

THE SOCIOLOGY OF URBAN LIFE

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**THE SOCIOLOGY
OF URBAN LIFE**

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preface

The SOCIOLOGY OF URBAN LIFE is designed as a comprehensive introduction to the field of urban sociology. Completing such a project is most challenging because of the vast diversity of accumulated theories, concepts, and empirical data which are currently available regarding all aspects of modern urban communities and urban life. The author of such a work is sometimes tempted to present an eclectic assortment of topics, in the hope that nothing significant will be left out. On the other hand, there is an equally compelling temptation to provide a more limited and focused perspective, with the risk that the greater selectivity of materials will provide a far less comprehensive overview of the field than usually called for by "survey" type courses common to urban sociology.

This present volume attempts to avoid the extremes suggested above. Of necessity, urban sociology remains a highly speculative and interpretive field, requiring the synthesis of a vast assortment of theories, concepts, and research findings. But such synthesis must provide a workable balance between focus and breadth, and between extreme eclecticism and rigid systemization. This balance hopefully has been achieved here by the introduction of five major perspectives as the book's guiding frame of reference. They include: 1) the social change perspective; 2) the social organization perspective; 3) the ecological perspective; 4) the social problems perspective; and 5) the social policy perspective. These perspectives are implied or

assumed throughout the book rather than spelled out in every instance, but they are defined and explained in more detail in the introductory chapter.

In addition to a guiding frame of reference, a variety of other student needs were taken into account in preparing the manuscript. These include an appropriate reading level, clarity of presentation, logical organization, sufficient explanation and illustration, and the need to maintain a high level of interest and stimulation. It is the author's premise that a well written, interesting, and clearly presented synthesis of current knowledge of urban processes and forms be available for many more people than just those seriously committed to becoming urban scholars or professional urban practitioners, and it was partially with this goal in mind that the present volume has been prepared.

I wish to acknowledge with deep debts of gratitude the many persons who wittingly or unwittingly contributed to the making of this book. First are the many former teachers who helped shaped my interest in and knowledge of the many dimensions of urban society—most notably, Amos Hawley, Albert J. Reiss, Albert J. Mayer, H. Warren Dunham, Harold Wilensky, Bazil Zimmer, Donald Marsh, and Mel Ravitz. Colleagues who read portions of the manuscript and made many valuable suggestions include Robert Gutman, William Faunce, Melvin Webber, Nahum Medalia, Richard Stamps, Donald Warren, Jesse Pitts, Donald Levin, and Jacqueline Scherer. W. C. Dutton, Jr., Edmond Burke Peterson, Charles Blessing, Norbert Gorwick, John T. Howard, Robert Hoover, Robert Carpenter, Bernard Frieden, and Robert Marans are among former colleagues, employers, or teachers in the field of urban planning who helped sensitize me to some of the applied and policy aspects of urban planning as a problem solving profession.

Special thanks and appreciation go to Donald Levin and Jacqueline Scherer for their more direct contributions to the book. Levin wrote Chapter Seven on the urban family and Chapters Nine and Ten on formal and informal political institutions. Scherer wrote Chapter Eight on urban religion and Chapter Twelve on urban welfare and education. Scherer also shares equal authorship with me in preparing Chapter Sixteen on the urban future and social policy. Needless to say, I alone accept full responsibility for the contents and any shortcomings of these chapters, as well as for the remaining parts of the book which I have exclusively authored.

I am grateful to Ed Stanford and Bill Webber of Prentice-Hall for their help and encouragement, and to the late Marion Wilson, Beth Watchpocket, and Denise Pattison for typing the manuscript. Finally, I wish to thank my son, David, who prepared some of the photographs, and my wife, Patricia, who assisted in ways too numerous to detail.

Harry Gold

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PART I

INTRODUCTION



chapter I

urban sociology as a field of study

During the past century, America has changed from a predominantly rural society to one in which a great majority of its population now lives in urban areas. This transformation has had such far-reaching effects on the American way of life that its significance has not yet been totally comprehended by most Americans. Recent popular concern with the nature and quality of urban life seems to have been aroused by the turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, when a series of urban crises claimed national attention, and many Americans began pressing for answers to questions about the nature and causes of urban problems and about the future of cities. As a result, urban sociology has recently become a field with considerable popular appeal to college and university students. What the neophyte student of urban sociology soon learns, however, is that the so-called current urban crisis is the product of a vast and complex evolutionary, or perhaps revolutionary, social process that has been continuously unfolding for many centuries. The student may also soon learn that urban sociology is a field of research with a rich and varied tradition going back at least a half-century, long before it assumed its current popularity. The boundaries and concerns of urban sociology have been in a continuous state of flux and growth during its development, and many sociologists are not certain that it makes sense to treat urban sociology as a distinct subspecialty set apart from general sociology. Because of the diversity and complexity of the subject

matter, the content of existing urban sociology texts differs widely, and the boundaries of the field are not readily apparent when one looks at the existing body of urban sociology literature.

