



A Tale of Two Cities: Amsterdam and New York

Jan Rath

Woody Allen's movie *Hannah and Her Sisters*, one of the three movies about New York being screened in Eye today, is about a group of lower-middle class people – family members plus their spouses – and how they cope with each other and with the neurotic rhythm of life in the big city. The family affairs play out against the backdrop of New York, Manhattan in particular. The director and one of the characters is Woody Allen himself, who virtually embodies New York City: he was born in the Bronx, grew up in Brooklyn and has spent a great part of his life in Manhattan. Many of his movies are a celebration of or a tribute to the Big Apple.

I was co-editor of a book that appeared last year called *Immigration and the New Urban Landscape: New York and Amsterdam*. It is not so much about family, but about migrants: how they have become part of the mainstream in both New York and Amsterdam, and how that process has been shaped by the opportunities—or lack thereof—in these cities. It also deals with the question how these cities have changed because of the presence of migrants.

Anyone who has ever visited New York recognizes in *Hannah and Her Sisters* the typical New York landscape: we see skyscrapers, renovated factories, lofts, brownstones, parks, the famous Carlyle hotel, and Woody Allen leaving the hospital where he underwent tests to find out whether or not he had a brain tumor. He was of course sure he had one.

He was depressed, as always, and expected to die soon, but tried to cheer himself up. He told himself, without much conviction, that “Nothing can happen, I’m in the city and I’m surrounded by people and restaurants...”. This observation did not comfort him, on the contrary, it upset him even more.

Interestingly, he referred to modern urban life in this moment of crisis. In Allen’s movies the city is omnipresent. Not only in terms of physical structures—say bricks and mortar—but also in sociological terms: the city is crowded, busy, hectic, overwhelming, difficult to manoeuvre, anonymous, and to some extent the city is like a jungle.

How people cope with these circumstances is a classic theme in urban sociology. In the early days of social science, say the late nineteenth, early twentieth century - a period characterized by rapid economic expansion - cities grew dramatically: such as London, Berlin, Chicago, New York, and Rotterdam. The expanding manufacturing industries needed labor, and poorly educated people from surrounding rural areas or from distant countries gravitated to these cities in droves. Farm boys and girls transformed into proletarian workers with nothing else to offer than their labor - they became factory fodder.

This dramatic urbanization had profound consequences for their way of life and, indirectly, for the urban way of life. Most came from small rural communities, from places where everybody knew each other, where they were able to maintain personal relationships with virtually everybody, places that fostered protection as well as the kind of social cohesion that our national and city governments love so much. But not all that glitters is gold. In these small communities one also find peer pressure, gossip, and social expectations that may hamper one’s freedom of movement.

In big cities, on the other hand, it is impossible to maintain face-to-face relationships with everyone. There are simply too many people. Social relationships therefore become more and more impersonal, and are increasingly based on rational considerations. Also, support systems are not as developed as in smaller communities. Besides, it is way too busy and this may drive the urban people nuts.

Many people react to this hectic and potentially neurotic situation by avoiding or ignoring the other. They do notice the other’s presence but decide not to acknowledge it explicitly,

not to pay attention to it: an attitude we urban sociologists call *civil inattention*. You don't look at each other directly, do not start a conversation, do not say hello etc.

But, at the same time, people in cities are also looking for new forms of belonging, to some extent based on their own preferences. In a small town, there are only one perhaps two 'Gothic' fans, too few to sustain institutional practices, but in a city there are easily a few thousand Gothic fans. They will try to meet, organize joint activities etc and in so doing create new urban identities, new forms of belonging, and new places of home. Cities are therefore the location of multiple subcultures.

To some extent, urbanites can switch from one to the other. In the movie *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Woody Allen displayed dissatisfaction with his Jewish identity, and – to his mother's dismay - decides to become Roman-Catholic. The freedom to choose does not really exist in small communities. *Stadtluft macht Frei*. Well, I have to admit that switching is not always that easy; the Roman-Catholic novice Woody Allen discovered that soon enough.

Families can also serve as places of belonging, places where you are protected from big city pressures, as *Hannah and her Sisters* demonstrate.

The movie is very American: you do not only see the streetscapes of New York, but also Thanksgiving dinners, you observe the way people greet each other and talk to each other, etc. Could a similar kind of movie could have been made in Amsterdam? The question is whether or not the differences between the cities shape different opportunities and eventually a different way of life.

People in the Netherlands seem to have a soft spot for New York, probably partly because of the fact that the history of NYC is connected to the history of the Netherlands. The rhythm of the heartbeat of Dutch visitors to NY goes up when they hear about Peter Stuyvesant, when they wander through such streets as Amsterdam Avenue, Wall Street, Bleecker Street, Broadway or the Bowery—all streets with originally Dutch names—or when they take the subway to Harlem or Brooklyn.

There is also a belief that what works in New York will work everywhere. A few years ago the then deputy mayor of Amsterdam Lodewijk Asscher visited New York to explore the intricacies of New York's integration policy. Well, New York does not pursue an integration policy, but the deputy mayor did notice something worthwhile following. Upon returning he praised the American way of appreciating the skills and competencies of newcomers and he explicitly mentioned the fact that debates about migrants and migrant integration were not characterized by integration bullshit, in Dutch 'geen integratiegezeik'.

I was happy to hear it. While the Dutch love to complain about migrants and emphasize their deficiencies, the Americans seem to have a more open and pragmatic attitude and therefore offer more opportunities.

In our book *New York-Amsterdam*, we discuss similarities and differences and of course raise the question whether it would make sense to compare these cities.

The similarities were obvious:

- Amsterdam and New York City share a high proportion of foreign-born immigrants.
- These immigrants have had to face a wide array of challenges of adjustment and accommodation, and these processes show remarkable similarities in the two cities.
- By the standards of their respective countries, Amsterdam and New York are relatively liberal cities with progressive elites.

The differences between the cities, however, overshadow the parallels:

- Scale. The population of Amsterdam's municipality proper is about 800,000 and that of the agglomeration about 1.0 million. New York City's population is 8.2 million and that of the metropolitan region's about 22.2 million. Also, the surface area of New York City is six times that of Amsterdam, and the population density twice as high. Notwithstanding the fact that Amsterdam is considered a 'big city' in the Dutch context, Amsterdam compared to New York City sometimes seems barely more than a small picturesque European place.
- Migration history. Amsterdam lacks a continuous history as an immigrant city, and the institutional legacy that this involves.

- Welfare provisions. New York, for its part, lacks (in American eyes) the generous welfare protections and services that are provided in the Netherlands and Amsterdam. The economic citizenship regimes in both cities are an ocean apart. More generally, the role of the state is fundamentally different.
- Among other things, Amsterdam lacks the large native black minority presence which is so significant in New York. Race clearly continues to play a determining role in the US.
- Yet the expectations about the newcomers' ethnocultural heritage is quite different. The US tends to be much more relaxed. In NYC, immigrants do almost as well as US-born workers in terms of wages, benefits and occupational status, and they are more likely to live in the middle-income brackets than people born in the US since they often work in the family business. But, as the movie shows, families are a mixed blessing.
- A related difference, finally, is the presence of Jews. In Amsterdam, Jewish life was dramatically affected by the Holocaust; this is evidently not the case in NY, where Jews constitute a sizable and visibly present community, as Woody Allen's movies attest.

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Jan Rath is a professor of urban sociology at the University of Amsterdam and co-editor of the anthology 'Immigration and the New Urban Landscape: New York and Amsterdam' (2014).