Urban Nightlife, Social Capital, and the Public Life of Cities

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Sociologists and urban scholars emphasize how nightlife establishments contribute to the social capital and public life of cities. In the interests of tempering this line of argument, I suggest three generalizable empirical findings that provide grounds for skepticism on this score: (1) the racial and class barriers to participation imposed by urban nightlife enterprises; (2) the normalization of gender differences and the routine harassment of women within such scenes; and (3) the lack of inclusiveness surrounding local nightlife in urban neighborhood communities. These findings suggest that nightlife scenes may function more efficiently as generators of bonding rather than bridging social capital.

KEY WORDS: cities; culture; nightlife; public life; social bonds; social capital.

INTRODUCTION

In the early twentieth century, social critics and reformers bemoaned the development of urban zones of nightlife and leisure as deeply threatening to Victorian sensibilities and bourgeoisie codes of propriety. Foundational research conducted by faculty and graduate students of the Chicago School of urban sociology in the 1920s and 1930s specifically targeted cabarets, taxi-dance halls, roadhouses, and red-light districts as hotbeds of commercialized sex, gambling, bootlegging, and organized crime (e.g., Cressey, 1932; Reckless, 1933). Yet by the 1960s, social observers were celebrating the cultural worlds of barrooms and other neighborhood entertainment spots for contributing to the vitality and public safety of local urban street life. In The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs (1961:40) compares the chattering scene at Greenwich Village’s White Horse Tavern to “a college bull session with beer, combined with a literary cocktail party,” its constant human traffic of patrons keeping the surrounding neighborhood safe from violent crime until

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at least three o’clock in the morning. In contrast to those whom she disparagingly characterizes as “compulsive managers of other people’s leisure” (1961:41), Jacobs celebrates the freewheeling nightlife of the city as an unequivocal social good, equating the civilizing function of the White Horse with that of an uptown church youth and community center.

This transformation in rhetoric surrounding the nightlife of the city has reached a fever pitch in recent years as sociologists and urban scholars emphasize how nightclubs, bars, and music venues contribute to the public life of cities. Many stress the attractiveness of urban nightlife to educated, high-skilled workers employed in postindustrial industries of knowledge and symbolic production (Currid, 2007; Florida, 2002; Lloyd, 2005). Others point to how nightlife scenes contribute to their cities’ overall social capital—that is, the collective benefits gained from the growth, intensity, and variety of interpersonal relationships and connections shared among fellow citizens and their social networks. In The Great Good Place, sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989) argues that bars, restaurants, cafés, and other nightlife establishments have historically functioned as “third places,” as intimate worlds of sociability, conversation, and leisure where urban dwellers can enjoy the pleasures of informal public life among strangers, and a popular forum crucial to the sustainability of a participatory democracy. For Oldenburg, its apparent inclusiveness makes the third place behave as a social leveler that temporarily renders social inequalities among patrons irrelevant by opposing “the tendency to be restrictive in the enjoyment of others by being open to all and by laying emphasis on qualities not confined to status distinctions current in the society” (1989:24). Similarly, recent research on urban rave parties depicts such nightlife scenes as inclusive environments that value “diversity, acceptance, and equity” (Anderson, 2009: 310), where, according to one informant, “everyone’s allowed to be themselves and express themselves” (Tepper, 2009: 287).

As an urban ethnographer, I recognize that the excitement surrounding the nightlife of the city remains one of life’s wonderful constants, and so I readily sympathize with these romantic notions of the corner dive, the martini bar, and the after-hours café. Scenes of urban nightlife help generate subcultural variety and intensity for their cities (Fischer, 1975), and give birth to innovations in music and art, politics and performance. The poetry of the Beats and Bob Dylan; the bebop sounds of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie; the urban blues of Muddy Waters and Hawlin’ Wolf; the rock music of the Grateful Dead and the Ramones; the raucous comedy of Lenny Bruce and John Belushi; the Stonewall riots and the gay rights movement—all germinated in bars, clubs, coffeehouses, and other late-night spots in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. Moreover, successful nightlife scenes attract cosmopolitan visitors to their cities; increase the liveliness and pedestrian traffic of downtowns after the close of the business day; boost local economic

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3 According to Oldenburg (1989), the term “third place” references the idea that these social arenas provided a “third” alternative to the two most dominant spaces of everyday life: the public world of labor and work and the private, domesticated realm of the home.
growth; and, under the best of circumstances, serve as incubators for developing local movements of cultural creativity and expression.

