The City as a Security System

by

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*To what extent does the city as such work as a security system? This is a question that gets lost in discussions of terrorism, gangsterism, warfare, ethnic conflict, religious strife, and so on. The assumption seems to be that we are always on the verge of a violent war of each against all, held in check by the civilizational power of the state. Almost forgotten is that orderliness often appears otherwise, maintained by processes that do not involve the state. Cities in particular are remarkably orderly, despite the fact that they bring thousands if not millions of strangers together, in close proximity* (Weber 1978; Jacobs 1961; Sennett 1970; Amin and Thrift 2002, 2017)*. Political scientists have not paid much attention to this. My aim in this paper is to explore some of the work of social scientists and journalists who have attempted to identify the order in apparently disorderly city neighbourhoods. What are the conditions of possibility for security there, and how do the security systems generated by city neighbourhoods relate to the ones generated by states? I will be addressing the work of Alice Goffman* (2014)*, Katherine Boo* (2012)*, Richard Sennett* (2012)*, and Nancy Rosenblum* (2016) *in particular, with the aim of clarifying how security is established within urban neighbourhoods and how the operations of the state secure that security, disrupt it, or challenge it in positive or negative ways.*

Elsewhere (2011), I have argued that we need to think of the world in which we are living as a “city” that is both local and global. Moreover, I have suggested (2015) that our right to this city has to be understood in terms of the principle of local self-government and *vice versa*. In making these claims, I have suggested (2014) that urbanism in general – and the city in particular – works as a security system whether or not there is an effective state to maintain order. I have gestured at some of the evidence for that, such as the persistence of urban order in face of state collapse or withdrawal, but have not offered a systematic argument or social scientific “proofs” along these lines. I am not sure that such proofs could be developed, any more than their contraries: we are dealing with matters that are so general that they drive us back to first principles of interpretation and assessment, which are themselves subject to many uncertainties. Let me just suggest that, given the fact that cities *seem* to work as security systems, the burden of proof lies with those who claim that such systems are bound to fail without the backing of a state. There are many reasons for thinking that a well-ordered state is a good thing, but exactly how necessary it is – and in what respects it is necessary – is difficult to work out when arguments in political theory are so often posed in terms of stark contraries that obscure the complexities of human life. Here I want to proceed in a more measured way and consider what we know (or could learn) from the way cities work as security systems. My focus is especially on the micro-politics of neighbourhoods, because as Nancy Rosenblum argues (2016) political theorists tend to pass over what happens at this level in favour of what they can see happening on a larger scale. If we look at what happens in neighbourhoods are we drawn toward the standard conclusions of statist thought, or are we pulled in the other direction?

The main premise of statist thought, famously articulated by Hobbes, is that there can be no civilized order without sovereignty. Although we all have our quibbles with Hobbes, most of us actually agree him: we think that there has to be a state equipped with police and armed forces for there to be law and order, let alone any semblance of justice. Fashionable criticisms of the state from both the left and the right tend to obscure the problem that the state was meant to resolve: to provide for a lawful order without resorting to the personal rule of a king or other despot. The state de-personalizes rule, and subjects it to legal procedures. In its *ideal* form, the state just *is* a lawful order in which rights, property, and personal freedoms are secured from arbitrary violence (Vincent 1987). Most of us assume that such an order needs to be secured by more than popular assent and acquiescence: that there have to be police to deal with miscreants and an army to defend the state from those who might try to overthrow or seize control of it. Of course, everyone is aware that a state can also be subverted from within: turned into an instrument of personal or party rule, or simply corrupted by its own agents. A state can collapse or be overwhelmed. It can be a sham that covers over something much worse (Marx 1977; Arendt 1951). It can be manipulated for all sorts of nefarious purposes. But, most of us still suppose that there is really no alternative to it, and that the “monopoly of legitimate violence” of which Weber (1978, 2004) spoke is necessary for the state to achieve its purposes.

Of course, some people think that a civilized order can emerge and be sustained without the state. Anarchists obviously believe that the state creates more problems than it solves (Graeber 2013; Scott 2014). Prone as it is to the abuse of power (and tempting as it is as a vehicle for any and all oppressors), the state is rarely in accord with its own ideal. Perhaps we would best be rid of it. How that might happen without resort to armed violence is not clear, however. Moreover, it is difficult to see how a benign anarchy could be sustained in the long run without resort to state-like means, such as a court system, regulatory agencies, and police forces. So, most of us suspect that we are stuck with the state, and that we have to work out how to make it closer to its own ideal. The good state, the just state, is a tantalizing and seemingly inevitable ideal, because it is hard for us to conceive of a just and civilized order that is not in some sense a state. It is equally hard for us to imagine a situation in which this good order is never threatened by corrupt officials, criminal gangs, terrorists, or marauding armies. Thus, we are driven back to Hobbes, however much we deplore him. Wasn’t he right to suppose that sovereignty is necessary for civilized order?

