Each person, withdrawn into himself, behaves as though he is a stranger to the destiny of all the others. His children and his good friends constitute for him the whole of the human species. As for his transactions with his fellow citizens, he may mix among them, but he sees them not; he touches them, but does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone. And if on these terms there remains in his mind a sense of family, there no longer remains a sense of society. (Tocqueville, quoted in Sennett 1992b: vi)

INTRODUCTION

Alexis de Tocqueville, sociologist avant la lettre, had visions of freedom and democracy, inspired by the land of promises, America, but feared an erosion of connectedness. Modern individualism may break chains but brings the fear of loneliness (Mazlish 1989: 262). But was Tocqueville right? Do urbanites behave like they do not care, as if their fate is not linked to the fates of others, in their everyday routines in the ‘times in between’ (Byrne 1978) on the way to their life activities of work, leisure, family where they may primarily anchor their identities? Or have scholars, especially those who have studied cities in the North, been relatively blind to the city’s ‘capacity to provoke relations of all kinds’, a capacity to ‘continuously reshape the ways in which people, places, materials, ideas and affect are intersected’ (Simone 2010: 5)? And what about those for whom the street and squares are the ultimate arena for their activities, like street vendors or squatters in parks (cf. Bayat 2010: 13)? Have the social science traditions of thinking in binary oppositions of public or private stood in the way of seeing other assemblages that provide urbanites with sociabilities and may be social capital?
Mainstream social science has generally understood urban intersections as networks. Social scientists have carefully mapped how we get by and ahead, and use our social networks to do so: family, friends, people we know. They have called this social capital, durable ties that we employ to get something: a job, a new dentist or a second-hand car. People rely on others whom they know for a wide variety of resources, as many empirical studies have confirmed.

This access to resources through embeddedness in social networks (Portes 1998) is widely championed: it enhances people’s chances for jobs and education (Szretzer 2000; Lauglo 2000; Munn 2000; Fevre 2000; Fernandez & Castilla 2001), their health (Campbell 2000), the liveability of their neighbourhoods (MacGillivray & Walker 2000; Forrest & Kearns 2001) and their happiness (Ram 2010). Social capital is also embraced for the wonderful things it does to public life: collective efficacy (Sampson et al. 1997), associational life (Maloney et al. 2000) crime prevention (Sampson et al. 1997; Sampson & Groves 1989), cohesion (Forrest & Kearns 2001) and tolerance (Putnam 2001).

But is social capital a good thing? Drug rings, mafia networks and human trafficking circles similarly also depend on social capital (Blok 1988; Zaitch 2001; Whyte 1981). That alone does not disqualify its effectiveness: the potential to harm others through social networks does not make them less productive. Social capital supports opportunity hoarding, exclusion, reputational damage and stigmatization. In fact, it is instrumental, as the glue that holds in-groups together because it helps keep others out, for processes of ‘Othering’ and perpetuating stories that keep others out (Tilly 2000). Nevertheless, exclusionary as social capital may often be – also described by Bourdieu (1986) as the ‘club effect’ – it works: whatever the aims of those involved, ‘features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust … facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’ (Putnam 1996: 67). In short, short social ties become social capital when, through these ties, such coordination and cooperation occur. To Putnam, social capital was on the decline: a Golden Age of civic engagement had gone, as suburban commuting, television watching and various other changes in social life over the 20th century had diminished the practices where durable engagements could form (Putnam 1996, 2000).

Where, then, did the city go? Are features of social organization merely spatial because gravity binds humans to the ground (cf. Gans 2002), or are cities places where ‘relations of all kinds unfold’ (Simone 2010: 27), so that they constitute a public life of social capital that has not so far received the attention it deserves?

