SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE CITY[[1]](#footnote-1)



1. Introduction

1. The following are some of the major sociological theories which have conditioned urban studies during this century.

2. Urbanism is the lifestyle of a city, the values of the urbanites. Urbanisation is the process of urban growth.

3. The early major theories of urbanism are products of the Chicago School, that reflect the experience of American cities. Study of Third World cities is producing quite different models.

2. Historical Analyses - Mumford and Sjoberg

We have already considered the historical analyses of the city. Gideon Sjoberg built off the major study by Mumford in developing these theories[[2]](#footnote-2)

3. Organic Theory - Robert Park[[3]](#footnote-3)

Park was trained as a journalist, and his initial interest in cities grew from firsthand experience reporting in them. After study under the German sociologist George Simmel, Park moved to the University of Chicago in 1914, where he taught in the Department of Sociology. Drawing on the insights of Darwin, Park drew analogies between plant communities and human communities. His ideas were first promoted in a 1916 article: '***The City - Suggestions for Investigation of Human Behaviour in the Urban Environment'***. Sometime called the *Organic Model* of the city, Park's analysis drew on extensive study of different groups within the city. His theory focused on the interaction between humans and their environment, comparing this to the evolutionary process in the world of plants.

i. Competition

As with plant species, people in the city compete for limited space and access to the most desirable location for residence and business. Such competition is marked by land values, which sort urban dwellers into separate types occupying specific areas. The slum represents the area of minimum choice; that which is left over. Competition thus leads to segregation.

ii. Dominance

Within different varieties of plants growing in one area, a certain species will exert a dominant influence in that it controls the environmental conditions which encourage or discourage other species. In the city as a whole, the Central Business District will play such a dominating role. In local areas of the city, certain activities will dominate the environment.

iii. Invasion and Succession

Plants change the micro-environment in which they live, and in so doing make it possible for other less tolerant species to thrive under the new conditions. Park applied this concept to urban communities, noting the way in which an ethnic area could be invaded by people from a different ethnic group who would eventually establish dominance.

Park's work was seminal, and established the *Chicago School'* of urban sociology, which has itself been dominant in the field for most of this century.

4. The Original Theory of Urbanism - Lewis Worth

Wirth wrote ***Urbanism as a Way of Life*** (1938) aiming to give a concise theory of urban life which would express the discoveries of the Chicago sociologists during the previous 20 years as a universal model of the city.

The three major factors which affect the significant demography of the city, according to Wirth, are: (i) large size (ii) high density (iii) heterogeneity. In combination these three conditions give rise to that way of life which we know as urbanism.

i. Psychological Effect

Wirth had also studied under George Simmel, and was influenced by Simmel's claim that city life is characterised by the intensification of mental stimulation. According to Wirth, the city dweller is assaulted by profuse and varied stimuli. A host of different sensory stimuli compete for attention and demand response from the urbanite. In order to survive in this environment, people adapt and find mechanisms for filtering. They become aloof, brusque, and impersonal in their dealings with others, seeking to gain some distance from the demands made upon them. But still the psychic overload created by over-stimulation takes its toll in terms of stress and psychological strain. Tim Costello uses the phrase the retractable psyche:

This personality trait permits the urbanite to walk along a city street passing hundreds of people and behave as if they were not there. Such a protective blindness is not because of hurry since the same thing will happen in a crowded lift or on a train where for half an hour they might stand with someone's elbow in their ear without so much as acknowledging them. There is a constant psychic drain of recognising strangers and dispatching the emotional energy to conserve means that urban reserve is really a subconscious survival mechanism.[[4]](#footnote-4)

A further consequence is that the adaptive distancing of people leaves them unsupported, many suffer loneliness, and in bad cases physical deterioration and mental illness. According to Wirth, urban estrangement allows people to weave fantasies creating the conditions for both creativity and criminal depravity.

Egon Mayer speaks of the post-modern period as being described by some leading theorists as one marked by growing autonomy of major institutions, placing them not only beyond moral constraints that develop out of a shared value system, but also beyond direct manipulation by individuals[[5]](#footnote-5).

ii. Lifestyle Produced by Broken Social Structure

The urban processes of competition, comparative advantage, and specialisation lead to a high degree of community differentiation. This can be seen in a number of different facets of city life: the division of labour, the diversity of locales, the differing social circles. In the city people move in and out of various places, activities, and groups of people. This in turn produces a weakening of social ties. On the broad level small primary groups of society such as family, friends and neighbours have their ties weakened. People work and play outside their family network, and so the family is less cohesive. City dwellers travel outside their neighbourhood for work and recreation, and so neighbours become less significant. Through these processes social bonding is weakened.

