an association between the “everyday” and qualitative methodologies. Because the contents of everyday life can seem difficult, if not impossible, to quantify, “a discernible affinity between everyday life approaches and a preference for qualitative

methodology has persisted throughout the years" (2009:6). It is also, I think, because so much of the compelling work in micro-sociology has been narrative. Understanding everyday life, it seems, necessarily involves encountering ordinary stories.

In a similar vein, sociological work on the everyday has tended to privilege the private sphere and intimate interactions. This is understandable, as these things tend to be regarded as the most important things for most people. But just as sociology was mistaken that the public realm was asocial because it involved strangers, I would suggest that much of what is interesting and important about everyday life, especially in urban contexts, is in the public (or semi-public) realm. Interactions with strangers are fundamentally social, and equally fundamentally, a substantial component of everyday life.<sup>5</sup>

I want to argue here that a structural approach to public space is an important perspective on the "everyday." Following Simmel—the most important micro-sociologist of urban life—I believe that if we look carefully at how people use public space, we can learn much about how social life is structured, especially regarding collective identities and inter-group relations. In the public realm, everyday life is dominated by visual information. We learn of others by seeing them, by reading signs of collective identity (group memberships) in their appearance, their performance of cultural practices, and patterns of social interaction.

We form our sense of ourselves and our affective attachment to particular places—among other things, our sense of "home"—by seeing and interpreting signs of difference. These signs of difference inform us of the boundaries of groups we encounter in everyday life. We are not necessarily consciously aware of our perception of these signs as markers of group boundaries in much of our ordinary routines, but this forms an important part of our social knowledge. Practices of our own "home" culture take place within the boundaries of groups (centered on the in-group, but increasingly hybrid) in the vernacular landscape of urban spaces. Our feelings for our social self (our primary and secondary affiliations) and our places are constructed and maintained through repetition.<sup>6</sup> This is why everyday life is so important for understanding the place-based nature of collective identity.

Like much of everyday life, urban dwellers are able to do this interpretive work without being conscious of it. We may not know what we know, or how we know it, but we can use that knowledge to guide our behavior in public space in urban places, even if we have never been there before. The knowledge that guides our action is sometimes incorrect, of course, but that is an important characteristic of the social patterns of everyday life in the city.

Lefebvre was the most important of the sociologists of everyday life working in the Marxian tradition. He was concerned with the ways that everyday life facilitated or inhibited class consciousness. He observed that post-war French society was fundamentally transformed by mass consumerism. This relieved some of the burden of the working class but at the cost of "colonizing" everyday life (Schilling 2009). This was achieved by

#### 4 Introduction: Everyday Globalization

the strategic disconnect between needs and desires. “Lefebvre remarks that in present consumer society, desires are progressively decoupled from real needs; inversely, real needs no longer naturally produce desires. Everyday life is made homogenous, cleansed of any style” (Schilling 2009:193).

Lefebvre thought of the “everyday” not as a set of activities, but as a mode of living. He uses the metaphor of “level” to convey this perspective. Ordinary individuals rise above or sink below at various points. “Those who are ‘immersed’ in everydayness live in close contact with the concrete; pushed to act by basic needs, they experience social existence as cyclical and deeply repetitive” (Schilling 2009:194). This is characteristic of working-class life. Professionals tend to live above the everyday, and experience life as a linear progression of projects and accomplishments.

Lefebvre saw the city as related to a particular organization of everyday life. Like other urban theorists, he uses the metaphor of language (or text) to describe the city. “The city *writes* and *assigns*, that is, it signifies, orders, stipulates,” he observes (1996:102, emphasis in the original). As a site, the city mediates the “near order” of everyday life and its institutions (family, local groups) and the “far order” of the state and ideology. To decipher the city as text, one needs to know both the level of the everyday as well as the level of ideology and the organization of production. He notes that global processes have influenced the space and time of the city

by enabling groups to insert themselves, to take charge of them [global processes], to *appropriate* them; and this by inventing, by sculpting space (to use a metaphor), by giving themselves rhythms. Such groups have also been innovative in how to live, to have a family, to raise and educate children, to leave a greater or lesser place to women, to use and transmit wealth.

(1996:105, emphasis in the original)

Indeed, Lefebvre even offers a definition of the city as “plurality, coexistence and simultaneity in the urban of *patterns*, ways of living urban life” (1996:109, emphasis in the original).

Certeau also uses language (or, more precisely, the speech act) as a metaphor to explain quotidian urban rhythms. Like Lefebvre, he saw everyday urban life as creative. Answering the structuralism of Bourdieu and Foucault, he viewed ordinary urban life as a form of resistance to the reproductive powers of classes and institutions.<sup>7</sup> The everyday practices of ordinary (non-elite) urban dwellers are tactical—“tactics amount to seizing the opportune moment the better to subvert power relations, as in the case of assembly-line workers who in their overseer’s absence craft an object for personal use from scraps picked up off the cutting floor” (Schilling 2009:201).