It is not that simple, however. We know from the historical record that there have long been societies without states: places and peoples that seem to be as civilized – and perhaps also as just – as ones elsewhere, but that have not been governed by states. We also know that the current global order, mediated though it is by states, is not in itself a “world-state” and probably never could be. Finally, we know that the reach of the state, even at its most powerful, is limited and again perhaps necessarily so. The Soviets tried to create a state-controlled economy, which seemed to work well enough for a while but ultimately collapsed. Is that a sign that economic life has a form of its own incompatible with the procedures that must characterize a just and effective state? Many have thought so. The same is true with respect to family and personal life more generally. What of cultures? Religious or spiritual life? Aren’t they necessarily autonomous in some degree? Life, be it urban, rural, or tribal, tends to develop in accordance with multiple logics that, although they may resolve themselves into awkward but liveable assemblages, rarely form dialectical unities. The assemblages of the urban are particularly complex (Amin and Thrift 2002, 2017). The logic, rules, and powers of the state order are formidable, and the state can act to better things in various ways, but state control of human life is not and never can be complete. People are too resistant. Nature itself is too resistant. So, the ideal of “law and order” is misleading insofar as we suppose that the state can reduce everything to order thanks to its sovereignty. Even Hobbes admitted this in his own way: he knew that the state could not regulate private conscience and he implicitly supported the emergent capitalist economy, which he thought that the sovereign would have to let be, in its own interest. If an effective state is necessarily a limited one, does that not imply that civilization and justice must develop mainly on their own, with at best some support and refinement on the part of the state?

In a way, we all believe this. Morality and ethics – however we conceive of them – are clearly not products of the state: it is more the other way around. Moral and ethical principles arise from life experiences of all sorts. Specialized ethics arise in the context of particular activities – farming, cycling, dancing, dating, or whatever. If we have rules of general applicability, we have worked them out from many particular experiences, in different contexts, over many generations. Much the same is true of other principles that we do not think of as ethical or moral, but that nonetheless guide us in our actions, from walking down the street to taking a meal with other people or organizing some new venture. Most practical principles of conduct are *not* derived from the state and its rules: rather, the state at its best operates at a distance: regulating, stimulating, enabling, adjudicating, *etc*. This is the secret of “government,” as Foucault (2007, 2008) understood it. The state can help, but it cannot generate the vibrant life that it seeks to regulate. Such a life must emerge and develop within the populace that is to be governed.

So, it seems that the state as most of us imagine it is at one remove from the sources of human vitality. Is civilization then a consequence of the state, or rather of the life that the state seeks to regulate? Perhaps it is wrong to pose this as a choice, but statist thinking tends to skew our understanding in one direction, especially insofar as it suggests that “security” – read: “law and order” – is provided by the state, rather than otherwise. By contrast, the National Rifle Association in the US seems to suggest that people would be more secure if they all carried guns all the time. That seems unlikely to me: the opposite is closer to the truth. Nevertheless, the NRA’s position is a reminder that culture – in this case, a culture of gun-carrying or its opposite – is crucial to security. In my view, a culture of gunlessness – a culture in which people disavow guns and are sceptical of people having them at all – is more conducive to security and hence to law and order. In any case, the laws about gun-ownership and gun-carrying are less important than the culture that supports or opposes such things. If life becomes more secure in relation to firearms that will be more the result of a cultural shift than any change in the laws. Perhaps the best way of understanding this is that the cultural shift that leads people to disavow guns is the same shift that leads them to put their trust in the state to curb extreme violence. We might follow Hume in supposing that in a long-standing stable state people will gradually come to trust the authorities to render them justice of a sort – or follow the 18th century revolutionaries in thinking that trust and legitimacy must come first, which is what the revolution is to generate. Either route might be viable, but it is certainly misleading to suggest that sovereignty will generate or even protect civilization automatically.

Here I identify “civilization” with a modicum of order that enables people to go about their daily lives without much fear of extreme violence. I imagine “justice” as more than that. In this paper, I want to explore – with the assistance of various anthropologists and sociologists of everyday life – what happens both in extreme situations, where the state is a source of insecurity rather than security, and in situations of the opposite kind, where people generally trust the state and take a modicum of security for granted. I am more used to the latter situation than the former, and I cannot pretend to have more than a dim sense of how security arises in adverse situations. Nevertheless, it seems clear to me that people do usually manage to establish some security or “normalcy” in their lives, and figure out ways of dealing with threats of violence. How do they do this? What are the micro-practices of civilization? What enables these practices to flourish? What forestalls or defeats them? How does “the state” relate to what happens on the ground? There is much to be explored here, and I can only scratch the surface – or, more accurately, to attend to what other people’s scratching has revealed.

**Life *in extremis*: Annawadi and Sixth Street**

Let us begin with places where the state clearly fails to provide the security it promises. Many examples could be chosen, but two prize-winning books have caught my eye in this respect: Katherine Boo’s *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (2012), which was later adapted by David Hare as a play performed at Britain’s National Theatre, and Alice Goffman’s *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* (2014), Goffman being the daughter of the late Erving Goffman, one of the pioneering sociologists of everyday life. The focus in the one case is on a desperately poor “informal settlement” near the airport in Mumbai, India, and in the other on a small African-American neighbourhood in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The accounts are by white outsiders, and depend on first-person observations and interviews that journalists rely upon but that many academics find insufficiently scientific. Clearly, one cannot take these accounts as definitive, but it is hard to read them without taking them seriously.

The first thing to note is that the police in these places apparently do not provide security: instead, they are a source of *in*security for the residents. People have to work out how to avoid the police, and to protect themselves as best they can when they fall under police control. To the extent that a civilized order emerges in these neighbourhoods, that order depends on what people can do for themselves, beyond police surveillance. What the police do – and more generally what *the state* does – usually makes things more difficult in this respect, not less.

