

The Empire of Scrounge Meets the Warm City: Danger, Civility, Cooperation and Community among Strangers in the Urban Public World

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Abstract This article offers alternative views on scrounging—looking through garbage to find valuable objects—as a disorderly activity, and on urban public life as dangerous because of disorderly people. The European micro sociological perspective on the fleeting but positive moments of urban public life, as developed in ‘The Warm City’ (Müller in *De warme stad: betrokkenheid bij het publieke domein*. Jan van Arkel, Utrecht, 2002), is used to reread and reconstruct Ferrell’s ethnographic work in the ‘Empire of Scrounge.’ The focus of my article is to more deeply examine the public interactions scroungers have with scroungers and non-scrounging citizens. Ferrell’s interest in, and presentation of, his material leaves out this kind of micro analysis of stranger-interactions while scrounging in public space. My article shows that, in contrast to the belief that scroungers disrupt social order (and therefore need ‘policing’), scroungers often interact in a civil and careful way with strangers in order to purposively sustain public order, which allows them to continue their informal waste management. The overall image of urban public life which comes with these interactions is that of a ‘Warm City’, a social environment that consists of civility, cooperation and community among strangers.

Introduction

In many American cities, scrounging—looking for valuable objects in the waste that others leave outside of their houses, offices and shops –, is illegal because it is seen as behavior that threatens public order. The logic behind this type of regulation is that without its implementation, disorder will prevail in public places and the city will become a place where its citizens do not feel safe. This way of reasoning fits perfectly with the broken windows theory, which states that disorder has to be tackled because otherwise crime will be on the rise (Wilson and Kelling 1982; Kelling and Coles 1996).

This article offers an alternative view on ‘disorderly’ public activity, and identifies a social process by which urban public life becomes ‘warm’ (rather than dangerous) because

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of ‘disorderly’ people. In this article I introduce the European micro-sociological concept of ‘The Warm City’ (Müller 2002) and analyze if the fleeting social encounters of marginal people such as scroungers can result in positive interactions. I focus on (a) the interactions of scroungers in public space with other scroungers and non-scrounging citizens and (b) the urban image that flows from these interactions. I use Jeff Ferrell’s ‘Empire of Scrounge’ (2006), a rich ethnography of the social world of scrounging in Fort Worth, Texas, to study these interactions.

The perspective in the Warm City is shaped by empirical research of public places in the inner-city of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and by concepts from the urban ethnography of (semi-)public places and (symbolic) interactionism (Goffman 1963, 1971; Wiseman 1979; Lofland 1985; Kenen 1982; Nash 1975). In this paper, I explore whether ‘The Warm City’ is applicable to a North American city (Fort Worth, Texas) and a marginal group of public actors (scroungers). My article is organized as follows: first I discuss the relevant literature, after which I will focus on the methods I have used and present my findings.

Broken Windows, Scrounging and the Warm City

Since the emergence of the broken windows theory in the 1980s, the ‘disorderly’ stranger has become a target of ‘strict police control and social exclusion. In the spirit of this theory no form of rule breaking in public places should be accepted by law enforcers. According to this perspective any form of public transgression can be seen as a lack of social control, which triggers people to behave as they wish. In order to implement broken windows theory, zero tolerance policing was started: any minor fraction of public order should be restored immediately by punitive police action.

In the mind frame of those who support zero-tolerance policing, the urban poor are the source of urban danger and the solution is to scrutinize their behavior, imprison them on vague accusations such as loitering and/or to exclude them from public life (Coleman 2003; Goffman 2009; Sheldon and Brown 2000; Wacquant 2008). One of the grave effects of the zero tolerance policing style is that it affects the life of the urban poor in a drastic way. In many American cities, their mere presence in public spaces is reason enough for the police to intervene and in many occasions this results in arrests for loitering. Because of this kind of policing, the public life of many cities has been eroded and a significant part of the urban population feels alienated from the police and the community government (Collins 2007; Duneier 1999; Fagan and Davies 2000; Garnett 2004, Goffman 2009).

Although the broken windows theory and the order maintenance approach have been heavily criticized, it has become a rampant ‘success’ in many cities across North America and Europe (Duneier 1999; Harcourt 2001; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999, 2004). Yet this ‘political’ image of the ‘disorderly’ world of marginalized, poor people can be counterbalanced by a careful rereading and analysis of the ‘Empire of Scrounge’. This study depicts the social world of scrounging, recycling and second hand living in an urban context which exists in a variety of places, such as elite neighborhoods, marginalized living areas and the city center. In his ethnography, Ferrell focuses on a wide range of aspects of the urban underground of scrounging, such as the social world of yard sales and homeless centers, and the informal and formal mechanisms of mutual support among the urban poor.