This chapter asks whether social capital has a public life: how does life in urban public spaces generate the above-mentioned features of social organization? If – and this is not uncontested – Putnam was correct that we are all ‘bowling alone’, what happens on the way to the bowling hall? What, in other words, happens in experiences and events outside our social networks, where interactions are the by-product of walking, waiting, watching, wandering? Everyday life, Crawford (2011: 345) states, is the ‘connective tissue that binds daily life together, amorphous and so persuasive that it is difficult to perceive’. Casual meeting is not mating (Blokland & Van Eijk 2010) – but are everyday fluid encounters void of social capital? Granovetter bracketed out such interactions as ‘absent’ ties (Granovetter 1973); they have been by and large absent from social capital studies since, or vaguely described as ‘contacts’ without further theorizing. Measurements of ‘contacts’ in (especially) neighbourhood survey research hardly differentiate between durable ties with, for example, local friends and other, more incidental encounters with neighbours. I argue for a more precise understanding of relationships, on a continuum from durable
ties to fluid encounters, because each figuration between agents in the ever-changing city provides its own restrictions and potentials for social capital. Acknowledging the value of all encounters that make up the urban fabric of the city is necessary to explore both the dangers of subtle forms of exclusion and the resulting reinforcement of structural inequalities and the potential for progressive social change in cities. If we do not take up this challenge, we miss the resourceful practices through which people make the city work for them, and hence opportunities to support those practices.

I start with exploring what ‘public life’ may mean. I then argue that, first, we need a precise understanding of the spatiality of social capital. Second, I maintain that we need to understand the role of sociabilities beyond the usually central network ties. I propose a conceptual alternative to durable ties for understanding social capital. This chapter’s second part then asks attention for fluid encounters. Here the unexpected public familiarities and incremental urbanism, the ways of improvisation or ‘creative tinkering’ (McFarlane 2011: 39) with urban space that agents engage with in their urban lives and livelihoods - come together. I will show why I think we need to reflect on these when investigating social capital. As we will see, while the public life of social capital is not void of inequalities and exclusions, it has progressive potential.

WHAT IS PUBLIC LIFE?

Public is what is not private: everyday usage of the term suggests a binary opposition. Academics contest the term (Low & Smith 2006; Watson 2002). Urban design, architecture and planning focus primarily on public space as the city’s locations with free access: parks, squares, streets. This understanding of public space concerns the land use (Bentley et al. 1987; Moudon 1991). The privatization of public spaces like gated communities shrinks access. Privatization of consumer spaces like shopping malls and entertainment centres that comes with specific rules, design and surveillance practices excludes citizens who do not confirm to behavioural expectations, creating a ‘private city’ (Squires 2011: 207–212). Touristification pushes the daily mundane out of sight, leaving ‘diversion districts’ where diversity can safely be consumed (Judd 2011: 266). In this approach, public life occurs in public spaces, in opposition to private sites; that demarcation does not hold up well (Watson 2002: 52), so thinking of public and private as a continuum is more useful. The limitations or liberties of access on the one hand and the degree of control of what we reveal about ourselves on the other constitute two dimensions that may help us to think about such a continuum. Common usage of the term ‘private’ is confusing, because it suggests that we are out of the control of others there where we can isolate us from the power of others, for example of the state, whereas the intimacy of lives in, for example, our homes is also the sphere where we have most limitations not to reveal our personal feelings and thoughts as long as we do not live entirely alone. The streets and squares of the city are not without control and power and surveillance, but neither is life there simply public – not least because those without residential homes do home-making in makeshift forms in everyday practices.

Two alternative understandings of the public demonstrate that life in public spaces is not immediately ‘public’ as a result: rather than assuming space is ‘there’ as container, these perspectives see it as produced social space. The production of space has been
extensively discussed elsewhere (Lefebvre 1995; Brenner 2000); important for us here is
that not merely design and formal access, but the sociality of spaces constitute meanings,
understandings, and therefore subtle inclusions, exclusions and transgressions. Public
space, as place where strangers meet (Sennett 1992a: 719), is meaningful, imaginary and
symbolic (Watson 2002: 55). Seen as a continuum, we will see below that public space
is contested through various appropriations of space. The idea of public space as a site
of ‘micro-politics’ (Tonkiss 2005: 59) and conflicts, exclusions and symbolic violence is
different from the ideal of public space that social theorists developed.

Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt have especially conceptualized public space as a
political space, and seen as conditioning civil, if not civic, society. Arendt (1958) does not
see public space as linked to specific locations but as a collective being, of ‘commons’, that
serves and is constituted by participation and collective engagements (Yücesoy 2006: 2).
Similarly, Habermas (1991) describes public space as the sphere of communicative action
on the basis of rational, critical dialogue among equals. They hence share the notion of

an ideal realm in which people can discuss and debate freely and equally; to do so they
need to cut loose from their particular, private circumstances in order to discuss and
debate … whatever people’s origins, gender, style of life, class, they should have an
equal voice as citizens. (Sennett 2010: 261)

Habermas’s metaphor of the 19th-century coffee house as exemplary public space of
deliberation has inspired a body of literature on ‘home territories’ and ‘third places’
(Lyman & Scott 1967; Cavan 1963; Liebow 1967): bars, coffee shops and corner stores
where one goes for the ‘joys of association’ (Oldenburg 1989). At such places, as Moore
(1897) in an early essay pointed out, we see how public space allows control over revealing
one’s identities: one is free to come and go and to be oneself or an imaginative some-
one else, all at low cost. However, such studies describing conviviality show who is
there – not who is not. Whereas there are structural contexts that vary – where to have
coffee if you cannot afford €4.50 for a Latte – I think it is more important that they ignore
the absence of those who experience much more subtle forms of exclusions. For exam-
ple, when older Italian American residents and gentrifiers around General Square in a
New England college town celebrated the blossoming of the cherry trees, an annual cel-
bration of community, one could observe the conviviality of these two groups, mingling
with visitors from elsewhere. In the social construction of the historical narrative of this
place, the presence of African Americans who became a significant group in the area,
especially in the housing project a few blocks from the square in the 1960s, remained
invisible. So, too, were they absent from the annual festive celebration of the neighbour-
hood’s history. A description of the conviviality through the events at the square would
contribute to silencing, or making publically invisible, the African-American inhabitants
(cf. Blokland 2009a). As a political ideal, this square then ceases to be a public space.

That the city is a specific realm for public space as political idea is the starting point for
Sennett (1992b), who sees the city for its physical form, as prompting people to think of it
as meaningless. Although urban theory may be moving to a different understanding, it is
an empirical question whether people still do so – and some studies on public safety and
trust suggest that they do (see Blokland 2009b). Modern architecture, Sennett wrote in
1974, reflects that masses are concerned with their single life-histories, and public space
lacks intimacy (Sennett 1973: 5). Like earlier authors, Richard Sennett points to the roles
we take on in public space, and laments their limitations. This reminds us of descriptions of ‘the urban’, connecting ‘urban’ and ‘public’. The ideal type of urban public spaces, as Bahrdt (1998) has argued, referring back to Weber (1958), is the market, characterized by instrumental rational exchange. Urban life is, therefore, always a partial integration: in the marketplace, we only engage with others as exchange partners. We do not have to reveal other parts of our identities, nor do differentiations and structural inequalities matter to the trade. For Simmel (1908), the city produces anonymity and an intensity of sensory experiences that makes us blasé, not unlike Tocqueville’s idea of modern life. Seen from this angle, public life may appear superficial and individual – although, as Fisher (1982: 61–62) noted, the lonely subway-rider may have a thriving social life. But it also provides space for the agency of partial integration and the representation of the self (cf. Bulmer 1986: 91–92). One may argue that there is a price to pay for the control over information about oneself through this partial integration. Unknown resources about can also not be accessed: connectivity may be a precondition for sharing information, for support, for borrowing, lending and giving. Seen in this way, the city may be sub-optimal for the public life of social capital. And, indeed, for the formation of social capital to be submitted through communities as we have long thought of them, as place bound and with increasing degrees of ‘thickness’, they may well be. Urban fear, expressed in temptations to avoid the night-time city, drive SUVs, put up walls, security camera systems and gates – which are notably not at all something only some middle classes do – can be understood within such analyses of partial integration, especially in urban areas undergoing major social change.

