

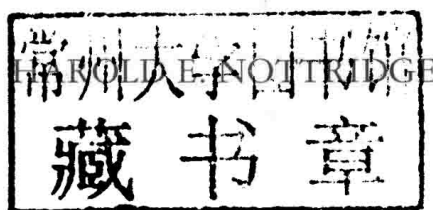
THE SOCIOLOGY OF URBAN LIVING

Harold E. Nottidge

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THE CITY



THE SOCIOLOGY OF URBAN LIVING



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SOCIOLOGY OF THE CITY

The Sociology of Urban Living

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General editor's introduction

Today sociology is going through a phase of great expansion. Not only is there a widespread general interest in the subject, but there is rapid growth in the numbers of new courses at Universities, Colleges of Further Education, and elsewhere. As a result there is an increasing number of potential readers of introductory textbooks. Some will be motivated by general interest; some will want to find out enough about the subject to see whether they would like to pursue a formal course in it; and others will already be following courses into which an element of sociology has been fused. One approach to these readers is by means of the comprehensive introductory volume giving a general coverage of the field of sociology; another is by means of a series of monographs each providing an introduction to a selected topic. Both these approaches have their advantages and disadvantages. The Library of Sociology adopts the second approach. It will cover a more extensive range of topics than could be dealt with in a single volume; while at the same time each volume will provide a thorough introductory treatment of any one topic. The reader who has little or no knowledge in the field will find within any particular book a foundation upon which to build, and to extend by means of the suggestions for further reading.

It is perhaps difficult to see the continuing and world-wide expansion of urban populations in a way which does

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not involve a value judgment. Certainly there are many influential voices which condemn the spread of towns and cities as 'urban sprawl' or see in the growth of suburbs with their rows of 'little boxes' a social and cultural desert, just as there are many who see in the city the supporting base for a whole range of cultural activities, and in the new suburbs and housing estates the potential for a growth of 'community' with its implication of a supportive and satisfying network of social relationships. But there are two main reasons why the issues involved need to be examined as dispassionately as possible.

First, the understanding of what is involved in urban living becomes ever more urgent to social scientists and planners alike. There is no reason why sociologists and others should not take up positions which involve their making a value judgment about the desirability or otherwise of various developments in society and their consequences. The essential requirement is only that such standpoints should be based on the best evidence, both theory and data, which is available. As will be seen from this book, such evidence is often hard to come by and the issues are more complex than public controversy would often make them seem. The second reason is arguably even more telling. This is that much controversy in the field of social life arises because of a readiness to concentrate on what may appear to be immediate social problems, and it is because of this that value judgments come so rapidly. On the other hand, a careful study of social structure and social processes, without too much emphasis on whether one is solving a social problem, may eventually lead to a better solution to the problems which arise. From this book the reader will, it is hoped, get a concise idea of what these social processes are in the field of urbanization, and what is the sociologist's approach to them.

A. R. EMERSON

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What is urban sociology?

The word 'urban' was hardly used in the English language before the nineteenth century. It is briefly defined by the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* as 'pertaining to town or city life'. It is derived from the Latin 'urbs' a term applied by the Romans to a city—more especially the city of Rome.

The word 'sociology', which is so frequently applied to all kinds of situations, is also of recent origin; the vagueness of its usage in common language and the element of disagreement that occurs among sociologists about the meaning of the word, make it advisable for us at the outset to accept a definition which will be adhered to throughout the whole of this work. We shall consider sociology to be essentially the science of social structure and social relationships. Urban sociology is the sociology of urban living; of people in groups and social relationships in urban social circumstances and situations.

Although the study of people in towns and cities is an important aspect of urban sociology it would be unwise to confine the study solely to towns and cities. It has proved extremely difficult to create a complete sociological definition of the city. One reason for this difficulty lies in the immense variations which exist between towns and cities whether we are looking at existing ones or those known to us in the past. Towns vary in size, density of population, general appearance and the reasons for their development; in their relationship to other places and in a host of other ways. They are often closely linked with

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the society which has led to their creation. It is not yet possible to find a common urban pattern which will apply, for instance, to a remote Latin American mountain town of some 2,000 inhabitants and equally to the huge industrial complexes of the English Midland conurbation where one town merges into another.

Another question of definition is linked with the problem of boundaries. It is occasionally possible to find historical examples of towns whose walls acted as a limit between the townsfolk and the country people. The townsman in certain German mediaeval towns might say with pride, '*Stadtluft macht frei*', meaning that the townsman was freer than the countryman because he possessed certain rights, but it is doubtful whether we can say that this represented a kind of social distinction which was universally applicable. In many highly urbanized countries today it is hard to demonstrate that there are definite sociological differences between town and country based solely on the location of the inhabitants. One American sociologist has found that in the middle of a large, densely populated industrial city, there were 'villagers' (Gans, 1962). They were immigrants who had brought with them a rural way of living and a different social structure from the urban dwellers round them. Though they earned their livelihood from a city they remained villagers. It will be useful for us to bear in mind the northcountryman's advice about Yorkshire, 'Don't consider it as an area—it's a state of mind.'

Some urban sociologists have tried to make a definition of the city based on the criterion of size of population, especially when studying the urbanization* process in

* The word 'urbanization' does not fit easily into the strait-jacket of a definition. The demographic description is the proportion of people who are living in urban settlements or a rise in that proportion. The actual process of urbanization—the changes which may occur in social patterns when people move to towns and cities—is important to the sociologist.

