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## **The geography of ambiguity: a reflection on agency and morality in urban negotiations**

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### ABSTRACT

Geography, as a perspective, draws great strength from its ability to understand the multifaceted nature of people's relationship to place. This is especially significant in the understanding of cities. Since urbanization was recognized as a key feature of modern industrial society, urban landscapes have been understood as fields quite unique in terms of their diversity, intensity, and potential for encounter. Concomitant with this potential, however, is a rather deep ambivalence – a degree of variability that makes urban landscapes in a sense unknowable, or unpredictable, and therefore as something never 'settled' but always requiring everyday negotiation. In this paper, I reflect on the everyday ambivalence of urban landscapes and suggest that while we often view this ambivalence in terms of constraint upon agency – what Simmel understood as the retreat of personality – it can be read as part of a broader issue concerning the importance of value in everyday life, and of the capacity, indeed, perhaps the necessity, of agency, and of everyday decision-making, in understanding urban landscapes. In particular, I suggest that this adds a moral dimension to everyday negotiations and, by extension, to the way in which urban landscapes themselves should be viewed. Drawing on de Beauvoir's (2018) arguments about the moral responsibilities inherent in the notion of 'freedom', this paper suggests that the ambivalence and moral ambiguity of urban encounter and everyday negotiation can be seen to reinforce the necessity of choice and of morality in understanding urban landscapes. It consequently also has a bearing on how we view cities as sites of difference, and for urban community.

### INTRODUCTION

The paper I'm going to give today is a reflection on a piece of research I carried out with a couple of colleagues some years ago that explored university students' experiences of interpersonal violence and harassment. One of the outputs from that research is a chapter in the edited collection *Landscapes of Hate*, which is being formally launched here at the RGS-IBG conference tomorrow evening. In that chapter, we drew on qualitative data provided by female students at a civic university in the northeast

of England, regarding their experiences and perceptions of interpersonal violence and harassment, and their everyday engagements with their urban landscape. From these varied pieces of data, which ranged from small, almost casual remarks through to quite detailed descriptions of their encounters with the urban landscape, we uncovered an image of female students' everyday negotiations in which the landscape, and its features, are seen as ambivalent. Urban sites and routes were seen to shift between atmospheres of safety and unsafety depending on various factors including time of day and the presence or absence of others, but almost invariably subject to change, uncertain, and unpredictable. Furthermore, it is a consequence of this uncertainty, this ambivalence, that female students' routes – like those of everyone else – contribute to those landscapes and their ambivalence because they are also contingent, and reproduce in practice what is already implied in our images of urban spaces: spaces become secluded because they are deliberately avoided; places are crowded with strangers because they are home to the attractions such as the night-time economy, and so on.

This places a significant emphasis on agency; not just in the responses made by students to encounters with the urban landscape, but also to how those landscapes, and their atmospheres, continue to be reproduced and redeveloped through these contingent negotiations.

Putting the specific context of these accounts to one side, the ideas of ambivalence and agency raised in this research speak to broader issues concerning how we think about urban landscapes and negotiations. Specifically, they draw attention to the moral dimension of landscapes and urban encounter, and the implications of ambivalence for the idea of moral community – and it is to these more general ideas that my remarks this morning are directed.

My reflection here draws on various ideas, and a broad concern with urban geography and the sociology of the everyday, but particularly on Simone de Beauvoir's essay *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.<sup>1</sup> I'll come to this in a moment, but first I'd like to reflect briefly on the idea of urban encounter and the significance of ambivalence, or ambiguity, in the sense I have described.

#### URBAN ENCOUNTER AND AMBIGUITY

It is common now in urban geography to consider urban landscapes in terms of 'encounter'. The notion of encounter draws our attention to the everyday, perhaps even mundane – although by no means

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<sup>1</sup> De Beauvoir, S. (2018 [1947]) *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Trans, B. Frechtman), New York: Open Road

unimportant – events and experiences that comprise most of our fleeting, contingent, and meaningful interactions with diverse places, people, and objects.

That there is more to the everyday encounter of urban landscapes than the simply functional is a foundation of urban geographical theory. The great modern urban theorists – and I’m thinking particularly of Simmel,<sup>2</sup> Wirth,<sup>3</sup> Benjamin,<sup>4</sup> and Lefebvre<sup>5</sup> – recognized that experiencing urban materialities is also an encounter with the social relations and histories which gave rise to them, and which are expressed through them. Moreover, that the intensity and diversity of urban landscapes and encounters has particular consequences for the ways in which they are experienced.

Simmel, for instance, saw the density and diversity of encounter resulting in the retreat of individual subjectivity, of person-hood, through the development of what he called the ‘blasé attitude.’<sup>6</sup> Unable to fully assemble our experience of landscapes, we are unable to align ourselves with them, even to comprehend them, on anything deeper than a superficial, merely instrumental level, and consequently we disengage from seeing urban encounters in a meaningful way. The depth of person-hood itself, and with it the possibility of social relations, becoming lost within the landscape.

