What we can learn from babies' sociability

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The sociability of very young children reveals a neglected dimension of relations and interactions in public, and highlights issues associated with ordinary urban contact that often go unnoticed. Civil interaction exhibits an inclination towards friendliness, a concern for others and the surrounding world, which, while admittedly limited and sometimes disputed, nevertheless contributes to an ordinary sense of belonging to a moral and political community.

Since Georg Simmel, urban sociability has been described using forms of restraint, reserve and indifference that mass contact and excessive solicitation of the senses produces in city-dwellers (Simmel 2013). In the work of Erving Goffman (1973, 1974, 2013), attention was focused on the fragility of ritual activities whose completion goes unremarked but which make peaceful coexistence with strangers possible. His analyses showed the considerable efforts that are required, even between strangers, to implement the rites of civility that are held to ensure the mutual preservation of "face". One such reflection on the "civil link" (Pharo 1985; Gayet-Viaud [Forthcoming]) focuses heavily on its defensive aspect. Showing respect, from this perspective, first of all means keeping one's distance, behaving oneself and "showing respect" for others, not getting involved, not challenging, not impeding, and not causing harm or inconvenience[1].

Rites of civility are today still frequently envisaged on the basis of this idea that their primary function is, like the grease between the cogs, to enable everyone involved to continue on their way and go peacefully about their business; they can be likened to a sort of toll that each individual pays to ensure we are all mutually left in peace. This concept is predicated on the ability of city-dwellers to leave one another alone, to avoid one another, first of all in the context of managing pedestrian traffic flows and various other forms of circulation, but also, more generally, according to this same model (based on the paradigm of circulation), in the exposure of differences, in order to avoid all forms of challenge and conflict. Civility is thus often understood as that which expresses and enhances city-dwellers' "capacity for detachment" (Joseph 1997).

And yet studying the sociability of children, and very young children in particular, enables us to complement and qualify this vision, by showing that the act of leaving one another alone is neither the sole aim nor the ultimate benefit of urban interactions and relations in public. Indeed, the way in which expressions of real empathy and affinity and gestures of friendliness that are perceived relatively unequivocally as welcome, owing to their benevolent and disinterested nature, come to

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[1] These kinds of (minimal) definitions of moral requirements are predominant in works categorised in the field of "minimalist ethics", such as those of philosopher Ruwen Ogien (2007).

the fore around the atypical figures that are babies suggests that a substantial proportion of what is at stake and at work in urban coexistence is left aside by the dominant theories concerning civility.

The ethnographic survey that we conducted over the course of six years of observations in urban public spaces in the Paris region has revealed significant divergences[2] between the commonly held image of "average" urban sociability and these atypical cases of sociability that are brought to light via children. Two such divergences can be cited here: 1. consideration for others and the disinterested inclination towards increased friendliness; 2. the desire to talk about sensitive subjects rather than letting things go and letting events take their natural course.

The baby: a unique urban figure

Sociology is usually wary, and not without reason, of generic figures and their designations. The child in general terms probably exists no more than "young people" or "youth" (Bourdieu 1984). Yet ethnographic observation indicates that, with regard to urban encounters, the very young child – the baby – is a type of being that is perceived in a relatively unique way according to a number of relevant *typical traits* in order to define what it is (Schutz 1962, 1964; Cefaï 1994). In situations of urban co-presence, these "types" produce effects that are sufficiently prominent and recurring (if not systematic) to be described and analysed as such, and exhibit norms – by associating categories with qualities and attributes – and characteristics of all kinds (Jayyusi 2010) that are usually too familiar to be noticed, but which any analysis of culture (here, urban culture) must identify and explain.

Indeed, contrary to the accepted model of civil interactions that take place between adults, babies elicit interactions marked by spontaneous engagement by strangers with others that cannot be described as interactions of the "entry ticket"[3] type (Relieu 1996) and that extend beyond the sole context of "safe supply" (Goffman 1973).

Accordingly, many people, when they encounter babies, are inclined to smile at them, wave to them, talk to them – in other words, they "dare" to address them. Why do we feel we have permission – an obligation, even – to do this upon seeing little humans and the demeanour they exude? Why do we feel a desire to turn to babies, to present ourselves to them and look at them, to try to elicit some sort of recognition and to show that we, in turn recognise them?