Goffman describes her experience of policing on “6th Street” as follows, foreshadowing many of the themes of the “Black Lives Matter” movement in the US:

In the first eighteen months that I spent in the neighborhood, at least once a day I watched the police stop pedestrians or people in cars, search them, run their names for warrants, ask them to come in for questioning, or make an arrest. In that same eighteen-month period, I watched the police break down doors, search houses, and question, arrest, or chase people through houses fifty-two times. Nine times, police helicopters circled overhead and beamed searchlights onto local streets. I noted blocks taped off and traffic redirected as police searched for evidence – or, in police language, secured a crime scene – seventeen times. Fourteen times during my first eighteen months of near daily observation, I watched the police punch, choke, kick, stomp on, or beat young men with their nightsticks. (Goffman 2014, 4)

She emphasizes that the neighbourhood she was studying is not exceptional.

6th Street is not the poorest or the most dangerous neighborhood in the large Black section of Philadelphia of which it is part – far from it. In interviews with police officers, I discovered that it was hardly a top priority of theirs, nor did they consider the neighbourhood particularly dangerous or crime ridden. Residents in adjacent neighborhoods spoke about 6th Street as quiet and peaceful – a neighbourhood they would gladly move to if they had enough money. (4)

Police corruption is apparently not a huge problem either:

For many decades, the Philadelphia police had turned a fairly blind eye to the prostitution, drug dealing, and gambling that went on in poor Black communities. But in the late 1980s, they and members of other urban police forces began to refuse bribes and payoffs. In fact, corruption seems to have been largely eliminated as a general practice, at least in the sense of people working at the lower levels of the drug trade paying the police to leave them in peace. (3)

What has happened in the last thirty years or so is that the police have been told to “get tough on crime” and eliminate as much of it as possible. The effect has been to make young Black men in low income neighbourhoods into useful targets for police forces trying to get their arrest rates up to prove their commitment to crime-fighting and to attract more resources. As Goffman argues, the consequences for the targeted group are horrific:

By the time many young men in the neighbourhood have entered their late teens or early twenties, the penal system has largely replaced the educational system as the key setting of young adulthood. These boys and young men are not freshmen or seniors but defendants and inmates, spending their time in courtrooms instead of classrooms attending sentencing hearings and probation meetings, not proms or graduations. (109)

The consequences extend to the community as a whole:

The authorities’ efforts to hunt, capture, try, and confine large numbers of young men in poor and segregated Black neighborhoods are not only changing the way these men see themselves and orient to the world around them. The heavy police presence and the looming threat of incarceration are spilling out past their targets and tearing at the fabric of everyday life, sowing fear and suspicion into the networks of family and friends that have long sustained poor Black communities. Under the threat of prison, a new and more paranoid social fabric is emerging – one built on the expectation that loved ones may become wanted by the police or inform on one another to save their own skin. It is woven in subterfuge and trickery; in moves and counter-moves; in the paranoiac practices of secrecy, elusion, misinformation, and unpredictability. If there is solidarity, it is an occasional solidarity against the police. (199)

The effect is not to reinforce the rule of law, but to undermine it.

Some might say that in neighborhoods plagued by drugs and violence, the police have little choice but to arrest large numbers of young men … But around 6th street the street trade in drugs, neighborhood rivalries, and their potential for violence are all deeply woven into community life. Under these conditions, the role of law enforcement changes from keeping communities safe from a few offenders to bringing an entire neighbourhood under suspicion and surveillance.

In this context, the highly punitive approach to crime control winds up being counterproductive, creating entirely new domains of criminality. The level of social control that tough-on-crime policy envisions – particularly in a liberal state – is so extreme and difficult to implement that it has led to a flourishing black market to ease the pains of supervision. … Thus, the great paradox of a highly punitive approach to crime control is that it winds up criminalizing so much of daily life as to foster widespread illegality as people work to circumvent it. Intensive policing and the crime it intends to control become mutually reinforcing. (201-202)

Goffman describes how people in the community deal with intensive policing. When a police raid begins or seems imminent, the young men who are its possible targets scatter, and the women – mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, girlfriends – do their best to conceal their presence, as well as the presence of the guns and drugs that the police may also be searching for. Practically all of the young men in the community have had trouble with the law. Many of them are on bail or parole. There are warrants out for some of them – mostly for failing to appear at some court proceeding or another – as well as outstanding charges for mostly minor offences.

In the context of legal insecurity, people show their love and commitment to one another by protecting those close to them from the police, sometimes at the cost of their own safety. Some of these gestures are as small as telling a cop that they didn’t see which way a man went. Some are bigger, like when a man with a warrant risks an encounter with the police to attend the birth of his child. And some are as big as offering oneself up for another’s arrest. Small or large, all these gestures carry deep meaning, becoming rituals that people perform to show respect, to demonstrate love or intimacy, to uphold the revered status of others, and to identify themselves as good people. In this way, people construct a moral world through the looming threat of prison, finding opportunities for acts of sacrifice and protection that bind them to others. (126)

There is a distinction locally between “clean” and “dirty” people – the latter being ones who are likely to be arrested if they come into contact with the police because of parole violations, outstanding warrants, unpaid fines, or connections with crimes, past and present. A “dirty” person can be particularly “hot” if the police are looking for him intensely.

Those who continue to have dealings with a young man once he becomes wanted, who protect and aid him in his hiding and running, or who support him while locked up are known as *riders* – a term signaling courage and commitment. Those who turn on a man … are said to be “not riding right”. (7)

In this moral universe, a woman who “rides right” under intense police pressure can win considerable respect whatever her other failings. But, things are so tilted in favour of the police that community solidarity is difficult to sustain.

