ITSO7  – Urban sociology

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1. Introduction

» Drawing on Robert Park to explore urban sociology (the city as a « social laboratory »)
Context: University of Chicago, 1915-1935
Main authors: Albion Small, William Thomas, Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, Louis Wirth
Using the city as a « social laboratory » (R. Park and E. Burgess, *The city*, 1925)

**Robert Park: The city as a “social laboratory”**

« The city, from the point of view of this paper, is something more than a congeries of individual men and of social conveniences – streets, buildings, electric lights, tramways, and telephones, etc.; something more, also, than a mere constellation of institutions and administrative devices – courts, hospitals, schools, police, and civil functionaries of various sorts. The city is, rather, a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition. The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature. [...] There are forces at work within the limits of the urban community – within the limits of any natural area of human habitation, in fact – which tend to bring about an orderly and typical grouping of its population and institutions. The science which seeks to isolate these factors and to describe the typical constellations of persons and institutions which the cooperation of these forces produce, is what we call human, as distinguished from plant and animal, ecology, [...]**

*Anthropology*, the science of man, has been mainly concerned up to the present with the study of primitive peoples. But civilized man is quite as interesting an object of investigation, and at the same time his life is more open to observation and study. Urban life and culture are more varied, subtle, and complicated, but the fundamental motives are in both instances the same. The same patient methods of observation which anthropologists like Boas and Lowie have expended on the study of the life and manners of the North American Indian might be even more fruitfully employed in the investigation of the customs, beliefs, social practices, and general conceptions of life prevalent in Little Italy on the lower North Side in Chicago, or in recording the more sophisticated folkways of the inhabitants of Greenwich village and the neighborhood of Washington square, New York ».


3 main ideas:
- « The city » as the departure point for a general sociology
- Urban ecology → the social organization of urban space
- Anthropological methods applied to the modern city → urban ethnography

2. The organization of urban space : from « urban ecology » to the study of segregation

A. What is « urban ecology » ?

*Robert Park’s definition: « [...] There are forces at work within the limits of the urban community – within the limits of any natural area of human habitation, in fact – which tend to bring about an orderly and typical grouping of its population and institutions. The science which seeks to isolate these factors and to describe the typical constellations of*
persons and institutions which the cooperation of these forces produce, is what we call human, as distinguished from plant and animal, *ecology* (R. Park, 1925)

→ Biological metaphor
→ Driving force organizing the urban ecosystem = competition between social groups
→ Division of the urban space into several « natural areas » of people sharing the same social characteristics

**Example:** E. Burgess’s concentric model of « The growth of the city » : « any town or city [tends] to expand radially from its central business district »; « succession » = « the tendency of each inner zone to extend its area by the invasion of the next outer zone »

![Chart 1. The Growth of the City](image)

B. From “urban ecology” to the study of segregation

a) Measuring segregation

Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 1993: residential segregation as the « missing link » to analyze the persistence of racial inequality in the US

Segregation = physical separation between different groups

Measure of segregation = dissimilarity index: which can be interpreted as the percentage of people from the group who would have to move in order to produce an even distribution of the whole population in the given zone.

**Example:** an index of 81% for Blacks in Milwaukee means that 81% of Black people would have to move in order for there to be an even distribution of Blacks and non-Blacks in every neighborhood in the city
Milwaukee, the most segregated large Metropolitan area for Blacks or African Americans in 2000 (source : US Census bureau [link to source])

b) Is racial segregation just a matter of social class?

• W.J. Wilson, *The truly disadvantaged* (1987) : a class perspective on inner-city poverty and segregation (decline of manufacturing jobs in inner-cities, new opportunities outside of the ghetto for middle-class Blacks)

• vs Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid* (1993): « no matter how much Blacks earned they remained spatially separated from Whites » (p.85)

Table: Dissimilarity index for Blacks in 1988

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metropolitan area</th>
<th>Income category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Under $2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>85.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>91.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td>88.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milwaukee</td>
<td>91.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlanta</td>
<td>82.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


c) Explaining the persistence of racial residential segregation

• Neighborhood preferences

→ Schelling, 1978 : how the aggregation of « micromotives » results in segregation at the macro level

To test his theory, check out the: « Parable of the polygons » [link to source]
More specific sociological explanations of racial residential segregation in the US:

- Blacks favor integration but express reluctance to enter all-white neighborhoods, because of fear of white hostility
- Whites favor integration in principle, but "negative stereotypes about black neighbors remain firmly entrenched in white psyches."

"Given the harassment that historically has followed their entry into white areas, Blacks express considerable reluctance at being the first to cross the color line. Once one or two black families have entered a neighborhood, however, black demand grows rapidly given the high value placed on integrated housing. This demand escalates as the black percentage rises toward 50%, the most preferred neighborhood configuration; beyond this point, black demand stabilizes until the neighborhood reaches 70% black, after which demand falls off. The pattern of white demand for housing in racially mixed areas follows precisely the opposite trajectory. Demand is strong for homes in all-white areas, but once one or two black families enter a neighborhood, white demand begins to falter as some white families leave and others refuse to move in. The acceleration in residential turnover coincides with the expansion of black demand, making it very likely that outgoing white households will be replaced disproportionately with black families. [...] As in the past, segregation is created by a process of racial turnover fueled by the persistence of significant antiblack prejudice."

