

# Urban Ethnography of the 1920s Working Girl

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The 1920s was the era of the city. The urban population of the USA for the first time exceeded the population of rural areas and the nascent institutions of city life were flourishing. This article discusses the urban ethnography of the era with a focus on the way women and work was conceptualized, especially how 'the city' figured in explanation. Three ethnographies are examined — Frances Donovan's *The Woman Who Waits* (1920) and *The Saleslady* (1929) and Paul Cressey's *The Taxi-Dance Hall* (1932). Donovan and Cressey presented their empirical material to show that the so-called working girl faced a multifaceted world of opportunity in employment, not of disadvantage, as commonly emphasized in today's ethnographic studies of women and work. The conclusion reflects on the past, present and future in terms of the city's explanatory prominence in various eras.

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Contemporary urban ethnography of women and work is about disadvantage. Ethnographic and quasi-ethnographic portrayals feature the conflation of emotional and commercial labour, time-binds and poverty, among other travails that disadvantage women in the workplace (Ehrenreich, 2001; Hochschild, 1983, 1997). Whether caught in middle-class pressures at the intersection of work and family life (Fried, 1998; Lareau, 2003, Nippert-Eng, 1996), or barely surviving in the throes of discrimination and exploitation (Chapkis, 1997; Hall, 1993; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Miller, 1986; Paules, 1991; Romero, 1992), the lived experience for women at work in contemporary ethnography resonates with inequality and marginality, if not sheer survival. The urban context of these ethnographies is merely the background for highlighting problems related to class, race and ethnicity and gender in various sectors of society.

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The rapid rise of metropolitan populations in the 1920s featured the city and its open horizons for women in contrasting terms. For the first time the urban population exceeded the rural population of the USA. The city was not just a place, but an alluring framework for understanding the modern temper, where women especially related to work in ways they never had before. City life was a leading force that loomed as a source of explanation. If class, race and gender were there in the particulars, the big story was how the city affected people's lives, characters and social worlds. The related urban ethnography of new roles for women provided a view of women and work whose leading theme was opportunity, not disadvantage. While women's emerging position in employment was not all positive, the travails of the workplace for working girls were outshone by the gleam of urban life.

This article presents varied dimensions of this ethnography, showing in detail how urban opportunity, while touted as new and exciting, was anything but purely positive or purely negative in its consequences for women who worked. The framework that keyed the explanation of experience for women who worked in the 1920s contrasts sharply with the contemporary framework of understanding. This provides historical case material for arguing that the prominence of explanatory frameworks works alongside empirical data in persuading us of the significance of research findings. What persuades us now ethnographically in understanding women in relation to work was not what persuaded an earlier generation of urban researchers.

## 1920s urban ethnography

The urban ethnography of the 1920s was fascinated by city life, which, in the American context centred largely on the city of Chicago. As a working time period, the decade was long, stretching from ethnographic studies that started during and after World War I and extending to 1930s publications based on research in the 1920s. The urban ethnography was inspired by leading figures in the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago, mainly W. I. Thomas, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess.

From 1895 to 1918, when he left the university, Thomas was exemplary in encouraging graduate students to think about the city and life history as interwoven. Personality, according to Thomas, was not something located within, but thoroughly imbued with social organization (Thomas, 1966). Thomas looked to the organization of society to understand attitudes, wishes and other dimensions of inner life. Social disorganization was viewed as the primary ingredient in personal turmoil, not unconscious motives or childhood experiences. The dysfunctional families and juvenile delinquency experienced by new immigrants to the city, for example, were traced to the radical shift in circumstances that followed displacement from tightly organized

communities to the looser ways of the metropolis and a surrounding open society. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's (1974 [1918]) monumental book, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, documented the relationship between social organization and social personality, showing how the city of Chicago, in this case, and an increasingly urbanized society, were key dimensions of the immigration experience.

Following Thomas's departure from the university, Park and Burgess led the way. From 1914 until his retirement in 1933, Park especially encouraged students to treat the city as a natural laboratory (Faris, 1967). Just as important was his call for viewing it as a point of departure for understanding the lives of men, women and children. It was the quintessential explanatory variable, not just a setting for investigations of personality, groups and social institutions. From 1919 to his retirement in 1957, Burgess added to the call for urban studies. Burgess was especially interested in urban institutions and made important contributions to research on the social organization of family life in the urban setting. For both Park and Burgess, the leading idea continued to be that individuals and society were most fruitfully studied in co-relationship, not separately, an argument that established a perspective relevant to this day.

The urban ethnography of the 1920s produced numerous studies of personality and social institutions. Whether viewed as a geographic formation or as a cultural phenomenon, the city was centre stage. From city churches and city schools, to immigrant newspapers and the natural history of 'vice areas' in the metropolis, urbanism was key. Exemplary institutional studies, and soon to be prominent researchers in their own right, focused on what was unique to the city, features rarely, if at all, found in rural or village life (see Faris, 1967). In 1928 Everett Hughes completed his dissertation entitled 'A study of a secular institution: the Chicago real estate board.' A year later Paul Cressey completed his master's thesis, entitled 'The closed dance hall in Chicago'. In 1931 E. Franklin Frazier received his Ph.D. for a dissertation entitled 'The Negro family in Chicago' and Robert Faris for his dissertation 'An ecological study of insanity in the city', both of which had ethnographic elements.

This was the research context for the three 1920s urban ethnographies considered here that deal with the working girl in the city. Two are based on ethnographic research projects completed by Frances Donovan (1920, 1929). The first of these was started in the winter of 1917 and was published as a book entitled *The Woman Who Waits* in 1920. Donovan was a resident of Chicago and engaged in intensive participation observation as a waitress in various restaurants in the city, mainly in the downtown Loop area. The second project took Donovan to New York City during two summers in the 1920s (no dates are provided), where she worked in sales on the floors of two department stores. This resulted in her book, published in 1929, entitled *The Saleslady*. The third ethnographic project was launched by Paul Cressey and his

associates in 1925 in Chicago and dealt with what was called 'taxi dancing', in which young women sold dances for a nickel or, more commonly, for a 'dime a dance' in dance hall establishments. The term 'taxi dancing' derived from the idea that, like taxis, the women could be hired for the intended purpose. Cressey viewed the taxi-dance hall as a new source of work for women and as a form of urban recreation for the men who patronized it. His book, published in 1932, was entitled *The Taxi-Dance Hall: A Sociological Study in Commercialized Recreation and City Life*, the data of which were collected by a team of observers of the taxi-dance scene. It is telling that the words 'city life' appear in the title, flagging explanatory prominence in a way urban ethnographic research does not today.

