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FEATURED REVIEW ESSAY

Elijah Anderson on Race Relations and Public Space:
Beyond the Primacy of the Street

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Were a future historian to turn to the sociological literature of the past fifty years to seek information on how members of different races were living together in urban areas, he or she would get almost no sense of the extent to which blacks and whites (not to mention other groups) have interacted along and across racial lines. Harvey Molotch's *Managed Integration* (1972) showed, by counting the number of blacks and whites in various stores and commercial spaces, that they may have gone shopping side by side, but otherwise, they did not socialize in public. There has been little ethnographic data collected on the topic since. In works like Massey and Denton's *American Apartheid* (1994) and Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), which emphasize the extent of social isolation and segregation in the United States, interaction suffuses these studies as an imputed variable. These works were never intended to be informative about the actual interactions that occur between and outside such communities as their inhabitants circulate throughout the city, but the influence of demographic images could give the impression that blacks and whites barely interact.

I

Along comes Elijah Anderson, whose *The Cosmopolitan Canopy* takes up the issue on the basis of his in-depth observations of public areas in his long-time home Philadelphia. Anderson reports on various sites including the Reading Terminal Market, Rittenhouse Square, and the Galleria Mall. The first two are venues dominated by middle- and elite-class sensibilities, while the Galleria caters to the tastes of the black working

The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life, by **Elijah Anderson**. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012. 318pp. \$17.95 paper. ISBN: 9780393340518.

classes and the poor. All of the sites, however, are islands of civility in which various kinds of people meet, agree to lay down their swords, carry on daily routines and give expression to higher selves.

For Anderson, such racially and ethnically diverse spaces offer a rest from the persisting strains of city life and a chance for various kinds of populations to intersect. They are "pluralistic spaces where people engage with one another in a spirit of civility, or even comity and goodwill" (p. xiv). A major accomplishment of the book is to depict variations, to show how they work, and to give them a name.

After an introductory chapter featuring the sort of walking tour that opened his earlier *Code of the Street* (1999), Anderson begins with an ode to Philadelphia's indoor farmer's market, the downtown Reading Terminal. A regular at the market for decades, he paints a loving portrait of the many types of people that congregate there, including the core of Amish vendors. The patrons range from corporate executives, to construction workers, to senior citizens in poor health. They are all "on their best behavior" (p. xv) as they eat and shop for food and other items.

What is it about this space that causes people "to take leave of their particularism and show a certain civility and even an openness to strangers" (p. 43)? Anderson has a theory that organizes his presentation of the ethnographic materials clearly. To begin, he

divides the city into two kinds of human beings: the open-minded, whom he calls “cosmos” (shorthand for cosmopolitan) and the close-minded, whom he calls “ethnos” (shorthand for ethnocentric). As Anderson sees it, “most Americans have attained a degree of cosmopolitanism. Yet, everyone has a mix of cosmo and ethno elements in his worldview” (p. 271). People-watching contributes to the creation of the cosmopolitan canopy. It is literally the sight of so many different and differing people in one another’s physical presence, as well as participation in what one sees, that reinforces the idea of a “neutral space” (p. 34) in which one’s ethnocentric side is moderated or even suppressed. Whites and minorities who have few opportunities for such interaction elsewhere can relax, imitate, and experience a sense of civility.

The dynamic that Anderson highlights repeatedly is the self-fulfilling nature of the interaction: *the interaction and the sight of it makes it so*. Most who come are probably repeat players, and they have long visualized different kinds of people getting along in the space. For newcomers, on the other hand, such visualization of tolerance is “infectious” (p. 11). In Rittenhouse Square Park and the streets surrounding it, other social cues serve to bring about similar results. There is, for example, a fountain and a statue of a goat that attracts mothers, nannies, and little people. The sight of “public mothering” is a cue that indicates that this is a civil place. A sense of safety and protection underlies good behavior and, in turn, leads to a virtuous circle of acts of good will. Dog walkers are also crucial. They interact naturally among themselves, but also with others, including children, as they form a critical mass in the park throughout the day. In a similarly positive encounter, when an elderly white woman has trouble standing up, a man sitting on a nearby bench rises and offers his hand to help. “Those of us who observed this act realized that we ourselves might expect such help or be called upon to render it” (p. 121).