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regions such as parts of Asia or Latin America. In these areas some cities and towns are expanding with great speed and rapid urbanization is taking place. Breese (1969) has pointed out that it may be convenient to affix the term 'urban' to places with 20,000 inhabitants or more, so establishing an admittedly arbitrary demarcation between rural and urban by a counting of heads. However, this demarcation does suggest a number of important questions. Are those who live in settlements of less than 20,000 sociologically different from the others? Do we call them 'rural' and can we say that there will be social differences between those who live in large or small settlements? It is safer to assume that the criterion of 20,000 people may be a useful tool for studying the speed of urbanization in a particular area, but it must not be allowed to lead to a wider, unsupported theory applicable everywhere.

The fascination which the city held for some of the older urban sociologists seems to have bewitched them into uttering over-broad generalizations. Thus we find such terms as 'the urban dweller', 'the city dweller', 'urban man', 'the urban pattern', 'the urban way of life'. Moser, in his comparative study of a large number of English towns, has warned us of the need to refrain from the use of such general terms unless we are at the same time prepared to accept and to show the variations that exist between towns (Moser and Scott, 1961).

The relevance of urban sociology

For a long period, until about the seventeenth century, the population increase of the world was comparatively slow and the levels of population reached were fairly stable; then a rapid surge of population commenced which continued at an ever-increasing tempo. The process has been graphically called 'the population explosion'. Some calculations state that the present large world population

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will probably have doubled by the year AD 2000. Parallel with this general population expansion is an 'urban explosion'—an enormous increase in that part of the world's population which lives in cities. At present, some 370 million people live in large urban settlements of over one million inhabitants in size. It is estimated that, if this urban explosion continues, by the end of this century nearly 2,600 million people will be living in these settlements. These people would thus be a very much higher proportion of the world's population. The expansion would produce great physical and material demands and changes since vast quantities of houses, buildings, roads, communications and services of many types would be required. Those now studying social life in existing large urban areas may wonder what the future might hold in the way of intensified urban social problems.

The social changes involved would be greater still. New forms of social living could be created when men dwell in such large masses. It must be remembered, as Elisabeth Pfeil (1950) has reminded us, that man has been on the earth a much longer time than his towns and cities, which are a comparatively recent phenomenon in the history of social living; it is by no means certain that towns and cities, important as they have been in man's cultural development, are the last stage.

We are beginning to realize what urbanization implies by observing how it occasionally occurs in some relatively undeveloped parts of the world. The process of urbanization may happen with startling rapidity; the social adjustment to the new urban environment may demand great flexibility in the human beings who have to undergo this adjustment. We may wish to examine the effects of the sudden impact of urban living on a peasant who was tied to the soil and used to the social organization of a distant and isolated village, or the strains imposed on a wandering tribesman who exchanges the solitudes of the desert for the close life of crowded dwellings and the busy multi-

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tudes of the city streets (De Vries, 1961). These questions, both as they emerge today and as they will present themselves in the future, lie within the province of the urban sociologist.

Urban sociology can also be relevant in another way. According to Reissman (1965), urban studies are basic to the discipline of sociology. The process called urbanization can serve as an illustration of change in any society and the social structure and the social organization which are found in urban living can help us to understand the social structure and the social organization which are found in any society, even if not urban. Indeed Reissman affirms that some social features such as social class and bureaucracy can only really be studied in urban society. Cities and towns can be considered as a kind of social laboratory, in which a number of features of society can be studied more closely. For example, the sociological study of migration to urban areas affords useful material. People migrate to towns from less urban areas and from town to town. We may study the kind of people who move and ascertain what motives urged them to migrate—pressure from one cause or another such as the social attraction of the town. We may wish to know the social class of the migrant and whether it changes with migration or whether his residence in an urban situation leads to any significant change in social structure such as in types of family. An important aspect of our research could be the social relationship between the migrant, as a newcomer, and those who are already resident in the urban area.

One recent and valuable consequence of the growth of the discipline of urban sociology has been the recognition of the need to study urban social structure and organization more broadly and in many countries of the world. In the beginnings of urban sociology much pioneer work was carried out in Great Britain, the USA and western Europe. Some of the early theories of urban sociology were developed in those countries. This, however, had

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one serious defect which has become more obvious in recent years. There were special conditions in the United States and western Europe. The form of urbanization, the social history and the social structure were of a particular type often linked with a specific industrial development. It was, perhaps, almost inevitable that American, European and British sociology should show a certain outlook which has created difficulties when this sociology is applied to other parts of the world.

We know now that the conditions in these countries may not necessarily be found in other parts of the world. Speaking of Indian urbanization processes Sovani (1966) writes :

Is the urban social situation different from the rural social situation in India and, if so, are the differences between them similar to those found in the West? ... Urbanization itself is a culture-bound phenomenon. It is unrealistic to expect the same kind of social developments in under-developed countries as in the polar types of Western cities.

It is clear that criteria which have been developed for use in the USA or Great Britain may be useless when applied to an Asian city or a Latin American town. To widen our view of social structure and social organization and to make our generalizations both more accurate and more universally applicable, we need a body of theory based on collated research made in many different countries. The discipline of *comparative urban sociology*, though still in its infancy, may supply us with new theoretical concepts which, in turn, can be applied to urban sociological theory in all countries.

Urban sociology and other urban studies

The investigation of cities, towns and adjacent or connected areas, requires a variety of different disciplines. The