Debord and the other Situationists were aware of how quotidian mobility created everyday consciousness, that taken-for-granted quality where theorizing on everyday life begins. Debord (1957, 1958a, 1958b, 1961) was



especially concerned with the way that the design of urban space domesticated urban dwellers. The consumer capitalist city produced patterns of daily life that eliminated the possibility of the chaotic and enticing qualities of the city, including its revolutionary potential. Space (and time) had to be routinized and monitored to accomplish this. The capitalist city is a space where everyone looks and acts alike, but thinks of him/herself as an individual. In this sense, the Situationists argued, everyday life is a lie.

Debord and his colleagues proposed a radical repurposing of urban space as a remedy to the regime of the Spectacle. The Situationists sought to provoke “situations,” the dynamic use of space and time in unproductive activities to create an emergent sense of community. If routinized space/time could domesticate the minds of urban dwellers, then “situations” could liberate them (Shortell 2015). Whether or not one agrees with the Situationists’ revolutionary perspective, their insights into everyday urban life are quite useful. It is a reminder that everyday life is not trivial and unimportant, but precisely where institutional power is most heavily manifest and where ordinary urban dwellers, when they choose to, resist that power.

A sociological approach to the “everyday,” including everyday globalization, must bring the ordinary details of our quotidian routines, what many social scientists have called the “unnoticed,” to the foreground for analysis. This is, as Jacobsen (2009) puts it, to make the familiar unfamiliar. If urban dwellers are normally not reflexive in the practice of everyday life, then urban researchers must bring observational data about those patterns to bear, not only to describe them but also to explain them.

Schutz is generally regarded as the first phenomenological sociologist. Like Weber, he believed that sociologists had to understand the meaningfulness of social life for social actors in order to understand society. Social life is not only meaningful, it is meaning-constituting, and the task, Schutz argued, was to understand how this is possible (Overgaard and Zahavi 2009). In large measure, this involves the problem of intersubjectivity.

One important insight into everyday life in Schutz’s work concerns the extent to which our everyday routines rest on our knowledge of social types. Most of our interaction is guided not by direct knowledge of individuals, but by expectations of typical motives and behaviors. “Our practical knowledge, including the various typifications, is a tool that we employ immediately and take for granted in order to navigate in the life-world and accomplish our aims” (Overgaard and Zahavi 2009:105). This practical knowledge is socially generated. We generally assume that others follow the same kind of everyday logic, which allows us to plan for interactions with strangers.

Schütz disagreed with Weber that it is possible to know others’ behavior (and motives) as we know our own. But, Schütz says, this does not mean that others’ meaning-making is incomprehensible. He explains:

My lived experiences of another’s acts consist in my perceptions of his [sic] body in motion. However, as I am always interpreting them as



something having an implicit reference to “consciousness of another.” Thus the bodily movements are perceived not only as physical events but also as a sign that the other person is having certain lived experiences which he is expressing through those movements. My intentional gaze is directed right through my perceptions of his bodily movements to his lived experiences lying behind them and signified by them.

(Schutz 1967:2759)

We are aware of the meaningfulness of our own experience and we operate as though others have the same quality of their experiences, even when we don't know enough about their individual lives to know the specific context in which they experience the world. We also perceive the artifacts of others' actions as meaningful in the same way—assuming that they come from someone's stream of lived experience in the same social world. This is the basis for a semiotic analysis of the social world.

As Jacobsen (2009) notes, sociologies of the everyday, especially from the phenomenological perspective, have been accused of being solipsistic. This is perhaps the worst thing you can accuse a sociologist of, given the subject matter of the discipline.<sup>8</sup> In this matter, I agree with Searle (2010:3), who was considering the problem of accounting for “consciousness, intentionality, free will, language, society, ethics, aesthetics, and political obligations” in a world that consists of particles and forces. Searle insists,

We must not allow ourselves to postulate two worlds or three worlds or anything of the sort. Our task is to give an account of how we live in exactly one world, and how all of these different phenomena, from quarks and gravitational attraction to cocktail parties and governments, are part of that one world.

(2010:3)

My task is more modest, but I would situate it in the same kind of realism: people make interpretations of the existing social world, and we often see things differently (because we read things differently than they were intended, among other reasons) and often disagree about “what is”—and especially what “should be”—but we are constrained by that “exactly one world” where our social lives take place. Our perspective on the world is always inexact and partial, always reflecting a limited view from our position in the social order, but the world we live in is the same.

## EVERYDAY GLOBALIZATION IN URBAN PUBLIC SPACES

Public space is something that every urban dweller knows about, but is surprisingly elusive to define. It is often contrasted with private space, that of the household, the realm of intimate or kin relations. Definitions that rely