Children's autonomy and our relationship with public spaces

Clément Rivière

The relationship between children and the city – a subject seldom studied in France in the past – has in recent years generated renewed interest in the world of the social sciences. Clément Rivière, who has conducted research in this field in Paris and Milan, shows that the parental structuring of children's outings in the city is based on protected spaces whose safety is assured through mutual acquaintance, and that these (highly gendered) practices tend to be much more restrictive for girls.

French researchers have, to date, shown little interest in the mobility of children in the contemporary city, and even less so in how this mobility is structured and supervised. And yet learning how the city works and parental instructions and restrictions in this domain are all potential entry points for studying the representations and issues associated with urban spaces: the way children's urban practices are structured and supervised reveals a great deal about city-dwellers' relationships with public spaces more generally.

This was borne out by an interview-based survey conducted in the 19th *arrondissement* of Paris[1] and the Monza-Padova area of Milan[2] among parents of children aged 8 to 14.[3] Here, we shall consider two aspects in greater detail: the gradated nature of public spaces, leading us to a proposal for a sociological definition of the "neighbourhood", and the specific treatment involved in the urban socialisation of girls.

A gradation of more or less protected spaces

The process by which children gain their autonomy comprises several stages. Their school careers play a key structural role: the journey to (and from) school is at the heart of parents' representations of children's urban autonomy. Quantitative analysis shows that the move to secondary school "marks a clear break" (Massot and Zaffran 2007): in practically all case, the entry into *sixième* in Paris and *prima media* in Milan[4] heralds the end of parental accompaniment to school, for a number of reasons. First of all, secondary school and its less regular timetable complicates the situation logistically for parents. Second, peer pressure among children heavily discourages such accompaniment to the school gates. Finally, secondary school is not a place of

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[1] The 19th *arrondissement* (administrative district) covers the north-eastern corner of the city of Paris, including the neighbourhoods of La Villette, Les Buttes-Chaumont and the northern half of Belleville.

[2] The area in question covers a triangle in the north-east of Milan and is named after its main roads (Viale Monza and Via Padova). This area includes several old rural villages absorbed by the expansion of the city, such as Gorla, Rovereto and Crescenzago.

[3] Survey conducted as part of a thesis in progress that studies how parents structure children's urban practices in socially mixed contexts in Paris and Milan. In total, 78 interviews were conducted (both locations combined) with 88 parents of 123 children (69 boys and 54 girls) aged 8 to 14, between spring 2009 and autumn 2011.

[4] *Sixième* in France and *prima media* in Italy correspond to the academic year in which pupils turn 12 (equivalent to 6th Grade in the USA, Grade 6 in Canada, Year 6 in Australia, Year 7 in England).

intense sociability for parents, unlike primary school. This perceptible gain in autonomy upon starting secondary school tends to have repercussions on other urban practices, such as children's journeys within the neighbourhood, or journeys made in the context of after-school activities.

As the journey home from school often requires children to possess a key to the family residence, it is, to a certain extent, necessary for them to learn how to behave in the home on their own: indeed, the home is often the first space in which autonomy is acquired, as children are typically left in the home alone before they are allowed to go out on their own. The distinction between the three "realms of city life" identified by Lyn Lofland (1998) is thus particularly relevant from the standpoint of studying children's urban autonomy: in addition to the role played by the home and kinship/friendship networks (the private realm), hinted at above, we shall now see how the neighbourhood and networks of mutual acquaintance (the parochial realm) broaden and structure a child's universe as he or she grows up.

A limited perimeter of autonomy can be identified in the immediate environs of the home, with running errands to the corner shop generally representing the child's first experience of urban autonomy. Other spaces are also deemed by parents to be protected areas where their children can experience autonomy early on. These spaces are characterised not only by the protection provided against the dangers of road traffic, but also by the higher level of mutual acquaintance that prevails; as such, some of these spaces are considered "training grounds" for city life. From the play area to the "big park", children progress from one protected space to another according to a hierarchy based on the level of mutual acquaintance found in these spaces.

> "Parco Trotter is very important for us... because it's a protected space, where I don't have to worry. So I always tell her... In fact, lots of her friends aren't allowed to go out of the park, are they? There they are, inside the park, and they know they mustn't go out the gates, because it can be dangerous outside." — Luisa, dressmaker, Milan. One daughter aged 12.

This approach of "containment" (Valentine and McKendrick 1997) within defined spaces becomes more flexible as children grow older and progress through school. In particular, one issue that arises sooner or later is the question of taking public transport – a real entry point into the public realm and a world of strangers and city streets (Lofland 1998). Once parents are reassured by the first successful journeys, public transport networks become a key structural element for discovering the city, with initial trips focusing on shopping, sports, leisure and cultural spaces. The final stage of children's autonomy, rarely attained by age 14, is being allowed to go out unaccompanied at night in areas outside the immediate neighbourhood. This stage reveals the intensity of attention and energy devoted to organising children's journeys and activities that take place beyond the bounds of the neighbourhood (in which mutual acquaintance provides significant reassurance).

> When we go out, we're always saying hello; it's a way for parents to say that they're keeping an eye out [for other parents' children]... And I'm always saying to [my daughter's female] friends that we meet, "Are you on your own? Where are you going?". Of course, they're older now, so it's normal for them to be out on their own, but when they were younger I would be saying that all the time. And the friend in question would reply, "Well, yes, I'm off to such and such a place". So I realise now that I do look out for other people's children and keep an eye on them. So I imagine that other parents do the same." — Aliénor, homemaker, Paris. Two daughters aged 12 and 3; two sons aged 11 and 8.

