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Multicultural places and the idea of home

Abstract

Place identification in urban sociology has traditionally been associated with a sense of ‘being at home’ and connected to the formation of stable and fixed identities. The rise in transnational migration and the increasing number of refugees around the world has made particular regions and communities, within many western nations, culturally diverse. This has led to a re-conceptualisation and re-examination of the relationship between place and home. In light of this new paradigm I explore the existence of multicultural places and investigate the ways, if any, we can speak of ‘being at home’ in these diverse urban places. If home has been traditionally associated with order, sameness and identity while multicultural places are conceptualised in terms of fluidity, contingency, heterogeneity and difference then there seems to be an inherent tension between these two ideas. Are the ideas of home and multiculturalism mutually exclusive? I maintain that they are dialectically interwoven, especially when we acknowledge that otherness and home should not be conceived in binary terms. In order to examine this complex relationship the paper provides a brief discussion of home within the discourses of modernity and postmodernity and then links these discourses to phenomenological and sociological approaches to home. The concluding section demonstrates how home and otherness are expressed in intercultural moments where sameness and diversity rub against each other causing occasional friction but also moments of intercultural dialogue.

Keywords: Home, Homelessness, Multiculturalism, Movement, Modernity,
Multicultural places and the idea of home

Place identification in urban sociology has traditionally been associated with a sense of ‘being at home’ and connected to the formation of stable and fixed identities. The rise in transnational migration and the increasing number of refugees around the world has made particular regions and communities, within many western nations, culturally diverse. This has led to a re-conceptualisation and re-examination of the relationship between place and home. In light of this new paradigm I explore the existence of multicultural places and investigate the ways, if any, we can speak of ‘being at home’ in these diverse urban places. If home has been traditionally associated with order, sameness and identity while multicultural places are conceptualised in terms of fluidity, contingency, heterogeneity and difference then there seems to be an inherent tension between these two ideas. Are the ideas of home and multiculturalism mutually exclusive? I maintain that they are dialectically interwoven, especially when we acknowledge that otherness and home should not be conceived in binary terms. In order to examine this complex relationship the paper provides a brief discussion of home within the discourses of modernity and postmodernity and then links these discourses to phenomenological and sociological approaches to home. The concluding section demonstrates how home and otherness are expressed in intercultural moments where sameness and diversity rub against each other causing occasional friction but also moments of intercultural dialogue.

Modernity and the loss of home

A cursory glance at the scholarly literature on the subject of home suggests that the meaning of ‘home’ is complex and multidimensional and thus the notion of home has
become one of those ‘essentially contested concepts’. This contestability, however, does not mean that the meaning of ‘home’ was at one time uncontested, but it does highlight the emergence of a critical sensibility spanning across various disciplines. Nevertheless, this critical perspective does not contextualise home within the discourses of modernity, post modernity and tradition. As will be briefly demonstrated, the importance of home and how it is defined depends on one’s understanding of these societal configurations.

For example, Leontis (1999) contends that the idea of home has become an elusive and theoretical conundrum within modernity. It may represent a physical place where certain emotions and memories are evoked, but it has also been understood that such “a warm place of permanence and comfort exists no more” (Leontis 1999: 2). For some the relationship between modernity and home is one of mutual opposition because “the vocabulary of modernity is the vocabulary of anti-home” (Felski 1999-2000: 23). In this assessment modernity is characterised by mobility, movement, exile and boundary crossing, or what Bauman characterises as liquid modernity (2000), while in a traditional society home has been associated with familiarity, order, predictability, sameness and territorialising practices. This tension between home and an understanding of modernity as fluid makes it difficult to conceptualise ‘home’ in a world of flux where everything that is solid melts into air (Berman 1988).

**Phenomenological approaches to home**

This tension between home and modernity is evident within the phenomenological approach because it tends to be critical of a modernity understood in terms of flux, mobility and individualism. In this account ‘home’ does not represent a socio-spatial system or a physical dwelling but is a subjective experience (Hollander 1993: 43). For the
phenomenologist, home is a state of being or an affect and therefore these scholars “accord epistemological status to the subject’s meaning and experience” (Somerville 1997: 230).

The work of Heidegger (1977a; 1977b) and Berger et al. (1973) is indicative of the phenomenological position. They argue that home has become increasingly meaningless in a global and plural modern world and consequently individuals have become increasingly disoriented, alienated and estranged. For example, Heidegger formulates an ontological reading of homelessness in which modernity “prevents us from making ourselves at home, from dwelling poetically in what he calls the ‘house of being’” (Lewandowski 1995: 142). He believes that “homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world” and “estrangement of man has its roots in the homelessness of the modern man” (Heidegger 1977a: 219). Underlying this pessimistic attitude is a notion of home associated with the spiritual unity found between humans and things (Lewandowski 1995). A language of authenticity underlines this critique of modernity because Heidegger presupposes that there is an authentic self which the modernizing experience has destroyed or suppressed.