In the 1960s, when modernist planning brought bulldozers to older neighbourhoods in American cities, architect and activist Jane Jacobs became famous for warning of the disappearance of convivial public space. Coming from Greenwich Village, NY, then at risk of demolition, she advocated (Jacobs 1961) an urban policy and planning that took the city as it is lived on the street seriously. She was especially interested in showing how urban design, including land-use mixture, short blocks and abundant squares and parks, provides the space to socialize children, exercise informal social control and build neighbourhood ties. Her plea was not based on extensive empirical research. She left causal connections unexplained: while, for example, people having their eyes on the street may mean that they recognize others, it remains to be seen how eyes on the street lead to social control (see Blokland 2009b; Blokland & Nast 2014). The media report regularly on crimes where bystanders did nothing. However, Jacobs pointed to the relevance of spatial arrangements for urban interactions. Lofland (1998), too, has shown how the city is neither anonymous nor village-like, but includes public, parochial and private spheres at various sites and times, and argues that studying urban life must include the study of various annual festive forms of everyday interaction that make urban areas socially meaningful. Amin and Thrift (2002) call this the significance of the ‘banality of everyday life in the city’.

Lofland’s (1998: 9) concepts enable us to develop a less rigid, empirically useful understanding of public space through the interactions that constitute it. First, she describes the city as the site where one, on leaving one’s private space, ‘moves into a world of many unknown or only categorically known others (biographical strangers), many of whom may not share one’s values, history, or perspective (cultural strangers)’. Lofland then develops three ‘realms’ within the city as social, not physical, territories. The public realm is the world just described; the private realm is characterized by ties of
the Public Life of Social Capital

intimacy among primary group members in households and personal networks; and the parochial realm is characterized by a sense of commonality among acquaintances and neighbours in personal networks. Although she says that these realms do not match specific places, her prototypes again suggest this, so in the use of her concepts for empirical work, realm and space have often been mixed up. The strength of Lofland’s conceptual framework is, however, that it enables us to see urban life as process rather than fixed states. As Blokland and Soenen (2004) have shown, the ways in which specific groups sit and talk with each other on public transport, for example, is a temporary parochialization of a public space. Parochialization and privatization create realms in the public space where such trust and distrust (Sztompka 1999) may develop – and social capital find its public life. It is to social capital, and especially its spatiality, that we now turn.

The Spatiality of Social Capital

The popularity of the concept of social capital has produced an increasingly diffused use of the term. Initially, Coleman (1994: 300), for whom social capital was ‘primarily a way of understanding the relationship between educational attainment and social inequality’ (Schuller et al. 2000: 5), defined it as ‘the set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organizations and that are useful for the cognitive or social development of a young person’. ‘Social relations’, Schuller et al. summarize (2000: 6), constituted for Coleman ‘useful capital resources for actors through processes such as establishing obligations, expectations and trustworthiness, creating channels for information, and setting norms backed by sanctions’. For Bourdieu (1984), who was interested in how cultural reproduction impacts upon the social reproduction of class positions, social capital was one of the sources of power. He defined it as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition … which provides each of its members with the backing of collectively-owned capital’ (Bourdieu 1986: 248). Social capital was one of the capital forms contributing to the formation and re-enforcement of classes (although he did little in his study of social capital with inequalities based on structural categories like race or gender). Both Coleman and Bourdieu hence defined social capital as a feature of durable social relations between individuals and have inspired many scholars using variations of network analyses to show how the fortunate keep their fortunes to themselves, intentionally or not. Putnam (1996: 67) initially saw social capital as a feature of social organization. With his Bowling Alone (2000) the term had a common currency, but also broadened so much that it became almost identical to ideas of ‘social cohesion’ or ‘community’, which have their own conceptual problems (Blokland & Savage 2008: 2–3). Arguing that civic engagement, places for schmoozing and organizational life affect social capital, Putnam became almost tautological: the community needs social capital and social capital is the vibrant community. One may wonder why this would still be capital, in the sense of being a resource that can be made productive to achieve something else or just an asset (as capital, as a concept, is about investment). Putnam helps us see social capital as a vehicle for public life in urban spaces, and urban spaces as organizing social capital, including its exclusions. Encounters and affiliations organize the urban fabric, both through weaving,
or fluid encounters, and through knitting, the formation and reproduction of more durable affiliations and personal ties.

