Everyday Encounters in Public Space

I’m at a supermarket looking for a hair dryer. As I stand in front of the electronic household equipment, I observe an elderly Turkish woman asking a young white British shop assistant for advice. I hear him say: ‘Do you understand?’ She says, ‘No, no English, only Turkish.’ She takes her mobile phone out of her bag and calls someone, indicating to the shop assistant to wait. Once she has spoken to the other person on the phone, she hands the phone to him. The person on the phone now seems to be doing the translation, and the phone is being handed back and forth between the shop assistant and the Turkish woman. It seems completely normal for the assistant to deal with a customer via an interpreter over the phone. He is very friendly all through the interaction and he seems in no way surprised about the translation service over the phone.

(Research Diary, 12 August 2008)

This is one of many social interactions which I have observed during my fieldwork in Hackney. The fact that the shop assistant is in no way surprised about the nature of this transaction exemplifies the commonplace nature of diversity in Hackney, discussed in the previous chapter. The skilful way in which both the shop assistant and the customer deal with the situation points to something more than just commonplace diversity, but to the existence of specific skills which facilitate communication across language (and, in other such interactions, cultural and religious) differences.

Such skills have been theorized in various ways, particularly in sociological literature on ‘civility’ and anthropological literature on cosmopolitanism. In the first section of this chapter, I discuss theories...
which have focused on interactional principles in diverse urban spaces and I look at the meaning of ‘civility towards diversity’ in a super-diverse context, exemplifying these theories with my own findings. I then go on to discuss cosmopolitan theories which look at cosmopolitanism in its everyday practice rather than just as a worldview. I exemplify such theories with examples from public space where such practices are particularly relevant, especially when it comes to business transactions. I develop the notion of corner-shop cosmopolitanism, referring to the use of cosmopolitan skills among traders. However, cosmopolitan practices are not always paralleled by actual knowledge about other people’s life-worlds. Even if people possess cosmopolitan skills when navigating Hackney’s public space, they do not necessarily know much about their neighbours’ cultures and traditions, an issue I discuss in the concluding section.

Civility in the context of diversity

Underlying the skills necessary to communicate with people who differ in terms of their educational, ethnic, religious or class background is what has also been described as ‘civility towards diversity’. In her discussions on patterns of behaviour and social life in the public realm, Lofland (1989) defines ‘civility towards diversity’ as one of the main ‘interactional principles’. This principle

specifies that in face-to-face exchanges, confronted with what may be personally offensive visible variations in physical abilities, beauty, skin colour and hair texture, dress style, demeanour, income, sexual preferences, and so forth, the urbanite will act in a civil manner, that is, will act ‘decently’ vis-à-vis diversity.

(ibid., 1989:464–5)

Importantly, Lofland states that this civility towards diversity does not necessarily imply a specific appreciation of diversity, but it means treating people universally the same, and it can emerge from indifference to diversity rather than from a specific appreciation of it.1 Boyd (2006:871) describes civility as a ‘moral and sociological requirement’. In contexts where difference is experienced in intense proximity, civility is ‘the lubricant that makes modern urban life possible’.

Buonfino and Mulgan (2009) take the definition of civility a step further and describe it as a ‘learned grammar of sociability’. They compare these grammars of sociability with language. Although we are born with