There's nothing more "natural",[4] it would seem: babies are spontaneously sociable, and no one who responds to babies' seemingly inherent quality of approachability could be accused of malicious intent. The community invited to approach in this way thus immediately shares in this sociability. Straight away, babies are seen in terms of their generous accessibility; though perfect strangers, they seem instantly familiar and close. They indiscriminately greet anyone who looks at them, and typically take a liking to anyone who smiles at them: they are an inherently "good audience". This form of civility appears to go hand in hand with spontaneity and authenticity; it encourages not just friendliness but also a consideration and kindness that are supposedly difficult

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[2]   This text makes use of results from an ethnographic survey conducted in Paris and the surrounding region in the 2000s on the subject of urban civility, which formed the basis of my PhD thesis (Gayet-Viaud 2008). A book derived from this thesis is due to be published in 2015: *La Civilité urbaine. Enquête sur les formes élémentaires de la coexistence démocratique*, Paris: Economica, "Études sociologiques" series.

[3]   "Entry tickets" (Relieu 1996) are those subjects that are universally accepted as being legitimate pretexts for interacting with strangers: asking for the time, asking one's way and asking for a light (for a cigarette) are three of the most common such "tickets". More generally, conversations between strangers are signposted by what Goffman called "safe supplies", and "small talk": insignificant subjects that are within everyone's reach and which play an essentially phatic role in exchanges, i.e. creating links and maintaining communication. Talking about the weather is a typical example of small talk.

[4]   Here, "natural" is to be understood in the sense of "obvious" rather than in reference to an opposition between "innate" and "acquired". Indeed, in the phenomenological perspective that is ours, this binary opposition is not particularly relevant. As social beings, our "natural" aspects are completely "acquired", i.e. socially constituted; however, this does not make them factitious or artificial.

to access, or are even out of reach, in relations between socialised individuals, and especially among strangers.

A particular kind of common good

The smile or the interest that babies incite (we try to see their face once we have noticed their presence, and in turn we try to be seen by them) are part of an impulse that is not driven or conditioned by the anticipation of a response, and is not the product of any anticipation "in the second person" (Ogien 2005), but the result of a spontaneity that, while impulsive, is reasonable nonetheless. Smiling at a baby comes from an "I", and is something that is given to recipients before being formally offered to them, and which is beyond the control of the person issuing the smile. Behind this humble carelessness associated with the pleasure of an encounter and the expressions of wonder on faces in response to a smile, we can look further and see an old woman who is touched, a flattered teenager, a young woman who is moved, a tired but cheered old worker, a man who is charmed, and so on. By contrast, when someone moves towards a baby and smiles at him or her, the intention behind the smile is irrelevant. The very first gestures, the beginning of a smile, or the visual search for the baby's face and gaze, cannot be interpreted in terms of intentions. They signal the perception of a beauty that is already rooted in an authentic recognition. It is undoubtedly this irreducible sincerity of the impulse that subsequently ushers in permission, boldness and specific adaptations to the civilities authorised and implemented around the baby. The person who is looking at, turns towards and contemplates the baby first appears in the attention that they pay to the baby and which the baby pays back in return, transcending questions of a person's public behaviour or "face" (Goffman *op. cit.*).

Accordingly, the mother or accompanying adult tolerates this, indulges these potentially intrusive gestures and words – which could seem inappropriate – from strangers; because the comments these strangers address to them, indirectly, via a sort of "ricochet effect", is carried and mediated via the baby, who is quite clearly the primary party in the relationship, rather than the other way round. When strangers approach and babies in this way, the driving force behind the approach is so strong that the people in question "take the liberty" of spontaneously talking to, touching or even squeezing the baby, perhaps even dispensing some advice to the mother on the best way to raise the child.

Very young children and babies in particular thus prove to be figures who are particularly open to interactions that are "warming" and which encourage friendliness. But they are also figures who are particularly open to the expression of unsolicited opinions and advice from third parties who, as soon as babies are present and involved, dare to put themselves forward, to engage with others, and to say what they think and know – or think they know. Moreover, tensions emerge and sometimes elicit complaints concerning the correct delimitation of these prerogatives of any co-present adult: speaking to the baby, making remarks, or even giving unsolicited advice.[5]

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[5] As children grow up, people feel entitled to address them directly in order to engage conversation with them, and also sometimes to reprimand them. Generational authority therefore extends beyond the family circle and exhibits, in public, an extension of the norms that usually prevail in the domestic space. For more on these forms of relations in public, see Cahill (1990).

