



URBAN SOCIOLOGY, CAPITALISM AND MODERNITY

*Mike Savage
and Alan Warde*

CONTINUUM

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Mike Savage and Alan Warde

Continuum / New York

1993

The Continuum Publishing Company
370 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017

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Printed in Hong Kong

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Savage, Michael.

Urban sociology, capitalism, and modernity / Mike Savage and Alan Warde.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8264-0587-8 (hardcover)

1. Sociology, Urban. 2. Sociology, Urban—History.

3. Capitalism. I. Warde, Alan. II. Title.

HT151.S265 1993

307.76—dc20

93-9816

CIP

Urban Sociology, Capitalism and Modernity

Acknowledgements

It is extremely rewarding, though also frustrating, to write a book when the field is changing so fast. This is a book that changed many times in the making, and which made us read and think until the last minute. Many thanks to all those who have helped us by talking to us, making comments, and giving general advice. In particular Mike Savage would like to thank students on his workshop at Keele University on urban sociology in 1990 for helping him to realise some of the limitations of existing work (and textbooks!) in the field.

Frances Arnold, our publishing editor, has been very supportive. Janet Finch helped to commission the volume, and she and Graham Allan commented helpfully on drafts. The following people have commented on the whole or parts: Peter Dickens; Helen Hills; Brian Longhurst; Chris Pickvance; Greg Smith; Gerry Stoker; Adam Tickell; John Urry; and Paul Watt. Versions of Chapter 2 were presented by Mike Savage to the Urban and Regional Studies Seminar, University of Sussex, December 1990, and by Alan Warde to the Department of Sociology, University of Melbourne, at Easter 1991. Versions of Chapter 6 were presented by Mike Savage to the Urban Change and Conflict Conference at Lancaster University, September 1991, and to the Department of Sociology, University of Salford, May 1992. Many thanks for the comments received.

Finally, on a personal note, Mike Savage would like to thank Helen Hills for her love and support. Virtually our first conversation was about our mutual interest in urbanism, and it led to fine things.

MIKE SAVAGE
ALAN WARDE

The authors and publishers are grateful to the following for permission to reproduce copyright material: *Urban Studies* for a table from G. Bentham, 'Socio-tenurial polarisation', vol. 23, no. 2 (April 1986); The University

viii *Acknowledgements*

of Chicago Press for a diagram from R. E. Park, E. W. Burgess and R. D. McKenzie, *The City* (1967); Pergamon Press Ltd for a table from A. Heath *et al.*, *Understanding Political Change* (1991); HMSO for Central Statistical Office material from *Social Trends*, © Crown copyright 1989. Every effort has been made to contact all the copyright-holders, but if any have been inadvertently omitted the publisher will be pleased to make the necessary arrangement at the earliest opportunity.

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1 Introduction

Consider one view of why the experience of the modern city is so fascinating and compelling:

the great buildings of civilisation; the meeting places, the libraries and theatres, the towers and domes; and often more moving than these, the houses, the streets, the press and excitement of so many people, with so many purposes. I have stood in many cities and felt this pulse: in the physical differences of Stockholm and Florence, Paris and Milan: this identifiable and moving quality: the centre, the activity, the light. Like everyone else I have also felt the chaos of the metro and the traffic jam: the monotony of the ranks of houses, the aching press of strange crowds . . . this sense of possibility, of meeting and of movement, is a permanent element of my sense of cities . . .

(Williams, 1973, pp. 14–15)

Many people will recognise elements of Raymond Williams's feelings in their own encounters with cities – for he repeats a cultural stereotype which pervades modern societies. This book, a critical reflection on the nature of urban life and experience in the context of social change, evaluates the extent to which this view of the city can be sustained sociologically.

The problem of urban sociology can be discerned initially in the short extract above: its scope is potentially enormous – from the architecture of cities to traffic congestion, the experience of urban life, the behaviour of crowds, housing, planning and so forth. The experience of urban life seems so all-encompassing that it is difficult to distinguish what might not be the domain of urban sociology. The definition of the subject has often been a source of despair to its practitioners and advocates. The recurrent worry was how to define 'the urban', to specify distinctive and unique properties of the city that provided the focus for specialised scholarly

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attention. Thus, as far back as 1955, Ruth Glass pointed out that 'there is no such subject [as urban sociology] with a distinct identity of its own' (Glass, 1989, p. 51). She continued, 'in a highly urbanised country such as Great Britain, the label "urban" can be applied to almost any branch of current sociological study. In the circumstances, it is rather pointless to apply it at all' (Glass, 1989, p. 56).

