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Everyday life on the streets of London

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Peter K. Andersson, *Streetlife in late Victorian London: the constable and the crowd* (Lund: Lund University 2012). 285 p.

In this imaginative and provocative thesis, Peter Andersson seeks to understand the everyday experience of living in a late nineteenth-century city – in his case, London, the largest of those cities – as far as possible ignoring "impressions" and "reflected experience" – literary representations, outsiders' accounts, so-called views from above (the elite describing and often moralising about the lives of the poor) – and focusing instead on "unreflected" and "momentary" experience, constituted in the everyday practices, actions and gestures of ordinary people (p. 10). Andersson does this firstly through the lens of the police constable on the beat, as recorded in the surviving notebooks of a handful of constables, but especially through the evidence they and others gave in trials conducted at the Old Bailey, London's Central Criminal Court, or as reported with lots of apparently verbatim detail in the London press. His thesis exploits the possibilities opened up by the avalanche of digitised records now available online – including the Proceedings of the Old Bailey, British Library 19th-Century Newspapers, the Charles Booth Online Archive, *The Times* Digital Archive, and Edwardian oral histories – to search individual cases and record individual experiences, often reading "against the grain" or "between the lines" to uncover everyday routines disrupted by crime, accident or other untoward happenings.

Andersson's methodological framework is provided by a sociologist, Erving Goffman, who analysed the situational character of everyday behaviour: how people perform, playing different roles in public and private settings – "frontstage" and "backstage" – and how they engage in "impression management" by ordering their appearance, manners, posture, gestures – how

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they interact with one another (p. 18).[1] Goffman worked among his contemporaries, so his sources were directly observational. Applying these ideas historically is more challenging. Urban and social historians have also been very interested in differences between public and private, but – following Lyn Lofland[2] – Andersson is more concerned with an in-between realm of parochial space – the local neighbourhood – certainly not private but equally not quite public (p. 19).

Following two chapters introducing readers to Victorian London, to historical studies of behaviour, and to the principal sources and methods to be employed, the thesis proceeds through four substantial chapters dealing, firstly with the neighbourhood or parochial setting; then with encounters on main, multi-purpose streets, and the tension between moving and standing still; then with the management of appearances – especially dress, how people judged one another by what they looked like, and how they presented themselves to others; and finally, with manners and, especially given the police perspective, the meaning of what we might normally think of as bad manners – misbehaviour.

Andersson has interesting things to say about the development of "stranger interaction" – a "diluted" intimacy between fleeting acquaintances, people who behaved briefly, to our eyes, as if they had always been friends, even though they had only just met for the first time, in the pub, on the bus or in the street. He draws on Lofland's idea of "categorically knowing" one another, and so engaging in "routinised relations" (p. 92) (I don't know you personally, but I think I know the kind of guy you are sufficiently well to spend time with you, buy you a drink, or exchange gossip). We might think this really was just a performance – playing a part in a theatrical ritual – but Andersson concludes that these performances were sincerely meant. The street, he argues, was not so much a theatre as a playing field. In the theatre, the audience are usually just observers, they don't alter the course of the play; but on a playing field, the gaggle of spectators constitutes a crowd who can have an effect on the game. Crowds in social history are usually studied as purposeful, single-minded collectivities – as mob, rioters, marchers or protestors – but Andersson's are crowds of bystanders who took on some responsibility for the situation, assembling around a street-corner huckster, or intervening to defend somebody who had been wrongfully arrested.

Inevitably, there were problems of conflicting norms of behaviour: the policeman was supposed to keep his distance from the people he policed, to maintain his dignity and authority, but he also needed to cultivate a sense

1. E. Goffman, *The Presentation of self in everyday life* (London 1990).

2. L. H. Lofland, *The public realm: exploring the city's quintessential social theory* (New Brunswick 1998).

of trust; and, for the most part, he was just an ordinary bloke, so from time to time he succumbed to popping into the pub while on duty, or taking a nap in an empty building during a boring stretch of night duty, or bullying or behaving violently towards people whom he disliked, or who had dared to challenge his authority. And there were more recurrent conflicts – between those who used the street as a means of getting from one place to another as quickly as possible and those who wanted to stop for a chat; between those who hated noise and those who needed to make a noise to earn a living.

