



# **URBAN SOCIOLOGY**



by  
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# URBAN SOCIOLOGY



A Systematic Introduction

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# **URBAN SOCIOLOGY**

To Koukla, Norma and Christopher

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# Introduction

Most Americans today are born, live, and die in cities. Cities dominate our day-to-day lives—our work, recreation, technology, where we live, whom we meet, and the ways we interact all reflect a culture based on cities. Our lives and those of our cities are intertwined and linked in social, cultural, and physical systems, so that urban social structure and norms affect our definitions of who we are and how we see the world. Physical space throws us together or isolates us in human crowds and canyons of steel and concrete. We are strangers alone or at home among our friends and relatives. In cities we become lost in mazes of one-way streets or wide boulevards and we learn all the nooks and crannies of a downtown arcade. America and much of Western culture have become urban, and both are dominated by urban ways of doing things.

Because of the importance of cities in modern society, sociologists have concentrated on describing and defining urban structure and ways of life. "Urban sociology" is one of the oldest specialties within sociology; it dates from the turn of the century. Further, many other sociological specialties have distinct urban dimensions: criminology

and the investigation of deviant behavior are mainly studies of urban conditions; demographers are greatly concerned with processes of urban migration and the shift of people from rural to urban residences; and the studies of social policy, family, aging, medicine, social differentiation, power, and bureaucracy have urban dimensions. Because cities affect nearly every aspect of modern life, some sociologists have defined urban sociology as coterminous with the discipline itself. Any phenomenon in the social world that has an urban component is seen as part of urban sociology. However, most research and theoretical development in the area is focused on certain dominant critical issues.

## Urban Sociology

Urban sociology has been particularly concerned with city structure, urban life-styles, and social organization.

Traditional studies in urban sociology can be divided into four broad categories, discussed respectively in Sections I, II, III, and IV of this book:

1. Human ecology
2. Urban community

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3. Urban problems, policies, and planning
4. Urbanization

**Human Ecology.** Ecology, the study of how people use and relate themselves to geographic space, is a theoretical orientation that developed within urban sociology and has a great influence at present. Sociological human ecologists study land-use, changes in patterns of land-use, and spatial organization, and are very closely related in theory and method to human geographers and urban economists (particularly "location specialists").

**Urban Community.** Sociologists who study the *city as community* do not concentrate on land-use, but instead are concerned with social organization, ways of life, and the social-psychological impact of cities. Urban community studies may concentrate on *organization variables* such as social systems, complex organizations, or groups. They may also be concerned with *social-psychological phenomena*: How do people perceive their cities, communities, and neighborhoods? Does urban life affect the ways we see ourselves? Are there personality types that are unique to

urban areas? Do cities create mental illness? All of these subjects have been addressed from urban community perspectives.

These first two areas of concern to urban sociologists also reflect the two dominant theoretical schools in urban sociology: human ecology and community. As will be seen in subsequent sections, there is a great deal of overlap in the problems addressed by adherents of the two theoretical orientations and, more often than not, results of their studies are complementary. It is through analyzing results of studies based on both perspectives that the most complete picture of the fabric of city life is obtained.

**Urban Problems, Policy, and Planning.** The remaining topics that are typically included in urban sociology are issue areas. To be sure, there are major theoretical developments specific to each area, but they draw heavily on theory, method, and organization from the ecological and community perspectives. The topic of urban problems, policy, and planning deals with the nature of urban problems and possible actions that might be taken to correct social ills. Here, urban sociologists have been concerned not only with ways of

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redeveloping existing cities to make them better places in which to live, but also with ways to *plan* and create new cities.

**Urbanization.** The fourth area of interest to urban sociologists is the nature of urban growth and development, the process of *urbanization*, by which a greater and greater proportion of people move to cities. Sociologists seek answers to the following: Why do cities grow? What happens when the urban population explodes? Are there relationships between cities, modern ways of life, and industrialization? What are conditions like in rapidly urbanizing areas in Asia, Africa, and Latin America? What has caused the migration of people to cities? All of these issues fall within the study of urbanization.

C. Wright Mills (1955) once said that a good sociologist must have a "sociological imagination." An important part of this "imagination" is the necessity to look at the world from a critical perspective. Things are not necessarily what they seem to be at first glance. Sociologists probe beneath the surface to understand the essence and meaning of social life and organization. Sometimes their conclusions support commonsense views; at other times they conflict. Sociology is a "debunking" science that may at times disagree with dominant opinion. Where these instances are particularly important, they have been noted in the text.