Nevertheless, urban sociologists continued to research and write about life in cities, undaunted by the prospect of contributing to a subject whose boundaries could not be delimited. We have written this book in the belief that there is no solid definition of the urban; approaching matters from the point of view of a definition of the 'urban' produces very oblique appreciations of the role and achievements of urban sociology. The label 'urban' sociology is mostly a flag of convenience. However, the fact that the urban cannot be defined in a general way does not mean that important things cannot be said about specific processes in particular cities! This text therefore isolates the actual contribution of the subdiscipline, in order to identify the common elements explaining its persistence.

Looking at the textbooks published over the past thirty years, it would be hard to isolate a core to the subject, for their principal organising themes are extraordinarily various. Some are about planning improvement of life in cities, others describe urban forms and structures; some offer histories of urban growth while others seek the biological or ecological bases of urban behaviour; some are theoretical treatises on the quality of the urban experience, others epistemological reflections on the concept of the urban (e.g. respectively, Greer, 1962; Pahl, 1970; Reissman, 1964; Dickens, 1990; Smith, 1980; Saunders, 1981). This prompts our view that the history of urban sociology is discontinuous, unamenable to an account of its linear evolution around a single theme (cf. Saunders, 1981). Yet, although there is no cumulative tradition, there are a number of recurrent threads and themes around which urban sociology revolves.

Themes examined within urban sociology and the types of topics which we discuss include:

1. what it feels like to live in a modern city and whether there is a unitary or universal 'urban' experience. Defining characteristics have been sought, e.g. anonymity – being just another face in a vast crowd; the uncertainty and unpredictability of events in complex urban environments; the senses of possibility and danger induced by cities;
2. whether, by contrast, places are distinctive, what makes for attach-

- ment to particular neighbourhoods or cities, given that people certainly perceive places to have their own identity and characteristics;
3. how urban life is affected by the features of local social structure, e.g. class position, gender, ethnic group, housing situation, and so forth;
 4. how informal social bonds develop and to what extent the nature of affective relationships – with kin, neighbours, friends and associates – are determined by the external social context and environment, much discussion having been devoted to whether different kinds of settlement engender concomitant types of social ties;
 5. how to explain the history of urbanisation and the concentration of population in towns, cities and conurbations;
 6. what are the basic features of the spatial structure of cities and whether different spatial arrangements generate distinctive modes of interaction;
 7. what is the nature of, and what are the solutions to, ‘urban’ problems like congestion, pollution, poverty, vagrancy, delinquency and street violence;
 8. how urban political affairs are conducted, what influences political participation and what impact the different agencies of the local state have on daily life.

Urban sociologies oscillate in their focus as they select among themes and try to reconcile divergent concerns. In this book we argue that a coherent programme for urban sociology would be concerned with the mutual impact of two analytically separate entities, *capitalism* and *modernity*. Moreover, past achievements too are best appreciated as an extended enquiry into the relationship between modernity and capitalism.

Definitions of modernity are highly contested. A glut of recent literature, focused on a putative transition to post-modernity, has caused intensive re-examination of what is meant by the term ‘modernity’ (for a summary see Smart, 1992). We prefer to reserve the concept modern to describe a particular mode of experience. One insightful formulation is that of Berman (1983) who makes ‘the experience of modernity’ a central organising principle of his study of Western aesthetic reflections on life in cities:

There is a mode of vital experience – experience of space and time, of self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils – that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience ‘modernity’. To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that

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promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity; it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, ‘all that is solid melts into air’ (Berman, 1983, p. 1).

The ambivalent experience of modernity contrasts with traditional ways of life, which were socially more secure and predictable because less open and manipulable. Most urban sociologists, and particularly the early ones, were fascinated by this experience of modernity. Yet this dominant preoccupation has always existed in tension with another, the way in which capitalist economic structures affect urban life.