The Galleria is a different story. Anderson describes it as the “ghetto downtown,” a community of close-minded black folk (“ethnos”) in one mall. What makes it

a canopy, albeit not a cosmopolitan one, is that various elements of the black community—the “street” and the “decent”—can co-exist here. People feel free to be themselves, “loud and boisterous and frank in their comments, released from the inhibitions they might feel among Whites” (p. 87). Nevertheless, Anderson stresses that a negative feedback-loop has given this place a self-reinforcing negative reputation among both cosmopolitan whites and blacks. It arises from cues given off by the non-white population on the streets around the mall and culminates in occasional deeply disturbing incidents such as the “flash mob”—high school students organized through Facebook and Twitter, who suddenly appear on the downtown streets “wreaking havoc on businesses and terrifying pedestrians. . . . As quickly as this storm appears out of the blue, it is over, but the effects are lasting, powerfully redefining the public spaces of the canopy zone” (p. 98).

II

In a career spanning almost four decades, Elijah Anderson has established himself as one of the towering figures in U.S. sociology. A protégé of Howard S. Becker and Gerald Suttles at Northwestern and the University of Chicago, his life-long project has been to bring Becker (to whom the book is dedicated) and Erving Goffman to the ghetto, marrying an interactionist micro-sociology with the reality of the post-industrial inner city. In the process, he has created a world of concepts that have become a crucial touchstone for contemporary discussions of the inner city.

At his best in this book, Anderson writes with the authority and wisdom of a Jane Jacobs. He even adopts a similar anecdotal style, which is different from the voice and fieldwork for which he became well known earlier in his career. Like Jacobs, he wanders through the city and takes it all in, writing down notes whenever things strike him as interesting. The result is a “rendering” by a man-about-town. The final picture we get is very compelling, but his departure from the more professionalized style of fieldwork has its costs. Because he is frequently gathering his data by participating in his *own* life

rather than that of others, he ends up making some key inferences about people and situations on the basis of their appearances, much as all of us do in our own lives. Throughout the book he seems to be engaged in the sort of people watching—folk ethnography—that he claims is the mechanism through which a canopy is created and sustained by average people. This is true when he writes in detail about the lives of people whom he has never met (pp. 206–207). He also uses such techniques to illustrate the crucial “nigger moments” that many blacks, he included, experience when in the canopy, which is worth quoting at some length:

“The noontime crowd was sitting outside enjoying the sidewalk-café ambiance. As we approached, an African American hostess greeted us, which was quite striking because it is rare to see a black person working for any of the high-end restaurants fronting the square; usually the waitstaff is young and white. The hostess was quite gracious, even friendly toward us, as she offered to take my knapsack for safekeeping. Then she gave us the option of a choice sidewalk table or inside. Michael [Anderson’s friend, a black physician] and I decided to sit outside, where we could enjoy the pleasant day. We sat and perused the menu. After placing our order, I remembered that my cell phone needed charging. I decided to ask the nice young hostess to recharge it for me inside.

As I entered the restaurant, I was confronted by a sea of white people, some dressed casually, others not so—this was the business lunch and casual upper-middle class crowd—and I was pretty blasé about what I was going to do. But no sooner had I stepped inside the restaurant than a heavy-set white man rose from the bar and confronted me, asking, ‘Can I help you, sir?’ A few of the other diners turned their gaze toward us. I was surprised by the show of aggressiveness and the sharp tone of voice. But I kept my cool and gazed about for the hostess, explaining to the white bouncer that I wanted to see the hostess. ‘Can I help you?’ he asked again, his voice rising. I then said, ‘I’m looking for the . . .’

By now, the hostess had spotted me and approached with what seemed a rather forced smile. As she did, she greeted me,

acknowledging that I was a bona fide customer. With this recognition, the heavy-set white man retreated from his defensive mode and returned to his seat at the bar. The hostess was very pleasant, even solicitous, as she took my cell phone and charged it. After returning to my seat, I could not help discussing with Michael what had just happened. Having faced this sort of treatment on numerous occasions himself because he is black, he agreed that something was amiss here. Still, it wasn’t so amiss that we couldn’t take up where we’d left off before the slight rent in the canopy that I had just experienced” (pp. 140–141).

