

distinctions current in the society. Within third places, the charm and flavor of one's personality, irrespective of his or her station in life, is what counts. In the third place, people may make blissful substitutions in the rosters of their associations, adding those they genuinely enjoy and admire to those less-preferred individuals that fate has put at their side in the workplace or even, perhaps, in their family.

Further, a place that is a leveler also permits the individual to know workmates in a different and fuller aspect than is possible in the workplace. The great bulk of human association finds individuals related to one another for some objective purpose. It casts them, as sociologists say, in roles, and though the roles we play provide us with our more sustaining matrices of human association, these tend to submerge personality and the inherent joys of being together with others to some external purpose. In contrast, what Georg Simmel referred to as "pure sociability" is precisely the occasion in which people get together for no other purpose, higher or lower, than for the "joy, vivacity, and relief" of engaging their personalities beyond the contexts of purpose, duty, or role.⁶ As Simmel insisted, this unique occasion provides the most democratic experience people can have and allows them to be more fully themselves, for it is salutary in such situations that all shed their social uniforms and insignia and reveal more of what lies beneath or beyond them.

Necessarily, a transformation must occur as one passes through the portals of a third place. Worldly status claims must be checked at the door in order that all within may be equals. The surrender of outward status, or leveling, that transforms those who own delivery trucks and those who drive them into equals, is rewarded by acceptance on more humane and less transitory grounds. Leveling is a joy and relief to those of higher and lower status in the mundane world. Those who, on the outside, command deference and attention by the sheer weight of their position find themselves in the third place enjoined, embraced, accepted, and enjoyed where conventional status counts for little. They are accepted just for themselves and on terms not subject to the vicissitudes of political or economic life.

Conversation is the main activity

Neutral ground provides the place, and leveling sets the stage for the cardinal and sustaining activity of third places everywhere. That activity is conversation. Nothing more clearly indicates a third place

than that the talk there is good; that it is lively, scintillating, colorful, and engaging. The joys of association in third places may initially be marked by smiles and twinkling eyes, by hand-shaking and back-slapping, but they proceed and are maintained in pleasurable and entertaining conversation.

A comparison of cultures readily reveals that the popularity of conversation in a society is closely related to the popularity of third places. In the 1970s, the economist Tibor Scitovsky introduced statistical data confirming what others had observed casually.⁷ The rate of pub visitation in England or café visitation in France is high and corresponds to an obvious fondness for sociable conversation. American tourists, Scitovsky notes, "are usually struck and often morally shocked by the much more leisurely and frivolous attitude toward life of just about all foreigners, manifest by the tremendous amount of idle talk they engage in, on promenades and park benches, in cafés, sandwich shops, lobbies, doorways, and wherever people congregate." And, in the pubs and cafés, Scitovsky goes on to report, "socializing rather than drinking is clearly most people's main occupation."

American men of letters often reveal an envy of those societies in which conversation is more highly regarded than here, and usually recognize the link between activity and setting. Emerson, in his essay on "Table Talk," discussed the importance of great cities in representing the power and genius of a nation.⁸ He focused on Paris, which dominated for so long and to such an extent as to influence the whole of Europe. After listing the many areas in which that city had become the "social center of the world," he concluded that its "supreme merit is that it is the city of conversation and cafés."

In a popular essay on "The American Condition," Richard Goodwin invited readers to contrast the rush hour in our major cities with the close of the working day in Renaissance Italy: "Now at Florence, when the air is red with the summer sunset and the campaniles begin to sound vespers and the day's work is done, everyone collects in the piazzas. The steps of Santa Maria del Fiore swarm with men of every rank and every class; artisans, merchants, teachers, artists, doctors, technicians, poets, scholars. A thousand minds, a thousand arguments; a lively intermingling of questions, problems, news of the latest happening, jokes; an inexhaustible play of language and thought, a vibrant curiosity; the changeable temper of a thousand spirits by whom every object of discussion is broken into an infinity of sense and significations—all these spring into being, and then are spent. And this is the pleasure of the Florentine public."⁹