Berger et al. also adopt a phenomenological notion of homelessness and note that homelessness characterises modern consciousness due to the ‘pluralization of Life-Worlds’. As a result, it has been difficult for modern subjects to maintain a ‘home-world’ which can “serve as the meaningful centre” for their life in society (Berger et al. 1973: 66). The movement of people or “the migratory character” of modern subjects (Berger et al. 1973) and the demise of the authentic self (Heidegger) reflect modernity’s moral, social and existential crisis. The development of the homeless mind has led to the
destabilization of modern identity. Due to the rise of technological production and bureaucratic rationality, modern identity has become more open, differentiated, reflective, and individuated (Berger et al. 1973: 76-79). The authors conclude that the modern self has experienced a “metaphysical loss of ‘home’” (Berger et al. 1973: 82) or an ontological insecurity and this threatens one’s sense of being-in-the-world.

This reactionist sensibility perceives the modern condition as a state of estrangement and views modern culture as lacking in depth and substance. As one observer has argued, the ‘homelessness’ myth presupposes that we have been rooted within a single, all-inclusive order (Shotter 1993). Heidegger and Berger et al. presuppose that a moral and an existential order once existed and that the modern condition has somehow undermined this order and the rooted, stable subject that supposedly supported it. This “longing for home, the desire to attach oneself to a familiar space, is seen by most theorists of modernity as a regressive desire” (Felski 1999-2000: 23) and may hide a rallying cry for reactionary nationalism (Bammer 1992).

**Sociological approaches to home**

Recent sociological research - both in their conclusions and in their methodology – reflects a modernist rather than a reactionist sensibility to the conceptualisation of home. The problem here is not ‘existential homelessness’, but how can we define home in a fluid and contingent world. Home is not conceived as a fix category because in some cases perceptions of home are linked to class, gender, and tenure (Somerville 1997). Class differences have been important in highlighting the complex experience of home, while sociological studies have shown that the meaning of home is never gender neutral. In addition, owner-occupation and length of stay both have an impact on the constitution
of home (Somerville 1997: 229). Després’s (1991) review of the literature on home also adopts a social constructionist approach in her critique of the psychological and socio-psychological interpretation of home. These interpretations over-emphasize the relationship between home and self and/or social identity and downplay the societal and material forces which contribute to the definition of the meaning of home. The sociological or social constructionist approaches highlight the contextual nature of defining home, but their modernist sensibilities are evident when they implicitly and explicitly connect home to place. Thus the social constructionist approaches tend to perceive home as fluid, but this fluidity is not a consequence of the de-territorialisation of home, but is a consequence of a theoretical bias.

**The postmodernist reconstruction of home and migration**

This de-territorialisation of home is evident in those postmodernist accounts that question conventional theories of representation. The ‘loss of home’ is not something we should mourn because this loss could become the source of our creativity, freedom and transgression. For these postmodernists, ‘home’ has become a floating signifier that is provisional and relative. It “is discursively produced by a particular speaker in a particular context for particular ends” (Bammer 1992: vii). This post-modern conception of home maintains that a commitment to place implies a commitment to foundationalism or an uncritical acceptance of pseudo traditionalism (Leontis 1999: 2).

This anti-foundationalist position is clearly evident in the literature on migration and home. Rapport and Dawson (1998) are critical of the conventional anthropological account of home associated with fixity and its constitution of cultures as rooted in time and space. In contrast they argue that “movement is the quintessence of how we –
migrants and autochthones, tourists and locals, refugees and citizens, urbanites and ruralites – construct contemporary social experience and have it constructed for us” (1998: 24). The post-modernist turn within the social sciences has seen the deconstruction of the subject and thus a shift from conceptualising identity as fixed and unified to the realisation that one can be at home in movement and that movement can be one’s home. Modern subjects “dwell in a mobile habitat and not in a singular or fixed physical structure” (Rapport and Dawson 1998: 27).