Some have pointed out that social capital can have its dark sides too (Ostrom 2000; Gargiulo & Benassi 1999), and more recent work has shown that exclusionary processes make use of social capital. Starting with Bourdieu (1984), this scholarship argues that social capital is contingent on the initial positions of people in a hierarchy and the scope of their social ties (Lin et al. 2001). ‘Monopolistic group closure’ (Haynes & Hernandez 2008: 63), a term going back to Max Weber’s work on ethnic groups (Weber 1968) means that social capital is ‘something more than “connections”’ (Haynes & Hernandez 2008: 65). Still, scholars have paid most attention to the positive effects of social capital. As urban scholars engaging with the 21st-century speedy, big urban mutations, we must note that social capital’s connection to space has been under-theorized, while urban policy makers implicitly make assumptions about social capital’s spatiality (cf. Blokland & Savage 2008). Now that cities are growing faster than ever, inequality and growth accelerate and insecurities increase, we need a better understanding of the spatial dimensions of social capital formation: social capital is not unrelated to where agents create resources through relations, trust, coordination and cooperation. To connect social capital to space does not mean, however, to locate it simply ‘in’ space as if space were a container filled with ‘more’ or ‘less’ social capital. Varied life-worlds find their expressions in cities and constitute spheres for social relations and sociability. There is thus an immediate connection between the city, as a socially produced space, including its built structures, its memorials, its commercial infrastructures, its street corners and crossroads, and the spheres of social relations and sociabilities developing there. As I argued elsewhere (Blokland 2009b), urban design indeed affects liveliness. But that observing each other leads to niceties, a positive community and mutual acceptance and integration, or, closer to Jacobs, even to enacting social control, is not guaranteed. The physical environment, Gans writes (1994: 25), ‘is relevant to behavior insofar as this environment affects the social system and culture of the people involved or as it is taken up in their social system’. He therefore differentiates between a potential and an effective environment. Any physical environment is, Gans (1994: 26) says, a potential environment: to what extent it becomes an effective environment depends on the social positions and cultures of the people who will use it. His idea of the effective environment, ‘that version of the potential environment that is perceived, conceived – and created by users’ (1994: 27) helps us see two ways in which social capital may have a public life in the city.

First, various urban built environments, as public places, provide potential environments for public, parochial and private realms. Not all interactions in public space may provide access to resources. Indeed, on our way to other spheres of our lives, we do a lot of ignoring others, denying their presence, or being civilly inattentive. But while waiting at the bus stop, riding the subway, standing in line at the bakery, or walking our dogs, there is always a potential social environment that may turn into an effective one: we may exchange words, engage in a conversation, find commonalities and cease to be just strangers in the public.

Especially where people due to restrictions of formal entitlements need to be inventive to make lives and livelihood in the city, it seems, does this potential environment become most visible. In our recent study of the ways in which inequalities are ‘done’ in the city of Berlin (Blokland et al. 2016), Arbter (2016) shows how Sub-Saharan Africans, for example, defy the idea that social relations must be durable to be resourceful. With people
of colour being a small group in Berlin, Sub-Saharan Africans easily make contact in public spaces, assuming a similar region of origin or heritage, as one of Arbter’s interview partners, Melanie, revealed:

**Interviewer:** I once asked somebody... ‘how do you know this person?’ He said, ‘Oh, you know he is African I just saw him on the street and we started talking.’ Does this happen to you also?