But at the same time, much sociological theorizing reportage reveals a certain kind of wishful thinking about the civic promise of urban nightlife scenes. In fact, for many participants, such places aren’t even that much fun, much less sanctuaries of social inclusion. Despite Oldenburg’s romantic nostalgia for “the great good place,” during the last century or so most bars, taverns, and late-night cafes in U.S. cities have never really operated as “social levelers,” and in the contemporary neoliberal metropolis it seems unlikely that we should expect any better from our urban entertainment districts anytime soon. In the interests of tempering the prevailing conventional wisdom in the social sciences—that urban nightlife necessarily contributes to the social capital and public life of cities for the greater good of their residents—I would suggest three generalizable empirical findings that provide grounds for skepticism on this score: (1) the racial and class barriers to participation imposed by urban nightlife enterprises; (2) the normalization of gender differences and the routine harassment of women within such scenes; and (3) the lack of inclusiveness surrounding local nightlife in urban neighborhood communities. I base this assertion not only on the historical and ethnographic record, but also on my own experience conducting field research in, Chicago and Philadelphia.

**RACIAL AND CLASS BARRIERS IN URBAN NIGHTLIFE**

One of Oldenburg’s central arguments is that third places have been gradually disappearing from the American urban landscape since the mid-twentieth century, and that this decline suggests horrific consequences for the strength and vitality of the country’s public life and collective social capital. In *Bowling Alone*, political scientist Robert D. Putnam (2000) raises the same concern, citing that among other downward trends, the frequency of attendance at neighborhood bars, taverns, discos, and nightclubs declined nearly 40–50% from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s (2000:101). In addition, the number of full-service restaurants per capita fell by 25% between 1970 and 1998, while the number of bars dropped by 50% during the same period (2000:102). According to Putnam, these figures help illustrate the overall decline in social capital and civic engagement in American life.

But bars, restaurants, and other nightlife establishments have hardly represented a bastion of democracy and social egalitarianism for all citizens alike throughout the last century. As historian Lizabeth Cohen reminds us in *A Consumers’ Republic* (2003), African-American men and women were routinely denied entrance to theaters, restaurants, taverns, hotels, and other nocturnal “public” places, including the very bowling alleys and their leagues that Putnam finds so viable as resources for civil society and participatory democracy. During World War II and throughout the 1940s, black soldiers stationed at military bases in the Deep South were routinely denied access to public
accommodation at night (as well as during the day). As Cohen observes: “Certainly, white southerners went out of their way to enforce Jim Crow ‘to impress colored soldiers from the North who may get the wrong interpretation of racial equality in Mississippi,’ as the mayor of Jackson put it, when he banned ‘all colored persons’ from the main floor of the City Auditorium during performances of the light opera *Porgy and Bess*, despite its almost totally black cast” (2003:91). If the enforcement of Jim Crow was to be expected in the South, Cohen points out that African Americans experienced this same discrimination in the Northeast as well. For example, she explains that “although Newark became a mecca for black jazz in the thirties and forties (which not incidentally provided hundreds of black jobs), African-American customers were resigned to their exclusion from the major ‘whites only’ clubs along the city’s thoroughfares of Broad and Market Streets and their banishment to the balconies of downtown theaters (referred to as ‘nigger heavens’) if they wanted to see first-run movies or hear black greats such as Eubie Blake, Ella Fitzgerald, and Duke Ellington, or even hometown stars like vocalist Sarah Vaughan and tenor saxophonist Ike Quebec” (2003:176).4