It is perhaps for reasons such as this that we tend to view encounters with landscapes from the point of view of constraint: that is, of the limits of choice, of the restrictions placed on people’s movements, and the need to accommodate the presence and difference of others, particularly when we have reason to find it undesirable. There is absolutely good reason for this, and the evidence provided by our research, along with myriad other studies, contributes to these arguments. But there is a very great danger in reducing interactions with urban landscapes to the level of constrained responses to external conditions, and viewing negotiations in what are essentially pragmatic terms. Most importantly, because of what is left out of such pragmatic understandings – that is human value and morality, which, as I see it, are central to the idea of encounter.

To talk of a moral dimension to landscapes, as I mean it here, is not to imply a simple moral ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ to the negotiation of landscapes, but to recognize the broader sense in which such encounters have a moral element.

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<sup>2</sup> Simmel, G. (1971 [1903]) ‘Metropolis and mental life’ in D.N. Levine (ed.) *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; pp.324-339

<sup>3</sup> Wirth, L. (1938) ‘Urbanism as a way of life’ *American Journal of Sociology* 44(1); pp.1-24

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, W. (1979) *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (Trans. E. Jephcott & K. Shorter), London: NLB

<sup>5</sup> Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space* (Trans. D. Nicholson-Smith), Oxford: Blackwell

<sup>6</sup> Simmel, G. *op cit.*

Urban encounter, whether of other people, groups, symbols, spaces, objects, architecture, landmarks, topography, or any other aspect of the socio-material landscape, is, at a fundamental level, an event that prompts us to judge, evaluate, and make choices. Understood in this way, encounters, rather than being instances exclusively of constraint, are invitations to agency.

This, of course, is not to suggest that our daily activities are not in large part practical responses to our environments; only to argue that the pragmatism of such responses is not everything, and that affording primacy to practical and instrumental concerns risks taking a potentially very debilitating turn in understanding our relationship with our environment and with each other. We should take seriously Bertrand Russell's warning that pragmatism, because in the end it divorces our actions from the moral component of choice, leaving no obstacle to using circumstance to justify morally inexcusable actions, is the road to totalitarianism.<sup>7</sup>

Because of the essential component of agency, even mundane encounters are moments of judgement and choice that often go beyond the immediate and the practical, and which have consequences far beyond the momentary and the personal, but which instead reach out to the wider realm of meaning and of morality. Certainly many everyday decisions, about which route to take to work, for instance, may not typically engage much in the way of our deeper values (although that's not to say that they necessarily *do not*), but, if we are to take seriously the claims that urban landscapes are the products of our everyday engagements with them – that, as de Certeau suggested, they are 'scripts' written by our movements<sup>8</sup> – then even mundane decisions contribute to the greater landscape of the city, which most certainly is, and is experienced as, a product of meaning, of value, and of morality.

Our everyday judgements and choices can, however, also be very decidedly influenced by values. To travel by foot or bicycle instead of the car or the bus, so as to minimize our carbon footprint or to get more exercise, for instance; or to take the longer scenic route through green spaces instead of the high street; to support local businesses by buying a coffee at the independent coffee shop rather than the Starbucks, are meaningful decisions that go beyond the practical. Likewise using urban space to socialize, exercise, or to consume; or micro-gestures, such as picking up another person's discarded rubbish, playing music, or talking loudly on phones on public transport, are all meaningful actions that shape the landscape and its geographical and social fabric.

The ambivalence of urban landscapes, draws our attention to the fact that negotiating these landscapes and encounters is an uncertain and complex business, made even more difficult when we

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<sup>7</sup> Russell, B. (1996 [1946]) 'William James' in *History of Western Philosophy*, London: Routledge; pp.727-729

<sup>8</sup> De Certeau, M. (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press

acknowledge that these negotiations do not take place in a moral vacuum. Landscapes are ambivalent, and our engagements with them contingent. Encounters present opportunities for action, the consequences of which may not be knowable; or we may be faced with encounters in which conflicting and irreconcilable values may press upon us.

How then can we negotiate urban landscapes that exhibit such complexity and ambiguity, in which landscapes and encounter are diverse and contested, and about which reliable knowledge is difficult, if not perhaps unattainable, in a moral way?

### MORALITY, ENCOUNTER, AND AMBIGUITY

In reflecting on these ideas, I was reminded of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, which raises very similar points regarding the moral context of life in late modernity.

The problem of ambiguity and its implications for action were a central aspect of the existentialist movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the centre of which lies the question: *how is choice to be made in a world without moral certainty?*

De Beauvoir made a significant contribution to this concern when she argued that it was a moral imperative to make decisions and to exercise agency, to be a *moral agent*, even in the face of ambiguity.

'To exist,' in de Beauvoir's phrasing, 'is to cast oneself into the world.'<sup>9</sup> To be willing to commit to undertaking moral actions, to making moral judgements and accepting their consequences, despite the lack of certainty. In fact, it is because moral action is ambiguous, and involves competing moral demands, that action has meaning at all. Kierkegaard had made a related point previously when he argued that it is because human life is not perfectible that it is at all meaningful.<sup>10</sup> That it is in the struggle with ambiguity of judgement and action that makes moral agency possible.