(Massey and Denton, American apartheid, 1993, p.95-96)

- **Discrimination with a smile**
  - Fair Housing Act 1968
  - Discriminatory practices in the housing market (rental and sales)
    "Black clients who inquire about an advertised unit may be told that it has just been sold or rented; [...] their phone number may be taken but a return call never made; they may be shown units but offered no assistance in arranging financing; or they may be treated brusquely or discourteously in hopes that they will leave" (M&D 1993, p.96)
  - Racial steering: "when white and black clients are guided to neighborhoods that differ systematically with respect to social and economic characteristics, especially racial composition" (M&D 1993, p.100)
  - Discrimination in access to credit

3. Urban ethnography as a distinct sociological style
A. Definition

Drawing on anthropology, following R.Park’s recommendation (cf supra): « The same patient methods of observation which anthropologists like Boas and Lowie have expended on the study of the life and manners of the North American Indian might be even more fruitfully employed in the investigation of the customs, beliefs, social practices, and general conceptions of life prevalent in Little Italy on the lower North Side in Chicago, or in recording the more sophisticated folkways of the inhabitants of Greenwich village and the neighborhood of Washington square, New York » (The city, 1925).

Urban ethnography implies a sociologist’s long immersion (participant observation) within a given urban community (issues of access, degree and types of participation…) Qualitative research: direct observation, interviews Predominately inductive Time-consuming, personally engaging… but at the root of the most interesting findings and analyses


a) A classic: W. Foote Whyte’s Street-corner society (1943)
- W. Foote Whyte lived 3 years in a poor italian neighborhood of Boston (“Cornerville”) in the end of the 1930s
- Issues of access; key informant: “Doc”
- Against the idea of social disorganization, he analyzes the organization of the community around street corners (the “corner boys”), gangs, social clubs (ex. bowling), political clubs, racketeering …
- Ex. role of bowling scores in the reassertion of rank and status within the group

- 5 year fieldwork in East Harlem (puerto-rican neighborhood, El Barrio)
- Focus on the economic organization of crack dealing and the street culture surrounding this activity
  - Documenting the everyday life of crack dealers (access/key informant: Primo)
  - Analyzing the structural conditions and transformations (economy, gender norms) that favor involvement in crack dealing: decline in manufacturing jobs/shift to service employment:
    - 1st generation migrants: factory and garment industry
    - 2nd generation: lower-end service jobs, often supervised by women
- Selling crack as a way to restore masculine dignity

c) Everyday life in a poor black neighborhood in a context of mass incarceration: Alice Goffman's On the run (2014)
- Settled for several years in a poor Philadelphie neighborhood (« 6th street »)
- Key informant : Mike
- The everyday consequences of the war on drugs and mass imprisonment of Black men: Black men being constantly « on the run » from the police
  - Fear and suspicion in everyday social relations
  - « cultivating and unpredictable routine »
• « paying to pass undetected »
• Impact on access to services, jobs, healthcare, and the protection of the police when needed

d) Combining urban ethnography with quantitative methods; M. Desmond and N. Valdez (2013) on the consequences of third-party policing for inner-city women

“Third-party policing” = the assignment of policing responsibilities to non-police actors such as landlords; Ex: “nuisance property ordinances”:
• Landlords get letters (citations) from the police when their tenants place too many calls to the police classified as “nuisance”
• After a citation by the police, the landlords must take a course of action to ensure the “nuisance” calls will stop (written answer within 10 days describing the course of action)

Methods of inquiry:
• Urban ethnography (Desmond, 2012)
• Qualitative analysis and coding of 911 calls, citations and answers by landlords
• Quantitative analysis (regression), linking this data with other data (poverty, percentage of black residents in the neighborhood, crime rate…).
• Interviews with police officers and landlords

Main results:
• 1/3 of the citations involved cases of domestic violence
• “properties located in black neighborhoods were more likely to receive nuisance citations for domestic violence even after controlling for the prevalence of domestic violence calls made from properties and neighborhoods’ domestic violence rates” (p.132)
• “Courses of action” taken by landlords (ex.):
  • Discouraging tenants to call 911 (notably in cases of domestic violence) (see next slide)
  • Eviction of the tenant (in 57% of the cases involving domestic violence)
domestic violence. One landlord, a middle-aged white man who owns 114 units, mostly in poor black neighborhoods, explained how he deals with being cited for domestic violence in his properties:

Like I tell my tenants: You can’t be calling the police because your boyfriend hit you again. They’re not your big babysitter. It happened last week, and you threw him out. But then you let him back in, and it happens again and again. Either learn from the first experience or, you know, leave. Don’t take him back and get hit because you tell him, I don’t know, “I don’t want to sleep with you.”

And what do you normally do when you get a nuisance letter?

I evict them. . . . Look, you’re rolling the dice if you don’t evict the tenant. Because

[the police] want the problem eliminated. Not gradually fixed, but totally eliminated. A five-day [eviction] notice is exactly what the police want.


4. **Urban sociology as general sociology**

A. **Back in the early days of the Chicago school...**

- Studying the growth of the city: urban ecology
- Urban economy, organization and lifestyles
  - Work
  - Deviance
  - Social organization
  - Cultural life
  - Politics...
- Examples of studies:
  - William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki. *The Polish peasant in Europe and America*. (1918)
  - Frederick Thrasher, *The Gang* (1926)
  - Louis Wirth, *The Ghetto* (1928)
• Harvey W. Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum* (1929)
• Clifford S. Shaw, *The Jackroller* (1930)
• Paul G. Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall* (1932)

B. ... Up until now

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« The city » as the departure point for a general sociology

Social organizations and subcultures of local urban communities (who holds power? What is the division of labor/tasks based upon? What are the norms and values?): rich/poor ghettos, ethnic/migrant communities

Social order, norms and culture

Local embedding of (legal or illegal) economic activities

How deviant activities unfold and are organized within the urban space

The city as a social laboratory

Economic sociology

Political sociology

Sociology of inequalities

How urban inequalities reflect and reinforce social inequalities: segmentation and segregation of urban space

Urban planning and its discontent/urban social movements

Urban planning/ housing policies and their social consequences

Social movements

Public policy

Norms, deviance and social control

5. References