The civil rights movement largely did away with legally sanctioned regimes of racial segregation, but such patterns continue to persist informally in urban entertainment zones across the nation. Nightclubs enforce dress codes that target hip-hop fashion popularized by black working-class youth, including Timberland boots, baggy pants, denim shorts, plain white t-shirts, tank tops, sweat bands, do-rags, and athletic jerseys (Grazian, 2008: 116; May and Chaplin, 2008:63). In Chicago, residential segregation prevents the racial integration of most neighborhood entertainment zones (e.g., Laumann *et al.*, 2004), while in Philadelphia, people of varied racial and ethnic identities share the sidewalks of prominent nightlife corridors such as Old City and South Street but patronize different establishments, or else attend the same venues on different nights of the week (or alternate hours of the same evening). In fact, the overwhelming majority of Philadelphia’s downtown nocturnal offerings, which include more than 200 dining restaurants and 65 bars and nightclubs, cater almost exclusively to affluent and predominantly white crowds of suburban commuters, leisure tourists, business travelers, conventioneers, and elite college students (Grazian, 2008).5 In Chicago’s Loop and North Side nightlife districts, even clubs and bars that promote traditionally African-American music styles such as blues and jazz often cater to mostly white upper-class audiences (Grazian, 2003). London’s hip electronic dance music nightclub scene notoriously

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4 Cohen also points out that “until the opening of the black-owned Coleman Hotel in the 1940s, African American entertainers who played Newark were themselves forced to stay at black rooming houses or with friends” (2003:176).

5 In Philadelphia, exceptions include a variety of entertainment options promoted specifically to middle- and upper-class African-American consumers, such as music venues (i.e., jazz, rhythm and blues, neo-soul, dance, hip-hop, reggae, and other world music), ethnic restaurants (featuring cuisines from the Caribbean, Africa, and the American South), and special events (such as the Black Lily Film and Music Festival).
discriminates against black men, and first- and second-generation immigrant youth, particularly those of South Asian descent (Malbon, 1999:64–66; Thornton, 1996:25). In spite of the rhetoric of spirited transcendence and nonconformity commonly associated with nightlife settings such as rave parties, dance, rock, and blues clubs, such seemingly countercultural havens generally replicate the same structures of race, ethnic, and class inequality and exclusion found in the larger society. The persistence of such local hierarchies illustrates the pervasiveness and stability of the social order, particularly with regard to systems of stratification.6

GENDER DIFFERENTIATION AND THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN AT NIGHT

Oldenburg describes urban taverns and beer gardens as inclusive public spaces that encourage the temporary suspension of prevailing social inequalities. His depictions of nightlife evoke motley worlds common to Billy Joel songs, bars where lawyers and bankers hobnob with penniless beggars and alcoholics. Such paeans to the city’s nocturnal haunts inevitably ignore how nightlife scenes emphasize gender differences among patrons while providing an inviting space for the harassment and degradation of women. In this sense, such places are anything but a social leveler.

As a point of fact, women (as well as men) have historically experienced nightlife arenas as distinctly and overtly gendered. The male domination of turn-of-the-century workingmen’s havens such as saloons and billiard halls made female participation intensely problematic (Peiss, 1986; Rosenzweig, 1991). Today, although women have greater access to these types of public spaces and more autonomy within them, the social production of gender differences, rather than being “leveled,” continues to play an active role in shaping their experience of public leisure and commodified entertainment. Just as occupational sex segregation remains in the workplace despite recent gains made by women in the professions (Reskin, 1993; Reskin and Roos, 1990), social norms of gender differentiation continue to define the culture of U.S. urban nightlife for participants.

The feminization and sex segregation of the nightlife industry is stark by any measure: women currently hold a majority of all bartending jobs in the United States, as well as nearly three-quarters of all restaurant waiting jobs, and over 90% of all restaurant, lounge, and coffee-shop hosting jobs