Capitalism refers to the economic order of Western societies in which production is organised around the search for profit. The private ownership of the means of production – land, tools, machines, factories and suchlike – entails that their owners ultimately retain profits, and those who do not share ownership are forced to work as employees. These economic relations of exploitation generate social class inequality, an inherent feature of capitalist societies. The search for profit leads also to a dynamic, competitive, conflictual, economic system prone to crisis. These powerful economic forces cannot but affect the nature of cities and in the 1960s and 1970s urban sociologists, influenced by the revival of Marxist political economy, concentrated attention on the capitalist roots of urban conditions.

Today the tide is turning again and urban sociology is once more being focused on issues of modernity, sometimes in the current guise of debate about post-modernity. Rather than condone wholeheartedly this intellectual shift, we submit that urban sociology needs to synthesise the best elements of the political economy of capitalism with more cultural analyses of modernity, realigning the subject near the heart of the sociological discipline as well as illuminating urban experiences.

The book contains six substantial chapters. Each deals with a different set of issues and body of literature; each body of literature, for purposes of study, may be read separately. However, there is also a sustained

argument running throughout the book about the nature and functions of urban sociology and how the analysis of the interacting mechanisms of capitalism and modernity constitute differential urban experiences.

Chapter 2 provides a brief history of urban sociology, primarily as practised in Britain and the USA. In the 1970s and 1980s older work was heavily criticised and radical new approaches were promulgated. Much of value in the older tradition was prematurely condemned as inquiry into the social conditions of modernity was discarded. We recommend that contemporary urban sociology should reintegrate older and newer approaches.

Chapter 3 explores economic theories of urban development and decline. Here we show how recent analyses of capitalism have used the concept of uneven development to explore the differentiation of cities in varying parts of the globe. Instead of a uniform process of urbanisation, where all cities grow according to the same logic, attention to uneven development identifies variation in accordance with location within the capitalist world system. We also argue that such theories are insufficient to express the cultural dimensions of modernity.

Chapter 4 examines urban manifestations of the inherent inequalities of capitalism which powerfully affect the spatial and social organisation of cities. We discuss processes which produce inequalities within cities, such as gentrification, suburbanisation, and household divisions. Hence we argue that the experience of modernity is not a universal one, its costs and benefits are differentially felt.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus directly onto the city and modernity. We consider the classic works of Georg Simmel and Louis Wirth, in search of a 'generic' urban culture. Is there an urban way of life, which can be defined in terms which apply, in some way, to all cities? We examine Wirth's attempt to show that urban ways of life could be contrasted with rural ways of life and Simmel's endeavours to specify the city as the locus of modernity. Protracted investigation, we contend, has failed to provide a convincing demonstration of the existence of an urban way of life.

Chapter 6 therefore considers how places gain different meanings. We argue that no account of urban culture is adequate unless it takes seriously personal, unique, experiences of urban life, but that this occurs in the context of broader cultural forces. It is suggested that the work of Walter Benjamin offers a series of valuable beginnings for this project. His ideas implicitly criticise the fashionable claim that an era of post-modernity has emerged.

Chapter 7 surveys analyses of urban politics, showing their respons-

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iveness to changing political agendas and the impact of the forces of capitalism and modernity. We examine, in particular, the importance of state welfare and the politics of consumption, the significance of local economic policy, urban protest, the urban bases of political alignments, and the policing of cities.

2 The Roots of Urban Sociology

In this chapter we present a brief and selective survey of the history of urban sociology. Section 2.1 deals with the concerns of urban sociology in its 'golden age' between 1910 and the 1930s, when it was central to the development of the discipline. We focus on the Chicago School and identify elements in its legacy which are relevant for analysis today. We contrast the development of urban sociology in the UK to indicate some of the specific strengths of the British tradition of urban research. After the Second World War urban sociology became more marginal to sociology, and in section 2.2 we indicate some of the reasons for this. The pressing sense of social turmoil and political unrest which had earlier generated an interest in cities was replaced by more complacent political attitudes in which it was assumed that economic growth and social harmony were destined to be permanent features of capitalist welfare states. The rise of functionalist and structuralist social theory altered the terrain of sociological inquiry. By the middle of the 1970s most commentators were contemptuous of the contribution of the Chicago School and of urban sociology more generally. However, in section 2.3 we argue that this dismissive evaluation was misplaced and that the theoretical approaches favoured in the 1970s left a series of serious conceptual problems. We consider in particular the influential Marxist critique of urban sociology of Castells and elements of its subsequent development as 'the new urban sociology'. In conclusion we suggest that aspects of the research agenda of contemporary sociology signify a return to some broad objectives of urban sociology implicit in the work of Georg Simmel and the Chicago School, where the study of urban life is seen as integrally linked to an investigation of 'modernity'.