Anderson expects a reasonable reader to understand the scene the way he does: something was “amiss,” and the situation arose because he was a black man. The methodological problem is that although he describes this as something that occurred “in the course of his ethnographic research” (p. 138), he was living the scene as an ordinary black man in his everyday life, and thus thinks about it the way an ordinary person might. He considers the definition of the situation as provided by only one person other than himself: his friend, Michael, who did not witness any of it. The two of them conclude that something is amiss because Michael has experienced similar treatment on many occasions “because he is black.” What we are being offered is the ultimate convenience sample, the problem of which is the possibility that some readers will be led to question the evidentiary basis for these incidents. Because of the subtlety and ambiguity of racial offenses, the discipline of sociology should strive to make such encounters as visible as possible with the most systematic methods. What if Anderson had put on his ethnographer’s cap and searched for the inconvenient sample (Duneier 2011) which is harder to obtain and could highlight the biases in his account. What if he were to observe further interactions between the male employee and customers of different races? What if he were to ask how the male employee and hostess defined the situation, by seeking interviews with them on future occasions? Possibly, nothing would have come of an interview with the man, although one can never be sure without trying. We might have learned

that the man found it strange that Anderson refused to tell him what he wanted and insisted on talking to the woman. And how do we know that the hostess would not have explained that her colleague was merely trying to protect her from yet another of the many males who continually harass her, wandering into the restaurant to ask for her email address or telephone number?

There is something much more important than the evidence at hand, which is illustrated by thinking of the conversation with his friend Michael as its own kind of useful data about how ordinary people—himself included, when living his routine existence—think in these situations. Individual blacks tend to learn that they have nothing more than provisional status in the cosmopolitan canopy, and they expect to cycle through social situations in which they feel that precariousness most acutely (p. 291). In everyday life, blacks do not have time to conduct an experimental audit study, and few people can do much more than make inferences from people watching. So we must assume that conversations and interpretations such as the one between Anderson and Michael are quite common. In fact, if Anderson as an astute observer of ordinary social interaction makes such an inference in everyday life, we must assume that vast numbers of ordinary blacks untrained in analyzing interaction draw similar conclusions regularly.

Anderson uses the term “nigger moment” to refer to situations in which whites demonstrate “a dramatic failure to treat blacks with the respect they deserve” (p. 291). He explains that these are moments in which “he or she is powerfully reminded of his or her putative place as a black person” (p. 253). “When this happens, they figure that the white people thought of them as a ‘Nigger’ all along, the whites’ protestations notwithstanding” (p. 291). Because blacks have been through it so many times before, the disposition to say “here we go again” without seeking further evidence is a rational response, even if a neutral observer of that interaction would disagree. As Anderson’s own experience with Michael suggests, what matters in defining the phenomenon as rational is whether he and Michael *feel* the dramatic failure of whites to treat them with respect.

Anderson never claims that blacks’ interpretations of the individual situations are necessarily factual or that blacks’ assessments are particularly systematic or careful. In fact, when describing middle-class blacks in restaurants, he states: “When blacks are alive to slights, they can interpret all discourteous behavior as racially motivated” (pp. 234–235). “Because of the history of racial injury in America, Blacks have developed a heightened sensitivity to insults” (p. 256). Both his conversation with Michael and his analysis elsewhere in the book suggest that, whatever the n-moment is or is not on an evidentiary level, it is ultimately a folk category constructed around ordinary black people’s felt sense of rationality, which justified his, and Michael’s making their own interpretation. In the privileging of blacks’ definitions over whites, the n-moment would appear to sometimes encompass accusations by whites of hypersensitivity and paranoia, but only when non-blacks find out how a particular interaction was interpreted. This does not occur very often.

In a classic paper, Joe R. Feagin (1991; see also Feagin and Sikes 1994) argues that many middle-class blacks are so aware of charges of this kind made by whites that they engage in the most careful assessments of their interactions and tend to give whites the benefit of the doubt. Sometimes, they miss true discrimination when it really occurs (pp. 109 and 111). Despite their difference, both Anderson and Feagin ultimately come down in the same place: particular situations might appear minor in isolation, but the way in which they pile up, little by little, and get interpreted in terms of a larger historical experience, explains the particular manner in which blacks come to interpret them as racial incidents.