Donovan and Cressey's work was a product of the kind of sociology and urban ethnography called for by Thomas, Park and Burgess. While Donovan did not receive a graduate degree in sociology from the University of Chicago, she did live in the city for years, worked as a teacher there (see her later 1938 ethnography, *The Schoolma'am*), was clearly inspired by Thomas's ideas and referred to the work of Chicago sociology luminaries in all three ethnographies (see Pittenger, 1997). For example, in discussing strategies for maximizing one's tip as a waitress in her first book, *The Woman Who Waits*, Donovan referred to Thomas: "Tipping is the gambling factor in the life of the waitress.... To get a tip is, as William I. Thomas says, "like winning a game. It involves the same uncertainty" (Donovan, 1920, p. 202). Her next book, *The Saleslady*, actually appeared in the University of Chicago Sociological Series published by the University Press. The introduction, written by Park, is an endorsement but also points to the untrained method of observation Donovan applied:

*The Saleslady* is a contribution to our knowledge of changes that are taking place in the life and character of women as a result of their entrance into the broader fields of economic life. It is in a manner impressionistic and descriptive rather than systematic and formal.... The author has been able to enter sympathetically and understandingly into the experiences of the persons whose lives she depicts, but at the same time she is keenly alive to the larger implications of her own experiences and those of the women with whom she is associated. (Donovan, 1929, p. viii)

Paul Cressey's research was more directly a product of his Chicago training. It was originally submitted to the Sociology Department for his Master's degree and subsequently published as a monograph by the University Press. Like Park's recognition of Donovan's contribution, Burgess's introduction to *The Taxi-Dance Hall* echoed the city as an interpretive framework. The dance hall was a new urban institution seeking to locate itself in the metropolis's moral space. The introduction also flagged the dark side of opportunity, a theme that plays out in the book and which I will discuss in relation to the complex results of urban opportunities for working women following World

War I. Here again, the city was key, this time emphasizing the moral nuances of new roles for women in the urban context. Burgess explained:

Promiscuity naturally arises under conditions making for casual acquaintanceship in city life. Conventional avenues for forming friendships are notoriously deficient in the city. The drive toward casual association, with the added piquancy of adventure and irresponsibility, is correspondingly strong. (Cressey, 1932, p. xxxi)

## The city and opportunity

What view of the city informed the urban opportunity theme in the research? This is most explicitly found in Park and Burgess's (1925 [1984]) 'suggestions for investigation of human behavior in the urban environment'. Their book, entitled *The City*, was a collection of essays written by Park and Burgess along with fellow Chicago faculty members, Roderick McKenzie and Louis Wirth, and presented an agenda for urban research. The city as a complex social force figured prominently in their suggestions for how to think about the variety of human behaviours in question. Morris Janowitz writes the following in his introduction to the book's re-publication:

From the period 1915–40, the writing of the Chicago school of urban sociology was extensive and their impact diverse. The key figures had a lasting impact on scholarly research into urban affairs, and raised fundamental issues of social and political policy. Their efforts even spilled over into the humanistic disciplines.

Their research monographs presented vivid descriptions of urban reality which commanded a wide audience outside academic circles. These men initiated the tradition of the detailed case-study approach which was continued by men such as David Riesman and Oscar Lewis. (Park and Burgess, 1984 [1925], p. vii)

The city had distinctive characteristics as it related to personality, on the one hand, and newly emerging institutions such as the restaurant, the department store and the dance hall, on the other. Park's own essay led the collection and it was from this essay that the initial 'suggestions for investigation' derived. His sense of the city resonated throughout the book, as did the characteristics that served to inform the opportunity theme in the three ethnographies under consideration.

In Park's view, the city was not just a physical environment. Certainly, its geography was an important dimension distinguishing it from the physical contours of rural life. For Chicago urban sociologists of a decidedly ecological bent, this was featured above all, especially as it produced what adherents

considered a competitive tenor uncharacteristic of rural environments. But Park saw something more, what he referred to as a distinctive 'state of mind':

The city is, rather, a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition. The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature. (Park and Burgess, 1984 [1925], p. 1)

Park considered the city to be a moral environment built on a particular division of labour. There was a new and growing diversity of occupation in this environment. As Park noted, 'The multiplication of occupations and professions within the limits of the urban population is one of the most striking and least understood aspects of modern city life' (Park and Burgess, 1984 [1925], p. 2). He and his colleagues would repeatedly add that this ought to be studied. It spawned a generation of case studies of urban occupations, including the variety of new roles for women under consideration here. The moral significance of this emergent economic organization and its new roles translated into a source of opportunity never known before on this scale, providing a freedom especially for women to assemble their lives and identities on markedly different terms than home, marriage and domestic life. The moral environment of the city presented the opportunity to women especially to be independent.

Park elaborated on what he referred to as 'industrial organization and the moral order'. It is telling that he introduced this section of his essay with the German adage, '*Stadt Luft macht frei*' (city air makes one free), as this is precisely the sense of opportunity that led the way for Donovan's and Cressey's studies of urban work life. Park's encouragement was evident in its specifics when he wrote:

The effects of the division of labor as a discipline, i.e., as a means of molding character, may therefore be best studied in the vocation types it has produced. Among the types which it would be interesting to study are: the shopgirl, the policeman, the peddler, the cabman, the nightwatchman, the clairvoyant, the vaudeville performer, the quack doctor, the bartender, the ward boss, the strike-breaker, the labor agitator, the school teacher, the reporter, the stockbroker, the pawnbroker; all of these are characteristic products of the conditions of city life. (Park and Burgess, 1984 [1925], p. 14)

Typical of Chicago sociology, Park did not limit the urban moral environment and its opportunities to respectable occupations and, indeed, he helped to establish the category of work as applicable to any and all gainful efforts at survival, including 'jack-rolling' (Shaw, 1930 [1955]) and taxi dancing

(Cressey, 1932). Later, as if to say that city air made us *all* free, Chicago sociologist Everett Hughes (1984, p. 52) wrote irreverently about 'going concerns' in this environment, 'The term institution, in short, suffers from an overdose of respectability, if not of hypocrisy,' hinting at the variety and diverse moral consequences of the urban opportunity that Donovan and Cressey described in their ethnographies.

Park's and his colleagues' view of the city and the opportunity theme were not isolated from contemporary currents of thought. Two important essays stand as historical bookends to this line of thinking and series of studies, which in their time added to the frame of understanding Donovan and Cressey applied. One was Georg Simmel's (1903 [1950]) essay, 'The metropolis and mental life' and the other was Louis Wirth's (1938) essay 'Urbanism as a way of life.' It is sufficient to note that both argued that the city was a new and distinctive moral environment and had unique effects on human interaction and 'mental life'. Simmel's work was a huge source of inspiration to Park, just as Wirth carried forth the faith in his own later essay and career.

