Urbanism

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Whereas *urbanization* refers to the process of increased population concentration in cities and other densely populated areas, *urbanism* describes the distinctive social and cultural patterns including values, attitudes, norms, customs, behaviors, and lifestyles thought to be common among city dwellers in contrast to their rural counterparts. Urbanism as a social theory gained prominence following the publication of sociologist Louis Wirth's essay entitled "Urbanism as a Way of Life" (1938). The essay built on urban-focused scholarship by Wirth's University of Chicago colleagues, classical European social theorists, the groundbreaking American sociologist W. E. B. DuBois, and others, to theorize how the city's large population size and high degrees of density and social heterogeneity influence inhabitants' interactions and behaviors, thus creating a distinctive "way of life." Urbanism has had a lasting impact in the fields of sociology (especially urban sociology), urban studies, and urban planning. Subsequent generations of scholars have revised the theory, while practitioners have used its core principles to guide urban planning and design.

ORIGINS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF URBANISM

The industrialization of Europe beginning in the late eighteenth century sparked rapid urbanization that led to the emergence of the industrial city. This novel type of human settlement brought about new transportation, communication, and banking systems, all of which contributed to economic and social changes across Europe. Social theorists of this new Industrial Age, including Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Georg Simmel, wrote of this great societal transformation. These theorists contrasted life in the traditional rural village with that of the modern industrial city to draw attention to the particularities of the latter type of settlement. They emphasized the city's highly specialized division of labor, potential for anonymity, social conflict, secularization, increased importance of voluntary associations and mass media, and weakened kin relationships. While theorists such as Durkheim offered a mostly optimistic perspective of life under these conditions, others were more pessimistic. For example, in "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903/1950) Simmel argued that although life in the city can be liberating, its inhabitants incur social and psychological costs. The money economy, Simmel wrote, lacks the personal and emotional investment of domestic production and direct barter common in the rural village, which leads to interactions that are dominated by head rather than heart. This emphasis on rationality and superficiality, combined with the increased stimuli common in cities (lights, noise, crowds), alters city dwellers' minds and personalities, leading them to feel detached and act with indifference toward others. Simmel termed this disposition the "blasé attitude" and acknowledged it as both a necessary and unfortunate condition of life in the industrial city.

As with Europe, the United States experienced a period of rapid urbanization following industrialization. Between 1870 and 1920, the nation's urban population increased from

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approximately 10 million to more than 54 million people. Northeastern and Midwestern cities – notably Chicago – grew not only in size but also in racial, ethnic, religious, and class diversity due to waves of international migration and the Great Migration in which six million African Americans relocated from the South, seeking economic opportunity and hoping to escape Jim Crow segregation as well as racially motivated acts of violence.

Rigorously studying the societal changes created by industrialization and urbanization became a primary focus of American social scientists. The University of Chicago was established in 1890 as a research institution tasked with studying the Industrial Age's new economy and social structure. Two years later, the university became home to the nation's first formal sociology department, taking as its thematic core the city of Chicago and the industrial city more broadly. However, it was four years later at the historically black Atlanta University where, arguably, the first *scientific* school of sociology was founded. Under the leadership of W. E. B. DuBois, the Atlanta School of sociology published numerous studies of black communities that were based on the collection and analysis of rigorous empirical data. DuBois was no stranger to rigorous methodology. For *The Philadelphia Negro* (researched from 1896 to 1898 and published in 1899), the sociologist conducted 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork, living alongside residents of the city's Seventh Ward. DuBois combined these data with census figures and statistical analyses, thereby producing one of the earliest empirically based works of sociology. In the following decades, generations of University of Chicago-affiliated sociologists and other social scientists produced an influential body of urban-focused works known as the Chicago School of sociology. In addition to Louis Wirth, scholars affiliated with the Chicago School included Nels Anderson, Herbert Blumer, Ernest W. Burgess, Ruth Shonle Cavan, Paul G. Cressey, Ellsworth Faris, E. Franklin Frazier, Everett C. Hughes, George Herbert Mead, Robert E. Park, Walter C. Reckless, Albion Small, W. I. Thomas, Frederic M. Thrasher, Florian Znaniecki, Harvey W. Zorbaugh, and Nobel Peace Prize winner Jane Addams who worked closely with members of the university's faculty and was influential in the development of sociology as an academic discipline.

