URBANISM

AND URBANIZATION

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If one were to draw a line across a classroom chalkboard to represent all the time of human evolution, the first cities would emerge a fraction of an inch from the end of the line. The agglomerations of humans in large settlements is a phenomenon that only began about seven thousand years ago.

The first cities appeared in Mesopotamia, in the river valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates in what is now Iraq. Like all early cities, their populations were tiny by today’s standards, rarely exceeding thirty thousand. However, their inhabitants were concentrated in a small area, as most early cities were bounded by walls; in fact, population densities (up to ten thousand per square mile) were comparable to those of many small American cities today. Crowding and urban congestion has been a characteristic since the first cities.¹

These early cities had other characteristics that we would instantly recognize as urban: monumental religious and government buildings, armed forces, taxation, fashion, class distinctions, and artisans, merchants, officials, and priests who were not directly involved in food producing activities.

By 3000 B.C. cities began to appear outside of the Tigris-Euphrates region, with the earliest of these other cities arising in the Nile valley of Egypt. The similarity of early Egyptian cities and the earlier Mesopotamian cities raises the question of whether the city was invented once or twice and then diffused elsewhere or cities developed independently of one another.² Clearly, the close proximity of the two regions meant that early Egyptians had some knowledge of the cities of Mesopotamia. But the mere knowledge of city life could not in itself have been “sufficient to induce the generation of urban forms.”³ However, it is plausible that the diffusion of certain technology and ideas from Mesopotamia to the Nile region would have hastened urban development. This hypothesis, that urbanism spread from Mesopotamia to Egypt, is supported by the five-hundred-year time lag between the appearance of the first Mesopotamian cities and the later Egyptian ones, by the similarity in architectural styles, and by the sudden appearance of an advanced writing system in Egypt.

A millennium after the emergence of these cities, other urban forms appeared in Pakistan’s Indus River Valley, the Yellow River Valley of China, and later in Mesoamerica. These cities had many of the same architectural and spatial characteristics: They had a citadel (temple or pyramid) monopolizing the central place; their
streets were winding and narrow, unlike the grid plan we are accustomed to in modern cities; and along their crooked streets were clustered low houses of one or two stories. The elites and more affluent citizens lived near the center, with the poorest citizenry being on the outskirts, nearest the encircling wall. Yet there were also some significant differences, especially between those of the early Old World (Mesopotamia, Egypt, Indus Valley, and China) cities and the earliest New World urban forms in Mesoamerica, where cities were less dense and were spread over larger areas. Mesoamerica is the one region where archaeologists can say with some certainty that its early cities developed independently, uninfluenced by other civilizations. In fact, Mesoamerican cities developed without the benefit of many of the technological advances found in the Old World civilizations, notably the wheel, the plow, metallurgy, and draft animals.

If we had the space to continue looking at the development of urbanism over time, we would next turn to the cities of Ancient Greece, which are the immediate roots of Western civilization and the Western city. There were over five hundred towns and cities on the Greek mainland and surrounding islands by 600 B.C. And then we would shift our lens to Rome. As the Romans expanded their empire across Western Europe, towns and cities sprang up in their path, often beginning as garrisons for Roman troops and promoted by trade. But by 400 A.D. the Roman Empire had fallen and with it urban life also declined. Outposts of the Roman Empire like Paris and London shrank to little more than small towns, which they remained throughout the dark ages. Six hundred years would pass before cities would again expand in western Europe, and more than a thousand years would pass before the industrial modern cities that we know today would begin to take shape. If we had the space we would also want to examine early cities in Africa, such as Benin, and the Chinese cities, which in many respects were more advanced than European cities until the Industrial Revolution in the West.

**Definitions of City**

When we use the terms city and urban, what exactly do we mean? What kinds and sizes of settlements count? Where do we draw the line between town and city, between rural, suburban, and urban?
Scholars of urbanism would like to define *city* and *urban* in a manner that encompasses the same kinds of communities throughout the world and throughout all periods of human history. But is it possible to adopt a single definition that will pertain equally to the early, preindustrial cities of Mesopotamia as well as to contemporary New York, Hong Kong, and Beijing? The different ways the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines city gives us a clue to the difficulty. Its entry reads: (1) A town of significant size. (2) In the United States an incorporated municipality with definite boundaries and legal powers set forth in a charter granted by the state. (3) In Canada a municipality of high rank, usually determined by population, varying by province. (4) In Great Britain, a large incorporated town, usually the seat of the Bishop with its title conferred by the Crown. (5) The inhabitants of a city as a group. (6) An ancient Greek city-state. (7) Formerly a walled area in the center of a community. So the dictionary suggests that there are many ways to define city, often specific to particular countries. Our dictionary doesn’t even begin to take into account cities in the non-Western world.