Andersson is also perceptive in discussing irony and sarcasm in social relationships: calling somebody "guv'nor" both acknowledged and undermined their authority. Politeness could express disassociation. In various ways, therefore, he challenges dualistic thinking about past social relations – as either intimate or distant, egalitarian or hierarchical. He provides us with lots of very human examples, and with a much more nuanced way of thinking about everyday life. He is dissatisfied with urban histories that assume a narrative of modernity, built around dualisms of order and disorder, intimacy and alienation, sociability and anonymity, in which the pre-modern city comprised disorderly but sociable community whereas the modern city was orderly, disciplined, efficient, but impersonal – a city of strangers who stayed strangers. So he has little time for Richard Sennett's thesis of the fall of public man, or for Marshall Berman's chronology of modernity connecting processes of modernization to changes (mostly for the worse) in modern experience.[3]

I was disappointed that he ignored another metanarrative – the progression from police governmentality to liberal governmentality, that is, from the state ordering you how to behave and using military power to get its way, to the so-called "rule of freedom" in which the state or other institutions create the conditions in which people recognize their self-interest in behaving appropriately. While it may be refreshing to find a thesis with no genuflection to Foucault, the limitations of liberal governmentality lie behind much of what runs through this thesis – the creation of a police force that is one with the people; the "improvement" of the built environment – slum clearance, new streets, lighting, sanitation, the whole process of "civilizing" – that is supposed to facilitate healthy living, but which allows both surveillance and self-surveillance, what Patrick Joyce refers to as the "omniopticon".[4] Joyce certainly deserves more attention in the introductory sections of this

3. R. Sennett, *The fall of public man* (New York 1976); idem, *Flesh and stone: the body and the city in Western civilization* (London 1996); M. Berman, *All that is solid melts into air: the experience of modernity* (New York 1982).

4. P. Joyce, *The rule of freedom: Liberalism and the modern city* (London 2003).

thesis because, like Andersson, he is dissatisfied with representations of city life, and wants to know how places worked, how life was lived on the streets and in the public spaces of the city.

If we believe, if only a little, in the thesis of liberal governmentality, that surveillance linked to improvement changed behaviour, we need to be more cautious of lumping together sources from 1870 and 1900 in a single narrative. At one point, Andersson invokes Mayhew and then cautions himself with the observation that what was true of the 1850s and 1860s may not have applied in the 1880s and 1890s (pp. 225f.); but he might have reflected more broadly on that problem in his thesis, especially as the proliferation of eye-witness accounts, one Old Bailey case after another, frequently omits the date of the incident from the main text. London was growing rapidly – doubling in population between 1870 and 1900, moving from an undemocratic Metropolitan Board of Works to a democratic and socially progressive London County Council, carved through by new roads and railways, tramways, bridges, tunnels, and social housing. Did none of this produce any systematic change in the practice of everyday life over the 30-year span of this thesis? And, returning to the theme of surveillance, what did the practices of policing, crime reporting and photography do, not just in the moment when somebody knew they were being watched or photographed, but cumulatively, as people came to expect they were being observed, over the longer durée of a 30-year period?

As a geographer, I am delighted with the attention paid to space and territory in this thesis: the concept of the parochial, the diversity of different kinds of streets. Andersson is alert to differences between inner city and suburbs, to debates about segregation and socio-spatial mixing in Victorian cities and the characterisation of East End and West End. But the characteristics of specific places are less evident. Of course, the places where policemen walked or crimes were committed or photographs were taken are named; but more could have been done to embed those different sites in their particular social milieux. Did people use the same slang or follow the same fashion fads in Lambeth as in Bethnal Green? Was the meaning of the same action different in the slums of Westminster compared to the slums of Whitechapel? Writing to his sister in 1883, the novelist George Gissing commented that "I spent an evening in the east-end on Saturday. It is a strange neighbourhood; totally different from the parts of London in which my walks generally lie. The faces of the people are of an altogether different type, & even their accent is not quite the same as that of the poor in the west end."[5] Gissing offers us just an impression, but perhaps Anders-

5. P. F. Mattheisen *et al.* (eds.), *The collected letters of George Gissing: volume 2* (Athens, Ohio 1991) p. 121.

son could cut his material another way, to examine whether streetlife was different in one working-class neighbourhood from another.

At the time Gissing made his observation, he was writing his second published novel, *The Unclassed* (1884), in which he set the slums that are a major feature of the novel *not* in the East End he had just visited but close to Westminster Abbey. When the novel was republished a decade later (1895), Gissing moved the slums to the, by then, notorious East End, yet he failed to follow the implications of his earlier observation and change the way his characters spoke or looked. This carelessness with literary space may seem to justify Andersson's avoidance of "literary representations" as a mostly moralising top-down and imagined world, rather than the reality of everyday life. Yet even Andersson cannot keep to his vow of factual reporting completely – he includes references to W.S. Gilbert in jocular mood, and, more than once, to Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes – hardly a reliable source of information on daily life in Victorian London! Thomas Hardy's letters are quoted twice, prompting the question why so little use is made, if not of novels, then of the letters and diaries of writers who "did research" and who can be trusted to say what they saw. What makes Hardy or Gissing a less reliable commentator than witnesses at Old Bailey trials? Are the sources deployed in this thesis – police notebooks, Old Bailey proceedings, oral histories and, in later parts of the thesis, photographs and film clips – any less self-conscious performances than fiction that deals with everyday life?