In 1938, the *American Journal of Sociology* published Wirth's essay "Urbanism as a Way of Life." Wirth's core assertion, that the spatial environment of cities influences inhabitants' social interactions and behaviors, diverged from work of colleagues such as Park who had conceptualized cities as built environments that merely contain social interactions. A comprehensive theory of urbanism, Wirth argued, could provide a better understanding of the growth of cities and help inform urban social policy and development.

Wirth theorized that the urban way of life was attributable to three defining and interrelated ecological characteristics of cities: size, density, and heterogeneity. The effects of these characteristics could be measured and analyzed statistically thus allowing for predictive modeling of urbanism. That is, settlements with high levels of size, density, and heterogeneity would be more likely to produce distinctly urban cultures.

As the population size of a settlement increases, the possibility of personally knowing and interacting with every other inhabitant decreases. Simultaneously, the statistical likelihood of differentiation in occupations, culture, and ideas increases. This diversity ensures that people in the city, unlike those in the rural village, are less prone to sharing a "common folk tradition." Thus, bonds of kinship and neighborliness are weakened, thereby placing greater reliance on competition and formal control mechanisms

such as governments and systems of law to maintain order. Wirth added that city dwellers, compared to rural villagers, are dependent on greater numbers of people to meet their life needs. But these interactions tend to occur with secondary ties (strangers and acquaintances) rather than primary ties (kin), and they involve only fractionalized aspects of others' activities such as through one's occupation. Wirth called this phenomenon the "segmentalization of human relationships."

The second ecological variable, density, refers to the concentration of inhabitants within cities (Wirth wrote that this density is analytically distinct from size, although the two variables are often mutually reinforcing). Within large, dense settlements, physical space and natural resources are limited and do not allow inhabitants to live a virtually autonomous lifestyle. As a result, competition increases and diversity and specialization emerge out of necessity. Following Durkheim and Simmel, Wirth maintained that while social differences among individuals result in spatial segregation – with varying degrees of voluntariness – the combination of dissimilar personalities and lifestyles among those living near one another ultimately leads to greater tolerance of strangers and their individual differences.

Wirth's third variable, heterogeneity, describes social differences between people. As Wirth wrote, the city's heterogeneity breaks down caste lines by creating a more complex class structure in which inhabitants hold the potential to move beyond the class standing of their families. Furthermore, the complex division of labor means that people from different ethnic and class backgrounds must interact with one another. Such distinctions become less apparent than they might be in smaller rural settlements, leading to increased overall social tolerance. Wirth also argued that sophistication and cosmopolitanism emerge in the city because inhabitants' social roles are variable and they typically do not hold allegiance to a single group, which allows for exposure to diverse stimuli from dissimilar groups.

Like Simmel, Wirth cautioned that although city life can lead to increased personal freedom, diversity, and tolerance, there are potential social and psychological costs. Heterogeneity and a reliance on secondary ties in the money economy could displace primary ties as a basis for association, thus discouraging the creation of lasting, intimate, and meaningful relationships that promote trust and neighborliness (Wirth's ecological framework in many ways obfuscates Simmel's critique of the money economy). Additionally, the city's rapid turnover, fluctuation, change, and transition in group membership could compound these factors, spurring crime, deviance, anomie, and other forms of social and psychological disorganization. Therefore, a lasting aspect of Wirth's theory of urbanism is a strong critique of the urban way of life.

NOTABLE CRITIQUES AND REFORMULATIONS OF WIRTHIAN URBANISM

The post-World War II era in the United States saw the proliferation of yet another novel type of settlement: suburbs. The New Deal led to the creation of the Federal Housing Administration, and pieces of legislation such as the GI Bill helped Americans purchase homes. However, people of nonwhite status were systematically excluded from receiving these benefits. The policies also favored investment in new suburbs rather than existing urban centers. A mass exodus of mostly whites from cities occurred, which led to deindustrialization and further urban disinvestment. These changes inspired scholars to build upon Wirth's theory by reevaluating ideas

of community formation while exploring suburbs as a new type of variation within the rural-to-urban continuum.

A 1956 essay by Sylvia Fleis Fava, entitled "Suburbanism as a Way of Life," analyzed high degrees of neighboring and other informal primary-type group contacts as a form of collective orientation within suburban communities. Fava argued that these traits emerge because of ecological concentrations of young middle-class families in low density environments combined with self-selective migration as people tend to move to these environments in search of neighborliness and community. Taken together, these ecological and social-psychological factors help produce a suburban way of life.