## Going to the city

Fascinated as they were by the city, Donovan and Cressey presented the world the working girl left behind in sharp contrast with her new situation in the metropolis. They collected enough background data from the girls to dramatically foreground their present work situations. If otherwise tacitly accepted, the contrast nonetheless worked to bring the city to bear as the featured source of understanding.

### *City air and opportunity*

Donovan applied the contrast differently from the way Cressey did. In Donovan's first study, the girls observed worked in various restaurants in the Chicago area, some of which were low grade 'hash houses' located in the Loop and others which served elite customers elsewhere in private clubs and resorts. Donovan was careful to observe restaurants across the board; she aimed to call attention to what was general to these workplaces for women rather than to how class singularly, for instance, figured into the mix. She did not ignore the socioeconomic factor and it certainly is apparent in *The Woman Who Waits*; rather, her goal, like Cressey's, was to highlight the contours of new roles for women in the urban setting. Donovan later conducted participant observation in two different department stores in Manhattan: one, which appealed to the mass market, she called 'McElroy's', and the other, targeting wealthier customers, she gave the pseudonym, 'Harold's, Fifth Avenue'.

Here, again, while class differences were evident, it was her intention to reveal what was common to this particular urban occupation rather than highlighting variations within.

What going to the city meant occupationally for the working girls Donovan studied and which she herself as a participant observer took on board, was the opportunity to work for themselves outside the home, reap the personal dignity of having accomplished that on their own, and be recognized in terms separate from domestic life. Going to the city usually meant going there alone, although a significant number of working girls of all ages, some married with children and some divorced or widowed, brought along family members. Regardless of this, the girls who waited in the Chicago restaurants and the salesladies at McElroy's and Harold's were a new breed of woman. They were known as working girls, of course, which not only referenced women who worked, but more importantly 'girls' who had never before so boldly ventured into a world usually occupied by men. Certainly, the world of work both in and out of the urban context always had certain occupations dominated by women, such as the working schoolteacher, whom Donovan later studied through participant observation and auto-ethnographically. The significance of going to the city was that, as a rapidly developing social form, it represented a world of opportunity for those who had rarely been offered it in such large numbers and on so many fronts. It was this new development that stood in contrast with the shackling air outside the city and, for some girls, just beyond the Loop.

Going to the city for the working girls in Cressey's taxi-dance hall had a more sinister tone. From dance hall to dance hall, the girls referred to what it meant to 'make a buck' — it enabled them to be on their own, away from the confines of community and small-town life. Like Donovan, Cressey took care to assign his team of observers to all sorts of dance halls, some serving a 'polyglot' crowd, including 'dark immigrant men' of various backgrounds. Not everyone was allowed in to spend a dime-a-dance with these working girls, however. The line was drawn at race, as Cressey explained, 'The group of men who are denied social acceptance elsewhere because they bear an invidious racial mark. Negroes are everywhere excluded' (Cressey, 1932, p. 109). Still, the socioeconomic variety of patrons of these establishments was obvious. Here again, variety notwithstanding, Cressey's focus was on the urban dimensions of new roles for women, especially their opportunities and, in Cressey's case especially, the related risks and challenges.

The sense of city air and opportunity in Cressey's study combines desire and reality in a way it does not in Donovan's books. Just as the working girls in the settings Donovan studied go to the city because they view it as a source of independence and improved social status, Cressey's dance hall girls express a desire to be on their own. Some view this as a way to the good life, especially those who hope to meet the right man and marry up, or at least marry with security. In Cressey's monograph, the city comes with risks to the

working girl that are less keenly emphasized by Donovan — a possible reduction to circumstances worse than those left behind. Not that the world of the waitress does not portend this possibility, something that is most evident on the hash-house circuit. Rather, if Donovan foregrounds the allure of the city for the working girl, Cressey always has in view its under-life and what this can mean for working girls in the long run.

### *The world left behind*

The urban opportunity theme is so thickly evident that the plenitude of what is left behind is descriptively thin (see Brekhus *et al.*, 2005). Both authors relegate most of it to the imagination. Throughout the ethnographies, Donovan's and Cressey's working girls refer, either directly or obliquely, to how leaving home afforded them the opportunity to seek their fortunes. Independence and the chance to succeed do not exclude home and family life. The latter desires are there, but new circumstances are seen as providing the freedom to seek companionship away from the prying eyes of parents, relatives and communities. The freedom of the city also offers amusements that home communities do not; activities that parents especially but also friends and neighbours would not approve of, especially for women.

If a leading theme of what is left behind centres on gender, the attractions of home and family life nonetheless endure as working girls' engage the desires of male patrons and customers. Cressey makes the point that, in seeking companionship and possibly more permanent attachment, the immigrant male patrons of taxi-dance halls themselves stand clear of the watchful eye of traditional homes and families. Many seek to settle down with an 'American girl', which would in effect return the women in question to domestic roles. For immigrant male patrons the city affords the opportunity to meet women of different backgrounds from their own, who are more familiar with the modern temper. While Cressey's working girls especially are aware of this, and of the possibility of settling down to something similar to what they left behind, they also desire the safety and security of a permanent relationship — a reliable working man — which, again, the city allows them to pursue on their own terms.

Many of the women who waited in Donovan's ethnography came from rural or semi-rural areas of Illinois or from nearby states, such as from small towns in Wisconsin. The working girls Donovan met in the Manhattan department stores where she herself was employed mainly came from the metropolitan New York area, although several immigrant working girls, mainly European, were featured in her book. Cressey's working girls had similar origins, although some worked and lived in the Loop on their own separate from family homes located within Chicago but not in the downtown district. Cressey points out that, once in the trade, some of the taxi-dancers he studied

circulated between the dance hall scenes of various large cities, seeking their fortunes (or misfortunes, as the case might be) in a broader world of urban opportunity.

### *The excitements of city life*

If the world left behind is not that far away geographically for some working girls, it is virtually worlds away from the city in the imaginations of both the girls and the authors. The excitements of city life are both ethnographically and empirically palpable. The opening scene of *The Woman Who Waits* is telling. Donovan (1920) describes how, on a busy Saturday morning, she became intrigued by the hustle and bustle in view:

One Saturday morning between seven and eight o'clock I took an elevated train at the station of one of our large cities in the Middle West, and rode down to the city to do some shopping. The crowds on the train at the early hour attracted me. The tide, which flows to and fro, from the circumference to the center of the city, was now at flood. I was interested particularly in the women. There were great numbers of them who swarmed into the coaches as fast as the gates could be opened and shut. They were working women, but the privileged class, the aristocrats, the women who labored in the 'Loop.' (Donovan, 1920, p. 7)

The excitement builds for several paragraphs as Donovan looks in wonderment, especially at the diversity of the women she observes, who are 'of every physical type' and 'all sorts of people in the ranks of the working women', including 'the private secretary of a prominent lawyer, the office executive, the stenographer, the typist, and the little filing clerk', among many others who work in the city, mainly for men.