Casting oneself into the world, involves the struggle of seeking to realize our moral agency – our *freedom*, for the existentialists – by choosing and pursuing our own ends and values, and by accepting the responsibility of the agency involved in making moral judgements. But what is striking about de Beauvoir's argument is the insistence that what makes these judgements, and the pursuit of our own

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<sup>9</sup> De Beauvoir, S. *op cit.*; p.45

<sup>10</sup> Kierkegaard, S. (1991[1848]) *Practice in Christianity* (Eds. and Trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong), New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

See also discussion in Jeffrey, H. (2021) Imagination, Suffering, and Perfection: A Kierkegaardian Reflection on Meaning in Life, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 38(4); pp.337-356.

ends, *moral*, is in the recognition that these are not merely individual decisions, but things which implicate other people, who are themselves moral agents casting themselves into the world.

With this comes the realization that our values, although they are the result of our own will, take their shape, and are made meaningful, only in relation to the world and to other people. The possibility of our own moral agency is a consequence of inhabiting a shared world, and so our freedom of moral judgement and action comes with responsibilities to recognize the same freedoms of others.

This returns us to the idea of encounter, and the challenge of negotiating ambivalent and diverse landscapes. Geography reminds us – and in this is it in agreement with de Beauvoir – that the insistence on moral action takes place in the messy particularity of space and material reality. Moral choices, like the everyday negotiations of urban encounter, are not abstract, they are embodied, and embedded in particular geographies; and the particular materiality and atmospheres of place are key components to the reality of moral judgements. This, of course, is further complicated by the ambivalence of urban landscapes.

There is, then, a parallel between what de Beauvoir saw in a modernity saturated by moral ambiguity, and the ambiguous atmospheres and landscapes of postindustrial cities: an insistence on agency. Agency that is not merely pragmatic, but which must entail the burden, of moral choice; a willingness to engage with the reality of the world, even in its ambiguity, and to live in accordance with one's values, and pursue one's goals, fully in the knowledge that the world is uncertain, that differences exist, and that actions – judgements – have consequences, for ourselves, for others, and for the landscapes we negotiate.

#### FOR A MORAL GEOGRAPHY OF ENCOUNTER

What then does this mean for the geography of encounter? For negotiating urban landscapes? For the possibility of moral community?

Each encounter, each negotiation, is an opportunity for judgment and so for agency. For all that past encounter shapes our expectations, landscapes are uncertain, and encounter is subject to contingency, and so there is always novelty, the potential for things to be otherwise, and for new judgements and actions.

But part of the ambiguity, or the ambivalence, of landscapes is that just as they are contingent, so too are our negotiations, and the consequences of our choices. In a sense, landscapes are constraining: they are obstacles; they limit our choice; but, and as a consequence of being obstacles, they create



the conditions that allow and imply the necessity of making – perhaps very difficult – choices, of *agency*, and the struggle with ambiguity that defines moral life.

A moral geography of encounter, then, would perhaps be one that recognizes something about the moral predicament of living with ambiguity that de Beauvoir identified echoed in the character of urban landscapes and negotiations. Ambivalent landscapes, which appear as partly unknowable, and which present as obstacles, nevertheless *urge* – necessitate, in fact – the activity of which only a moral agent is capable: the will to act, in accordance with our moral judgement, and to accept the consequences.

There is, then, a moral dimension to landscapes and to the idea of encounter: we must act, and therefore we make moral decisions. Even when they are far from ‘free’, they are possible only because of the freedom that comes from our moral capacity as agents experiencing and acting in a world that is shaped by our actions, and which is also inhabited by other equally free moral agents. The fact that landscapes are so saturated with difference, and that they, and the encounters they generate, are so ambiguous, only emphasizes the necessity of moral choice. This brings with it great potential for agency, but it also brings obligations, and duties regarding other actors; each of whom is presented with just the same ambiguity and has in themselves the same capacity for agency. Our choices, our responses to urban landscapes and encounters – the paths we take, the landscapes we create in our everyday negotiations, the atmospheres to which our presence and our movements contribute – are contributions to, and geographical expressions of – a moral community; a shared field of negotiations, built upon judgements, choices, and actions, that is, at least in part, conditioned by ambiguity and the weight of moral responsibility that comes from being free.

As products of these moral judgements and negotiations, the city may, in a sense, be looked at as a moral statement: a declaration of the result of a society’s moral effort. If a city is, then, a statement about the ‘good life’, the question then becomes whether we can come to terms with that statement, whether we see in that urban morality something of our own moral character, our moral purpose, or our own ideas of moral worth and value. We must escape the iron cage of the ‘blasé attitude’, and see the urban landscape, and the encounters it generates, as moral phenomena that demand moral judgement. But this is a great burden; it is a great responsibility, to take moral account of ourselves, our world, and our everyday negotiations. But to avoid it, or to balk at the weight of the responsibility of moral judgement, especially in the face of such ambiguity, such difference, achieves nothing. Moreover, it is reprehensible; for, as de Beauvoir made clear: we must act, and it is only in acting with moral purpose that we can be free.