One of the strongest critiques of Wirthian urbanism came from sociologist Herbert Gans who argued that the theory overlooked important compositional and contextual variation within urban areas and overstated the social dynamics of inner cities while neglecting outer urban regions. Unlike Wirth, Gans did not describe urban life as inherently segmented, anomic, and impersonal, nor was the city associated with weakened social ties and increased social and psychological disorganization. Gans's research on urban ethnic neighborhoods (*The Urban Villagers*, 1962) and freshly minted suburbs (*The Levittowners*, 1967) suggested that friendship, kinship, and associational ties may be impacted differentially depending on one's location within a city. For example, Gans challenged Wirth's primary/secondary tie dichotomy, instead proffering *quasi-primary* as a type of tie to explain the unique relationships that emerge in outer urban areas and suburbs.

Rather than use one conception of urbanism to describe city dwellers and their way of life, Gans identified a diverse mosaic: *cosmopolites* (highly educated people who choose to live near cultural facilities commonly found in inner cities); *the unmarried and childless* (single adults or couples without children or those with grown children who live on their own); *ethnic villagers* (first and second generation working-class ethnic people); *the deprived* (including people of color who experienced structural barriers to full societal inclusion and individuals who are mentally and/or physically disabled or from "broken families"); *the trapped and downward mobile* (people who cannot afford to move despite deteriorating neighborhood conditions). Gans contended that the last two types are the most likely to be associated with the social and psychological disorganization that Wirth described, but characteristics such as class, ethnicity, and life cycle stage are more important factors affecting the behaviors of city dwellers than are the ecological factors of size, density, and heterogeneity.

Gans argued that some of the deviations from Wirth's theory could be attributed to deindustrialization and other societal changes that had taken place in American cities in the decades since "Urbanism as a Way of Life" was initially published. However, Gans reasoned that the characteristics Wirth had identified as being unique to cities were largely the result of a shift from preindustrial to industrial societies. Hence, Wirthian urbanism did not actually focus on the city as a unit of analysis, but rather the modern urban-industrial society. Based on this analysis, Gans concluded that differences between cities and suburbs were overstated and even spurious.

By proposing the idea that friendship, kinship, and associational ties are fostered within localized contexts as opposed to urban environments, Gans's critique laid the foundation for subsequent scholars to analyze what are referred to as "neighborhood effects." Such research analyzes how localized structural factors such as rates of residential turnover and the socioeconomic

status and ethnoracial composition of residents affect neighborhood-based ties and community-level cohesion. Likewise, Gans's research (along with Fava's) paved the way for subsequent scholars to study suburbanism as both an ecological phenomenon and a way of life. But perhaps most significantly, their works contested Wirth's monolithic conception of an urban way of life, suggesting instead that there exist various urban *ways* of life.

Following the works of Fava and Gans, sociologist Claude Fischer looked to the variables of class, life cycle stage, ethnicity, and culture to explain how and why social relationships tend to vary depending on settlement size. But unlike Gans, Fischer considered these variables alongside Wirth's ecological factors. Fischer categorized existing theories of *urbanism* into two distinct types. The first type, *determinist theories*, included those of Durkheim and Simmel as well as Wirth and other Chicago School scholars who focused on social and psychological disorganization in cities. The second type, *compositional theories*, invoked the work of Gans and other theorists who argued that urban life depends primarily on demographic as opposed to strictly ecological factors. Compositional theories deny the effects of urbanism as identified by Wirth, namely the weakening of small primary groups due to size, density, and heterogeneity.

Fischer then proposed *subcultural theory* as a synthesis of the two types of urbanism. Subcultural theory addresses differences between inhabitants of cities and those of rural villages with respect to social ties, including those attributed to factors such as race and class. Fischer measured effects of location on the quality and structures of personal networks and found that people in cities had more segmented networks and fewer family ties as compared to those in rural settings. Yet when controlling for other factors, place-based effects on their own were insignificant. Nonkin networks tended to be correlated with other factors such as income and education. Fischer asserted that some of these differences are indeed caused by location, but argued that scholars ought to reconsider Wirth's and other determinists' arguments that cities inherently weaken group relationships.