**Melanie:** Yeah. Sometimes when we are going, you are going shopping, you can meet somebody. ‘Hallo, Guten Tag (Hello.)’ and he says, ‘Guten Tag’. Then he starts talking to you, you cannot go when somebody is talking to you. You have to stand [still] [so] that you hear what he is saying. So you will stand there and you hear what he is saying and give the answer and he again, you talk again, you give the answer and before you move. Yeah it can happen. [Laughing] If you don’t know that person, you have to. Yeah it happens anytime, it happens to me, it happens to me anytime. Somebody greets you, you see, you cannot go like that. ... You cannot go when somebody is talking to you.

A job, an apartment, a place to stay temporarily: these things could be achieved through visiting an African church and speaking to other, unknown church members, through calling on ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ already established in the city with a shared country of origin, but also through casual conversations with strangers met in urban public space. The capacity to provoke relations went beyond standard understandings of durable relations as measured in social networks. Whereas many scholars may have described such practices qualitatively, the conceptualization of social capital as transferred through either strong or weak ties in networks missed their relevance so far. And scholars whose conceptual language points to different forms of sociabilities have not been well integrated into, or sought connection to, the more mainstream social capital literature. Simone sensitizes us to the idea that cities are (also) ‘about publics, about forms of being together or of being connected that go beyond the specific details of what a person does, where he or she lives and comes from’ (2010: 117) and tries to work out dealings with others on the basis of partial integration (which he called selective incorporation (2010: 118)). But we need more precision: what are those forms of being and what, then, is together? Bayat (2010), echoing the idea of an atomized anonymous public life seen in Simmel and Sennett, refers in his *Life as Politics* to the relevance of ‘instantaneous communications between atomized individuals which are established by the tacit recognition of their commonalities’ that occur in public spaces. His calling them ‘passive networks’ is an unreflective use of the concept (or metaphor) of a network in an otherwise excellent contribution to new thoughts about ‘public’.

Second, in the social production of spaces, exclusions may produce public spaces so imputed with normative understandings of (in)appropriateness that they appear inaccessible to some. Hence the access to resources that being present as an articulation (Yiftachel 2009) may provide remains closed, too. In my fieldwork in a New England college town, whenever I walked into town with black men, they preferred not to take the shortcut through General Square, a well-kept park ringed by historically preserved mansions. The residents’ Blockwatch there reported ‘suspicious elements’ to the police. The community police officer was proud of the quick response rate there; the police wanted to encourage residents to ‘stay involved’ and ensure the safety of their area. Black men walking were...
suspicious and likely to be reported; for them, it was crucial to minimize encounters with police officers. Sometimes, the police must be avoided because of outstanding warrants. Often, the men had enough collective experience of the police to know that being stopped meant trouble: ‘one false move, you dead’, as TC, a young black man from the housing projects, put it. The representation of space that General Square had become shows that the Blockwatch, a good example of the sort of social capital often championed in urban policy, included immediate ‘othering’ through spatial exclusions. The ‘others’, then, by default, would not join the festival in the Spring, the community meetings, or the informal gatherings over white wine on a Sunday afternoon. We have thus seen that public space is a potential environment that becomes an effective environment only through the processes of agents that give it meaning and produce its sociality through their actions, often with exclusionary consequences for some. The scale of such processes has changed. More diversity has occurred in the ways in which people do ‘home’ and ‘community’ – all doings or practices or performances, not mental exercises. We have also learnt that it may make sense to revise our common understanding of social capital. I have indicated that urban public space, not just networks of friends and family or institutional contexts, can be a site for encounters that may do more for people in terms of getting by and getting ahead than the mainstream social science literature has usually recognized. The rest of this chapter explores this in more detail. It is here that urban improvisations (Simone 2004) and tactical learning (McFarlane 2011) occur.

