

Parklife

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Lockdown forays into park-life present those of us living in mainstream 'accommodated' lives with daily glimpses of another culture, suggests **Sally Mann**.

There was a time when heading to a park for a bit of company was the prerogative of those who the Britpop band Blur described as "the park class". In an interview explaining the origins of their 1994 hit *Parklife*, band member Coxon said:

It wasn't about the working class, it was about the park class: dustbin men, pigeons, joggers – things we saw every day.

I love Blur's song and its glorious 70s retro video.¹ It conjures up the secret life of city parks – as cloisters for plebs. 'Parklife' is a place to suspend social norms: public sunbathing, loud music, playing with dogs.

A place where the 'park class' claim space.

Between 26 March and 1 June 2020 (and then again, and then again), the UK was put into what Boris Johnson called 'national hibernation', with one permissible hour of outdoor exercise. This altered the demographics of my local inner-city park. More of us were drawn to dabble in a bit of 'parklife'. As community centres and shops closed, urban parks experienced the greatest increase in use of any public space (Eadson et al., 2020: 49).

I noticed a change to the social interactions in my park – the histrionics of stepping aside to allow passers-by; the sideways smiles as we perform exaggerated muscle-stretching upon entering the park; the solidarity of nodding at strangers. I was struck by it all. I did it all.

Embodied encounters

Despite the incursion of a new demographic of pandemic home-workers, I noticed how the regular 'park class' of street drinkers retained control of one distinct space, occupying six benches in a circle around a central memorial cenotaph in my local park. This area became ripe with potential to observe, in Hubbard and Lyon's (2018) terms, embodied encounters which are essentially unmediated; a place with wonderful potential for 'mis-meetings' which make cities full of 'risk and liveliness' (Stevens, 2007).

Parks are sites of rich sociological enquiry, revealing divisions and conflicts as well as contributing enormously to wellbeing. Even the physicality of parks, their architecture and landscaping, mirror social attitudes – from Victorian ideals of philanthropic benevolence and the edification of the masses, to the contemporary ‘regulation’ and ‘criminalisation’ of street populations (Johnsen et al., 2018). Of which, none is perhaps more telling than the increase of ‘defensive architecture’ in public spaces, such as metal bench dividers preventing people from lying down.

Such measures are often justified as making the built environment less conducive to ‘undesirable’ activities. I believe they contribute to an increasingly hostile environment for street sleepers during a crisis in homelessness (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018).

Parklife is an aspect of street life, and has a long history of sociological inquiry, back to the Chicago School. In the same vein, I recognised that the physical spaces for parklife vitally ‘set the stage’ for social interactions and have different meanings for the variety of cultures using the same space – ‘the litter, lights, trees, wind, buildings, pavements, billboards, cars, kerbs, dogs, drains and so on’ (Amin & Thrift, 2002: 292).

The park’s geography shapes both the interactions I observe and my sociological imagination as I move into them. Mobilities matter too (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry 2007). I note the time people spent in different spaces and the speed at which they moved through them. My local park provides a distinctive, contested space for social interactions and a site for unplanned and often friendly encounters.

After months of casual park observation, I began a small research project at the six-bench circle, seeking to add something timely to a century of academic study into the use, social benefit, contestation and access to urban parks. I collect stories about lockdown parklife from people at the six benches.

It is a new context, but I already know many of my participant storytellers. For the past seven years I have volunteered in a grass-roots project advocating for those who want to move off the streets.

More recently, through a methodology of walking interviews, I began to interrogate what keeps people street-sleeping and what it takes to transition into settled accommodation and a new identity (Mann, 2019). Lockdown gave me more time and less of an agenda. I decided to simply invite storytelling and observe interactions among what was to be a fairly settled group of parklife regulars, and note the interactions between them and other park users.

In doing so, I swapped my walking interview methodology for a sedentary variation. I sit on the six-bench circle at least one whole afternoon a week. My narratological approach echoes the shift in the sociology of parks: away from descriptive empirical studies to qualitative, explorative forays into parklife, first developed in the 1970s (Manning & Krymkowski, 2010).

As I begin to compile my findings, several key themes are emerging. Firstly, there is the nature of intentional and accidental social interactions and how these confer identity. This includes the ways space is claimed and protected, sometimes through displays of anti-social rowdiness.

Lockdown forays into parklife present those of us living in mainstream 'accommodated' lives, with daily glimpses of another culture, one of street life. For some, lockdown park encounters have been fear laden. Parks for People (2020) case studies found some felt their local green spaces had become overcrowded in lockdown, and – in some cases – were characterised by incidents or fear of antisocial behaviour, such as outdoor drinking and drug-taking (Eadson et al., 2020, p.52).

Familiar places

Another emerging theme is the importance of very particular, familiar places, even down to specific benches. In London, one Covid-response initiative, Everyone In, saw 40,000 people affected by homelessness offered immediate temporary accommodation in hotels and 'Bed and Breakfasts'. I learnt that some individuals travelled across several boroughs to return to this park every day (Neuvonen et al., 2010).

Being in a familiar space and being a known person seem to be the crux of what makes parklife so compelling. As people greet each other and interact they perhaps take on identities which challenge their experience of social invisibility. It is also a place where "things happen". Stories are currency. I am struck by how these narratives are used in identity creation: stories which oscillate between victimisation and heroism, which told and retold, appear mythic.

I have listened to dozens of stories now as people participate in the research project. Parklife provides new stories. I am observing a good deal of communality and sharing, as well as the constant black-marketing transactions of goods and information. There are arguments and a surprising number of interventions to settle and resolve them. There is drama and rest. There are social cues for needing space and ones to invite interaction.

As I watch and listen, I am becoming convinced that many people fail to make the transition from street-sleeping because 'mainstream' society is

lonelier, less liveable, and altogether less fun than parklife. Post-pandemic, as daily routines shift to the local, perhaps we are realising that meeting up in public non-directed spaces, for no good reason other than “having fun and doing exactly what you want to do” (Sullivan, 2012) – doing parklife – is not only a useful way to counter enforced isolation, but also harkens to something more essential, more human, which may have been eroded in our increasingly individualising and transactional culture. In Blur’s words, there is more “hand-in-hand” about parklife.

Sally Mann has taught sociology at the University of Greenwich since 2006, in the area of inequalities and social change. She is an academic activist splitting her time between lecturing and volunteering in grassroots projects in the London Borough of Newham – a community where she was born.

Note

1. The title song from Blur’s 1994 album Parklife.

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