One of the many differences between 6th Street and Annawadi is that the Philadelphia neighbourhood still contains many people who have regular jobs and are not involved in the cycles of criminalization that Goffman describes. Such “clean” people have to stand aside from the “dirty” ones and the police who are hunting them down. That is not always easy. The neighbourhood is quite homogeneous ethnically, and that no doubt contributes to community solidarity, but the fissures resulting from criminalization and criminality are difficult to overcome. The greater the intensity of policing, the heavier the weight of the state, the harder it is for “clean” people to reach out to others and establish community norms that discourage gun violence, encourage useful work and education, and reinforce the practices that contribute to a civilized community.

Annawadi, the Mumbai community Katherine Boo studied (with the help of various interpreters), is much poorer than 6th Street and is not the subject of such intensive policing. Nonetheless, the impact of the police – and of the state in general – is mostly perverse. Although police corruption may not be a huge issue any more in the Philadelphia neighbourhood, it is the key to understanding the relationship between the police and the inhabitants of Annawadi. Crime in Annawadi is of no interest to the police unless it can be a source of profit for them. Other supposedly public institutions – like schools, hospitals, orphanages, and courts – operate on similar principles. The people of Annawadi are useful to those above them only when they can provide cheap labour while remaining invisible, or when their misery can be used to attract donations from Western organizations, private businesses, or the state itself. It is well understood that most of the money donated to the people of Annawadi ends up in the bank accounts of intermediaries who know how to exploit the system. The police have their particular, brutal ways of extracting money from the poor, but they are not the main profiteers. Extracting money from the land itself, or from public services, is more profitable because the poor themselves have little that they can provide.

Although most murders in Annawadi are covered up – because the victims seem worthless, the likely perpetrators are under police protection, or it is just too much trouble and would worsen the police statistics – occasionally a suspicious death occurs that offers splendid opportunities for extortion. The police do their best to take advantage of it. Boo traces one case, of a woman’s accidental suicide following an argument with her neighbours. The neighbours were falsely accused of causing the woman’s death. Although the police quickly worked out that the accusations were false, they also knew that they could exploit the situation for their own benefit. As a first step, they arrested three members of the neighbouring family and subjected the men to horrific beatings. This was standard practice.

The idea was to get terrified prisoners to pay everything they had, and everything they could secure from a moneylender, to stop a false criminal charge from being recorded. Beatings, though outlawed in the human rights code, were practical, as they increased the price that detainees would pay for their release. (Boo 2012, 107)

On Boo’s account, the mother of the family, who had to take the main responsibility for getting her husband and older children out of the judicial system, was faced with innumerable demands for bribes from the police, court officials, doctors, and community intermediaries, which she could only meet in part, despite selling most of the family’s meagre assets and begging from every relative possible. In the end, the charges were dismissed, but not before every rupee available was extracted by one official or another. This is part of a more general pattern in which everything to which the people of Annawadi are supposed to have access – be it housing, employment, education, medical care, or welfare services – is only available if the appropriate bribes are paid. It matters little whether the services are offered by the state, private business, or charities. Wonderful-sounding programs are announced and part-funded by the state or foreign charitable organizations, but most of the money is diverted into the pockets of people who just pretend to offer services they don’t provide, divert goods (especially medicines) for private re-sale, and create fake documents that enable them to get benefits to which poor people would otherwise be entitled. For the residents of Annawadi, the police are just among the most brutal of their exploiters. They are not even necessarily the most dangerous.

The whole of Annawadi is technically an illegal settlement on land that belongs to the Airports Authority of India.

The slum had been settled in 1991 by a band of laborers trucked in from the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu to repair a runway at the international airport. The work complete, they decided to stay near the airport and its tantalizing construction possibilities. In an area with little unclaimed space, a sodden, snake-filled bit of brushland across the street from the international terminal seemed the least-bad place to live.

Other poor people considered the spot too wet to be habitable, but the Tamils set to work, hacking down the brush that harbored the snakes, digging up dirt in drier places and packing it into the mud. After a month, their bamboo poles stopped flopping over when they were stuck in the ground. Draping empty cement sacks over the poles for cover, they had a settlement. Residents of neighboring slums provided its name: Annawadi – the land of *annas*, a respectful Tamil word for older brothers. Less respectful terms for Tamil migrants were in wider currency. But other poor citizens had seen the Tamils’ sweat summon solid land from a bog, and that labor had earned a certain deference. (5)

By the time Boo began her study, Annawadi had become much more diverse ethnically, with migrants coming from both the north and the south of the country in search of work connected with India’s most dynamic city. Few found regular jobs: only six of the three thousand people living there could boast that (6). Most were day labourers, scavengers, petty traders – or thieves. People had to be enormously resourceful to survive, and the niceties of middle-class ethics could scarcely be observed. For most people there, life was (and is) “nasty, brutish, and short,” despite the ostensible presence of a sovereign state, a capitalist economy, and a vibrant civil society locally, nationally, and internationally.

