

The ethics of indifference: an exchange

This exchange between Laura Gherardi and Fran Tonkiss forms the preface to the Italian translation of 'The ethics of indifference: community and solitude in the city', published as 'L'etica dell'indifferanza: comunità e solitudine nella città' (Trans: Laura Gherardi) in *Dialoghi Internazionali:città nel mondo*. 13 (Autumn, 2010). pp. 146-59.

LG: Where does the idea of an ethic of indifference come from?

FT: My thinking in relation to this idea is inspired – as the article suggests – by a strand of urban social theory that focuses on the particular kind of solitude one finds in the midst of a big city. Thinkers such as Simmel and Benjamin, as well as later writers, have highlighted the anonymity and estrangement of urban life – the paradox of being and feeling alone inside a crowd. These ideas resonated with me not only intellectually, but also in terms of my own experience of cities. One of the things that drew me to a city such as London, to which I moved in my early twenties, was the freedom of living in a big city in which you could 'disappear'. It seemed to me then – and it still does – that what is sometimes seen as the unfriendliness of city life can be experienced as a kind of tolerance. As a sociologist, I understand this lack of interaction as a social relation: you are oriented to others, you accommodate their presence, you make social room for them, in the very act of ignoring them. For me, there is an ethical quality in one's indifference to others' presence in shared public space, to their behaviour or their appearance. And it seems to me that this can be a real value of urban life for individuals who might be subject to unwanted attention or harassment in public: women; people with disabilities; members of racial, ethnic or religious minorities. Simply being able to walk down the street, inhabit public space, without attracting the regard of others can be liberating in this sense. In a larger sense, everyone's use of public space is premised on the assumption that strangers are not necessarily threatening, that others will simply let you be. Of course, this 'ethics of indifference' has a double edge: the same tactics of disregard is used when people ignore others sleeping in the streets, in distress or asking for money, or stand by when acts of violence are committed in public. This is why I see the ethics of indifference as having an ambivalent quality.

LG: The idea of an ethics of indifference can be provoking; what about the reactions to your article in the English context?

FT: One of my own criticisms of the article is that it tends to imply that an ethics of indifference is a universal urban quality. In fact, I see this as shaped by different urban cultures. Some cities, to put it crudely, are more anonymous than others. Simmel and Benjamin were both thinking of early-twentieth century Berlin as a key point of reference; my own main point of reference is London, and I write in this article about New York. The kind of reserve of which Simmel writes, for instance, still seems typical of a certain kind of English-ness: as anyone who has taken the London Underground (no talking to strangers, no eye contact) would recognise. New York doesn't have that same kind of public reserve, although it does allow for a similar kind of anonymity. Other cities allow for greater interaction, and a much more overt gaze, between strangers in public. I would still argue, however, that cities in general tend to promote indifference as a social relation – a means of negotiating everyday co-existence with large numbers of people who not only are strangers but may be very different from you. Again, there is a double-edge or ambivalent quality to this: in urban contexts where we are increasingly under the surveillance of cameras, in which our movements can be tracked via the electronic traces we leave behind, there is a small – and somewhat melancholy - freedom in knowing that not all of our lives in public are observable.

LG: Is it an issue the Cities Programme is working on?

FT: The Cities Programme at the LSE aims to integrate social and spatial approaches to urban life. Our focus is therefore on how physical spaces shape social action and interaction, and in turn how social action produces and transforms urban space. One of the critical ways in which the ideas in this article relate to the work we do in the Cities Programme is in terms of how urban spaces work to allow people to exist in 'side-by-side' relations that do not threaten or negate others' identity or use of space. In thinking about the design of everyday public spaces, housing and urban environments, we are interested in how cities can support difference without reproducing social division or exclusion. This is not to say that all spaces will be equally

accessible, attractive and useful to everyone, all the time. There is, as Jane Jacobs put it, plenty of 'sorting' of people in the city: by economic function, by age or gender, by cultural practice. For us the challenge is not only about the ways in which people can be brought to 'mix' in the city – because sometimes they can't – but also about the quality and the permeability of the borders between different kinds of space. Often, the spaces that are hardest to make work are those liminal spaces that separate public from private spaces, different kinds of use and different users. Creating thresholds rather than barriers, legible borders rather than sealed boundaries, can help to promote routine co-existence rather than competition or conflict over urban space.