Fascinated by the prospect of becoming part of this world and studying the working circumstances of these women, Donovan, intrigued, muses:

Where do they all come from? What sort of homes are they living in? Have they been born in the city or have they drifted here later in life? What has determined their choice of an occupation? Would it not be interesting to have some definite information in regard to some one of these vocational types? These were some of the questions that came to my mind.

How many thousands are there whose stories we never learn? Why do they come? Because life is dull in the small town or on the farm and because there is excitement and adventure, in the city. The lure of the stage, of the movie, of the shop, and of the office make of it the definite El Dorado of the women. It is her frontier and in it she is the pioneer. (Donovan, 1920, p. 9)

Yet Donovan is cautious. The excitement of going to the city could portend loss as well as gain, even while Donovan, more than Cressey, emphasizes the strides for women that city life has brought with it:

What makes the story of the waitress important, aside from its human interest, is the fact that these women represent the advance guard of working women who are marching steadily deeper and deeper into the world of economic competition, getting into new and dangerous contacts. The movement of women out of the home into the world began long ago. Since the war [World War I] they have gone forward into the shop, the factory, and the office at a more rapid pace than ever before. There is now no talk of 'back to the home.' The war has made conclusive a revolution that had already begun. Naturally a change so vast and so far-reaching as that which is now going on cannot be effected without some losses. If women are destroyed or injured in this new life, there will be a loss to working women generally. (Donovan, 1920, p. 14)

The working girls of *The Woman Who Waits* and, later, of *The Saleslady*, share the excitement. As the workday came to an end in one restaurant, Donovan refers to the leisure opportunities evident in talk among the girls in the restaurant's basement dressing room, which she herself used. It is soon clear that 'doing the town' has a special meaning for these women, drawn from the economic and recreational independence of their circumstances:

At half-past eight I descended to the basement dressing-room thoroughly exhausted. But, although I was tired, nervously tired, I did not want to go home. I was in a mood for anything, anything but home. The other girls were dressing to go to the theatre, to a movie, or to a cabaret. I was sorry I had made no such plans myself. (Donovan, 1920, pp. 50–51)

The allure and excitement of the city reverberates in passing comments made by the working girls as they link the metropolis with opportunities absent back home. The idea of being vibrantly young for some, but carefree for many, echoes, as waitresses Kathleen and Janet explain:

'Perhaps when I am older,' continued Kathleen, 'and need a home, I will feel differently about it. But while I am young, I like to be free. It's fun to doll up for a man twice a week; any girl enjoys dolling up that often, but to have one around all the time is no fun.' (Donovan, 1920, p. 88)

'I [Janet] think I'm pretty lucky now. I'm getting six and half in wages because I have worked there a year and a half, and I have this little place all to myself, and just about everything I want except a piano. I do want a piano; I love music so!' (Donovan, 1920, p. 102)

*The Saleslady*, too, conveys the excitement of the city and especially its prospects for independence. Donovan describes what many of the working girls she came to know at McElroy's and Harold's feel about the opportunities their employment provides, obviating economic dependency. While marriage and family life are not uncommon for the saleslady, these sit alongside

the attractions of making it on their own, or at least contributing independently to the welfare and decisions of the household:

There can be no question that the saleswoman meets men, plenty of them, but as to how she meets them, that is her business. She follows her own inclination and judgment; her experience in the store teaches her to be a quick and keen judge of human nature, and my observation led me to the conclusion that she makes fewer mistakes in marriage than the women of any other group with which I am familiar.... The fundamental underlying attitude of the saleswoman toward marriage is the comforting fact that she does not have to get married — she is economically independent. She chooses her husband with shrewdness; she is bound to be a better judge of character than most women because no other occupation offers the same opportunities in this respect as selling. (Donovan, 1929, pp. 166–167)

Cressey (1932) exudes a similar excitement. But there is an ominous tone because with opportunity comes risk in the dance hall environment, especially for young women. He begins his chapter on 'the life-cycle of the taxi-dancer' this way:

A generation ago the young girl who broke with her home and neighborhood and set out alone upon the high roads of adventure had little opportunity to do other than sink, almost immediately, into some form of prostitution. But today many legitimate avenues are open to her, and, if she adopts an unconventional mode of life, many intermediate stages precede actual prostitution. (Cressey, 1932, p. 84)

In other words, the generation of women who came of age before World War I faced prospects for leaving home more dire than today's (1920s) young women. At the same time, the new working girl also loses the security of home and family life, which in some workplaces courts sexual exploitation, especially paid work that borders on the unconventional. But Cressey immediately suggests that taxi-dancing does not necessarily lead to prostitution and that it can be a good source of income:

The career of the taxi-dancer ends in her late twenties. It is a source of income only for the interim between later adolescence and marriage. Many young women use the taxi-dance hall in this way. Others use it to provide for themselves during the interlude between marital ventures. Still others — married women — use it as a source of additional funds and, not infrequently, as a diversion from monotonous married lives.

Cressey is more interested than Donovan is in the city's under-life. But even this is a source of opportunity in Cressey's view, not necessarily failure. Work is work, he would seem to say and it is the unique quality of urban life that it opens work to myriad possibilities:

All this exists today because, as never before in our mobile cities, it is possible for young people to lead dual lives, with little probability of detection. Thus the young woman may 'get in' and 'get out' of prostitution with a facility and rapidity which renders ineffective the traditional forms of social control. Likewise, the taxi-dancer, if she so desires, has a greater opportunity than ever before afforded to such a girl to 'come back' and again fit into conventional society. (Cressey, 1932, p. 84)

The dancers have a positive outlook, one that causes them to laud the thrills of their work lives, but also to lament the difficulties, especially those stemming from contacts with the strange new mixture of people who patronize the dance halls. Interestingly enough, for many of the dancers the mix expands their horizons, up to a point. One of the girls, who Cressey names 'May Ferguson', was 24 years old at the time and had

cut all connections with her relatives and friends in Rogers Park [an area of Chicago outside the Loop] and, for a time, lived intensely the life revolving around the taxi-dance hall.

Before he quotes her, Cressey comments:

Her reactions to the critical question of 'dating' and marrying an Oriental reflect the effectiveness of this social world in making possible a complete change in the activities and personal standing of a young woman of middle-class American society. (Cressey, 1932, p. 85)

May explains:

It's strange how my attitudes toward the mixing of the races has changed and changed back again in a little over a year. Two years ago I would have shuddered at the thought of dancing with a Chinaman or a Filipino and hated them just about as much as I did a 'nigger.' ... When I first stared in the dance hall on the West Side everything was exciting and thrilling. The only thing that bothered me was to have to dance with the Filipinos and the Chinamen. The first time one danced with me it almost made me sick. But after I'd been dancing there two months I even came to think it was all right to go out with Filipinos. You see, everybody else was doing it, and it seemed all right. But I never got so I would go out with a Chinaman. (Cressey, 1932, p. 85)

As did others of the era who followed Thomas's sociological approach to attitudes and personality, Cressey viewed the city and its new circumstances as providing the opportunity of 'defining' others in new ways, interactions with whom could lead to new identities.