Although conflicts of caste, ethnicity, and religion are evident in Annawadi and there is little possibility for such poor people to be generous, the stern law of the jungle is by no means universal. Boo describes the unbelievably hard lives of Sunil and Sunita, whose mother died when they were young and whose alcoholic father completely neglects them. Sunil is at a difficult point of transition:

In the old days, Sunil and Sunita had stood silently outside the huts of their neighbors at dinnertime. Sooner or later, some pitying woman would emerge with a plate. Sunita could still work this angle, but Sunil had now crossed an age line over which charity did not reliably extend. He looked closer to nine years old than to twelve, a fact that pained him on a masculine level, and might at least have been a practical help. But no one felt sorry for him any more. (34)

The pitying woman is emblematic of the human sympathy – and sense of solidarity – that remains despite everything that works against it. Sunil supports himself and his sister by scavenging, work that is difficult, dangerous, and scarcely remunerative enough to ensure his and her survival. He and the other scavengers suffer when prices for scrap fall.

Worse for the Matangs [traditional scavengers], and for Sunil, was the increased professional competition for trash. An army of uniformed workers kept the environs of the international terminal free of rubbish. … And on the streets, new municipal garbage trucks were rolling around, as a civic campaign fronted by Bollywood heroines attempted to combat Mumbai’s reputation as a dirty city. Stylish orange signs above dumpsters were commanding, CLEAN UP! Some freelance scavengers worried that, soon, they would have no work at all. (37)

So, even the apparently benign activities of the state and its middle-class supporters worked against him.

Boo summarizes the situation as follows:

In places where government priorities and market imperatives create a world so capricious that to help a neighbour is to risk your ability to feed your family, and sometimes even your own liberty, the idea of the mutually supportive poor community is demolished. The poor blame one another for the choices of governments and markets, and we who are not poor are ready to blame the poor just as harshly.

It is easy, from a safe distance, to overlook the fact that in under-cities governed by corruption, where exhausted people vie on scant terrain for very little, it is blisteringly hard to be good. The astonishment is that some people *are* good, and that many people try to be – all those invisible individuals who every day find themselves faced with dilemmas not unlike the one Abdul confronted, stone slab in hand, one July afternoon when his life exploded. If the house is crooked and crumbling, and the land on which it sits uneven, is it possible to make anything lie straight? (254)

Perhaps not, but a simplistic appeal to the state is clearly not sufficient. With respect to Annawadi and 6th Street, the states concerned – India and the USA – are clearly “failed states,” although that does not mean that the ideals expressed in the concept of the state, like equal citizenship and equal justice, are irrelevant. Nor that public services are unneeded, or best marketized. Somehow the practices that enable people to live well in their neighbourhoods have to be connected to the ones that enable them to live well in the wider world.

**The Democracy of Everyday Life**

In an important new book (Rosenblum 2016), Nancy Rosenblum tries to articulate the principles of what she calls “the democracy of everyday life.” Her point is that relations between neighbours – in the strict sense of that term – are qualitatively different from relations between friends, family, work-mates, and other associates, including fellow citizens. Sheer proximity forces people who are otherwise strangers to accommodate themselves to one another in various ways. In part, this is a matter of *live and let live*, but Rosenblum is at pains to show that this principle is more demanding than we might first imagine, and can involve disregard of or even resistance to the rules and regulations of the state or other formal institutions. Moreover, there are at least two other principles at work in neighbourly relations: *reciprocity*, extending at least to all the “decent folk” in proximity, and *speaking out*, in relation to the violation of neighbourhood norms (11). Neighbours return favours to one another, but also are prepared to meet rudeness or animosity with the same. They live and let live, but may speak out against flagrantly unneighbourly behaviour individually or with other neighbours. In crises, neighbours often have to rely on one another, because there is no one else to help. Neighbours may be everyone’s last resort, and the neighbourhood the last resort for democracy.

When we are reluctant to join civic associations or have no confidence in the meaning and value of our vote and voice, when political resources are liable to be overwhelmed, weakened, or abandoned, we neighbors can sustain the democracy of everyday life. The democracy of everyday life is the enduring substrate of democracy, which we fall back on at crucial moments to maintain our democratic bearings.

So:

The democracy of everyday life, with its disregard for social and political inequalities in deference to neighbors as “decent folk,” is a gauge of the profusion of sectarian identities and social and economic inequalities in public political life.

The improvised self-governing of the democracy of everyday life – and the sense of collective efficacy that comes with rallying, decision-making, and enforcement – is a gauge of our distance and felt remove from sites of political decision. (247)

The democracy of everyday life is an index of political catastrophe. When officials set neighbors against one another or condone violence so that everyday life is horribly deranged, we recognize that democracy is diminished in a special, deeper way than exclusively political standards allow us to see.

The democracy of everyday life is a compass for maintaining our democratic bearings when organized aspects of social and political life have lost their integrity or simply do not make sense to us. When public life is unjust, or beyond our capacity to influence, or so unappealing as to provoke retreat – when the mind is at the end of its tether with government and politics and with our fellow citizens, or when mindlessness rules – the democracy of everyday life is a hardy remainder. Not a substitute for political democracy and not a compensation for political disaster, but a saving remnant. (248)

Rosenblum acknowledges that the democracy of everyday life may not be present everywhere. People may not be prepared to acknowledge others as neighbours because of differences of caste, class, race, ethnicity, or religion. Nevertheless, one notices the practices Rosenblum describes in Boo’s account of Annawadi, where differences of caste, ethnicity, and religion are pronounced (even if everyone is of India’s lowest class and racial differences are not marked). People line up peacefully to take water from the well or use the outhouses; they respect one another’s private spaces; they share in the use of public spaces; and, they provide some minimal assistance to one another in grave emergencies (taking account of the fact that what might count as a dire emergency elsewhere is part of ordinary life in Annawadi). Without a modicum of neighbourliness, Annawadi could not function at all as a community, and it would not have come into existence in the first place if Tamil workers – otherwise in competition for employment, presumably – had not come together to clear and stabilize the site. Somehow the settlement expanded to accommodate others who were not Tamils, so residence is not conditional upon having the “right” ethnic identity, despite the inter-group tensions that are apparent. Annawadi is by no means an ideal community, but it does seem to function after a fashion, thanks in good part to the sort of neighbourly practices that Rosenblum identifies.