These key stages through which children gain autonomy are also a means of confirming the theory of a gradualist notion of public spaces: spaces open to all can indeed be thought of in terms of a hierarchy "based on levels of access to the city, from the most private to the most public" (Dris 2007). The central role of the trust generated by mutual acquaintance thus makes it easier to understand the recurrent evocation in sociological studies of the notion of a "village" in the representations of residents of sometimes very densely populated cities.

Urban socialisation: different for girls

The rhetoric that holds that girls are more "mature" than boys of the same age was often cited by the parents interviewed: boys were very often described as "distracted" and "daydreamers", while girls were said to be more "independent" and "responsible", and better able to make journeys safely in their neighbourhood. This clear distinction made by parents between boys' and girls' urban street practices leads many of them to let their daughters make journeys on their own in the daytime sooner than for their sons. However, despite this greater ability to make journeys without adult supervision generally attributed to girls, parents' concerns are structured by a real "gendered fear" (Lieber 2008) that gradually leads to an inversion of the degree of autonomy granted to boys and girls and they grow older. Although children of both sexes are given instructions with regard to their safety and protection, the supposed vulnerability of girls manifests itself more and more strongly in parents' responses with the onset of puberty: a relative consensus was gradually observed concerning the idea of an irrevocable difference between girls and boys. In particular, the fear of rape emerges as girls undergo the physical changes of adolescence.

> "I think it is different. In terms of assaults... of a physical nature. Erm... [silence] Would I say that I was less... Yes, I... I do think that Lola might be exposed to this kind of assault, as a girl, physical assaults... by boys... Yeah, it crosses my mind, of course it does. If I had a son, I would be worried about assaults as well, but of a different nature." — Céline, project manager in a cultural association, Paris. One daughter aged 11.

However, leaving aside this extreme hypothesis, the specific nature of the urban socialisation of girls can also be observed. Parents – to some extent reflecting Erving Goffman's observation that the positions of men and the positions of women in public spaces are structurally distinct – perceive the street as an arena for encounters that are threatening or, at the very least, uncomfortable for girls. In particular, girls are rapidly exposed to harassment and sexual advances:

> "'Do you think the fact they are girls changes their relationship with the street?'
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> 'Yes, absolutely. Because... well, they're more likely to be subject to comments. They are more "fragile" in quotation marks, more often the victims of verbal assault. […] Remarks on the street are a reality, and these remarks have a sexual basis, or sexist rather than sexual. And... when a girl of 16, or 14, blonde, walks down the street, I'm not saying that she's threatened, because I don't see it as a threat, but she certainly receives more outside input than a boy of the same age. It's a fact of life. And so, for girls, things are a bit more complicated.'" — Tommaso, freelance journalist, Milan. Two daughters aged 8 and 15.

Although parents are "a bit more careful about girls" because of this specific aspect of young women's experience of public spaces, daughters are also taught "how to react": they shouldn't "rise to the bait", but they shouldn't attract attention to themselves either. They are taught that certain situations, often rather surprising the first time they are encountered, should be considered "normal", in that they are very likely to arise again in future (wolf-whistles, compliments, being followed, etc.). These teachings come from a broader experience of public spaces that is very much structured by the dimension of gender, and in particular by mothers' experiences.

> "Well, as she's a girl, yes, she has had specific advice. Yes... because girls, even at 14, are still little girls in their head but aren't always little girls... physically, so you really have to try to explain things to them a little bit... The same goes for the "dangers", in quotation marks, of city life... Whereas, for a boy of 13 or 14, there perhaps won't be the same issues..." — Maud, chartered accountant, Paris. Two daughters aged 13 and 10; one son aged 7.

The urban socialisation of girls is therefore doubly differentiated, in that, on the one hand, they experience specific interactions in public spaces, and, on the other, they receive special attention from their parents. The parental structuring and supervision of urban practices is, in fact, generally noticeably more strict for girls, particularly with regard to acceptable clothing and going out at night.

Conclusion: "neighbourhood" and gender, as seen through children's urban practices

We could consider other examples to show that children are a good medium for revealing the relationships maintained with urban public spaces, but, for now, we shall instead insist on two key points. First, while the "sociological reality" of the notion of neighbourhood is somewhat "problematic" (Grafmeyer 2007), the central role played by localised mutual acquaintance – characteristic of village life – in the social and spatial structuring of the process whereby children achieve greater autonomy suggests that the limits of the sphere of localised mutual acquaintance might be the most appropriate sociological definition of the word "neighbourhood".

Furthermore, while the interviews provide evidence of strongly gendered notions of the city and parental teachings that are more or less aware of gendered norms in the usage of public spaces, the differentiated treatment of girls and boys most probably helps to produce and reproduce the association between urban public spaces, femaleness and danger (Lieber 2008). In particular, parents seem to encourage women to be dependent on others when going out in the evening. While the gendered restriction of access to urban public spaces is vigorously denounced with regard to certain contexts, particularly working-class/ethnic-minority neighbourhoods, the field study instead shows that such restrictions cross all sectors of society.

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Clément Rivière is currently writing his PhD thesis at the OSC (Observatory for Social Change, Sciences Po, Paris) and the Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca, and is also a temporary lecturer and researcher at the Université de Rouen. In January 2012, he participated in the drafting of a report on the effects of recent measures implemented in France to increase flexibility in school catchment areas (Marco Oberti, Edmond Préteceille and Clément Rivière, *Les effets de l'assouplissement de la carte scolaire dans la banlieue parisienne*, report for HALDE (High Authority to Combat Discrimination and Promote Equality)/DEPP (Department of Evaluation, Planning and Performance – Ministry of Education), 2012, Sciences Po–OSC).

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