Islamic cities, for example, can be quite different from Western ones. Unlike American cities, Islamic cities in the Middle East were subdivided into small residential quarters that persisted for long periods of time, even centuries, and in some older cities these quarters still exist. The neighborhood or quarter in the Islamic city was seen as defensible turf, even when it did not involve ethnic or sectarian segregation. This is unlike the fluid boundaries of neighborhoods in American cities like New York or Chicago. Gender segregation has been an important feature of Middle Eastern Islamic cities. Islamic law led to what amounted to building codes that prevented strange men from seeing the women of the house. The layout of houses, courtyards, and neighborhoods, as well as screening of windows, made it possible for women to see the men, but not vice versa. The causes of the differences between the Islamic and Western cities are not simply an entity such as “Islamic culture.” While the regulations regarding gender segregation are found in Islamic law, the importance of neighborhood defensibility is the outgrowth of a wide variety of social, economic, and political forces over long periods of time.5

Even within a single culture there may be little consensus about what the terms *city* and *urban* apply to. In an urban anthropology class, we found that our students variously referred to Schenectady, New York (the city in which they were living, which
has a population of sixty-six thousand) as a “town,” a “city,” and a “suburb.” The students from the rural areas and small towns of upstate New York saw Schenectady as a proper city, while those from Manhattan and Boston defined it as a “town” or “suburb” of Albany. It is no wonder that it is difficult to arrive at a definition that will stand up cross-culturally.

**Defining the City**

Urban scholars have often emphasized different characteristics in defining the city. Some definitions focus on demographic attributes, particularly the size and density of the population. Others reserve the term *city* for communities with certain specific institutions, such as an autonomous political elite or a commercial market. Some scholars define the city in cultural and behavioral terms. Ulf Hannerz, a Swedish anthropologist, takes relative density and size for granted and concentrates on the quality of heterogeneity in his attempt at defining the city. He points to the fact that in a city one has access to a wider variety of services and goods than in smaller communities.

Richard Fox connects cities to their societal contexts. For instance, one of the types that he delineates is the *regal-royal city*, such as that of Charlemagne, the medieval emperor of the Franks and founder of the Holy Roman Empire. The government founded by Charlemagne centered around the ruler’s entourage, which included his kin and personal retainers; it was based around a fortress that housed the royal court and the warriors who protected it, and was supported by an agrarian economy and serf labor. This contrasts sharply with the administrative capital of a highly bureaucratic state, full of “civil servants,” or a mercantile city-state in which traders control most resources, built around a market and an international port.

Based on our review of the many attempts at defining the city, we are not surprised that governments have favored a simple definition based on population size. But even that kind of definition varies from one country to another. In Denmark and Sweden a city could have as few as two hundred people, while in Greece and Senegal cities have a minimum of ten thousand people.
Problems of definitions aside, urban anthropologists and sociologists have been most concerned with understanding the way of life peculiar to cities. In what used to be the most widely cited article in all of sociology, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” Louis Wirth examined how cities influence the social organization, attitudes, and personalities of their inhabitants. We should note that Wirth began his analysis by defining the city as “a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogenous individuals.” Unlike governments (and demographers), Wirth did not give any figures for population or density in his definition. He believed any figure would be arbitrary or meaningless in that small settlements in close proximity to metropolitan centers often have urban characteristics, while conversely large communities in remote or isolated areas may be very provincial and nonurban in character. Moreover, rural areas—such as in China or Java, where irrigated paddy fields produce enormous yields of rice—may have population densities comparable to some American towns. But, in general, Wirth argued that the larger, the more dense, and the more heterogenous the settlement the more accentuated would be its urban characteristics.

Wirth’s classic essay has had an enormous impact on how social scientists have thought about cities. Let us briefly examine what he had to say. Wirth posited a number of social and psychological characteristics that arose from the combination of density, large size, and heterogeneity in the city. These might be summarized in terms of the three A’s: anonymity, anomie, and alienation. Anonymity stems from the fact that many of the people with whom city dwellers come into daily contact are complete strangers to them. In public places—streets, stores, markets, bus and train stations—urbanites are surrounded by strangers. In rural communities, especially in traditional societies, people rarely encounter people they do not know. Moreover, many of the people city dwellers do know are known only in one context. When a city dweller goes into a neighborhood market to buy groceries, he knows the clerk only as a clerk. When a rural dweller goes into a comparable shop, he is likely to know the clerk in sev-
eral different ways. He may attend the same church as the clerk, play on the same softball team, have gone to the same school, and may even be related through blood or marriage. In short, his relationship with the clerk has multiple strands rather than a single strand.