**URBAN SOCIABILITIES: FROM DURABLE TIES TO FLUID ENCOUNTERS**

Cities are made through the daily improvisations of agents, Simone (2004) argued. As mentioned above, social capital research, however, focuses primarily on the ways in which social networks provide access to resources. Such networks are generally understood as relationships from individuals that can be weak or strong (Granovetter 1973) but are durable. The methods of network researchers generally include variations of name generators: people mention concrete individuals whom they know and to whom they can or have turned for support. However, such social capital research assumes that durable ties are the important, if not only, form of connections between people that matter. Urban life, however, provides us with the daily experiences that learning about possibilities and opportunities in the city often occurs accidentally. Colin McFarlane has discussed this as ‘incremental urbanism’ (McFarlane 2011): through tactical learning, urban residents develop ways of living in the city and organize resources. Such improvisations do not necessarily imply durable social ties. Much of the urban sociabilities consist of encounters with people whose names one never learns and whom one may never see again. Such encounters are central components of urban public space. Fluid encounters, interactions and communications between people who are personal strangers are short and come without expectations that the social interaction is an investment in the future. Ever since Mauss (1954), social theorists have engaged with the gift, reputation and reciprocity as such investments. The gift provides the social tie with the basis for its continuation. In Coleman’s (1994) understanding of social capital, sharing a resource with another person may not ‘come back’ in that dyad, but triads and larger figurations may ensure that, through reputation, sharing a resource becomes an investment for future benefits.
Gouldner (1960) describes this as generalized reciprocity. A characteristic of fluid encounters is, however, that benefits in the future cannot be foreseen or may clearly not be there. Yet such fluid encounters do matter. Take this example in a paediatrics clinic waiting area, based on field notes of a study on social mix in a gentrifying Dutch neighbourhood. Statistically, the networks of the residents are not very mixed (see Blokland & Van Eijk 2010). Observations reveal why this picture is incomplete. A mother with a sick new-born baby tries to soothe the baby, while a mother of twin toddlers watched. They chat, and the young mother tells how she struggles with her sick baby, as a single parent on welfare, also taking care of her old father. The twins’ mother asks her whether she gets help, and she does not. She then tells the distressed mother about the possibility of getting a home-care assistant. Weeks later, the baby’s mother sees the twins’ mother shopping in the street. ‘I am so glad to see you again; remember we met at the doctor’s clinic?’ she says. ‘I wanted to thank you, because I talked to my social worker and now I have the home aid, and things are so much better for all of us.’ Such accessing resources through a fluid encounter would never be captured in social capital research that only investigates durable ties, yet was an important event for the mother. For those who have only the street as an ‘indispensable asset’ for economic activities and social and cultural reproduction (Bayat 2010: 13), outdoor spaces in particular may be sites for such fluid encounters, indeed also with the potential for collective action. The experiences of everyday encounters of people diverse in race, ethnicity, class and religion are, Bayat argues, above all spatial, and have the potential for both distancing and mixing.

Fluid encounters are not always entirely random. Simmel (1908) described urban life as the over-exposure to impulses that would make people blasé. This imagery of urban life as an endless flow of interactions with strangers contrasts with daily urban life experiences: the newsstand where we buy our daily paper becomes a place where we are recognized; the barman knows what drink to pour when we come in; the musician in the subway may know who is and who is not likely to spare a few coins – many routes and routines repeat themselves with regularity. While one can maintain a great degree of control over personal information, some partial integration occurs through this repetition of encounters. Strangers turn into familiar faces. Public familiarity develops.

Our encounters with others may be located on two continua that constitute public familiarity: a continuum of access (are spaces freely accessible, including whether they produce symbolic exclusions as discussed for the square above, with ‘public’ and ‘private’ as the two poles?); and a continuum of privacy (how much control do we have over information we give out about ourselves, with intimacy and anonymity as the two poles?). Figure 30.1 schematically presents these continua.