Cross-cultural ethical interaction or a multicultural mode of being at home

If we accept that modern subjects reside in mobile habitats and movement categorises migrants what are the implications for conceptualising a multicultural home? Home is always an encounter with otherness (Ahmed 1999: 340) and thus without otherness the idea of home is inconceivable. If we accept this formulation then the existence of multicultural homes is conceptually and empirically possible. Empirical work (Amin 2002; Gow 2005; Sandercock 1998, 2000, 2003; Wise 2005) on multicultural places have explored how social interaction in multiethnic places raise issues of belonging and exclusion. Sandercock argues that a ‘multicultural cosmopolis’ is where there is “genuine connection with, and respect and space for the cultural Other” and where we work together on matters of common and intertwined goals (Sandercock 1998:164). We can overcome the conflict and misunderstanding between diverse social and cultural groups over use of public space through a therapeutic or dialogic approach. This method involves culturally diverse people talking through their grievances over shared spaces in an open and communicative planning process which is less ‘rational’ and more in tune with the emotion and feelings of the participants. This process,
according to Sandercock, led to a compromise in the Sydney neighbourhood of Redfern between white residents and Aborigines over the future use of a factory site.

Gow (2005), on the other hand, provides research on the Sydney suburb of Fairfield that demonstrates through his idea of ‘together within difference’ the emergence of a multicultural home. A multicultural home is closely associated with his idea of a ‘multicultural civic solidarity’ formed by culturally diverse residents in a housing block. These residents were either refugees or were without permanent status. This diverse group, who at times had difficulties communicating with each other, came ‘together’ to stop the landlords from restricting them from parking their cars in certain places and stopping their children from playing at the front of the property. This upset the residents who held a meeting at the front of the housing block and agreed not to comply with the orders. This demonstrates, according to Gow, the ‘multicultural’ nature of their interaction and the new forms of citizenship emerging. This case study provides an example of how belonging and cross-cultural interaction are possible across difference.

A feeling of belonging is also evident in the multicultural place of Ashfield in Sydney. Wise (2005) found that although her Anglo-Celtic elderly participants felt that Ashfield had changed since the arrival of new Chinese and Indian immigrants, a sense of belonging and attachment to place still was present. The stories recounted by the participants expressed “hopeful intercultural moments”. These intercultural moments led to opening up to the Other and resulted in “interethnic belonging, security and trust”. This is reminiscent of home as a way of inhabiting and as a process of identification in which habit, coping, comforting and stabilising oneself are all evident (Wise 2000: 300). For the
elderly Anglo-Celtic participants of Ashfield home became a possibility even though they experienced Ashfield as fluid, diverse and mobile.

The case studies from Redfern, Fairfield and Ashfield demonstrate the existence of “micro-publics” in which cultural diverse people were forced to interact (Amin 2002). Unlike the manufactured, ‘boutique’ multiethnic public spaces where the marginalized and the prejudice stay away, real dialogue and negotiation occur in “micro-publics” where different cultural groups are forced to engage with each other. Such places include the workplace, schools, colleges, youth centers, and sports clubs (Amin 2002:14). In such sites, engagement with strangers, in a common activity, results in the destabilization of stereotypes and the creation of new attachments. As a consequence, there “are moments of cultural destabilization, offering individuals the chance to break out of fixed relations and fixed notions, and through this, learn to become different through new patterns of social interaction” (Amin 2002:15). The elderly Anglo-Celtic participants in Ashfield had to break free from established patterns of social interaction, the residents of Fairfield had to communicate across difference to resist the demands of their landlords, and the Redfern residents had to establish new ways of interacting that would satisfy the needs of the black and white community. It is through these intercultural moments that a multicultural home emerges, a home which is fleeting, but nevertheless temporarily fixed. These multicultural homes are places where strangeness, movement, dislocation, familiarity are in constant tension and otherness and sameness rub against each other.

In these fleeting multicultural homes, the relationship between self and other can be theorised as being with the other rather than for the other. In these intercultural moments a multicultural home is a place in which a multicultural mode of being at home with the
other becomes an ethical relationship. As Bauman notes, “responsibility is the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity” (1989:183). It is only by being responsible for the other that we constitute ourselves as ethical subjects. It is only by “being-for” the other that the uniqueness of the other is protected, whereas when the self is “being-with” the other then the meeting is fragmentary and precarious and, according to Bauman, it is the “meeting of incomplete and deficient selves” (Bauman 1995:50). It is in these intercultural moments that ethical relations are possible.

Nonetheless, living with difference provides no guarantee that multicultural ethical relationships will emerge. Micro-publics are sites where real dialogue can occur and where conflict and tension – as Wise (2005) has shown - interweave with empathy and responsibility. Greater exposure to otherness in an urban environment does not guarantee greater understanding of oneself or the Other, but may be the only means by which ethical relationships can thrive and where difference, otherness and home become mutually constitutive.

References