The consequence is anomie (normlessness, alienation, anarchy), a social condition in which societal norms affecting behaviour and lifestyle are severely eroded. People don't agree about the norms, and tend to challenge or ignore them. In turn urbanities are unrestrained by social rules of sanctions, and are free to commit all sorts of acts, from the bizarre to the criminal. So that order can be maintained in the city, impersonal agencies are employed - this Wirth describes as 'formal integration'. Thus social order is restored and chaos avoided. However, this is never as successful as the social cohesion created by strong bonds among small primary groups.

These ideas were further developed by Robert Redfield, a colleague of Wirth, who developed a polar model - folk society as against urbanism. Where urban society is impersonal, heterogenous and secular, folk society is peaceful, well integrated and comparatively free of strife. The city was increasingly perceived as negative, the rural life as idyllic.

5. Peasants in Cities

Oscar Lewis, an anthropologist, reacted to this definition by studying migrants into Mexico City and denied that everyday life in the city is largely the product of urbanism. The villagers kept their religious ties and familial ties in the migration.

"Social life is not a mass phenomenon. It occurs for the most part in small groups, within the family, within neighbourhoods, within the church, formal and informal groups and so on. Consequently, the variables of number, density and heterogeneity are not crucial determinants of social life or personality".

Miner[[6]](#footnote-6) studying Timbuktu, and Bascom[[7]](#footnote-7) studying the Yoruba of Western Nigeria also did not find the traits hypothesized by Wirth.

i. Social Worlds

Lewis, Rotenberg and Hannerz have argued that the primary social groups is not the city as a whole, but smaller intimate circles based on kinship, ethnicity, neighbourhood, occupation, lifestyle, or similar factors. These social groups often form physical enclaves such as Chinatown, K Road, Remuera Bowling Club. Such small social units are not destroyed by urbanism, but rather form the basic place of belonging within the city. They insulate and protect their members from the overwhelming variety of the urban context. Social worlds are to a large extent unaffected by urbanism, and demonstrate similar characteristics when located in a rural setting.

ii. Social Dynamics

Formative factors for people in a city are not primarily those of size, density, and heterogeneity, according to these writers. Rather the dynamics of social life are controlled by socio-economic class, culture, and stage in the life cycle. Thus the broad strokes of any person's social position can be determined by their occupation and wealth, their ethnic background and culture, and their marital and family status. It is easily seen that these factors are relatively independent of the size of the community. All urban context is relevant only insofar as it affects the social categories. For example, large cities may provide better-paying jobs, or attract more immigrant male workers than females. It will in turn affect the social worlds of that particular city, but the effects of cities on the individual are indirect rather than direct.

Gulick integrates these opposing poles into a schemata examining disconnectedness, minimal connectedness and connectedness (Gulick 1989).

6. Sub-cultural Theory - Claude Fischer

A middle way between these views is suggested by Claude (***To Dwell Among Friends:*** 1982). He agrees that urbanism has a direct effect on social life, but not by destroying social worlds. Rather it creates and strengthens them. Herbert Gans (*The Urban Villagers*) described an Italian-American neighbouhood in Boston as an “urban village”.

i. Subcultures

The single most important social effect if the growth in size of a given community is the promotion of diverse subcultures. Subcultural theory identifies social solidarity, sociablility and mutual assistance as factors that enable small social worlds not only survive but flourish in the urban setting. Street kids, punks, yuppies and psych patients are all examples of subcultures which provide the basic community for groups of urban residents. Such worlds are occupied by people who share distinctive traits, interact primarily with each other, and have a relatively distinct set of beliefs and behaviour.

ii. The Shape of New Communities

Subcultural theory sees an important role of the urban environment in shaping new subcultures. As communities grow in size, they begin to create new subcultures, modify existing ones, and promote contact between them. Integral in this is the emergence of networks (a set of links between individuals or groups) and associations - new types of community. Thus the city offers enormous opportunity for community.

Large communities attract migrants from wider areas than do smaller towns. These migrants have a wide variety of cultural and social backgrounds, and so provide for a diverse set of social worlds. The bigger the city, the more differentiation and specialisation takes place. Structural differentiation provides the basis for new subcultures, based around occupation or special interest.

Once the loose boundaries of a new subculture have been formed, the urban environment acts to consolidate and intensify the grouping. A concept of *critical mass* is used to explain the development of subcultures. A social group needs a certain number of members to allow it to grow from a small interest group to a viable and active subculture. When the group reaches such a critical mass, it can support clubs, newsletters, services, functions etc. If there is one in every 1,000 people interested in modern dance, a small town of 5,000 will have five enthusiasts. A city of one million, on the other hand, will have a subculture of 1,000 such people; enough to support studios, clubs and performances.