Wirth suggested that frequent contact with strangers in cities produces tension, superficial relationships, and loneliness. In this setting people are more likely to become “predatory” and to take advantage of others. In such an impersonal, anonymous environment, there is a need for formal control mechanisms (police, courts, jails). Informal sanctions, such as fear of being ridiculed or gossiped about (which promote compliance with norms in small communities) are insufficient in the large, anonymous urban environment.

The city environment, said Wirth, overloads its inhabitants with profuse and varied stimuli—traffic, blaring horns, flashing signs, and strange looking and strangely behaving persons—and this produces alienation. To cope in this environment, city dwellers become aloof and impersonal in their dealings with others.

While Wirth seemed to emphasize the negative sides, the diversity that one finds in a city often makes it an exciting place. More goods, more forms of recreation, more types of art-forms, more illegal activities, and the like are available in cities. Much of the impersonality of cities is related to and enhanced by industrial technology. The invention of the clock resulted in the subordination of individual and social activity to clock time. This is especially true in the work realm. We also find an increasing commitment to written records used to verify actions.11

Soon after Wirth published his article, anthropologists began to challenge the universality of his views. Anthropologists found that some non-Western cities were not marked by the heterogeneity, anonymity, alienation, and anomie Wirth described. For instance, William Bascom, an anthropologist who studied the Yoruba people of western Nigeria, found that the Yoruba had cities for a long time, but their cities lacked the diversity and the loneliness encountered by many new-time urbanites.12

Oscar Lewis, an anthropologist who followed villagers from Tepoztlan to Mexico City, found that the Tepoztecos maintained close kinship ties with each other and kept many of their religious practices in the city.13 In general, anthropologists challenged the idea that a single model or paradigm could apply to all cities in time and space. The difficulty in applying Wirth’s par-
adigm cross-culturally has encouraged some scholars to explore the variation in cities and to divide them into different types.

The best known of these efforts is Gideon Sjoberg’s distinction between industrial and preindustrial cities. Sjoberg, a sociologist who made use of examples from historical and anthropological sources, was primarily interested in understanding the characteristics of cities that had not been industrialized. The preindustrial cities he theorized about are rooted in agrarian economies. While the majority of people in the society are cultivators, the society is ruled by elites living in the cities. The urban dwellers obtain their food and raw materials from the surrounding countryside, and therefore preindustrial cities are primarily market centers and places of handicraft production. Between the elites and the lower classes or masses there is a sharp schism.

Unlike in modern industrial cities, a middle class is almost nonexistent. In fact, preindustrial cities often have a feudal character, with caste-like distinctions (rules against intermarriage) between the classes and with little opportunity for social mobility. Social status is ascribed rather than achieved—who you were born, not what you have become, is the guiding principle. Education is restricted to the male elite; women are regarded as inferior and are restricted in many ways. Different ethnic groups and often occupational groups may be segregated in different wards or sectors of the city.  

The focal point of the preindustrial city, and the dominant building in its skyline, is the cathedral or mosque, not the skyscrapers of the business district as in modern industrial cities. Streets are winding passageways, primarily for people and animals rather than for vehicle traffic. The preindustrial society is based on a technology that is powered by humans and animals (animate energy); there are no machines driven by inanimate sources of energy (oil, gas, coal, nuclear). The model of the preindustrial city put forward by Sjoberg is fundamentally different from the industrial cities that we know, and is quite different from the one on which Wirth based his theory of urbanism.

Many anthropologists have been as critical of Sjoberg’s theory of preindustrial urbanism as of Wirth’s. They recognize that there is something distinct about preindustrial cities as opposed to peasant or tribal villages or hunting bands, but they suggest that our proper concern should be not with cities per se but with the complex societies in which cities and their hinterlands are interwoven into tight political and economic webs. In most modern
societies, mass communications have closed the gap between rural and urban peoples, so that even in out-of-the-way places inhabitants may exhibit much of the knowledge and social characteristics of city dwellers.

**Urbanization**

The concept of urbanization has two meanings. One refers to the growth in the number of people living in cities, whether by natural increase or by migration from the countryside. This is the demographic process discussed later. The other meaning concerns the change in lifestyle from rural to urban. The two meanings refer to two aspects of the same phenomenon.

Related to all of this has been the explosion of urban communities from the old nucleated, often walled cities to the urban sprawl that is marked by suburb upon suburb. This sprawl is not limited to residential areas, but also includes industrial parks, office campuses, and airports, as well as resort areas, both near and far. Through modern transportation and telecommunication, the whole world seems to have become urbanized.