I sympathise with the aim of using untheorised eye-witness accounts, but I would still like to know more about the conditions in which PC Bendell and his colleagues wrote up their notebooks, and why and how their notebooks, and apparently no others, have survived. Are the Old Bailey proceedings as complete a report as they at first appear? Reviewing this source, Andersson suggests that, with the development of shorthand, the proceedings became fuller and more accurate (p. 29). Yet comparisons of some Old Bailey transcripts with reports of the same cases in *The Times* indicate that completeness was not always on the side of the Old Bailey. Moreover, if behaviour on the streets was a performance of sorts, then writing your notebook or giving evidence in court was surely also a performance, not "unreflected" truth.

Later sections of the thesis also make use of street scenes in photography and film. Again, we learn too little of why the pictures were taken, by whom and for whom. For architectural photographers working to the commission of buildings' owners it was desirable to photograph the street when it was empty or orderly. On the other hand, photographs taken to support slum clearance programmes or traffic improvement schemes like widening the Strand might deliberately want to depict overcrowding or congestion. Street photography is argument as much as record.

Andersson makes the common mistake of describing working-class London housing as "back-to-back" (p. 41). This term should be reserved for dwellings in which the back walls were shared (so there were no back doors, no back windows, and no through ventilation), common in many northern English cities, but rare in London, except where houses in one court backed onto houses in adjacent courts. Yet it remained true that families laid claim to little genuinely private space, dependent on the street and the doorstep as spaces of entertainment and social interaction. Police constables on the beat were instructed to check for unlocked doors (p. 50), yet this can only have applied in middle-class areas. In poor districts, doors were rarely locked, as witness the frequent refrain in Booth notebooks – "all doors open" – used to signify slovenliness and a "promiscuous" attitude to space and property. Alternatively, as Andersson notes, "the practice of sitting on one's doorstep or standing in front of one's house can be read as a way of expressing proud ownership and belonging, or it can be read as being at ease in the environment of the neighbourhood, encouraging people to stop by for a chat or just say hello as they pass" (p. 65). The diverse meanings of the same action point to differences of behaviour by class and gender as well as locality.

Regarding gender, women in these sources seem mostly to be put upon, to be either victims or witnesses of other (male) people's misdeeds. Yet popular fiction features feisty girl gangs running riot or baiting local police constables.[6] Maybe this is a fantasy on the part of male novelists, but it suggests the need for more reflexivity in the relation between "representation" and "everyday life", where the evidence of the former is used to raise questions about the latter; and it also prompts us to find a documentary female equivalent of the constable – the barmaid, the board school teacher, the corner shopkeeper, the neighbourhood matriarch?

The thesis ventures onto main streets to explore how pedestrians negotiated traffic, how those whose way of life depended on the streets – children and youths who lived on the streets, pickpockets, sandwich-board men, porters, crossing sweepers, street traders – interacted with those for whom the street was a place to pass through as quickly as possible, and how constables dealt with cases of loitering, obstruction, congestion, accidents, road rage, reckless driving, and – in the case of cabmen – intimidation. Amidst all the antagonism of "hurry", Andersson identifies co-operation among the anonymous crowd. Venturing inside public transport, too, he explores the "courtesies and insults" (p. 235) of travelling by train or bus, though he underestimates the public spectacle of arguing and fighting on the open top-deck of a London omnibus, a site of micro-geography as significant as the doorstep.

6. E.g., W. P. Ridge, *Mord Em'ly* (London 1898).

Andersson ends with the idea of the crowd, the assembled crowd as a community, and the desire to be one with the crowd. The constable's dilemma was that he was expected to police the crowd, but at the same time he was one of the crowd. I was reminded of King Vidor's great silent film *The Crowd* (1928), set in 1920s New York. John Sims, born 4th July 1900, the archetypal American, wants to establish his individuality in the crowded city; but in the end he settles with being one of the crowd, last seen uproariously laughing in the middle of a mass cinema audience. Andersson's thesis expertly demonstrates the same tension in urban modernity between heightened individualism and conformity, not only on the part of the constable but also among the cast of characters and sub-cultures – pickpockets, cabmen, cross-dressers, swells, mashers – that people its pages. There have been earlier books about the streets of London,[7] but Andersson's astute combination of social and anthropological theory and detailed empirical research ensures his a prominent place in the canon.

7. E.g., J. Winter, *London's teeming streets 1830–1914* (London 1993); T. Hitchcock and H. Shore (eds), *The streets of London: from the Great Fire to the Great Stink* (London 2003).