Ferrell did not start with a conventional analytical approach or theoretically driven question. In his own words: “I didn’t attempt any such thoroughgoing project” (Ferrell 2006: 204). As a result of this, he does not present his material in a singular conceptual framework with which he teased out the analytical possibilities of his findings. Still one

can detect several topics of (main)interest, such as (1) to record the waste Ferrell finds and to indicate what that symbolizes of the “hyper consumptive panic” in American society, (2) “the personal and political economy of scrounging as a means of survival”, (3) the description of the humanity of the everyday “social situation” of the urban poor living from urban waste (Ferrell 2006: 4–5), and (4) to highlight another perspective on trash by looking at how scroungers define it: not as waste, but as something that has value in their hands. They use it for different purposes and give it financial, pragmatic, social and esthetical connotations. All of these themes are touched upon and intermingled in short vignettes of the social world of scrounging, which are rich in detail of the human lived experience of and therefore form a substantive rich document which I can analyze for this article.

While reading Ferrell’s book, I directly saw similarities with ‘The Warm City’, which I published in the Netherlands in 2002. In this book, the focus is on social life in the public realm, which consists of those public spaces, such as parks, streets and cafes, where most people present are strangers, people who do not share biographical information (Lofland 1985). This realm is typical for urban societies and the users of this public space are commonly thought to interact with each other in an anonymous and superficial way, as is presented in the urban sociological literature.

For instance, Goffman (1963, 1971) and Lofland (1985) emphasized that strangers tend to avoid each other in order not to become a cause of alarm or of special interest for other people. These studies fit the dominant middle class perspective on urban social life, where the private realm is related to intimacy, primary relationships, safety and feeling at home, and where the public realm stands for anonymity, secondary relationship, urban fear and alienation. This image can be traced back to the origins of sociology in the second of 19th century (Tönnies 1887) where the small local community, where people knew each other in a non segmented way, was contrasted with cities which were disorganized, anomic, dangerous and unhealthy (Brunt 1989; Weintraub 1995). This image was reproduced in the first half of the 20th century in the Chicago school and highlighted in *Urbanism as a Way of Life* (Wirth 1938).

Since the second world war, Wirth’s concept of urban relationships as anonymous and superficial has been criticized by many. Some showed that relations in the private realm, such as family and friendships, do not resemble Wirth’s description (Greer 1956; Fischer 1981; Smith et al. 1954). Others focused on relations in the parochial domain (the neighborhood) and showed that in this urban context persons share biographical information and form continuous personal relationships (Jacobs 1961; Gans 1962; Stone 1954). But the image of urban anonymity and distant relations is still present in many studies on public space (Fischer 1981; Milgram 1970; Lofland 1985). In contrast, the *Warm City* explores interactions in the public realm, which are not only anonymous and fleeting, but also have personal and intimate dimensions. The results of this study have not previously been published in English, except in one publication (1997) on a subtheme of ‘The Warm City’, “city acquaintances”: strangers one meets regularly but shares no biographical information with. Therefore, a review of the findings is useful.

The core of this study consists of 45 in depth interviews. Most of the participants belonged to the age-category of 25–35 and were living between 5 and 10 years in Amsterdam. In general, the informants lived in the neighbourhoods and quarters next to the centre of Amsterdam. Their professions varied: accountant, theatre technician, secretary and so on. Most of them lived alone and enjoyed a way of living that allowed them to spend a great deal of time in public areas and thus belong to the category of ‘new urbanites’ (Häusserman and Siebel 1988; Anderiesen and Reijndorp 1990). The interviews

were open in character, so respondents could freely discuss their experiences of the public realm, such as sitting in a park, going to a cafe, shopping downtown and going to a market. The focus of the research was on what the informants did in those situations, what forms of interactions they encountered, and what kind of feelings and thoughts they had during those public interactions.

The findings in the Warm City indicate that urbanites make the public realm meaningful by wilfully and playfully interacting with others in this realm. The results show that during these interactions people try to manage information in order to define the identity of others, to probe situations and to present themselves strategically (Goffman 1963, 1971; Harman 1987). This process of reflection, conceptualising, and interaction diminishes the distance between strangers and creates the experience of urban warmth.

These warm interactions are conceptualized as small and temporary institutions, which, just as ‘family’ and ‘work’, have certain forms and social and symbolic meanings. To examine the start and development of ‘warm interactions’ an almost microscopical level of analysis has been used. The primary focus of ‘The Warm City’ is to identify the subtle ways in which persons create step-by-step involvement with others who are public strangers. The focus of the analysis is on space (the location of ‘The Warm City’), time (the duration of ‘urban warmth’), interactions and its meanings.