Urban sociology is not just involved in examining the reality of generally accepted "everyday truths"; because it

is a science, sociology particularly concentrates on attempting to explain and predict human behavior. Urban sociology has as its broad goal the understanding and prediction of human behaviors associated with urban life. This book will deal mainly with the theoretical orientations and research results that have been amassed by urban sociologists.

## Organization of the Text

The book opens with an introduction that presents the concept of urban sociology and its theoretical foundations (already given in the preceding paragraphs), and also gives varying definitions for the term "city." The introduction is followed by a brief overview of urban history, given in Chapter 1.

Following Chapter 1 the book is organized into four sections.

Section I surveys human ecology. Basic formulations of the "Chicago School" are discussed as are the critiques of the Chicago position (Chapter 2). In Chapter 3 modern theoretical and methodological approaches are described. Chapters 4 and 5, respectively, discuss conceptions of urban regions and the nature of intraregional organization. Special emphasis in Chapter 5 is placed on the process of suburbanization and patterns of residential segregation.

Section II deals with the city as community. In Chapter 6, the urban community is viewed as a social system and typologies of community structure

are presented. Of particular significance in this chapter is the emphasis on social stratification and social power in the organizational literature. Chapter 7 covers the broad range of urban and suburban, social class, and ethnic lifestyles that can be found in American urban areas. Finally, Chapter 8 presents basic formulations of urban social psychology, the self as an urban entity, perception of urban space, and the social-psychological consequences of migration.

Section III is involved with both urban problems and redevelopment and urban planning. Chapter 9 describes, briefly, the nature and extent of the twentieth century's urban crisis and some programs that were created to address it. Chapter 10 describes the major approaches to new community development, issues involved, and results of current planning efforts.

Section IV describes conditions in today's urbanizing world. Research on Africa, Asia, and Latin America is reviewed in Chapter 11. Chapter 12 highlights problems of urbanization in the Third World, and Chapter 13 concentrates on the effects of primacy and hyperurbanization on social structure and economic development. Attention is particularly paid to the importance and nature of urban squatter settlements and their forms of social organization.

In the Epilogue, Chapter 14, we speculate about the nature of cities in the next twenty to twenty-five years: What will the city of the future be like?

## What Is a City?

Cities exist on every continent (except Antarctica) and in every country. Most people know when they are in a large city and when they are not, but there is no clear agreement among countries as to what constitutes a city. In the United States, officially, an "urban place" is any community with at least 2,500 residents; an "urbanized area" is a city with no fewer than 50,000 residents. Whole counties and groups of counties that are dependent on a particular central city or twin cities are a "Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area." In South Africa, the number of people required to define a place as an urban area differs according to race, and in Brazil, *size of the population* is not used by authorities to define cities at all—a city is a capital.

The Brazilian definition is based on the *political function* of urban areas. In the United States, cities are not only defined by their population size, but also by whether or not they have filed papers of incorporation with the state. Incorporated cities have formal structure (city government) and definite boundaries. Like population-based definitions, political-formal definitions of what constitutes a city vary from country to country.

A third way of defining cities is by social structure and the functions they perform—this third approach is *sociological*. Sociologists have not been particularly concerned with minimum population or formal recognition of

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organization but rather, in the sociological tradition, cities are defined as geographically-bound forms of social organization that have certain characteristics. First, populations are relatively large, densely settled, and heterogeneous (Wirth 1938); second, at least some of the people engage in nonagricultural pursuits, and some are specialists. (Some social scientists also require the presence of written language [Sjoberg 1965].) Third, according to Max Weber, a city serves a *market function* and it has at least *partial regulatory power* (Weber 1958). Fourth, cities manifest forms of interaction in which the individual is not known as a complete person, which means that at least some interactions are with people not truly known as individuals, but instead, by the roles they perform. Fifth, cities require a "social bond" based on something larger than immediate family or tribe, perhaps based on rational law or tradition, such as religion or loyalty to a king.

The definition of cities presented above is not exhaustive. In general sociologists define cities by their organization, functions, and social characteristics.

## Theoretical Precursors to Urban Sociology

Classical European thought had a major impact on the development of urban sociology in the United States for two reasons. First, sociology originated in Europe as a discipline; second, many

of the early urban sociologists studied in Europe under the classical scholars. Although the threads of European thought having influence in urban sociology are too complex to be discussed in detail here, certain people and traditions are worthy of note. The most important of these traditions are discussed below.

**1. The City as Social Organization.** Such scholars as Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Henry Maine emphasized the functions cities perform and their types of organization. Weber argued that the city performs economic, legal, and protective functions (Weber 1958). Using his concepts of formal organization, power, and authority (Gerth and Mills 1946), it is also possible to analyze urban governments and formal structures.