Rosenblum focuses her attention on the way neighbours adapt to one another, but the principles seem to apply to other settings as well. Consider how people pass one another on the street, sort themselves out at a beach or park, line up at a counter or check-out at a store, get on a bus or train and find places to stand or sit, adjust themselves in a crowd at an event, offer help to the frail, elderly, or disabled, watch for small children, glare at rowdy teenagers, criticize careless drivers, warn others of dangers, and so on. There is a sense in which everyone at a particular location is a neighbour, at least for that moment, and we may respond to such passers-by in a way that is similar to the way we would respond to our more permanent neighbours. So, perhaps there is a continuum of neighbourliness in the large domain of relations between strangers in which most of us have to operate. Village or tribal life may have been characterized by face-to-face relations between people who were well known to one another, but in cities interactions with strangers are forced upon us if we have to travel to work, make our way back and forth to shops, use public facilities, or go visit family or friends in other neighbourhoods. No doubt, some people lead very sheltered lives that involve little contact with strangers, but most of us pass strangers on the street, in the grocery aisles, or other places as a matter of routine. What allows us to get on with these strangers? If Rosenblum’s principles are the correct ones – and I am right in extending them to these situations – we manage because we live and let live, observe the principle of reciprocity, and speak out against flagrant violations of the accepted norms of conduct.

Rosenblum is insistent on the distinctiveness of neighbourly conduct:

Something is lost if the democratic ethos of good neighbor is conflated with the special responsibilities that come with family or group ties. Something is lost as well if good neighbor is conflated with universal moral decency, respect, or an ethic of care said to apply to everyone, everywhere.

The elements of the democracy of everyday life comprise a set distinct, too, from formal and informal democratic institutions and practices, from public principles of justice or fairness, from the legalism of rights, and from civic virtues. Put simply, good neighbor is not a redescription of good citizen. One is not an informal variant of the other. The democracy of everyday life is not democratic public life writ small. (14)

Perhaps uniquely, reciprocity among neighbors is not a starting point on the way to explicit rules of coordination and organized methods of monitoring interactions. On the contrary, lacking the structures and practices imposed by institutions and without standard shared purposes, the give and take of good turns and bad set the tone and terms of neighborliness. (72)

Qua neighbors we must figure out how to live in relations of equality with others whom we do not choose and cannot escape, and who in the event of offense we must decide to address. … The project of self-governance among neighbors precedes and extends beyond whatever formal self-government is captured by political institutions. (100)

There is no necessary continuity at work, no dynamic imperative moving from our good turns as neighbors to collective civic action – not empirically and not morally. Continuity with citizenship is not the chief value good neighbor has for us individually and it is not its chief value to democracy. (215)

The democracy of everyday life has a place of its own, then, around home. After we take account of organized political life, work, membership groups, social circles, friends, and family, there is this “remainder.” Its importance owes to the depth and intensity of interests and values attendant to life at home, in proximity to neighbors. There, daily trespasses and kindnesses are inescapable. There, neighbors’ encounters and claims are concrete and immediate, not at all distant or abstract as our rights and obligations as citizens often are. We shouldn’t underestimate the significance of neighbor relations, just because and not despite the fact that they are mundane. Again, “To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts,” and encounters with neighbors brighten or degrade the day, every day. (235)

Well and good, but we should keep “the street” and other public places in mind as well. In fact, if we think of the city in all its complexity, we begin to recognize how difficult it is to reduce the various domains of human interaction to a finite list. Moreover, the qualitative distinctions between modes of interaction at different sites – say the difference between a grocery-market queue and the queue for a rock concert, or between interactions at a beach and in a crowded pub – are as significant as the differences between the informal democracy of the neighbourhood that interests Rosenblum and the more formalized democracy of a chess club. It is important not to suppose that there is one model of democratic interaction that applies everywhere.

What has this to do with security? Everything and nothing. If security is not provided by the state, it has to come from somewhere. Does it then emerge from the neighbourhood democracy Rosenblum describes? Evidently it does to some extent. People have an eye out for their own safety and weigh up their neighbours in this regard. Trusted neighbours are a source of security, and people contribute to each other’s security as a matter of reciprocity. This may involve keeping a watch on one another’s property, warning of suspicious intruders, and even rallying together to deal with perceived threats. Goffman describes at length how the young men on Sixth Street rallied to deal with threats from another neighbourhood. Nevertheless, it is apparent that security in other contexts or in wider areas is not simply an outgrowth of what happens in neighbourhoods. The neighbourhood is just one domain of interaction. The mutualities that develop in other contexts are crucial, and it would seem that the proliferation of localized practices of security is what enable people to move from one setting to another with confidence. The people of Annawadi and the young men of Sixth Street may be uncertain of their security outside their own neighbourhoods, but this is a sign of their relative deprivation. To feel secure everywhere and anywhere in a city is crucial for having a more generalized right to the city.