As with compositional theories, Fischer's subcultural theory stated that intimate social groups persist within the urban environment in *private* domains, despite the superficial, anonymous, and impersonal interactions that city dwellers have in the *public* sphere. Additionally, the ecological factors of size, density, and heterogeneity do impact the social orders of communities and can foster cohesion, falling in line with determinist theories. This process happens in the private domain through the emergence of subcultures, or culturally distinctive groups such as college students or ethnic groups. These subcultures emerge through *critical mass*, or population sizes large enough to create and sustain groups. Increasing the scale of critical mass on the rural-to-urban continuum leads to the creation of new subcultures, the modification of existing ones, and brings two or more subcultures into contact with one another. As these subcultures are created, they give rise to further subcultures and engender heterogeneity. Per Fischer, these subcultures play a vital role in cities as they help counter alienation, disorganization, and depersonalization attributed to the weakening of primary relationships. Because so many different subcultures exist in cities, people tend to become tolerant of the potentially peculiar behaviors that members of subcultures may embrace. Fischer concluded that inhabitants of nonurban areas that lack critical mass are actually more likely than city dwellers to experience the loneliness that Wirth and other theorists had attributed to city life.

SUBSEQUENT DIRECTIONS IN URBANISM

Since the late twentieth century, worldwide governments, cultures, and financial markets have become increasingly integrated through international trade into a single market through the process of globalization. Scholars have analyzed the effects of globalization on life within cities, a phenomenon known as *global urbanism*. The global urbanism perspective sees cities not as bounded spaces, but rather as strategic sites where multiple transboundary processes intersect and produce distinct sociospatial formations.

Sociologists including Saskia Sassen have studied how, in recent decades, networks of "global cities" such as London, Singapore, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and Tokyo have undergone further processes of urbanization and have experienced significant changes related to urbanism. Such changes include gentrification (or dispossession), the growing disproportionate power of high finance in many sectors of the economy, and new threats to human security, namely urban warfare. In books such as *The Global City* (1991) and *Cities in a World Economy* (1994), Sassen argued that cities have become "frontier spaces" as they face a host of global governance challenges (air quality and other environmental concerns, flooding, crime, and so on), while also providing a setting for technological and artistic innovation and giving rise to new economies, both formal and informal. Furthermore, global migration and the presence of endogenous cultures increase heterogeneity in terms of lifestyle and culture while reemphasizing the importance of both formal and informal control mechanisms as new political spaces within cities are created. These spaces help forge connections between nations and ethnic groups through formal urban governments, nongovernmental organizations, informal activists, and global firms. As cities globalize, they increasingly become global political spaces, often bypassing traditional neighborhood, regional, and national political hierarchies.

Scholars have also used culture and consumption as a lens for studying sociospatial changes in cities. With books such as *The Cultures of Cities* (1995), sociologist Sharon Zukin argued that culture, expressed through ethnicity, aesthetic, and as a marketing tool, influences the reshaping and revitalization of cities. Zukin eschewed the notion that there exists a monolithic urban culture or various subcultures, arguing instead that culture is constantly renegotiated in response to the city's ever-changing buildings, parks, streets, and interiors. Consumption within these urban spaces both reflects and influences people's social identities. A related construct, *authenticity*, allows for analysis of culture and political economy, especially in the context of global urbanism.

URBANISM APPLIED

Since the late 1980s, theories of urbanism have influenced the planning and development of urban, rural, and suburban environments. Urban designers, architects, planners, developers, and engineers created a movement known as New Urbanism. According to principles of New Urbanism, the physical design of spaces directly impacts social interaction and hence the formation of communities. The sprawling, low density suburban development that is common throughout much of the United States undermines the formation of community by encouraging people to spend time in private spaces, including automobiles. New Urbanism, by contrast, aims to encourage social interaction through increased walkability, connectivity, mixed-use structures, public spaces (including parks and town centers), and mixed housing types. Moreover,

residential design elements such as the required presence of porches near sidewalks, smaller lot sizes, and garages positioned in the rear of houses are implemented to spur neighborliness and community.

However, critics of New Urbanism maintain that people do not always behave in ways that developers intend simply because of architectural design and physical construction. Furthermore, some of the movement's fundamental designs may actually be counterintuitive to its goals. For instance, the isolation of New Urbanist developments from surrounding metropolitan areas in addition to the segregated zoning that often separates residential and commercial spaces may discourage walkability and reinforce reliance on automobiles. Critics have also argued that the developments attract primarily affluent white residents due to their relatively high costs, thus leading to increased racial and class homogeneity among residents. Opinion remains mixed as to the efficacy of New Urbanist principles on the formation of community, though New Urbanists continue to incorporate these principles into their designs, and the movement's organizing body, the Congress for the New Urbanism, remains active.

SEE ALSO: Global City; Neighborhood Effects; New Urbanism; Simmel, Georg; Wirth, Louis

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