Durkheim's contributions to sociology of the city were, like Weber's, numerous. Durkheim analyzed differences between traditional forms and more complex forms of social organization found in urbanizing societies in western Europe (Durkheim 1947). Durkheim argued that the division of labor created a mutual interdependence among various segments of the population, so that what held people together could be considered a form of *organic solidarity*. In traditional, small scale societies where there is minimal division of labor, and people interact with one another according to their "collective conscience" and tradition, social organization is based on *mechanical solidarity*.

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One of Durkheim's major insights was the idea that highly complex societies, such as urban societies, are integrated on a functional level. A second important aspect of his theories was that social structure could be reflected in the ways people distributed themselves in geographical space (Schnore 1958). This insight had major implications for later developments in human ecology.

Maine (1870), like Weber and Durkheim, saw cities as functional organizations. The basis of urban organization was the social contract among members of society. In urban societies, one's ascribed status as a member of a family was not as significant as was the set of mutual agreements or contracts. Social contracts allowed people to live in geographic proximity to non-kin and to interact with others to whom they were not known as individuals.

**2. The City as Evil.** Until recently, urban sociologists generally believed that conditions of urban life led to negative consequences for the individual. Oswald Spengler (1928) believed that as cities grew larger people began to define themselves as being different than those who lived in the countryside. In time, cities separate from nature and overemphasize wealth, power, and logic. As a result, the city loses its naturally-based "soul"; it declines and finally dies.

Georg Simmel (Wolf 1950) saw the city as an agent of social and psychological change. Urban life, Simmel argued, caused deviance and criminal behavior,

but it allowed people a chance to develop their maximum potential and to be free.

According to Simmel, because a city is so large, a person cannot grasp and understand all of it at any one time. Second, because of its complexity people have to invest a great deal more psychic energy to live in a city than in the countryside. Investment of psychic energy causes people's nervous systems to become overloaded, but they store the overload in sealed off compartments and can then react to one another in nonemotional, blasé ways. Compartmentalization and nonemotionalism were seen by Simmel as ways to reduce urban nervous stimulation, but also as ways of creating conditions in which humans lose a sense of individuality, with the result that people are known mainly as complexes of segmented roles. While the city's complexity might allow individual freedom, it also creates marginality.

To Simmel urban life is full of inconsistencies; according to Smith (1979):

Role specialization and personality traits functional for the money economy are rewarded; other, more emotional and spiritual inclinations are discounted or frustrated. Psychic overload is engendered by excessive nervous stimulation and urban industrial capitalism's overbearing artifacts. This reinforces the same "matter-of-factness" that the division of labor and the ad-

vanced money economy encouraged. . . . [On the other hand, by] rising above the barriers thrown up by objective culture, the truly refined individual can devote the self to a life of delicacy, spirituality and idealism. . . . The metropolis provides both barriers and opportunities for realizing the generally human and the personally unique and irreplaceable. Simmel leaves it up to the individual to realize both of these values—humanism and subjective life—by transcending the heavy weight of objective spirit in the modern world (Smith 1979: 122-23).

The key to the effects of urban life, according to Simmel, is the individual. The objectively oriented culture of cities presses the individual into objectified categories that result in personality problems. Conversely, by cultivating a sense of individuality it is possible for a person to transcend the pressures of urban life, to take advantage of the city's great diversity in interests and relationships, and to, thereby, create a truly unique and humane subjective sense of self.

Many of the negative overtones of nineteenth century urban philosophy were not without their justification. The rapidly urbanizing and industrializing countries of western Europe were facing very serious social problems. (For instance, death rates in cities far exceeded those in rural areas. The burning of high sulfur, soft coal in

factories and homes resulted in clouds of polluted smog. In England, for instance, sulfur would mix with water and produce an "acid rain" that ate into building facades and along with ash, clogged the lungs.) The United States experienced problems of rapid urbanization somewhat later than did Germany, France, and England, but conditions were also very bad. In the United States there was also a fairly strong farm and rural intellectual tradition emanating from works by Thomas Jefferson and others of the revolutionary and pre-revolutionary era (White 1962) that further affected intellectual perceptions of urban life.

**3. The City as a Way of Life.** The founders of the sociological tradition considered the organization of urban life as qualitatively different from that of typical rural patterns. This is reflected in Durkheim's, Weber's, Maine's, Simmel's, and Spengler's statements. They further expected that city forms of organization would produce different life-styles than rural forms; urban people would also have unique personality types and proneness to mental disorder. This was particularly highlighted in the work of Louis Wirth, whose "Urbanism as a way of life" (Wirth 1938) had negative consequences for the individual. What is most important about this conception is that many early sociologists placed blame for deviance and disorder often found in cities squarely on the complexity and organizational patterns that they manifested.