That is a theme implicit in Margaret Kohn’s new book, *The Death and Life of the Urban Commonwealth* (2016). Her focus is not on the democracy of everyday life, but on solidarism and the right to the city. By solidarism, she means “the claim that the division of labor creates a social product that does not naturally belong to the individuals who control it as their private property” (14). She thinks that this claim underpins the right to the city:

The claim is basically “we built that” and it applies both to the informal settlements and to the city itself. In some cases, the inhabitants literally made the land upon which they built their dwellings. According to Gautam Bhan, the neighbourhood of Pushta on the Yamuna River in Delhi was created by families who filled in the vacant marshy embankment with leftover debris and rubble from constructions sites, gradually transforming it into a place to live. Eventually this *terra nullius* became home to 35,000 people. (47)

Pushta is like Annawadi on a larger scale. Kohn understands the right to the city as one that extends generally, because the city as a whole “cannot be understood as an individual accomplishment. It is created collectively by many people usually over many generations.” (58) The right “protects access, enjoyment, and co-determination of the common-wealth of the city.” (3)

The term “urban commonwealth” … is meant to remind us that the city is a form of property that cannot be broken up into individual parcels. A sidewalk loses its usefulness for transportation if each person has control over a small section. By its intrinsic character, the city belongs to a collective. It is res publica: the public thing. (6)

Kohn describes the right to the city as a “hetero-right,” one that “highlights the otherness of rights that are both inside and outside the framework of liberal rights” (176).

The right to the city is a logical impossibility in so far as no one can assert a conventional property right to the city. The right to public housing functions in a similar way. … It claims a property right to something that is not a possession. … The dispossessed person’s right to the commons is also a hetero-right. It is a rights claim that casts doubts on the dominant way of thinking about rights. It highlights the paradox that the right to property is also the basis of dispossession. It reminds us that the right to private property cannot be universalized, because there is always a limiting moment when there is no more commons to be appropriated, and one person must violate another’s right or be left without “as much and as good” land as the first person who claimed a share. (188-89)

If we re-frame this discussion in terms of security, we can see that the right to security (in one’s own person and property) is a hetero-right, at least with respect to communities like Annawadi and 6th Street, where rights to security bump against private property rights and other claims that make people subject to exploitation and draconian policing in the name of a security they are systematically denied.

For people in neighbourhoods like Annawadi and 6th Street, security is partly a matter of evasion and resistance with respect to the state, and partly a matter of neighbourly practices that emerge regardless of the state. Robert Ellickson, from whose work Rosenblum drew some inspiration, explored such practices in northern California cattle country. He was particularly interested in whether “some nonlegal system of social control – such as the decentralized enforcement of norms – might bring about at least a modicum of order even under conditions of anarchy.” (Ellickson 2001, 138) What he found is that ranchers in the area generally adhered to a code of conduct that was different from what the law specified.

Most rural residents are consciously committed to an overarching norm of cooperation among neighbours. In trespass situations, their applicable particularized norm, adhered to by all but a few deviants, is that an owner of livestock is responsible for the acts of his animals. Allegiance to this norm seems wholly independent of formal legal entitlements. Most cattlemen believe that a rancher should keep an animal from eating a neighbour’s grass, regardless of whether the range is open or closed. (53)

This leads Ellickson to challenge the idea that there can be no order without law – or, more accurately, no order without the state:

In accord with Hobbes’ *Leviathan* and Mancur Olson’s *Logic of Collective Action,* many analysts assume that a general populace cannot achieve public order in the absence of a central authority capable of applying coercive sanctions. Except in quite small groups, it is thought, incentives to free-ride prevent the emergence of spontaneous self-help enforcement. If they can maintain close-knittedness, however, even thousands of people can achieve public order without aid of a hierarchy. On isolated islands that have virtually no formal government, for example, residents experienced little crime. In ways that are poorly understood, constitutive and other norms emerge to provide the glue that makes possible a surprising degree of order without law. (238)

Kohn’s response to this sort of argument is the standard one:

The state is necessary for reasons explained by republican theorists, as well as solidarists and social democrats. Groups such as criminal gangs, aristocratic families, guilds, religious orders, and corporations can wield considerable power, and a corresponding concentration of power is necessary to regulate, dismantle, and counterbalance these concentrated forces. The state, however, can also turn into a powerful agent of particular interests if it is not checked through some form of accountability or limited in some way. Democratic society plays this role. This leads to the paradox that democratic society is both the problem and the solution. Self-governing associations can use their power to exclude outsiders and promote the interests of their members, but they can also protect the vulnerable and decentralize potentially despotic concentrations of power. In order to distinguish between them, we need a theory of the public good. (168)

This implies, as she well understands, that people of neighbourhoods like 6th Street and Annawadi have to assert their hetero-rights – their right to the city – both against the state and against people with property and privilege (among whom Ellickson’s ranchers could certainly be found).

Ellickson tries to make sense of people cooperating in the absence of the state by drawing on rational choice theory. Richard Sennett offers a different approach, based on close observation of the way people sort out their differences in different settings, such as workplaces, community meetings, commercial exchanges, and street encounters. He is particularly interested in the way “everyday diplomacy” works.

Everyday diplomacy is one way people deal with people they don’t understand, can’t relate to or are in conflict with. To meet these challenges, people in communities, at work or on the street proceed in ways analogous to making and repairing things in the workshop. They use minimal force; create social space through coded gestures; make sophisticated repairs which acknowledge trauma. It’s often said that indirection is the essence of diplomacy, and it’s true that all these efforts rely on suggestion rather than command. But more pointedly, everyday diplomacy puts the dialogic conversation to work practically. One result is skilled conflict management. (221)

Sennett’s emphasis is on civility, empathy (“Sympathy overcomes differences through imaginative acts of identification; empathy attends to another person on his or her own terms.” [21]), dialogical exchange (“a discussion which does not resolve itself by finding a common ground” [19]), and the subjunctive mood.