For instance, the study describes short verbal contacts with several connotations (playful, impulsive, attentive and sharing) that urbanites use to breach the rule of public silence and impersonality amongst strangers. These encounters can be built up step-by-step into a less fleeting interaction. In such situations, people gather information to define the identity of the other and then decide how to approach him or her. During this process of information management they look for a common ground, such as similarities in each other’s biographical history, to start and continue the conversation. Once social or cultural familiarity is discovered, people feel recognition, and a temporary friendship develops. The encounters become more personal when it ‘clicks’, which means that people feel an instant mutual recognition, generating trust and understanding.

With ‘The Warm City’, a first impetus has been given to research the public realm in this way. However, it is unclear whether ‘The Warm City’ exists more generally as an empirical phenomenon among urban strangers. It may be that Amsterdam is a special kind of city with an image of tolerance and fun, public interactions. Further exploration of the ‘Warm City’ concept in other cities, among other urbanites—including marginal urban actors like scroungers—and during other historical times is required. Because Fort Worth and the social world of scroungers differ both vastly from the city of Amsterdam and the interviewed ‘new urbanites’, the ‘Empire of Scrounge’ represents a more extreme case for exploring the relevance of ‘The Warm City’ for other urban contexts and categories of urbanites.

Methods

Before I will explain how I analyzed Ferrell’s ethnography, I will describe his approach in order to explain what the added value of this article is in relation to Ferrell’s original work. Ferrell deviates from the conventional ethnographic approach in roughly three interconnected ways: (a) research, (b) analysis and (c) description.

- (a) Ferrell combined his lifestyle as a scrounger with his role as a researcher during 8 months: “I’d try to adopt a way of life that was at the same time field research and

- free-form survival” (Ferrell 2006: 1). This resulted in a combination of auto-ethnography and ethnography (Ibid: 32). His intention was not to interfere in the process of scrounging by his role as a researcher: “I would not seek out nor stage interviews with those I met in the streets, instead allowing interactions and conversations emerge as they might or might not.” (Ibid: 31).
- (b) Reading Ferrell’s book, it seems that he does not want to stop the flux and the flow of the ‘Empire of Scrounge’ with too much analyses, references and theoretical debate. He wants to stay as close as possible with his description on the skin of the human lived experience of scrounging. It is almost as if he was torn between engaging the reader with the unplanned adventurous world of scrounging and watering down this experience by integrating conventional analytical and theoretical passages. As a result Ferrell refers to several important issues in a fleeting manner, but does not reflect on them in a conventional systematic way, including interactions among strangers.
- (c) To be able to capture the social world of scrounging Ferrell did not choose a conventional ethnographic form. He has chosen to represent his experiences using columns or vignettes to “capture the discrete, situational dynamic that animates” the world of scrounging (Ibid: 29). Ferrell’s observations have the quality of thick description based on notes of “countless encounters with homeowners, apartment residents, police officers, homeless folks, and other scroungers of all sorts (...)”. He wants to show “a meandering series of scattered situations” (Ibid: 32). As a result the book is filled with details of daily experiences in the ‘Empire of Scrounge’ and therefore suitable for the purpose of this article.

I have analyzed the ‘Empire of Scrounge’ by first identifying all passages on interactions between strangers in public places. This social world also consists of less public places which have a “privatized” or “parochial” character (Hunter 1985), such as yard sales, second hand stores, scrap yards and homeless centers, but here my main interest is in interactions among strangers in public places. In some sense, methodologically, I positioned myself as an academic scrounger, going through the ‘Empire of Scrounge’ finding my own valuable goods. My research role as a scrounger refers to the process of scanning the original ethnography and identifying passages on interactions among strangers. This is not meant as an ironic word game, but rather in recognition of the basic value-filled process of scrounging as an activity. I have also occasionally engaged in urban scrounging in large European cities, and thus have some experiential knowledge of this activity. Another urban role, that of the *flâneur*, fits the pace of my research (Tester 1994). As a *flâneur*, I strolled through the ‘Empire of Scrounge’. I went several times over a passage to get myself into the described situations and to relate to the different actors involved. This approach has its effect on the presentation of my findings. Step by step, I will discuss the different scrounged descriptions of interactions.

The slow and close reading allowed me to gain an emic understanding, an insider’s perspective, of the social world of scrounging and also gave me the possibility to discover connections between different sections on interactions between strangers, along which lines I could reassemble the text in a new way. In that sense I have used the Situationist technique of *détournement* (Debord 2004: 114). A *détournement* is a form of reusing and reinterpreting the work of others, which can be related to, for instance newspapers articles, paintings or space. Here, I do not apply this technique for satirical or critical purposes as was common among the Situationists. Instead, I place the descriptions found in Ferrell’s book into a new analytical context. My intention is not to contest Ferrell’s ethnography but to add an extra layer of meaning from within it. My goal was to gather the

passages on interactions in public life, to compare them and see how they relate to each other in order to understand their patterns and to see what they say about urban public life in general.

Ferrell's interest in, and presentation of, his material leaves out a systematic analysis of stranger-interactions while scrounging in public space. And I address this gap in my article.