6 Of course, one can also identify a small number of racially diverse spaces of commercialized leisure that do flourish in integrated urban neighborhoods around the country (such as Philadelphia’s Mount Airy and Chicago’s Hyde Park): these places include jazz clubs and other black music venues, ethnic restaurants, and gay bars. Elijah Anderson (2004:15) refers to racially heterogeneous places like these as “cosmopolitan canopies” where “instantaneous communities of diverse strangers emerge and materialize.” Unfortunately, such sites all too often seem to be rare exceptions that prove the rule, rather than real challenges to the dominant racial paradigm of U.S. urbanism.
Nightclubs, restaurants, and cocktail lounges rely on the physical attractiveness and sexual magnetism of female service staff and the promise of eroticized interaction to recruit customers. Female workers in nightlife settings are often expected to “do gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1987) by attempting an exaggerated performance of sexualized femininity that includes wearing tight and revealing clothing, and handling obnoxious and suggestive comments from groups of male customers with flirty come-ons and gracious humor (Spradley and Mann, 1975; Steinem, 1983). Restaurant and nightclub servers also commonly experience sexual harassment from fellow co-workers, including owners and managers (Giuffre and Williams, 1994).

Like service staff, young female nightlife patrons are similarly expected to perform hegemonic femininity by adhering to constraining gender norms that include wearing snug designer jeans, low-cut blouses, and stiletto heels (Grazian, 2008). Young women report that sexualized role-playing performances—“show a little skin and be a little flirty,” as one informant revealed—are practically required for entry to many crowded nightclubs, particularly for underage patrons (2008:103). Perhaps for this reason, men often target females (whether patrons or employees) as “fair game” for their amorous advances and cheesy pickup attempts in drinking establishments and nightclubs, maneuvers that require women to rely on “cooling-out” strategies, avoidance tactics, and other defensive measures (Snow et al., 1991). College men routinely hassle women in bars and cocktail lounges when “girl hunting,” a collective ritual in which heterosexual men aggressively seek out female sex partners as a competitive male-bonding activity (Grazian, 2007). College women are also regularly harassed by sexually interested middle-aged men (including married men) in nightlife settings (Grazian, 2008:164–169).

THE EXCLUSIVITY OF URBAN NEIGHBORHOOD COMMUNITIES

The romanticized “urban village” (Gans, 1962) in sociology emphasizes the canonical working-class neighborhood bar, street café, or corner tavern as a hotbed of sociability, authenticity, and community solidarity, typically in contrast to what are described as the fragmented and alienating worlds of downtown nightclubs, bistros, and invitation-only affairs frequented by the affluent classes. In The Gold Coast and the Slum, Harvey Zorbaugh (1929) depicts the Persian coffee houses of Chicago’s Near North Side as public forums where immigrant men socialize, smoke, and play cards together, whereas high-society gatherings are marked by cliques and social games; as he dismissively asserts, the Gold Coast “can scarcely be called a community” (1929:68). In a special issue of the American Journal of Sociology on the study of leisure published in 1957, an examination of “The Neighborhood Tavern and the Cocktail Lounge: A Study of Class Differences” contrasts the “transient”
patrons of downtown cocktail lounges with the community “regulars” of local taverns “who can be found there at the same time each day … For these older patrons the tavern becomes a source for both social interaction and psychological satisfaction” (Gottlieb, 1957:560).7

Yet in these formulations of “community,” the exclusivity and internally stratified composition of these so-called authentic urban scenes often remain ignored and underanalyzed. Despite their potential benefits to surrounding urban areas, working-class bars and taverns have traditionally served as male-dominated spaces that exclude or else marginalize women. Moreover, as a consequence of the ordered segmentation of city neighborhoods (Suttles, 1968), working-class corner bars and taverns (like their upscale counterparts) are notoriously homogenous or otherwise subdivided on the basis of class, race, and ethnicity, regardless of whether they are located in segregated black neighborhoods or white ethnic enclaves.8 In Elijah Anderson’s A Place on the Corner (1978), the African-American milieu of “Jelly’s” bar and liquor store is internally stratified on the basis of class and social status among three groups of participants: “regulars,” “wineheads,” and hoodlums.” In white working-class neighborhoods, bar owners have historically institutionalized strategies designed to exclude African-American would-be patrons from admittance, just as upscale nightclubs draw on similarly racist tactics.