**4. City Life Is Subject to Study Using Scientific Procedures.** Durkheim and Weber, among others, argued that society could be studied using the methods of science (Aron 1970). The major purpose of the science of sociology is to understand human action and the meanings people give to their conduct. In this sense, urban sociology is the scientific investigation of urban life and structure. Urban sociology employs scientific orientations and procedures to develop understandings of urban conditions, forms of organization, and the ways people live in cities.

### **Methods of Urban Investigation**

Two major orientations to social science research based on data collection and underlying theory can be defined. This dichotomy of orientation will be referred to as "qualitative and quantitative" for simplicity.

#### **Qualitative versus Quantitative Research**

Qualitative research has often concerned itself with observation of local activities by researcher participation in the social milieu. This form of qualitative research is called *participant observation*. Participant observation tends to focus on small groups within the city, but may be used to analyze much larger groups and social institutions. Some researchers continue to favor observational techniques over others. Participant observation affords

one the advantage of not only viewing events as they occur, but also questioning informants about their behavior.

A second form of qualitative analysis is in-depth *interviewing*. Interviewing techniques vary from informal, in which no written or specifically ordered questions are used, to formal. In a formal interview a questionnaire is employed. Questions are asked in specific order and many follow-up questions that ask for specific responses may be part of the formal questionnaire. In the most formal interview format, a researcher may schedule meetings with interviewees, take notes and/or tape record conversations. Informal interviewing, like participant observation, allows the researcher to interact with the people being studied within more or less natural settings, while more formal interview procedures tend to provide more consistent information (since questions are asked in the same way to each respondent).

Qualitative analyses have certain advantages. While in the field conducting qualitative research, the problem under investigation can be reformulated or totally redirected as the need arises. Field work allows researchers to interact with people in the research setting. Researchers are able to gain firsthand knowledge of the social milieu and day-to-day changes in situation. While qualitative research designs often do not allow scientific generalization, qualitative studies tend to be sensitive to process and ongoing change. They are not locked into as rigid

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a format as are most structured survey and attitudinal studies.

The other major form of research is *quantitative*. While there are many forms of quantitative research, the most often applied in cities is the *survey*. Surveys normally involve development of a questionnaire or instrument, administration of that instrument to a sample, and analysis of data generated using statistical procedures.

Researchers feel that *quantitative* research offers one the opportunity to rigorously analyze information gathered from a broad population base. While structure is imposed upon the subject by necessity (data must meet appropriate statistical assumptions), the structure is different than for qualitative research. "Hard" data from quantitative studies reflect the explicit constraints imposed by the survey instrument. The framework imposed in qualitative study lies mainly within the researcher. "Soft" (qualitative) research is most often descriptive in nature while hard, quantitative data can be used much more easily for prediction. If they meet certain assumptions, quantitative studies can also allow generalization to populations from samples, and they are more easily subject to replication and checks for validity and reliability than are qualitative studies.

A second source employed in many quantitative urban studies is the census and other secondary sources of data. Census, voting rolls, organizational records, and the like provide ready, and

often accurate, sources of information, but they do have limitations. First, in some cases accuracy may be questionable and the researcher has no control over how the data were collected. Second, categories, types of measurements, and information available may not fit the researcher's needs. There is little one can do to re-collect the data or to modify it. Therefore, certain studies that must rely on secondary data may not be feasible, and others may need to be redesigned because critical pieces of information cannot be obtained.

Finally, it must be stressed that there is no *one* most appropriate method for conducting urban research. Techniques employed should fit the goals of the project. Clear, vivid descriptions of urban life can most readily be created using qualitative techniques. Trends, distributions, population characteristics, attitudes and opinions are most easily analyzed using quantitative data. Some very complex issues are best approached using both quantitative and qualitative research designs in tandem. Both quantitative and qualitative research procedures have been effectively employed in urban settings and both have produced information important for our understanding of urban life.

## Summary

In the introduction basic sociological orientations toward the city are described. There are two dominant theoretical approaches—ecology and community—and both consider the city to



be a form of social organization rather than merely a political or population phenomenon.

Urban sociology rests on a base of both theory and method. The theoretical traditions having the most impact on urban sociology's development include:

1. The city as social organization
2. The city as evil
3. Urbanism as qualitatively different life-style
4. The city as an appropriate subject for scientific analysis

Urban sociologists study the city using a variety of methods. Their selection of procedures depends upon the goals of the specific research project.

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