The Empire of Scrounge meets the Warm City

The urban context of the 'Empire of Scrounge', Fort Worth, is a city with a strong focus on law and order, which criminalizes the survival strategies of the urban poor. In this city, scrounging, as in many other American cities, is illegal. In Fort Worth there are many regulations to 'tidy up the city' which actually negatively affect those who reuse the city's waste (Ferrell 2006: 11, 12). The politicians who support these laws also create a negative atmosphere by the way they label scroungers. In relation to scroungers and their activities, Fort Worth politicians use concepts such as "a monster that is growing in the inner city", "a huge problem" and "rodents". And one actually states "give them hell" (Ibid: 179).

In the following pages I contrast this law and order perspective on scroungers with my reordered detailed descriptions of interactions among strangers in the 'Empire of Scrounge'. How are these interactions managed? How do they develop into less fleeting interactions? What is the social and emotional meaning of these interactions? And what is the role of scroungers in the creation of public order? First I focus on interactions among scroungers, secondly I describe interactions between scroungers and non-scrounging citizens.

Among Scroungers

Circling back west on Mistletoe Drive as it arches out over the bluffs above the Trinity River, I see ahead on the right one of those big clean-out-the-house trash piles, and two people already digging in it, their half-full cart sitting in the middle of the street (Ibid: 43).

Scanning the environment and seeing someone scrounging, or seeing someone walking to a trash pile is, in general, the first step in the sequences that makes up the encounter of scroungers. In some situations the interaction between scroungers can be limited to an "unfocussed" interaction. During these interactions "one gleans information about another person present by glancing at him, if only momentarily, as he passes into and out one's view" (Goffman 1971: 24). Observing other scroungers as the main goal of the interaction takes place especially when going and coming from scrap yards.

Observing others can be seen as a cold and distant way of relating to people. But urbanites as described in 'The Warm City' experience different forms of emotional and cognitive involvement when looking at others. They wonder about their own relations when they see a couple walking deeply in love and experience recognition or even closeness when a certain individual moves in and out of their gaze. A similar experience is shared by scroungers:

A few minutes later, sitting in the cab of my pickup across the street from the yards, taking it all in, I spot across the heavy traffic on North Main an older white guy, lying down with his head resting on his arm and elbow. He's lying up against a wood fence

under a big tree, keeping to the shade on a hot day like I was earlier. His scrounger's grocery cart is in front of him (...) We're both just chillin' near the yard, resting after hauling in one more load of scrap (...) (Ferrell 2006: 125).

By observing other scroungers closely, a scrounger learns how to identify similar people through their presentation of self, such as their clothes, hair and tan. Class and status, as indicated by one's presentation of self, play an important role in identifying someone as trustworthy. In almost all described interactions, scroungers are marginalized people. The well-off are more likely to belong to the anti-scrounging category of citizens, who frown upon it, try to prevent it, and even might call the police to stop it.

I'm back to the working pile, and the Yukon rolls up on me again, the driver easing down the power window. "Anything good in there?" he asks me, friendly enough. "Well, I don't know, everything seems to be broken," I tell him, looking to put off any well-heeled interloper — but in fact I get the clear sense that he's less interested in checking on the trash than in checking on me (Ibid: 44).

In the context of his dominant presentation of self the question of the man becomes a cause for alarm. His general presence does not fit the public identity of scroungers, so his question might indicate something else: checking what is going on.

Most interactions among scroungers develop in an orderly way and have a civilized character. Several steps can be distinguished. Step one consists of scanning other scroungers. Step two is the opening move of the newcomers. In general, it contains questions about the quality of the content of the trash pile or a request to join in. Part of the opening move in the 'Empire of Scrounge' is that one respects the claim of the first scrounger to the pile of trash.

Soon enough a middle-aged fellow eases up on foot. He's dressed in disheveled cloths and holds an unlit pipe between his teeth. "I saw the pile from over on Camp Bowie," he tells me, referring to a major thorough fare a block away, and so he decided to come over to investigate. While he rummages around and we talk sporadically, I keep at my scrounging. He's welcome, of course—but as per the scrounger's code, I don't intend to be run off the pile by a late arrival (Ibid: 48).

The reaction of the scrounger (Step 3) depends on how the newcomers present themselves. In general, if they stick to the civilities of the opening move, the reaction of the scrounger is positive. It is not only that the scrounger has to read the newcomer, but also that newcomers have to define the situation as safe before they proceed. The reaction of the scrounger is decisive for the newcomer to advance or not:

On "a long looping scrounge ride" Ferrell meets two people already digging in a trash pile and offers his greetings. "The man – white guy, ruddy complexion, older, heavy, maybe a little drunk—responds with a grunt, though not a threatening or unfriendly one, as he keeps busy plowing through the pile" (Ibid: 43).