2.1 The development of urban sociology 1900–30

At first glance our claim that the early twentieth-century was a 'golden age' for urban sociology may seem strange. Modern sociology frequently traces its roots back to three leading theorists – Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim – all of whom (Weber partly excepted) were relatively uninterested in urban phenomena (Giddens, 1971; Alexander, 1982). These three were preoccupied with analysing other principal characteristics of new industrial societies of the nineteenth century (Kumar, 1978; Lee and Newby, 1982). For Marx these were new capitalist societies, divided between the property-owning bourgeoisie and the property-less working class, racked by class conflict and division. Weber on the other hand emphasised the decline of traditional authority and the rise of rational, bureaucratic authority. Durkheim had a rather more optimistic view, in which people would learn to cooperate as they came to realise that they all depended upon each other in societies with a highly elaborate division of labour.

None of these writers were particularly preoccupied with the specific character of modern urban life. Indeed Saunders (1986) claimed that they all advanced rather different arguments in support of the view that in modern societies cities had lost any distinctive properties they might once have possessed. Whilst in ancient societies the distinction between town and countryside was socially significant, and in feudal Europe cities had distinctive social and political autonomy from the rule of rural landlords, by the nineteenth-century this was no longer true. In modern societies there are no social activities which happen only in cities or only in the countryside. In an age of high geographical mobility, in which people travel long distances to work, in which they frequently migrate, in which the mass media transmit messages across vast areas, and in which goods and services are moved to many different locations, it does not make sense, argued Saunders, to treat the city and the countryside as self-contained social orders, detached from each other.

If the 'founders' of sociology were uninterested in urban phenomena, how could urban sociology be of prime importance to the discipline in its early days? The paradox is more apparent than real, since the influence of Marx, Weber and Durkheim on early sociology was not as marked as is sometimes suggested in later accounts. Marx never claimed to be a sociologist, and his work was rarely taken seriously within Western sociology until the 1960s, being at most a position which was criticised as deterministic and mistaken. Weber, although an academic (unlike Marx)

was also seen, until the 1930s, primarily as a specialised historical sociologist and his methodological writings, which have influenced later sociologists, were not especially well-known until Parsons popularised them in the 1930s (see Parsons, 1937). Of the three only Durkheim had a strong influence on the development of sociology as an academic discipline, helping to found one of the earliest sociological journals, *L'Année Sociologique*, in 1896. Even so he was important in only one of the two French sociological schools which emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, and the other, strongly based on the work of Frederic Le Play and the journal, *La Science Sociale*, arguably had a more important short-term impact.

Thus, irrespective of the theoretical writings of Marx, Weber and Durkheim, sociology emerged in the early twentieth century as a discipline primarily concerned with the nature of urban life and the analysis of what might loosely be termed 'urban problems' – unemployment, poverty, social unrest, rootlessness, congestion and so forth. The sociology of cities dominated early sociological work, both in Britain and America, and it proved of particular value in examining social relationships in an individualised and fragmented society.

2.1.1 The Chicago School

The Chicago School played a particularly important role in the establishment of urban sociology. The University of Chicago was founded in 1892 and the Department of Sociology soon came to have a commanding influence in the USA, partly because the leading journal, *American Journal of Sociology*, was based there. By the First World War the concern with urban life had been made apparent by Robert Park's publication of his article on 'The City', which laid down an exhaustive research agenda for urban sociology. The School subsequently produced two distinctive bodies of work: one is associated with the ecological mapping of the so-called 'natural areas' of Chicago, the other with a series of ethnographies of diverse social groups in the city.

The Chicago School is often best-known for Burgess's model of urban form, based on patterns of land-use in 1920s Chicago, which attempted to delineate the basic patterns of social segregation in modern cities. This, the concentric zone model (see Figure 2.1), was an ideal-type representation of city growth, assuming the absence of natural features like waterfronts and hills. It postulated the existence of a Central Business District (CBD), in the middle of the city, and then, further out, a zone of