The growing interest of legislators, government officials, journalists, community leaders, private foundations, research centers, and the general public, has resulted in a tremendous increase in the volume of urban research and writing. Millions of dollars have been poured into studies of virtually all aspects of urban life: population trends, changing patterns of residential and social mobility, poverty, housing, transportation and communications problems, race and ethnic relations, civil disorder, crime, city-suburban relationships, changing land-use patterns, municipal taxation and service delivery problems, pollution and other environmental problems, change in life styles and values—the list of urban-related topics is virtually endless.

The field of urban sociology has in fact grown so broad in its scope and in its overlapping concerns with topics associated with other disciplines and other subspecialties of sociology that some scholars have begun to doubt whether urban sociology really does have a clear focus of its own, independent of sociology as a whole (Gutman and Popenoe, 1970; Thomson, 1969). Very often, urban sociology courses and textbooks consist of a wide assortment of topics that do not seem to be connected to one another in any theoretically meaningful sort of way. Much of the writing, for example, relegates the urban community to a background context within which particular kinds of problems and behavior are considered, but the urban community itself is not the prime object of investigation. On the other hand, some textbooks and courses have become unduly restrictive in their efforts to provide a more rigorous or systematic frame of reference for urban sociology. They may focus exclusively on social stratification, social psychology, demography, or census tract analysis, at the expense of other equally important approaches or themes.

Of necessity, urban sociology still remains an interpretive, speculative field requiring much synthesis of empirical and theoretical materials from an extremely wide variety of sources. This book is no exception. It is an attempt to present the frames of reference that the author has evolved in his own courses in urban sociology and in his urban-related work experiences over the past several decades. The hope is that the book will do justice to what the author perceives as the mainstream of this difficult but exciting, challenging, and important field.

The field of urban sociology is so complex and diversified that it cannot be approached or completely understood from any single perspective or frame of reference. What is needed is a multidimensional approach that can provide the student with various perspectives to demonstrate the relationships between the various kinds of urban data and theory and clarify their meaning, without at the same time oversimplifying the complexities of the phenomena involved. To accomplish this goal, five major perspectives have been selected to provide the orientation for the remaining parts of the book. These are: 1) the *social change* perspective; 2) the *social organization* perspective; 3) the *ecological* perspective; 4) the *social problems* perspective; and 5) the *social policy* perspective.

Urban communities, like most social phenomena, are ever-changing entities. They may grow or decline, they may rearrange themselves internally, or their essential character may be altered over time. One cannot discuss present-day urban communities and urban life without asking such questions as: "How did these communities get to be the way they are?" "What are the existing forces likely to produce change?" Or "What are these communities going to be like in the foreseeable future?" Urban life as we know it is a relatively recent historical development, and there is no reason to believe that the urban community of tomorrow will be identical to the urban community of today. Because social change is ubiquitous to all social life, any effort to scientifically describe and explain current social realities is extremely difficult; and by the time existing social patterns that have been observed through social research can be analyzed and communicated by publication of the results (a process that may take at least several years) the original social patterns may have been significantly altered.

But to say that social change is ubiquitous is almost to say nothing, if the changes are not widespread or far-reaching in their consequences. The rhetoric of social change is currently in fashion, but if the concept of social change is widely and equally applied to all manner of conditions or is flagrantly abused, it may cease to have meaning or significance.

For our purposes, the most significant social change process is *urbanization*. Urbanization refers to the processes by which 1) the very first cities in history begin to emerge and develop in previously rural areas; 2) rural populations begin to move to cities; 3) urban communities continue to grow large and to absorb an ever-increasing portion of a society's or region's population; 4) the behavioral patterns of migrants to cities are transformed to conform to those that are characteristic of groups in the cities; 5) as cities grow larger, their structure and form become more complex and elaborately differentiated; and finally 6) urbanization transforms the nature of the entire society in which it occurs. Thus wherever urbanization takes place, it ultimately produces a radical transformation in the structure of the containing society.

The process of urbanization has been uneven throughout recorded history, moving slowly or not at all in some periods, accelerating rapidly in other periods, and declining in still others. In some periods of history urbanization has occurred so rapidly that it has assumed truly *revolutionary* proportions. Lest this be considered an exaggeration, it is important to identify the manner in which the concept of revolutionary change is being introduced here. Social revolutions involve nothing less than changes that drastically alter the structure of the entire society in which they take place. Thus the urban revolution, the industrial revolution, the democratic revolution, and so on, are all examples of radical transformations of the basic social patterns of the societies in which they occur.

Urbanization can be further described as revolutionary according to the following characteristics suggested by C. P. Wolf (1976) in his analysis of the structure of social revolutions:



Boston, like every other city, has changed through the years, as shown here in 1700, 1800, the turn of the century, and today. (Library of Congress and Massachusetts Dept. of Commerce and Development, Division of Tourism)