Although the scrounger does respond with a grunt, it is not read as 'threatening' or 'unfriendly', which is seen as a sign to continue. But when there is some cause for alarm, there is not much protection from others when one is scrounging. There is a symbolic way to protect oneself. This is related to information-management: withholding information about one's activities and the potential valuable content of the pile of trash.

... I see a guy, white, maybe fifty-five, gray hair, baseball cap, tape measure on belt, walking up to the pile a few feet from me. "Finding anything valuable?" he says, friendly enough. "Nah, not really," I say, employing my usual mode of downplaying my presence and my finds – you don't want to provide too much of answer until you find out more about the question. "Just looking for brass and copper, really. Finding just a little copper". And I figure it is indeed best to find out more about the question, since I'm after all on a private lot, though I haven't seen any "No trespassing signs." (Ibid: 53).

The "guy" doesn't fit the typical scrounger's presentation of self, which signifies him as a potential 'hostile' other. On top of that Ferrell is walking on a private lot. In this unclear situation, scroungers resort to downplaying. This does not only protect the loot, but also the scrounger in case of a hostile reaction of the approaching party.

When the other is defined as non-hostile, more information about one's identity and that of the loot can be shared. But when the newcomer does not show any deference, this creates a situation of tension related to for instance competition and claims on the trash.

After a while, three Hispanic guys roll up in a big late-model SUV, and jump out in a hurry. On the one hand, they don't seem to acknowledge my prior claim to the pile – an informal code that I've found to be almost always honored in the empire. On the other hand, they're friendly enough, handing me items they don't want, and chatting with me while we all work (Ibid: 66).

Sharing stories and objects (Step 4) during scrounging creates a stronger bond among scroungers. The previous example shows the social force of sharing: it can even restore the social damage (mistrust) done by not living up to the code of acknowledging a person's prior claim to a pile. Sharing narratives and valuable objects creates trust. Silence creates mistrust.

In the course of the interaction it is important to show that one is not greedy. This also creates trust among scroungers and is therefore a constituting force in the social order of the 'Empire of Scrounge'. It is not only that the first code—acknowledge the first claim—but also 'giving' that creates this desired and 'pacifying' presentation of oneself as non-greedy.

She hands me a couple of vintage U.S. Navy wool pullover uniforms, and thanking her I tell her, "Well, sure. I'll take these if you don't want them – but you were here first." She assures me I should have them, and continues to pull clothes out of the pile for me. "Is there anything in particular you are looking for that I could help you find?" I ask her, looking to return the courtesy. "I'm trying to find a curtain to match the first one I found," she tells me. "I found the one, but can't find the other—it's sure to be in here." I ask the color—it's brown stripes – and we look for it, but without success (Ibid: 43).

The gift of valuable objects can be labeled as a "free need" (Goffman 1963: 127): an offer which doesn't take much extra time and energy of the giver, as in opening a door. It is a small service which conveys civility and creates trust. The gift while scrounging does not require much extra attention either. While scrounging one has to go through items one does not want anyhow, objects which might be of value for others. Instead of grabbing and throwing them on a pile, one can actually give objects to others and thus presenting oneself as a kind and non-greedy person (Wiseman 1979). So the act of fulfilling a free need is at the same time an almost free way to present oneself in a positive and decent manner, thus

creating an agreeable atmosphere while scrounging. It also creates the possibility of getting valuable objects in return.

The act of giving is not only related to fulfilling each other's practical need, but also has a symbolic layer which relates to public order and social relations: the creation of a situation of sharing and caring. Giving back and forth confirms the established relationship and creates a moment of belonging to a community (Mauss 1990). Another code also refers to the non-greedy presentation of self: "take what you need and leave the rest" (Ferrell 2006: 66). What one leaves behind, is an indirect and anonymous gift to others.

After the period of creating trust, scroungers can get closer if they share a common ground (step 5), such as similarities in one's biographical present and past, a collective experience of excitement and the sharing of a sense of humor and ethos (Traynowicz 1986).

Finding a common ground requires information-management, which starts with the previously discussed steps—scanning, opening move, reaction, sharing and caring and the presentation of the non-greedy self—and continues with the probing of the other and one's presentation of self (Harman 1987). This process leads from a general categorization of the other as hostile or non-hostile to a more precise definition of the other on the basis of biographical information.

You tearing this down? "I say guessing that he's the worksite foreman come to check me. Nah, I'm working in this house across the street. Thought I'd see if I could find a board to use in this pile." For what he does not say. "Well there might be a few not broken," I tell him, friendly but not hopeful, given the bulldozers indiscriminate destruction. So he circles the pile looking for a board, and I keep at my work – and then he says, from the other side of the pile, "Here you go, here's some," and tosses me a length of copper pipe. "So, you are building a house in the neighborhood?" I ask, after thanking him. Nah, my youngest son just bought his house. I'm a contractor. I build houses, so I got elected to do some work on it. "(...) And I do mean elected," he adds, after just the right pause. "Didn't have much choice in that matter, huh?" "Right".