## Difference as urban diversity

If 1920s urban ethnographers featured opportunity over disadvantage, it did not mean that they ignored the place of class, race and gender in men's and

women's work lives. For 1920s urban ethnographers, such differences were facets of the diversity of urban opportunity; class differences especially were viewed as features of urban variety. Taking the city to be the key explanatory variable, Donovan and Cressey were not so much concerned with how, for better or worse, class, race and gender shaped women's work lives, as these were treated as natural elements of metropolitan life in general and the urban workplace in particular.

The authors described class differences in women's workplaces in two ways. One was to feature organizational differences in the work settings they studied and how the differences affected women's lives. The formulation of empirically grounded typologies was characteristic of Chicago ethnographers and these were used to generalize differences. The other way was to contrast class and ethnic differences in the patrons of these establishments and how that affected work, which was broached in May Ferguson's comments.

Donovan (1920) developed a typology of restaurants along class lines and described the respective opportunities and travails of each type, from the hash house to the supper club. According to Donovan, 'The waitress will say, when talking of jobs, "Anything is better than a hash house," and she will work in one only when she can find no other place' (Donovan, 1920, p. 107). This rough-and-tumble, countertop establishment with few tables is the first of five types of restaurants identified. The hash house is where the working girl in the restaurant business often begins her career. These jobs are readily available and require minimal work experience, even while it is clear from Donovan's material that learning on the job is difficult. The pay is low and the tips scanty. Donovan notes that about 75 per cent of the approximately 1500 restaurants in Chicago were hash houses. These restaurants are open around the clock, place a premium on quick service and keep the waitresses hopping. Yet, as both Donovan and Cressey point out, for each type of establishment they studied, the establishments provided more opportunity for women than at any time in the past.

At the other end of the spectrum, past the company lunchroom and the college club, are the tea rooms and especially the genteel café patronized by the well-heeled. Women who wait in these establishments are the cream of the crop, so to speak, and manage fairly comfortable lifestyles, being better off than the office workers and teachers at the time, according to Donovan. As she explains:

The manager of the café tries to employ the youngest, prettiest, and most efficient girls that he can find and he has little trouble in finding them, for the café is the most lucrative place in which the waitress can work, not because the wages paid by the management are better than those paid in other places but because of the tips which, in the café, are the greatest source of income. (Donovan, 1920, pp. 110–111).

Later, in New York, Donovan works in sales in a moderately priced and in an upscale store, again emphasizing what is common to these establishments rather than how they differ from each other. At the same time, as if to provide empirical evidence for Thomas's very social psychology, Donovan expresses amazement at how the difference can affect the salesladies' identities. Harold's, the upscale store, is a virtual spawning ground for confidence and self-esteem, especially for those working in departments of 'fine' merchandise where Donovan spent some of her time. 'Harold's girls' exude confidence and good taste. The physical environment of the store virtually rubs off in self-conceptualization. The most responsible positions bring uncommon esteem for their occupants. Their salesladies are at the very top of their professions and carry themselves accordingly.

Upscale or not, the department store working girl must learn to deal effectively with a variety of customers, who themselves vary along class lines. Donovan describes the types, again presenting difference as urban diversity. The typology of customers is empirically grounded and relates to sales commissions. From the 'business woman' who is a sure sale and the flapper, who is sought for the same reason, to the old woman with time on her hands who is just browsing and the overweight customer who will not fit into anything, each type comes into view with a sales strategy and a foreseeable outcome in commissions.

Through a series of 'social base maps of Chicago', Cressey presents the social geography of the work settings he studies. Map I 'shows the residences of Chicago taxi-dancers with reference to nationality and racial groups and local communities'. To make a point about the rapid growth of this type of 'commercial recreation' following World War I, Maps III and IV show the location of Chicago dance halls licensed during 1910 and during 1927, respectively. Over this period, the dance hall had not only spread farther north, west and south, but also grew rapidly in seating capacity. The biggest dance halls licensed in 1910 had 500–1200 seats; the largest in 1927 had 2500 seats and over. By 1927 these were huge establishments, providing work for many young women and entertainment for many men of diverse backgrounds. Map V shows the location of Chicago taxi-dance halls in relation to rooming-house areas in 1927–1930, the point being that the growth of this form of work and entertainment also fuelled the development of a form of housing suitable for independently living single men and women. Map VI further specifies residential location by nationality and race. Here again, difference points to urban diversity.

Difference also stems from the variety of dance halls and their appeal to various patrons. As if to say that this urban social world provides recreational opportunities for everyone (except 'Negroes'), Cressey describes 14 types of dance hall, from the municipal ballroom that is 'owned and operated by the city with an objective of social welfare' (Cressey, 1932, p. 20), the dine-and-dance restaurant that provides dancing with an orchestra and is sometimes

known as a 'nightclub', to the pleasure-boat dance that is seasonal and commercially operated and the taxi-dance hall. The taxi-dance hall differs from the others in being

A commercial public dance institution attracting only male patrons, which seeks to provide them an opportunity for social dancing by employing women dance partners, who are paid on a commission basis through the ticket-a-dance plan, and who are expected to dance with any patron who may select them for as few or as many dances as he is willing to purchase. (Cressey, 1932, p. 27)

While this definition appears to bear openness to difference, it is evident, too, from the maps Cressey provides and the dancers' comments, that there is considerable patron stratification in the mix, with dancer preferences for white American and northern European patrons and younger and able-bodied men over older men and the disabled.

Patrons vary in terms of their interest in the dancers. Cressey begins his discussion with reference to diversity, hinting at a public acceptance uncommon in non-urban settings:

The patrons at a taxi-dance hall are a polyglot crowd. Chinese and Sicilians, Hawaiians and Scandinavians, Mexicans and Russians, Filipinos and Roumanians, Jews and Poles, Greeks and American Indians, Hindus and Anglo-Saxon Nordics all mingle together. There is also a wide diversity in age, culture, and physical fitness. Veterans of sixty years or more take their places alongside youthful swains not out of their 'teens.' Sleekly groomed city chaps brush elbows with coarsely garbed yokels with calloused hands and lumbering gait. Men of apparently normal physique line up for their social adventure beside those of abnormal size and proportions and beside those with physical disabilities and speech handicaps. (Cressey, 1932, p. 109)

The variety of patron interest in the dancers is extensive, with nine types identified. One is the 'footloose globe-trotter' who frequents the taxi-hall for a good time while temporarily in town; another is the 'slummer' who goes to the Loop from other areas of the city for the same reason. Some patrons are interested in dancing and its recreational advantages, which are utilitarian in nature. Others are more romantically inclined and seek companionship, intimacy, sexual contact and even marriage. Not all dancers prefer the latter; they view their activities as paid labour only and limit themselves to customer relationships.