Observing, categorizing and assessing are standard in our daily interactions and routines. For a large part, as symbolic interactionists like Goffman (1959) have argued, social life derives its predictability from our capabilities to ‘read’ others, as they dance the ballet of public life according to its given choreography. But only repeated social interactions produce knowledge about others that moves towards knowledge that we may call ‘personal’. Stanley Milgram (1977, quoted in Lofland 1998: 60) calls such others ‘familiar strangers’: ‘the person who is not personally known but because of a shared daily path or round … is recognizable’ (Lofland 1998: 60). Lofland cares in particular about familiar strangers and the daily routines where such strangers become more familiar for their social–psychological meaning (1998: 66–67). For social capital, how public familiarity creates trust and access to resources is more important. Without strangers turning into
familiar faces we have little to go on in the public space of streets and squares other than stereotypes: categorizations based on external features, incidental events or generalities learnt from the media (Coyle 1930: 16–18). Where we locate others in terms of familiarity therefore depends on where we meet them – the degree of freedom of access of a certain location – and the control we have over information about ourselves, and hence of access to information about others. Such fluid encounters can help us with forms of incremental urbanism and tacit learning that constitute social capital, too. Fluid encounters may therefore be a conceptual alternative, not in contrast to but next to social networks as the vehicle of social capital: fluid encounters bringing unexpected, routinely produced public familiarities give social capital a public life.

CONCLUSION

So, to conclude, social capital can indeed have a public life. For accessing new ideas and information, for learning the city and doing the city, however unequal, as the people’s infrastructure, potentialities and retractions come potentially from fluid encounters just like they do from durable network ties. In recent work on how people use the city as a site of resources to realize their capabilities (Blokland et al. 2016), we discuss how agents often find ways to organize life and livelihood in Berlin, without exactly knowing how they learnt what they know of how things get done. This contrasts with the idea that we get by or ahead with a little help from our friends (Blokland 2008). Rather than assuming that when people did not rely on friends or family members for resources, they did
whatever they did all by themselves, as if humans are self-propelling essences, we have tried to probe how they organized their lives with the help of those who were not friends. Indeed, fluid encounters, especially when they can be nurtured in a context of public familiarity, may be an effective environment for a public life of social capital. Moreover, the city itself may provoke such encounters. Whereas the city is hierarchical, reflects class, race and gender inequalities, provides sites of resources exclusively for some at the expense of others, the city, due to its many parallel practices of doing stuff, especially among those marginalized to its fringes, is also the potential environment par excellence for what Bayat (2010: 18) called the politics of practice.

This chapter tried to show that certain urban spaces – in terms of their planning and design – and certain fluid encounters – in terms of their regularities and synchrony – may offer more to a public life of social capital than others, drawing on Gans’ distinction between potential and effective environment. However, I have also shown through examples of racialized spaces and heteronormative spaces how the spatiality of social capital, with its orientation on the ‘good’ it does inside the in-group, strengthens structural inequalities of socially constructed categories. As research continues to show that homophily characterizes people’s friendships, marriages and preferred neighbours (Bouma-Doff 2007a, 2007b), criticizing such practices may be politically important. Yet influencing such choices may lie well beyond policy influence. Instead, urban policy could think about the extent to which its urban planning enables, rather than prevents, spaces with potential for the development of public familiarity from brief encounters. Schmoozing, then, may have been the practice of sociability that knitted the city together in the Good Old Days. Rather than seeing a city of less sociability in the 21st century, I believe that our thinking about sociability has to change how it may be weaving the social fabric of the city more than it is knitting, but still carries potential for a public life of social capital.

Notes
1 The argument in this chapter has its origins in discussions I had years ago with Ruth Soenen. She argued in a little-known Ph.D. thesis that ephemeral contacts are essential to the urban social fabric (Soenen 2009, 2006; Blokland und Soenen 2004).
2 I do not discuss the social capital concept in detail, as such discussions exist elsewhere (Lin et al. 2001; Baron et al. 2000; Field 2003; Fine 2001).
3 For a detailed analysis of this example see Blokland (2009a).

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