Comfort Zones

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"So, are any of your friends Jewish? You know people feel more comfortable with their own kind." Interested in my life in England where I had settled several years prior, my 93-year-old aunt had begun our conversation by asking about what she felt was the most basic component of feeling at home. Several months later, when I again returned to south Florida to visit, Ida continued, almost as if I had not been away. "You know," she said, "I only feel comfortable with Jewish people." She spoke about her simultaneous love of the United States, her 'country', and of Israel, 'her homeland', whose internal rifts, treatment of the Palestinians, and foreign policy she knows nothing about.

Yet by all conventional measures, Ida is among the assimilated, not the ghettoized. Although her mother was a Russian Jewish immigrant, Ida was born in the United States. She knows Yiddish but she has spent most of her long life speaking English. She spent her childhood in poverty in a New York City multi-ethnic neighborhood, and as an adult lived in a quintessentially middle-class multi-ethnic suburb. She was not religious and her husband, a prosperous lawyer, was an atheist with a wide professional and personal network of people of all backgrounds.

My aunt's statements cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to current debates about identity, belonging, nationality, and religious difference, because they contain many of the contradictory tensions that pervade contemporary debates about immigration. She narrated her identity to me in the same year that Angela Merkel, Prime Minister of Germany, declared that immigrants in Germany lived in ghettos, and David Cameron stated that British Muslims live in 'these segregated communities behaving in ways that run counter to our values'.

What does Ida's admission of who she feels comfortable with say about whose comfort zones are highlighted in public debate and how people actually live their lives? Whose comfort zone is typical, Ida's or my mother Evelyn's? Evelyn came from the same Russian-Jewish American second generation, and also grew up speaking Yiddish and English. During her New York City childhood her parents' networks were German Protestants and Italian Catholics as well as Russian Jews. Throughout her life Evelyn had close affective relations with Jews and non-Jews. However, while in her childhood her closest friends were a circle of Jewish girls who formed their own club, complete with motto and jewelry, Evelyn's adult comfort zone was a group of parents – Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish – who were active in the local primary school. For my mother, as for many others, life cycle changes reconfigured her networks of sociability.

Most rhetoric and policy statements about assimilation, integration and social cohesion tell us little about how immigrants and their children live their lives, including the multiplicities of identities and comfort zones various immigrants and their descendants inhabit. Thinking about the variety of 'ways of being' that people who claim, or are categorized by, the same public identity inhabit, allows us to explore the differences among how people live their lives in terms of daily cultural practices, their public identities, and their personal comfort zones. For example, Ida and my mother share forms of dress, speech, culinary preferences, and décor that reflect the regional middle-class culture of the New York metropolitan area of their generation. They also have the same public ethnic identity: Jewish Americans. But they have had different kinds of social networks, which have given them different kinds of social capital, knowledges, and comfort zones.

The concept of comfort zone needs to become part of both the vocabulary of migration studies and daily life. Social geographers have begun to examine the factors that shape a personal identity, best understood as a psychic sense of being spatially at home, rather than ethnicity (McCreanor et al., 2006). However, comfort zones, while influenced by locality, should not be conflated with space. They exist within human social relationships and practices, and can involve particular physical locations, but can also exist within social relations mediated by letters, phone calls, or cyberspace forms of communication from a Facebook page to an email.

Comfort zones express histories of specific childhoods shaped by class, gender, family history and the cultural practices and sensibilities of a particular city and place, as well as intergenerational patterns of belief and custom. Comfort zones also embody life circumstances including, for many people, their past and continuing racialization, stigmatization, discrimination and prejudice. We all have comfort zones: a set of people with whom we like to spend time, and, at times of our day or week or life, we actively seek out.

However, as we live our life and make choices about who inhabits our comfort zone, we learn that not everyone's choices are equally visible, normalized, or judged acceptable according to national categorizations of belonging and difference. If our ancestors are seen as belonging to the core of the nation, then our comfort

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zone is not publically visible or remarked upon in public debates, even if we chose 'our own kind'. But if we are categorized through an 'ethnic lens' as different from the national cultural/racialised/religious core and we make the same choices about our comfort zone, we are seen as refusing to integrate and a threat to the social fabric of the nation (Glick Schiller et al., 2005). Moreover, if because of the ethnic lens of national discourse we are seen as the 'other', even when our comfort zone is a domain of sociability built on common interests or affinities with those understood as belonging to the nation, social scientists and politicians fail to notice.

Every day and without fanfare, recent migrants to Europe and North America and their children find pathways of local emplacement despite stigmatization. They settle by building comfort zones. Some, like Aunt Ida, settle on the basis of their shared ascribed identities. Others, like my mother, become part of a locality by establishing domains of commonality despite difference. If we put aside the public obsession with cultural difference and recognize that social life is lived by all of us within variations of personal comfort zones, we could reject the anti-immigrant fear mongering of political pundits. Then we could embrace common human concerns… and perhaps also save our planet from environmental destruction before it gets too hot to be a comfort zone.

References

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