## **Making a living**

The 1920s was a time when living independently away from home for a young woman was only beginning to be accepted and mainly in large urban centres.

If there was urban opportunity for women, it was pitched with a sense of danger not applied to men. The city was viewed as a risky place for the working girl. Still, while both Donovan and Cressey present working girls on their own, their portrayals are hardly one of the helpless woman alone in the city. While vulnerable to exploitation at work and, for the waitress and taxi dancer especially, to being sexually taken advantage of by male customers, successfully making a living under the circumstances is rendered with ingenuity. Donovan and Cressey do not shortchange the agency of the working girl, who cleverly if cautiously takes advantage of the opportunities of urban life. This is especially highlighted in Donovan's waitress book and Cressey's discussion of the earnings of the taxi dancer, where making a living is a more precarious than being successful in sales at establishments such as Harold's, even with such stores' system of sales commissions.

While restaurant owners can work the girls mercilessly, especially during the busy lunch hour, the woman who waits also knows that customers tip and that there are ways to increase income from it, considerably under the right conditions. The received wisdom for maximizing tips is discussed endlessly by the girls. An important rule of thumb is to avoid female customers, especially those with children or babies in tow. Male customers tip better across the board in restaurants, with the possible exception of the wealthy female patrons of 'high class' establishments. Donovan specifies the rule as she comments on waitressing in various settings:

Up to this time I had worked as a waitress in about fifteen different restaurants, lunch counters, tea rooms, cafés, employees' lunch rooms and department store lunch rooms. I had learned to throw food on the counter at some places like the Adams Lunch at 181 West Adams Street, which are called 'dumps' in the waitress world; to serve it with as great dispatch but with a little more art, at hash houses like White and McCreary's at 227 South Lincoln Avenue, and to be gentle and refined in the service which I gave to the members of the College club in the Chandler Building. I had learned that I need never expect a tip from the women who, with bundles and babies, eat in the lunch room at Worthley's nor from the patrons of the employees' lunch room at the American Heat and Light Company, nor from the habitués of the Park Tea Room, the rendezvous of the office woman. (Donovan, 1920, p. 70)

Sometimes the woman who waits must spend her own money to guarantee good customer relations. In some busy restaurants the combined duties of needing to assure a tidy table as well as providing efficient and courteous service prompt the waitress to actually tip bus boys to keep their assigned tables neat and clean. This, too, assures good tips, but requires adherence to a tipping pecking order among restaurant employees. There are hazards in this division of labour, as not keeping a watchful eye on one's co-workers can

lead to bus boys and other waitresses surreptitiously stealing the better tips as they clear or pass by tables, unnoticed by their servers.

Vigilance and hazards aside, the extra money that tips provide affords opportunity in its own right. The added income makes available, even to the humble hash house waitress, the recreational offerings that come with city lights. One evening at home after a long day at work, Donovan laments that she is too tired to take advantage of an invitation to step out after work with the girls for a night of excitement in town. In the process, she refers to the 'fascination of the tip':

I was sorry that I had made no such plans myself. I had been in the habit of reading or studying quietly in the evening until ten or eleven o'clock, [but now] I felt that to dance in a cabaret to the music of a jazz band was just the sort of recreation that I would appreciate. One dollar and ninety-five cents in dimes and nickels, my tips for the day, jingled lightly in my pocket. The jingle added to my excitement. I was beginning to feel the fascination of the tip. (Donovan, 1920, pp. 50–51)

Summing up the importance of the tipping system for the woman who waits, Donovan refers to W. I. Thomas in likening the system to a game of chance, indicating the ingenuity needed to succeed on this front, stressing the common agency of success, regardless of gender:

Tipping is the gambling factor in the life of the waitress. It redeems her work from dull routine and drudgery and puts into it the problematical. It is the same thing that makes the man shade dice for his cigars instead of paying outright for them. To get a tip is, as William I. Thomas says, 'like winning a game. It involves the same uncertainty. It has in it the element of chance, of luck; it is the getting of something for nothing, the legitimate satisfaction of the gaming instinct, which is no more dormant in the female than in the male.' (Donovan, 1920, p. 202)

Cressey (1932) refers to a similar game of chance operating in the taxi-dance halls that can enhance the dancer's income, but which also has its hazards. This transpires in relation to what Cressey calls 'the exploitation motif' or code for exploiting male patrons. The code, Cressey explains, 'grows out of the combined commercial and romantic interests and the necessary casual intimacies with many patrons' (p. 39). The combination fuels the code. On the one side, the dime-a-dance economy of the halls encourages dancers to get hired by as many patrons as possible, as their income, which is a percentage of the night's take for individual girls, depends on 'keeping on one's toes', if not on one's feet. This means being an attractive dancer. The cultivated lure of the wily dancer plays no small role in her success. On the other side, the patrons, many of whom are in search of female companionship as much as recreation, respond to girls who not only provide an evening of fun, but the possibility of romantic involvement. This is widely recognized by

the girls as well as the dance hall owners; keeping the profit motive in view is *de rigueur* as the girls 'doll up' to make a killing.

Making a living in these establishments is a balance of intimacy with distance. Just as the woman who waits cultivates tips from male patrons by feigning interest in them but limiting that to well-managed charm, the dancer sustains the market relationship she has with patrons lest it become a losing proposition. Cressey explains:

The impersonal attitudes of the market place very soon supersede the romantic impulses which normally might develop. Under the spur of commercialism the taxi-dancer, for instance, very soon comes to view the patrons, young or old, not so much as *ends*, but rather as *means* toward the achievement of her objectives — the recouping of her personal fortunes. Romantic behavior, along with other less desirable forms of stimulation, becomes merely another acceptable method for the commercial exploitation of men. (Cressey, 1932, pp. 39–40)

This echoes the theme of emotion management explored by Arlie Hochschild (1983) in her book *The Managed Heart*, subtitled the 'commercialization of human feeling.' Success in the business in both instances encourages the management of emotions, which in the dance halls translates into feigning both emotional and sexual interest. For Hochschild, the resulting denial of true feelings is interpreted as taking away from the airline stewardesses she studied a genuine part of their identities as women, pointing to the disadvantages of the contemporary commercialization of emotion. In contrast, attuned to the urban opportunities of the times, Cressey views this as the better or worse part of doing business under the circumstances. The new urban institution exemplified by the taxi-dance hall, like others that flourished in the 1920s, offered its working girls a chance to do better for themselves than women ever could before, in this case by dint of their feelings. Then again, as in the worst part of any business opportunity, some fail to sustain the logic (code) of this marketplace by falling in love, losing their sexual appeal, or otherwise growing older and becoming exhausted. They cease to profit from the code and, in the final analysis, themselves become objects of exploitation. If there is lament in Cressey's and Donovan's ethnographies over the misfortunes of the working life for these girls, it is less a critique of the city as a 'unique scheme of life' than of the misfortunes that are the natural downside of urban living.