After the man has revealed part of his identity, which explains his presence at the location, Ferrell finds a common ground in his own past and present life: "I tell him about working construction myself a long time ago, and the way my pick up truck keeps getting elected—and I mean elected—for friends moving jobs." The man continues the mutual friendly involvement by looking for copper and brass:

And as he's walking away, almost at the end of the lot (...) he turns back, says "here you go", and tosses me, in a soft underhanded arch, just the motion of a slow pitch softball pitcher, a nice brass sprinkler fixture.

The collective experience of humor and the sharing of objects have created a close bond between the two men: "a friendly sense of material community" (Ferrell 2006: 53–54).

Another route to a common ground is the collective sharing of the excitement and adventure of scrounging valuable objects. When several objects of special value are scrounged, the excitement and joy can be experienced as a 'kick' or a 'high'. Sharing this experience creates a momentous "we-feeling" or "communitas" (Turner 1969).

And by God we get with it. They both jump right in, opening bags, sorting through, talking to each other and to me. (...) At one point I dump a bunch of makeup and the like out of trash bag and into a small container lying on top of the bags: her happy

response upon seeing this is “Fucking’ Lan-Côme. (...) Well they throw out some good stuff in *this* neighborhood,” she says. As I am getting ready to leave, she eases over to me. “Shit, there’s some paper hangin’ stuff in there— checks and stuff,” she says, laughing. I laugh too, and I tell her Yeah, I found some checks the other day, some of them signed. (...) Finally (...) she sees the Abs of Steel workout videotape I’ve pulled out of a garbage bag and left on the pile. “How to stay healthy,” she says, reading from the tape cover. “Shit, how to stay high!” She laughs, I laugh and away I roll... (Ferrell 2006: 71).

The analysis of the interactions among scroungers shows that in general their encounters seem to be civilized and friendly. When there is no show of civility this in itself might be a sign of alarm and therefore a reason to retreat from the encounter. In one instance Ferrell describes such a situation.

While scrounging Ferrell sees “a pile of material on the curb of a commercial street” and hears somebody call him: “a weathered, white, middle-aged homeless guy, missing some teeth, sporting long air and a beard”. The man sits among waste: old bedding magazines, and a broken wooden door. After half an hour Ferrell returns and sees a second man: “Anglo, heavily tanned, bigger, cleaner cut, in dark shirt and pants”. This man starts talking to Ferrell: “(...) a good bit more menacing than the first guy. “Hey cowboy, get the fuck over here.” I don’t do that, either, and ride away. Sometimes holding one sort of street knowledge trumps betting on another (Ibid: 84– 6).

Considering the context of potential threat of law enforcers, such as the police and private security guards, it is remarkable that scroungers seem to be able to interact in a civil and friendly way. By doing so, they prevent situations of conflict and help to sustain public order. This way of interacting contrasts with the way scroungers are labeled by politicians as ‘disorderly’, ‘non-human’ and ‘crazy’. One city official even states “that many residents ... lived in fear” “of these scroungers” (Ibid: 179–180). So fear might play an important role in the interaction between scroungers and non-scroungers, such as homeowners and passers by.

Scroungers and Non-Scrounging Citizens

“Shit, are they home?” “Not that I can tell,” I answer with a smile of my own, having already checked, as usual, for any signs of occupation or annoyance in and around the house (Ibid: 70).

While scanning the environment, scroungers also look for the presence of non-scrounging citizens, such as homeowners, tenants and passers by. It is not uncommon that interactions with home-owners take place. And what is even more remarkable, many of these interactions have a civil and even cooperative character.

The opening of the interaction is crucial for the development of the rest of the encounter. If scroungers present themselves as polite and reasonable persons, there is a high chance of a civil reaction in return.

“Mind if I look through this to see what I might want?” “Sure, God bless you, go right ahead,” he tells me, adding that he’s here cleaning out the house that his girlfriend just sold (Ibid: 54).

When homeowners respond in a positive way, it is common that they request scroungers to keep the environment tidy.

“The man said we could look around in here, as long as we put it back and don’t leave a mess,” she tells me. Guessing she means the homeowner, I answer, “That seems like a fair enough trade,” and she says “Yeah” (Ibid: 43).

The biggest worry of homeowners does not seem to be the private character of their previous possessions, but the possible untidiness created by scrounging.