Today these patterns of racial segregation persist in white ethnic neighborhood bars as well as in black neighborhood taverns and other local late-night joints (i.e., Grazian, 2003; May, 2001). While the storied working-class neighborhood bar and corner tavern may endure as a hub of sociability and local solidarity for in-group male members, such places hardly qualify as “social levelers,” as generators of civil society and inclusivity. In this context, the “community” is socially defined in ways that deny participation to enough potential members (including women and ethnoracial outsiders) as to exclude more than half their local neighborhood populations.9

**BONDING AND BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL**

In Bowling Alone, Putnam (2000:22) distinguishes between *bonding* and *bridging* social capital: the former refers to the increased solidarity and

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7 In a similar vein, Richard Florida (2002:187) argues that the creative classes prefer “more authentic, indigenous, or organic venues” to what he describes as “heavily packaged commercial venues,” while in Urban Nightscapes, Paul Chatterton and Robert Hollands romanticize so-called alternative nightlife scenes for being “about tolerance, diversity, acceptance or the echoing the punk ethic, just being who you are” (2003:206). These assertions ignore the socially-constructed and performed nature of authenticity and the fabrication of social solidarity in scenes of urban nightlife; see Grazian (2003, 2004).

8 In Blue Collar Community, William Kornblum (1974) observes other bases of social cohesion and exclusion in neighborhood taverns besides race and ethnicity, such as workplace and occupational identity.

9 On “community” as a socially-constructed concept, see Suttles (1972), Hummon (1990), Anderson (1991), and Griswold (1992).
collective efficacy of tightly-knit local groups, while the latter refers to the social advantages that arise from cooperative connections made across networks. While urban nightlife clearly does not serve the inclusive purposes suggested by the latter definition, perhaps an argument could be made that bars, taverns, and nightclubs more efficiently serve their most exclusive circles of participants by functioning as breeding grounds for the development of bonding (rather than bridging) social capital and collective solidarity. While such an assertion would make an undeserved virtue of exclusionary and reactionary practices that differentiate and segregate consumers by race, class, and gender, it would at least have the benefit of being intellectually honest, rather than ideologically determined and empirically vacuous.

But at the same time, one could also argue that chronic processes of ordered segmentation in local urban spaces hinder even the generation of bonding social capital among in-group members. Despite participating within scenes featuring a relatively high degree of social homogeneity, dedicated insiders commonly differentiate and stratify themselves on the basis of alternative measures of status that nevertheless reverberate in the larger social structure, including occupational identity, cultural capital, and sexual prestige. My own work on nightlife in Philadelphia illustrates how urban nightclubs, cocktail lounges, restaurants, bars, and taverns alike attract clusters of friends, lovers, co-workers, and acquaintances who coexist alongside one another but never actually intermingle, as if “the promise of the gated community as an urban fortress of solitude has been realized on an interpersonal level in the very spaces of public interaction once cherished for their ability to bring strangers together in moments of camaraderie” (Grazian, 2008:13).

Meanwhile, within such social clusters and cliques, participants constantly introduce newer microhierarchies with which to evaluate themselves, sometimes by instituting arbitrary competitions that rank who can procure the most phone numbers from single women or complimentary drinks from prowling men, or other gender tests of masculinity or femininity, such as those performed through rituals of sexual boasting or snubbing; provocative displays of flirting or dancing; or bouts of aggression and violence, including fistfighting. While these kinds of competitive rituals may still promote in-group membership and collective solidarity, it is a kind of solidarity far more ambiguous than the paradise promised by Oldenburg’s great good places, past or present.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that despite the insistence among sociologists and urban observers that nightlife necessarily contributes to the social capital and public life of cities, three generalizable empirical findings offer grounds for skepticism on this score: the racial and class barriers to participation imposed by nightlife enterprises and their patrons; the normalization of gender differences and the routine harassment of women within such scenes; and the lack of inclusiveness
surrounding local nightlife in urban neighborhood communities. Of course, I readily admit that when it comes to nightlife opportunities in the city, variance is always the norm, and yes, this almost certainly applies to sociological approaches to urban nightlife as well. My hope is that by deconstructing how we as scholars typically talk about the nightlife of cities, we may further our understanding of its role in the contemporary urban metropolis without prejudice or blind nostalgia.

REFERENCES