## Sex and the city

This brings us to a misfortune, again viewed as natural, of being an appealing woman in the city. Cressey emphasizes issues of 'sexual misconduct,' as his research centres more on work and 'vice' than Donovan's does. The

taxi-dance hall lies at the crossroads of the legitimate and illegitimate, even while the halls are licensed and legal. The code of exploitation and the emotional logic put into play by the dancer's and patron's interests in each other make sex a continuing theme of work life for these girls. Sensual dancing easily spills over into sexual activity. The availability of physically attractive women prompts sexual interest by the men they serve. For Cressey, the career prospects are clear; those girls who can no longer profitably manage the vicissitudes of this marketplace or who seek greater but riskier income, turn to another source of urban opportunity — prostitution. The 'sex game', a term Cressey borrows from Donovan to describe related activities within their study sites (Cressey, 1932, p. 46), can become sex for profit in its own right.

Cressey describes the career path from dancer to prostitute which, for some, comes with the 'personal demoralization' spawned by the associated anonymity and loneliness of urban living. Sexual activity and opportunity are always in the wings for the taxi-dancer, a leading risk of city life for these women. For some, the sexual freedom associated with independence is what drew them to the city and to the dance hall looking for work in the first place. For others, sexual freedom and independence are by-products of taxi-dancing. Those who resist demoralization and do not choose to leave the city to return to the confines of safer circumstances, or whose failures do not lead them to seek the services of social agencies, can continue to make it on their own as sex workers. For Cressey, this again represents a natural progression, the policy implication being that what is natural can be shaped perhaps, but not eliminated. This is to be expected for the working girl, especially as the under-life of urban opportunity raises a malevolent hand to keep her in the city:

A rationale of exploitation is apparently basic to the enterprise of the taxi-dance hall. Associated with it everywhere is the practice of the 'sex game,' which serves to prepare the way psychologically for more serious sexual misconduct. Prostitution and allied forms of immorality very naturally follow. But other consequences of the rationale of exploitation and the practice of the sex game are not so readily seen. This scheme of life may pave the way, not only for a commercialization of sex, but for a criminal career of other varieties as well. (Cressey, 1932, pp. 248–249)

Cressey does not view this natural progression as individual failure, although personal demoralization can be associated with it. Rather, the social forces of the urban environment impel the process, making individual pathways understandable in social psychological terms. While Cressey applies the language of personal failure to many undesirable features of sex and the city for the working girl — describing it as 'sexual misconduct' and 'immorality,' for example — the explanatory focus is on the city and its institutions. Whether failed or successful, sexual enterprise comes with the city and its work life, not

ultimately with its participants' individual characteristics. If Cressey is sympathetic to the accusation that the dance hall and similar urban institutions spawn prostitution, it is clear that his understanding centres on a view of these concerns as part of the associated conditions of city life. Responding to various public charges against the taxi-dance hall, Cressey writes:

A fifth charge against the institution ... is that even though a great deal of prostitution, strictly conceived, is not to be found in the taxi-dance hall, it is for many young girls nevertheless a 'school' preparing them for prostitution and for allied forms of sexual misconduct... The social world of the taxi-dance hall embodies many factors which influence toward prostitution and sexual misconduct. One such factor is the attitude of cynicism and sophistication current almost universally among the girls. Associated with this is the scheme of life of exploitation and the 'sex game.' These, too, provide standards of conduct and rationalizations which may very easily lead toward misconduct. Finally, the social forces of the dance-hall world are such that it is only a question of time until the taxi-dancers are forced to gravitate toward less desirable activities or groups, or to leave the dance halls entirely. (Cressey, 1932, pp. 266–267)

While Donovan is softer in her approach, she applies the same explanatory framework. Donovan uses the vernacular term, 'indecent' to indicate what comes with the territory — sex and the city — for the working girl. Girls can maintain their decency, indeed they are sheltered from indecency, in traditional environments. The implication is that the social forces of home and domestic life operate to keep girls decent, even while these same forces suppress independence. If autonomy looms with urban opportunity, the risk for women is indecency and, at worst, sexual promiscuity. Simply put, sex is part of a landscape of risks for urban working girls. Conversely, the absence of the vocabulary of misconduct, immorality and indecency for men in the city reflects a contrasting scenario. For men the city is a landscape of sexual opportunity, as Donovan's and Cressey's respective portrayals of customer's and patron's roles in the sex game make abundantly clear.

The vocabulary of decency and indecency is sprinkled throughout the extracts from working girls' comments presented by Donovan. In a reconstructed conversation between Donovan (1920) and other waitresses that unfolded one morning at one of restaurants where Donovan worked, Donovan is surprised at how cavalierly her female co-workers speak about indecency. There is a rather crude admission that one might have been sexually promiscuous, something that other references in the book suggest is not a matter young women properly talk about, even while the same references also imply that this is a common occurrence among city working girls:

The next morning when I opened the basement door [of the restaurant] a pretty young girl was sitting on a bench smoking a cigarette and spitting

eloquently all over the place. The other girls were grouped around her. They were discussing their sweethearts, and the way they had spent the previous night. The pretty girl, who was about eighteen, said that among her lovers there was a street-car conductor.

Another spoke up and said, 'I used to have a street-car conductor, and I never paid any fare then. But I ain't got any now, they all either got married or turned me down.'

A girl about forty years old said that when she was out she couldn't take any beer because she was under the doctor's card and then she told what was the matter with her.

One of the others said, 'And is that what you got the matter with you! Aw, Hattie, I thought you was decent!'

A loud laugh greeted this remark, and a girl said, 'Hattie ain't never pretended to be decent as long as I've known her, have you, Hattie?'

'No,' said Hattie, 'I don't make no claims to being decent.' (Donovan, 1920, pp. 25–26)

In another episode, the subtlety of the sex game and its possible relationship to indecency is telescoped. In the rush of serving customers (feeding the 'loop-hounds') in one busy downtown restaurant, the novice Donovan is cautioned by another waitress to pick up her tip lest someone make off with it:

Quit pickin' up my order!' were the remarks that filled the little kitchen in quick succession. A girl said to me in a low voice in passing.