Anderson’s treatment of provisional status is a controversial, profound, and sobering crescendo at the conclusion of a volume that could otherwise be mistakenly read as a post-racial ethnography of the Obama era. From William Foote Whyte’s *Street Corner Society* (1943) to more recent work by Sherry Grasmuck, Amy Best, David Grazian, Colin Jerolmack, Reuben May, and Jooyoung Lee, urban ethnography has long documented that moments of recreation create vast spaces for people to “be

themselves," even as these moments cannot be taken for granted as fun for *any* ethnic group or person. Even in the spaces where one would expect recognition and acceptance, these moments must always be understood as a precarious achievement for everyone concerned. Yet, for blacks it remains a more extreme situation. As one of Feagin's subjects from two decades ago stated: "One problem with being black in America is that you have to spend so much time thinking about that stuff that most white people just don't even have to think about. . . . And so, that thing that's supposed to be guaranteed to all Americans, the freedom to just be yourself is a fallacious idea. And I get resentful that I have to think about things that a lot of people, even my very close white friends whose politics are similar to mine, simply don't have to worry about" (Feagin, p. 114).

Anderson's volume provides detailed and contemporary evidence that bears out such poignant statements, but it also advances the field. A quarter century has passed since Feagin conducted his interviews. Over that period, the black middle class has grown considerably and the color line has become dimmer, so that many more middle-class blacks today feel capable of coping with discrimination (See Lacy 2007; Patillo 2007). Anderson shows with subtlety and insight how the color line can still be drawn instantly and shockingly at any moment, and how it gets produced through interactional processes. "Navigating the unstable terrain demands unusual poise and forbearance, as assumptions of equality and inclusiveness can suddenly be called into question" (p. 270). He argues that such experiences explain why it is that, despite the existence of cosmopolitan canopies, it is also common to see numerous restaurants in every city where blacks, tired of "campaigning for their rights" (p. 238), voluntarily self-segregate.

III

Though Anderson makes little reference to his earlier work, it seems to me that the present study can be best understood in relation to *Streetwise* (1990). Two decades ago, he was mainly interested in the way that strangers

acquired information about others when they came into their presence, generally to pass inspection. His unit of analysis was interaction on the street. Sophisticated people were the ones who did not hold up gross stereotypes, but instead had a more refined understanding that allowed them to differentiate between different kinds of people in public space.

In the Philadelphia of the late 1980s, citizens were threatening to each another. Only a rare white was "streetwise" enough to know the difference between a dangerous black and one with benign intent. Today as well, Anderson still sees a "pervasive wariness of strangers" (p. 275) and a particular wariness of anonymous black males who represent the "iconic ghetto" (p. 28). But he has also identified an entire multi-racial class of sophisticated working- and middle-class people that can accept certain kinds of public space "as belonging to all kinds of people" (p. 3). These same people may still have their guard up in other locations, but he now sees their interaction in the city as a more complex phenomenon. There is wariness on streets where people must pass inspection and a cosmopolitanism in places where appreciation for different kinds of people is also possible.

Of course, the times that Anderson is studying are different from earlier ones. In the late 1980s, covered in *Streetwise*, the nervous interactions between blacks and whites that he observed on the streets of Philadelphia were the main story during an era of higher crime rates. In recent times, however, with crime rates at a historic low, pedestrians feel a greater sense that they can let their guard down. Indeed, today many city dwellers experience both nervous and easy-going interactions in their lives, and the streetwise person about whom Anderson wrote in the early 1990s now has far less to lose in being open-minded about difference. Cosmopolitan morality is all well and good if you can afford it.

IV

The Cosmopolitan Canopy forces us to reconsider the ways in which we think about urban space by privileging the experiences

of people as they move beyond the segregated spaces in which they officially reside. What is most different in Anderson's account of public space in urban life today is that the physical context of roles and statuses has changed. He clearly no longer accepts what Jane Jacobs and William H. White—not to mention his earlier self—would have called “the primacy of the street” (White:7). For these earlier generations of urbanists, social life in a shopping mall was demeaning and degrading. Its denizens were well aware of the fact that they were socializing not at the center, but to quote White quoting Russell Baker, “somewhere vaguely off toward the edge of a center that has failed to hold” (White, p. 338). Anderson's subjects do not think that way, and he privileges their sensibilities above what some sociologists might think they should be feeling. Nor does he write as if Reading Terminal or Rittenhouse Square are the new agora. What is more important to him is that socially isolated neighborhood housing for any race or class is simply more bearable if there is some “respite from the

lingering tensions of urban life and an opportunity for diverse peoples to come together” (p. xiv). In showing the existence of these canopies, and how they work in the context of contemporary racial inequality, Anderson has created a record of how urban space is defined in fact and how that space is used in daily interaction. This book will have a place in the canon of sociological thinking about urban life.

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