Understanding Cities

Unruliness and cities

Jenny Robinson
I'm Jenny Robinson. In the studio with me are Steve Pile, Eugene McLaughlin and Gerry Mooney. If I can start with you, Steve, perhaps you'd like to tell us a little bit about unruliness.

Steve Pile
It struck us that actually when we were thinking about what was moving through cities and how things were settling in cities that there was a kind of unruliness about that, it was never completely certain what was moving where, nor how those kind of movements took place, but there was something about kind of the openness of cities to wider connections that actually meant that the flows through the cities were, in a sense, unruly somehow. But on the other hand we also had this notion of settlement as well, that actually certain things were becoming settled in certain places, so there was something about the ways in which these wider connections between cities and the way that these flows were mingling or inter-mingling within cities, in the way that that started to produce certain kinds of regular forms that puzzled us, I think. So there was a question really for us about whether cities were unruly or not, whether they were orderly in some ways, or disorderly in some ways, or what the relationship between those things were for us, and I think we wanted to pursue that.

Jenny
OK so the thing that interests me though is that you also pick up quite a lot of the idea of the intensity of cities, and also the way in which cities intensify social relationships. Could you perhaps explain how is it that those emerge as concepts which are helpful on the back of the idea of unruliness?

Steve
Absolutely. The city has different kinds of intensities and issues of movement and settlement started to make us think about well what happens when things are actually brought together in cities. When we started to really think more carefully about this question we started to divide it, I think, or analytically to separate out different issues of intensity. Broadly, this would be to separate out the kind of felt intensities of the knife. So one set of issues do concern, well you know, how do people feel about the city, how do they experience it, do all these flows of people, goods, ideas through the city – do they unsettle people, do they make people anxious? Or is there something that's really creative about the city, the excitement of all this disorderly stuff or the excitement of the city – so what is the actual experience? So there's a set of issues there for us about the felt intensities of city life, not just excitement or not simply about the kind of dangers of city life, but also some other things around indifference or boredom, or whatever they might be, so there's a set of issues there. But we felt that that was quite different from another set of issues that were coming out of these issues we were raising and this is more related to the idea that Doreen Massey introduces, what she describes as open intensities. So we're arguing there that there are these wider connections between cities, that they do come together within the cities, but the cities are distinctive because of the way they bring things together, and this starts to produce an intensification of social relations, or what we're describing as the intensification of social relations, that the ways in which cities bring things together actually create something greater in those spaces where things are brought together. So out of those questions about intensification also come questions of de-intensification, and thinking about how it is that people might actually throw their hands up and say well, this is all too intense for me, or the fact that the city is bringing so many things together, just the sheer quantity of it sometimes, means that people want to kind of negotiate that in different ways, to actually abandon the city somehow or to find safe

havens, quiet havens. We're trying to separate out analytically on the one hand the felt intensities, and on the other side the open intensities of city life.

Jenny
So in a way you seem to be suggesting that it's the intensity of cities, the complex and difficult experiences that people often have in cities, and cities' general unruliness which leads to attempts to retreat from the city, find new ways of living in the city, and perhaps creating the kinds of differentiations of the city. I wonder if, Eugene, you might like to pick up something about that?

Eugene McLaughlin
The street skills are the starting point because in many ways it's not just walking down the street – if you're on an Underground, if you're on a bus – just look around and see what mechanisms people are using in order to either avoid someone else's gaze, in order to keep just that little bit of space and privacy in a very compact situation where people are forced into contact with strangers, because that is the defining characteristic, it is the negotiating city life with strangers, and the mechanisms that we have to develop in order to make sure that those encounters are safe, positive, neutral would be one way of doing it, but if you look at that and you think about that quite carefully you can see that the logics within that individual response can then be transformed or translated into much more systematic spatial organisations and ordering of space in the city. So you can see, for example, that the development of suburbs, you can see spatial residential segregation, you can see the development of catered communities, etcetera, and in many ways they do still carry those very, very basic attempts to differentiate, to protect, to control, to regulate, to neutralise.