'There's twenty cents on your table, dear, better pick it up.'

I hastened back to pick up the tips that I had somehow earned.

There were two dimes and they had been left by two men. Under one lay a man's business card with his name, address, and 'phone number upon it. I crumbled it up and threw it among the dirty dishes. Later I learned to know the meaning of the card left down turned upon the waitress' table. (Donovan, 1920, pp. 41–42).

The relationship between tips and the sex game for the working girls is brought forth clearly one day as a waitress discusses tips and decency:

It was six months before I made any money at Lane's. At first my tips were not more than ten or twenty cents a day. It's hard for a decent quiet girl to make tips anywhere. Now I have my regular customers, married men with families, who don't come up there to flirt, and I generally make a dollar in tips.

I've never had a word out of the way said to me. But we have all kinds of girls at Lane's just as at every other place, and the sporty girls and the ones that jolly the men to make the good tips. Not that I'm narrow minded, Fannie, living around this way takes all that out of you, and I don't criticize the girls. If a girl has a lover and they think it best not to marry, as long as they are not injuring any third party, I think it's between them and God. But when it's for money, I don't hold with that. (Donovan, 1920, pp. 101–102)

Sex and the city engage the saleslady in similar terms, even while her status in the working world makes it more businesslike than it does for the lower status women who wait and the taxi-dancer. At one point in her chapter on romance and marriage among salesladies, Donovan (1929) calls attention to the understandable unconventionality for women of the sex game in the urban environment. Women and men grow alike in the city, she suggests, equalizing sexual opportunity, bringing the sex game to a logical conclusion that fades gender differences:

The girl in the city can be excused for a certain amount of unconventionality. The city makes no provision for introducing her to men. The society girl has a mother who manages these matters for her but the working-girl must look out for herself. In the store there are only one-third as many men as there are women and the competition is, naturally, keen. The church might help, but for the most part the girl in the city does not go to church. Sunday is laundry day, the time for putting clothes in order, for going to the bathing beach, or on excursions into the country.

I have been told by one who has had more experiences than I that in many large city hotels there is someone who has a list of the names of women whom they can call upon to accompany the male guests who are alone in the city and desire companionship, to dinner, to the theatre, on sightseeing trips. The conventional idea that a lady must wait to be introduced — though it has much to be said for it — is not workable in a large city and the modern business girl does not sit around and wait for introductions that never come her way. She finds friends among men just as men find them among themselves and women make the acquaintance of other women. (Donovan, 1920, pp. 165–166)

## Conclusion

These ethnographies of the 1920s working girl are profiles in miniature of the time's urban imagination. That imagination viewed the city as a new way of life, one that presented the experience and social worlds of denizens in terms that contrasted sharply with traditional morality. The city air that made one free spread across the social horizon, providing new opportunities for those

involved in the humblest and the higher status occupations alike. The working girl especially was depicted as thriving in this environment, as men had always seemingly thrived, regardless of social context. But this came with risks for women, as independence shed the usual safeguards. Still, the city loomed magnificently, overshadowing its risks for all, both in the experience of the working girl and in the minds of their ethnographers. It was a great democratizing and economically levelling force, offering more than ever from life across class and gender, if not racial, lines.

Urban ethnography today has a different mission from that it had in the 1920s, at once more global and more particular. For example, the Center for Urban Ethnography at the University of California, Berkeley, facilitates participant observation research on urban environments with global resonances, while the centre by the same name at the University of Pennsylvania deals with topics in urban education. Indeed, 'urban' ethnography has evolved into a variety of research areas now categorized in more specialized ways. This reflects a shift in analytic figure and ground from urban to modern institutional life. There now are street ethnographies and workplace ethnographies, the latter divided into hospital, nursing home, prison and gang ethnographies, among other venues for pointing to the organized diversity and especially the everyday challenges of contemporary living.

An important point of the contrast between ethnographies of women and work in the 1920s and today's field studies of women and work is that explanatory persuasiveness stems as much from the analytic emphasis in place as from the strength of the empirical material in tow. It is not that the city in some way has not been present across the eras, nor that varied dimensions of advantage and disadvantage were not then recognized as much as they are now. The contrast, rather, is a matter of explanatory prominence. In the 1920s the city was imagined as a vast, compelling and consummate, if not ominous, force for change — for virtually everyone. The city would appear to explain everything and urban sociologists of the time presented their empirical material accordingly. Like other urban ethnographers of the era, Donovan and Cressey looked to the city for explanation, but they did not ignore differences within.

It would seem odd for today's ethnographers to do the same, as the city is now virtually everywhere in some form or other. Yet, just as the explanatory persuasiveness of the intersection of race, class and gender superseded the explanatory persuasiveness of each dimension alone, featuring in particular the complex experience of women in relation to work, intersectionality itself may now be receding in prominence as an explanatory framework. If gender was virtually absent explanatorily in 1920s urban ethnographies and more recently rose steeply in importance, it may be giving way to the re-emergence of urban consciousness. Looking ahead, the city — now figured globally — may once again be growing in explanatory prominence. Over a decade ago, Saskia Sassen (2001 [1991]) first argued that what she called 'the global city'

is increasingly upon us as a force organizing work, opportunity, advantage and disadvantage. In this context, the experiential complexity of intersectionality as it differentiates work along gender, class and racial lines may be displaced in persuasiveness, but not replaced, by the bigger story of globalization as it shapes the workplace for both men and women, especially along class and ethnic lines (see, for example, Sassen, 1998; Zimmerman *et al.*, 2006). This global consciousness, as it bears on the city in this case, is a leading theme of third wave feminism, which is contributing mightily to re-examining the place of gender in contemporary structures of opportunity, advantage and disadvantage in the urban workplace (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Hernandez and Rehman, 2002; Gillis *et al.*, 2004). The boundaries and fluidity of gender and work are forming in unprecedented ways, shaped by a new kind of city and explanatory persuasiveness (Linstead and Brewis, 2004).

Massive changes in opportunity, advantage and disadvantage, as these are mediated by the cross-border mobility of people and money, construct global cities such as New York, London and Tokyo, grounding and recentring race, ethnicity, class and gender in transnational terms. This is not because the explanatory inspiration for understanding women's relation to work can no longer be drawn from intersectionality, or from race, class, or gender alone, for that matter, but rather because explanatory prominence may once again be shifting, this time to financial institutions and networks that work across political borders to organize *everyone's* relation to work. Class, race and ethnicity in the global city are being reconfigured to construct opportunity, advantage and disadvantage across gender lines. Just as gender was background to the city in explanatory prominence in an earlier era and later rose to the prominence it has today, in the future it may once again become background, but to a city whose opportunities, advantages and disadvantages come in unprecedented proportions and complexity.

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