(...) I’m wary. The yard sports multiple “no trespassing” signs, as well as a hand lettered sign warning folks away from the leaning, dilapidated garage. Then the guy comes out of the old garage carrying rifle. “How ya doin’?” I ask, turning toward him throwing him a quick nod. To my relief, he answers with a friendly “Good.” Apparently he’s just moving the rifle as part of the garage cleanup. “Mind if I look through this stuff?” I ask, resuming my work. “Sure”, he says, and then walking toward me, gesturing a closed circle in the air, the rifle tucked under his arm, he adds, “Just try not to scatter it all around.” “No problem,” I assure him. “If I’m gonna look through stuff I try to leave it neater than I found it” (Ibid: 62).

Ferrell observed that other scroungers also stick to the rule of cleaning after scrounging. Ferrell sees it as “a negotiated curbside agreement”, which helps to create “some sense of informal neighborhood solidarity” (Ibid.). But whether or not this solidarity is felt by homeowners and tenants, by cleaning up scroungers present themselves in a respectable way, which helps them to continue their informal waste-management.

People, who just pass by, can be a (minor) cause of alarm. Although they are less involved in the situation, because it is not their trash, they still can act in an uncivil way or even call the police. Therefore, scroungers are also on their guard when a person is just passing by:

A while later an older white woman in a nice jogging suit and running shoes strides up, seemingly out for her afternoon constitutional. I brace again for possible trouble – or momentary unpleasantness, anyway – but instead she smiles as she gets to me and says, “Just a beautiful day, isn’t it?” Indeed it is – sunny, in the 70s, a great day for walking or scrounging – so I agree. “Just spectacular,” I tell her (Ibid: 44).

Class (or one’s social economic status as expressed through one’s presentation of self) plays an important part in relating to others while scrounging. It is used to categorize others as belonging to the anti- or pro-scrounging category of citizens. During the ongoing interaction information—“Just a beautiful day, isn’t it?”—is gathered which signifies that the general categorization might be accurate or not.

Scroungers are confronted with a positive response when they encounter “city acquaintances” (Müller 1997): strangers one meets regularly but shares no biographical information with. In ‘The Warm City,’ informants give several examples of city acquaintances: a woman who takes the same tram every morning, a man brushing the hair of his dog at the same spot and time everyday and an old man walking back and forth to a park every afternoon. Because of the regularity of these interactions people get attached to these familiar strangers. These interactions transform public places into a sociable and friendly environment.

As we’re walking around picking up cans, he talks fondly of his vacant lot, telling me that he hits this place often—so often that the construction workers next door now

know him and greet him “Oh, you’re here for the cans”. I tell him, yeah, I get mostly friendly responses too – “I don’t get yelled at that much” – he says, “Yeah same here.”

Non-scrounging citizens can take a more cooperative stance than being supportive or giving permission. For instance, homeowners can reveal the content of the trash in detail and point out specific objects the scrounger is looking for.

Bent over, digging through the pile, I straighten up a few minutes later to see a young white kid, tall, lanky, maybe fourteen or fifteen, standing in front of me on the sidewalk. “You looking for something?” he says not aggressively, but a little arrogantly, as it strikes me. “Just scrap metal, that sort of thing,” I say with a smile. This seems to put him at ease, and as I continue to dig and he continues to bring out bags and boxes, he begins to point out items to me in the pile. “There are four or five more ceiling fan motors just under” (...) A few minutes later a woman I would take to be his mother comes down the driveway, and while hurriedly walking across the street waves to me and says, “Take what you like” I appreciate the family’s courtesy. (...) Today the empire is friendlier (Ferrell 2006: 64–6).

The friendliness of the former owner of trash is also expressed by notes: “... on my rides I regularly encounter little curbside signs that say” “Please take”, “Works fine” and “Everything here free” (Ibid: 102). The small extra effort, the writing of the notes and putting them on the discarded object, has a strong symbolic significance. It creates a situation of sharing and caring between strangers.

When scroungers and non-scrounging citizens share space for a longer period, the interaction can go beyond civility, but it seems that it seldom passes the stage of cooperation into the experience of community. Only one example is given by Ferrell when he encounters a Latina maid in a rich neighborhood who gives him books:

“Libros!” She nods, smiles, and continues toward me. Arriving at the pile, she puts down her latest load, then lifts out a row of paperback books from another box to show me the larger hardcover books below. “Sí, muchos libros!” She’s smiling, I’m smiling, and I say, “Gracias, muchas gracias!”. She returns a couple of times with more boxes of books – pausing, smiling, telling me “mas libros”. Given the elevated purity of this neighborhoods ethnic and class composition, I’m fairly certain that what we have here is a nice moment of marginal community ... (Ibid: 81).

In this interaction a common ground is found on the basis of a shared marginal position, which in general is absent between scroungers and non-scrounging citizens, such as homeowners and tenants.

Although most interactions with non-scrounging citizens seem to be civilized, other forms of interactions can be observed. Non-scrounging citizens apply different strategies, which range from non-verbal to verbal, to try to prevent scrounging. One strategy is to make the scroungers feel uncomfortable by just ignoring their presence.