The subjunctive mood counters Bernard Williams’s fear of the fetish of assertiveness by opening up instead an indeterminate mutual space, the space in which strangers dwell with one another, whether these strangers be immigrants and natives thrown together in a city or gays and straights living in the same street. The social engine is oiled when people do not behave too emphatically. (23)

More generally:

Cooperation oils the machinery of getting things done, and sharing with others can make up for what we may individually lack. Cooperation is embedded in our genes, but cannot remain stuck in routine behaviour; it needs to be developed and deepened. This is particularly true when we are dealing with people unlike ourselves; with them, cooperation becomes a demanding effort. (ix)

This suggests that the key to security within and between neighbourhoods is the everyday diplomacy that enables people who are very different from one another to live together peacefully.

**From Sanctuaries to Cities**

Neighbourhoods like Annawadi and 6th Street are sanctuaries for the people who live there, and as such function like other sanctuaries, such as refugee camps. “Sanctuary cities” are meant to open things up in various ways but, as Jennifer Bagelman (2016) suggests, they keep refugees and asylum seekers in a “suspended state” in which they must wait indefinitely for some resolution of their status. According to the British “handbook” for establishing sanctuary cities,

… a place with a culture of hospitality will be more welcoming not just for people in need of sanctuary but for anyone who is newly arrived for whatever reason, or might be isolated or vulnerable. It will be a better place for local people too. It means that a city will not become a stagnant, fearful, inward-looking place, but will benefit from a flow of new ideas, talents and relationships. (17)

Bagelman puts this attractive vision into context. As she reports of “the supplicants,” meaning those who have received sanctuary:

Sanctuary and charity are often exhaled in the same frustrated breath. For these men at least, it signifies a form of despair, the kind of support one seeks when there is nowhere else to turn. Their sole source of aid, sanctuary support nevertheless elicits in these men a sense of dependency, uselessness and invisibility. (31)

A “culture of hospitality” that maintains a hierarchical relation between those who have a right to be there – and hence to offer welcome, sanctuary, charity, or citizenship – and those who must beg for assistance because they have no alternative is scarcely a democratic culture. Moreover, the invidious comparison between those who are generous enough – or simply have the means – to offer hospitality and those who do not creates another embittering divide (the consequences of which we have been observing recently).

The sanctuary is the obverse of the gated community, in that it separates those who offer sanctuary from those who receive it, just as the gates of the gated community separate the entitled inhabitants from those who must beg for admission. Clearly, the effect of our actually existing state system is to seal a part of the world – the wealthiest, most privileged, and most powerful part – off from the rest, and to force “others” to beg for admission on terms set by those with the sacred gates. The sanctuary city movement is meant to open things up, but it depends on the charitable impulses of people who are already highly privileged. The security it offers can never be on democratic terms. More significant is the security generated by migrants and refugees themselves, as they work together to save themselves from various threats, not least from the states whose protection they seek or the cities to which they assert their “hetero-rights”. Migrants are a reminder that claims to the city – which is to say, claims to the opportunities and benefits afforded by modern civilization – are not confined to those who can say, “we built that.” None of us built the modern world. We were born into it. Whatever claims we have on it we share as newcomers who stand to benefit from what our ancestors did and yet are challenged by the obstacles they created for us.

In this paper, I have been trying to make sense of the ways in which people secure themselves and the people they care about, especially in situations where the state appears as a hostile force or is simply absent. The absence of the state is something that we all have to deal in our day-to-day interactions with people on the street, in our neighbourhoods, at work, and elsewhere: there usually isn’t a cop within sight, and we wouldn’t want it otherwise. We have to figure out how to deal with other people, including ones who are annoying, intrusive, uncooperative, or downright hostile. As Sennett emphasizes, “everyday diplomacy” is a craft that we have to learn and constantly practice to get right. Most of us are at best so-so practitioners, but all of us have some sense of what is involved. Conflict is not just what happens on the other side of the world, or among the marginalized and excluded. It is an everyday experience with which all of us are familiar. What we learn is not just that people can be cruel and violent – or that they can disregard one another’s rights – but that people also have the capacity to negotiate difficult situations, smooth over differences, and learn to get along to make life better. We can see these processes at work in places like Annawadi and 6th Street, as well as in refugee camps and privileged neighbourhoods. If there is a ground to security, it is more likely to be found in these practices than in the formalized procedures of the state.

That said I must be cautious. The problem with most discussions of security is that they begin with an answer – the state – rather than with a question: how is security secured? I don’t want to substitute one pat answer for another. On the other hand, it seems clear to me that the everyday practices that enable urban life are as important for security as the ones that provide for “law and order” – especially for those who are routinely denied the protection of the state or offered protection on terms that demean them. To understand everyday security practices, we have to observe them and analyze them with as few preconceptions as possible. If cities bring people together for peaceful purposes – as they evidently do – and if people actually seek security in cities when they lack it in the countryside – as again they evidently do – then we should attend carefully to the way cities actually work. Few political theorists have done so. They are too much fascinated by the state and too willing to assume that the state solves the security problem by virtue of its own existence. Would that things were so simple.

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