Intensification of subcultures can result from interaction between them. When there is negative contact between different subcultures, a common reaction is to pillory the other group, and to withdraw within the safe boundaries of 'people like us'. It acts to make subcultures stronger and more self-reliant. Sometimes a particular subculture is sanctioned by the whole of society (homosexuals, criminals), and this serves to further strengthen their bonding. Subcultural theory thus accepts Lewis’ argument that small social groups form the primary environment for individuals, but modifies it by agreeing with Wirth that such social groups or subcultures are directly affected by the size, density and heterogeneity of any given community.

7. Rural - Urban Culture Change

One approach mentioned above to viewing the emergence of forms of urban culture has been the contrasting of polar types of society and their characteristics. The following table summarises ideas from multiple sources, particularly building on Oscar Lewis’ bipolar folk-urban continuum.

Gideon Sjoberg developed a theory about the preindustrial city over a ten year period seeking to distil the essential elements from preindustrial cities in Europe and parts of the third world today. Nels Anderson (1962) analysed modern industrial society as a whole demonstrating the driving power of technology in the development of these urban values. This is similar to the sociologist, Jacques Ellul in his study of Technique as determinant of modern personhood. In a later lecture we will extend this from the Industrial city to the post-industrial.

More recent anthropological studies have looked at cities as part of the larger socio-economic systems in which they are embedded. Jane Jacobs published on the economics of interrelated cities (*Cities and the Wealth of Nations)* We will examine this mrore in urban economics. Others have looked at such relationships from Marxist categories. But generally social anthropology has been focused on studies of communities in cities.

More recent urban analyses may be found related to postmodernism vs urbanism (See Dear and Soja), and in Urban Planning discussions linked to UNHabitat.

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**THREE POLAR TYPES OF SOCIETY*[[8]](#footnote-8)***

**CHARACTER- Viv Grigg, 1990  
ISTICS TRIBAL PEASANT/MULTIGROUP URBAN/INDUSTRIAL**

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**1.TECH** Hunter-gardener agriculture, beginning of high tech/complex  
**CONCEPTS** Subsistence/generalist specialization multiplex roles  
 (All do every task) crafts, artisans agribusiness

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**2. SOCIAL** Strong group,kinship strong group strong individualism  
**STRUCTURE** Clan, tribe,lineage multiple groups groups are  
 functional aggregates  
 short-term contractual  
 relationships

Family Extended Varies widely nuclear(old,sick excluded)

Dominant Father-son parent-child husband-wife  
 Diads patron-worker friend-friend

Mobility peasants not mobile social/geographic mobility

Integration Organizatn of Hierarchy Heterogeneity and  
between groups in larger units along Hostility/rivalry relativism  
 ethnic, family lines between groups   
 Lowest group oppressed   
 and emulates elite

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**3.ECONOMY SUBSISTENCE MARKET COMMERCIAL**

Land Shared,group owned tenants on Lord's land individual ownership  
Energy Human, animal,tools human,animal fuel-powered machine   
Goods Few - group use many by artisans vast number-for money

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**4.POLITICAL** Mono-cultural inde- town/peasant,city-state nationalism and interde-  
**STRUCTUR**E pendent clan groups structured like tribe pendent states.

Dominant Feudal lord-servant corporation  
Institution patron-client   
Leadership Tribal council dominant ruling group "big men", dynamic leader  
 feudal bilevel structure networks,voluntary assoc  
 each group has leadership bureaucratic institution  
Power Weak very great(lords) divided among specialists  
Control Shame when norms freedom  
 (law) violated shame,gossip,civil law civil/criminal law   
Decision- Mutual responsibility peasants limited rights individual and personal  
 making Group decisionmaking lords full freedom   
Communi- Up and down downwards and horizontal literate and postliterate  
 cation Oral societies within group mass media,public

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**5.RELIGIOUS ANIMISTIC ANIMISM+NAT'L RELIG'N MANY RELIGIONS**

**WORLD-** Uniform Great tradition secular  
  **VIEW** Small traditions (integrates local) pluralistic  
Importance Permeates all life important unimportant  
Perception High church /rituals bastion of right aggregate of individuals  
of church dominant.Religion is in midst of evil & in a chaotic world

as much in ritual as godless groups big leaders who serve   
 in concepts & statments as an aggregate point with  
 strong sense rght/wrong  
World World is good world is evil. world is chaotic  
 our little culture is good not evil   
Truth Truth is eternal truth belongs to truth is intensely our group personal  
God High concept of God   
Sacred Tradition is sacred group is sacred secularism

(group rituals)   
Sin Violation of cosmic Violation of group norms violation of self  
 order (stress self-fulfilment)  
Ancestors Nurtured, placated respected forgotten

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1. This section developed by Viv Grigg, expanded from course notes originally by Mike Ridell, 1995. Input from Fletcher Tink. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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4. Costello, Tim, ed.

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6. Miner, Horace  
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