Forms of felicity ignored by theories of civility

The quality of civil interactions that take place around babies does not define the scope of civil competence in dramaturgical terms, but signals recognition of a proximity and a common belonging, which the baby embodies and of which he reminds co-present adults, eliciting an emotion of a particular type, the first phenomenal manifestation of which is the smile. Civil interaction with the baby re-establishes the mutual recognition and importance, in Levinasian terms, of faces and the exposure and revelation of these faces[6] (Levinas 1990), placing them at the heart of urban encounters, instead of the notions of "face" brought to the fore by Goffman.

Civil interaction invites consideration of forms of felicity in interaction that are typically neglected, including approaches that consider urban public spaces as nothing more than crossing places for countless quantities of "vehicular units", between which the considerations and demonstrations of mutual respect are logically capped at the minimum level embodied by, and which satisfy the requirements of, civil indifference[7] (Goffman 2013).

Placing civil inattention at the core and peak of urban civility means defining civil competence as the desire and ability of each of us to keep up "normal appearances", to "make oneself negligible", so as not to expose oneself in public: in this way, civil competence resembles an art to guard against the risks of any encounter, and to avert any encounter; civility becomes this superficial virtue that makes it possible to fulfil interaction in public by simply applying – usually without thinking – some conventional rules that are purely formalities (which we believe can be summed up by invoking the list of prescriptions and prohibitions that we hear cited by parents everywhere, foremost among them the famous "magic words" – hello, please, thank you, sorry). Such a notion "naturalises" and thus promotes a fundamentally defensive and antagonistic vision of coexistence and contact (and more generally, life in society), that is to say a vision of man as a naturally violent being – a primal hostility that learning and education (about civility, in particular) can merely contain, but not eliminate; hence the *doxa* that holds that civility is a veneer, a mask, a lid placed on top of the boiling cauldron containing the darkest natural urges, and "real" feelings.

Without proposing what might constitute an angelic or irenic vision of human nature, it could be interesting to introduce a degree of complexity into such a vision of the world. This would mean putting an end to suggestions that the temptation to turn to evil, violence and aggression constitutes humankind's authentic, ineradicable primal nature, which is at best merely covered or hidden, and "contained", with varying degrees of success, by the (secondary, and so deemed artificial and superficial) conventions of life in society. It would then be a question of trying to reflect – as some authors invite us to do[8] – upon this other side of human existence that is that the inclination towards goodness, a liking of others, and concern for others and the world (Pharo *op. cit.*, Eslin 1996; Laugier and Paperman 2006). To reflect, in short, upon the unsocial sociability of humans, to cite the classic Kantian tension (Kant 1989). The attention paid to the sociability of babies and what it

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[6] For Levinas, access to the face is immediately ethical. In this sense, it goes beyond any possible description (skin or eye colour, shape of mouth or nose); this is direct access, an immediate perception of the vulnerability and exposure of the Other, simultaneously "pleading" and "demanding" for the person who uncovers the Other. The face is the best route via which to gain (moral) experience of others, as opposed to merely rubbing shoulders with silhouettes or "faces".

[7] Civil inattention – defined by Goffman as the means of giving other people, in situations of co-presence, minimal recognition by showing them that we have noticed their presence, but without them being the object of any particular curiosity – of course plays an essential role in urban sociability. Civil inattention therefore places the relational effort at a distance both from negligence and disregard (which would simply be inattention, that is to say pretending that other people were not there and did not exist) and from intrusion and any kind of initiative with regard to encounters.

[8] Here, I am thinking in particular of Hannah Arendt (2005): "According to our tradition, all human wickedness is accounted for by [...] the inclination to yield to temptation. Man [...] is *tempted* to do evil and he needs an *effort* to do good. So deeply rooted has this notion become [...] that people commonly regard as right what they don't like to do and as wrong whatever tempts them."

teaches us about the possibility of exhibiting kind and selfless consideration among strangers, opens up a path in this direction.

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