Jenny
Yes, so the thing that's interesting to me there is that of course all these responses to these strangers or to danger are very much individual, that is I might be more afraid than somebody else, and also socially constructed so that we're taught to be afraid of certain kinds of strangers, in a sense strangers are produced through the differentiation of urban space, it depends where you are as to who is a stranger or whether you are a stranger because you're in their place. I think what is interesting here is to think about what are the social processes that are producing these senses of fear that lead them to segregation, what are the kind of dynamics that produce these efforts to withdraw from the city. I wonder whether we need to go into this further then, simply thinking about fear.

Steve
That's what I'd like to pick up actually that, you know, some of the ways we can talk about strangers is through notions of danger and I think one of the ways that one can see suburbs as a response to that is to say well, they are an attempt to kind of manage strangers in a particular way, but I think that there are issues around unruliness that actually we need to sort of see some positive sides to that. One of the things we're grappling with this is the ambiguity of the unruliness of cities, I mean it's a question mark that is over are cities unruly or not, but also the ambiguousness of that unruliness too. One can imagine all sorts of situations in which strangers are fearful and we imagine them to be fearful, but also we may have images of strangers that are actually more fearful than they really are; you know, a stranger just may be a friend you haven't met yet. But another side of that is about I think the ways in which cities' bases are produced in which strangers will meet so one can think of all the kind of exciting spaces of cities where people are brought together in order to mix, in order to meet, and one might think of kind of all the kind of pleasurable sites in the cities like theatres, cinemas, clubs, all those things, as well as café society, all those kinds of aspects of it, and the ways in which inner cities now have been revitalised through strategies which are precisely designed to enable people to meet and mix, in Eugene's phrase, in kind of safe ways, I think.

Jenny
Gerry, would you perhaps like to talk about this?

Gerry Mooney
Yes, one of the things to pick up on in relation to the idea of the stranger is that it's very often seen that we're talking about simply potential individuals who are threatening to us, but for many people it's not a fear of strangers as such, it's a fear of particular places, localities within the city, and there's nothing new in that, I mean I've looked in the historically certain parts of British cities, certain parts of cities in other areas around the world have been constructed and viewed as being dangerous places or dangerous locales, locales that were effectively no-go areas for those that did not live within them, and we need to stop and think why is it that we inhabit cities where certain areas are defined and constructed in certain ways that marks them out from other places, for example we've made reference already to perhaps change has taken place in inner city that makes them more exciting, more attractive for certain groups of people, and the key thing I'd want to emphasise there is perhaps they are exciting for certain groups of people as opposed to other groups of people. There has been a huge debate within housing studies and within urban studies, particularly in this country, that processes of the gentrification have taken place in many of the older inner cities of Britain, and that's reflected in nice dockland housing, it's reflected in the creation of you know wine bars and restaurants, and that kind of trendy, yuppie culture, whatever people want to refer to it as, and that's great for many people who want to participate in that, but you've also got to think that there are other people who perhaps are excluded or disconnected from that particular kind of activity. I mean we're talking about this business about being connected and being disconnected, obviously we're referring back to the city being a very unequal place. I think one of the key things I'd want to bring out initially is that cities are sites of many things but one of the key things I think that they are sites of is inequality and spatial and social polarisation, I mean we're talking about cities being now characterised by a major gulf between the rich and the poor, a major gulf between people who live in certain parts of the cities as opposed people who live in other parts of the city, and the key thing for us then when we're looking at, you know, the question of unruliness and the question of order, disorder in the city is to locate that first and foremost, with an understanding that the city is a site of an equality, it's a site also of uneven power relations, and it's that unevenness which is reflected in the generation of particular ideas and discourses of the stranger and particular parts of the city being disorderly or dangerous, albeit potentially.