(...) a woman at the house – the one who wouldn’t make eye contact, much less answer my friendly “hello”—was hauling still more big, black shiny trash bags full of something or other out to the curb when I left (Ibid: 70).

The woman applies the uncivil non-person treatment: “it is possible for one person to treat others as if they were not there at all, as objects not worthy of a glance, let alone scrutiny” (Goffman 1963: 84). A common strategy applied by non-scrounging citizens to

stop scrounging is telling that the content of the trash is worthless. But to be able to stop scrounging one has to go beyond this statement. One has to communicate in a direct way one's resentment. This can be done in a more or less civilized manner.

"... just junk. There is nothing in those boxes," "he yelled," "just junk, paper junk". I agreed, but not much liking (...) his tone of voice, decided not to respond. (...) Then the guy in the doorway added, tersely, louder, "I'd appreciate it if you'd get out of there." So I stood up slowly, gave him a big smile, a thumbs up, and a loudly enthusiastic "OK" (Ferrell 2006: 61).

In the 'Empire of Scrounge' there is hardly any mention of an outright aggressive reaction toward scroungers, such as swearing and threatening to call the police. The interaction that comes closest to this is one in which people start shouting straight away, even before any opening move is made.

Just a couple of days ago, rolling up to a trash pile, I wasn't even off my bike when I heard an older woman's voice from behind the shrubs lining the backyard. "Stay out of here," she yelled—and before I could move or respond, an older man's voice added, "There's nothing in there you'd want" (Ibid: 64).

It is not only the category of persons but also the kind of place where one is, that indicates potential danger. In the better off neighborhoods, where the anti-scrounging urbanites are more likely to be present, scroungers should be on their guard and be prepared to face "momentary unpleasantness". A strategy would be to avoid these neighborhoods, but this conflicts with the fact that especially in these areas treasures can be found in the trash of its inhabitants. To gain access to these goods one has to surpass its former owner. Dealing with them in a civil manner seems to be most effective.

Conclusion

Although Fort Worth and Amsterdam and the urbanites studied in each city are vastly different, there are similarities in the process of how strangers connect with each other in both urban worlds. In both social worlds information-management is of major importance. The information one conveys about one-self and the information one gathers about others in order to categorize them is used as a frame of reference for interacting with one another. In general, danger and fear play a more dominant role in the 'Empire of Scrounge' than in 'The Warm City'. While at work scroungers scan constantly the environment for potential hostile others such as law enforcers and homeowners. Scroungers' emphasis on civility can be seen as a reaction to this: civility is a strategy which pacifies the potential hostile other.

According to the broken windows theory disorderly people, such as scroungers, are responsible for the rise of crime and urban fear (Wilson and Kelling 1982; Kelling and Coles 1996). If their behavior is not addressed, the city will become an urban jungle where only the strongest will survive. The policy is to scrutinize scroungers and exclude them from public life. This study shows that that premises of the broken windows theory are one-dimensional, dangerously naïve and do not relate to the complex diversity of daily human lived experience of scrounging (see also Snyder 2009 for graffiti). Because this article has used an almost microscopical lens, it is able to offer an alternative view on 'disorderly' public activity, and identifies a social process by which urban public life becomes 'warm' (rather than dangerous) because of 'disorderly' people. In contrast to the broken windows theory, scroungers maintain public order in an active way so they can

carry on with their alternative sustainable waste management, which in itself is a constructive quality because it creates a more sustainable world than the world of hyper consumption.

The essence of ‘The Warm City’ is that anonymous and fleeting interactions between strangers are not directly per se related to fear, danger and urban angst. The scroungers are a first-rate example of urbanites that are able to transform a (possible dangerous) public environment through interactions with strangers into a safe, friendly and enjoyable place. Over time, these urbanites have gained knowledge about how to read strangers and how to interact with them. They have created a mental map of the city (Ferrell 2006; Müller 2002; Spradley 1972), which consists of places of joy and pain, where it is safe and where it might be dangerous, where good dumpsters are in abundance and where it is hard to find valuable goods. This indicates that time is an important factor in gaining knowledge about the city, its places, its categories of urbanites and the social skills one needs in dealing with them. Over time, the city as an ‘unknown territory’ becomes a place where one has acquired knowledge about, so one knows how to move through it in a safe and enjoyable way.

This observation is of value for studies that focus on social life in urban public place. Since the Chicago school these studies have been focusing on the stranger as a transient urbanite for whom the city is an unknown place. While, in fact, many urbanites (and probably most) are not *transients* but *regulars* in the urban public world. For them, this world is a familiar territory, where they know what to expect and how to get around. The urban image which flows from this observation is not a city of fear and danger, but an urban public world where one feels at home and experiences civility, cooperation and community among strangers.

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