One can see how many communities throughout the world have become urban in some ways, in some cases without moving from their old homes. The twin Druze villages of Maaruf and Jebel el-Eneb in northern Israel illustrate this point. The inhabitants of these two villages are mostly members of the Druze sect. The Druze religion is related to Islam, and most of its adherents live in Lebanon, Syria, and Israel. The Druzes are Arabs, but unlike most Arabs in Israel they serve in the Israeli army.

A hundred years ago, all the inhabitants of these villages were peasants engaged mainly in growing wheat, olives, and other crops for their own use or to pay taxes. There were only about four hundred to five hundred people in each village, and there were fields between the villages. People going to the nearby towns of Haifa and Acco would have to travel for several hours by foot or donkey to reach them. While the people had contacts with the city and the world beyond, these contacts were few. They would not see outsiders very often. News from the outside world reached them, but not rapidly. The people’s life span was short, and infant mortality was high.16
In some ways things have not changed. If one goes to Ma’aruf during the winter months, one can still see the hills that are green from the winter rain and the almond blossoms. If one has a traditional host, he may still serve you bitter Arab coffee, the traditional sign of hospitality. Many people, especially the older folks, still wear traditional garb. But much has changed, also. The fields between the two villages are now filled with new homes to house the approximately thirty thousand inhabitants of the two “villages” combined. Most people no longer work in agriculture. The men are mostly employed in the manufacturing and service sectors of the Israeli economy. The villages have factories that assemble transistors and make nylon stockings; the factories employ women exclusively. Jebel el-Eneb also is home to several Arab-style restaurants and shops selling fabric and other “tourist” goods to visitors, especially on weekends. Many of these tourist goods are imported from as far away as Taiwan.

There are clinics in Ma’aruf and Jebel al-Eneb, and women go to urban hospitals to have their babies. Almost every house in the village has a television, and people watch programs from Egypt and Lebanon as well as from Israeli stations. The people use a variety of news sources for getting their information about the world.17

Despite all this, there are ways in which tradition is preserved. Most women continue to wear traditional Druze headdress, even when they wear Western dresses and skirts. Women generally do not travel outside the village without their husbands. Marriages continue to be arranged by others. Family and clan loyalties continue to play an important role in local politics, even though the villages have become more worldly places.

The numbers of people living in cities have exploded. For the first six thousand to seven thousand years after the emergence of the first cities, only a small percentage of people lived in cities. As recently as 1800 it was estimated that only 3 percent of the world’s population lived in urban places. In 1900, Great Britain was the only “urbanized” country in the sense that more than half of its population lived in cities. The United States reached this condition around 1920. In 1955, there were eighteen urbanized nations; by 1990 there sixty-eight such nations. The rapid pace of urbanization has been accompanied by massive migration from rural to urban areas and across international boundaries, as well as other social dislocations.18
EXPLORING VARIETIES OF URBANIZATION

In attempting to understand the underlying factors causing these migrations, social scientists often speak in terms of push and pull. Push factors are the conditions or attributes of the rural homeland that induce, or push, individuals to leave. Common among them are soil erosion, low crop yields, land shortage, disputes, and political factionalism. Pull factors are the attractions of the city that draw, or pull, individuals to it. These include jobs, educational opportunities, conveniences, the excitement and lure of the “city lights,” and hopes of success. Because few migrants have prior experience living in cities, pull factors often tend to be stereotypes of city life and what it has to offer. Not surprisingly, then, expectations are sometimes inaccurate or unrealistic.

Once in the city, the migrant must find work and a place to live, and develop a network of friends to satisfy his or her emotional and social needs. Of concern to urban scholars are the strategies migrants adopt to do these things. These strategies may be individualistic in that migrants may depend primarily upon their own resources and initiative, or they may be group oriented, with the migrants relying upon others—usually kin or fellow villagers—for assistance. The migrants seeking housing, for example, may find accommodation on their own or may rely upon kin for assistance. Similarly, in establishing friendships migrants may seek contacts with other members of the wider urban society or they may choose relationships solely among their own kind—kin, fellow villagers, or co-ethnics.

One strategy common to many different groups of urban migrants has been the formation of regional associations or hometown clubs, by which immigrants from a particular place form a voluntary group to assist each other in the city, to send aid to their common place of origin, and to retain the memory of their past. These kinds of associations are found in the United States, Canada, Africa, and Asia, and they are found among almost all kinds of migrants. In some cases, the kin group—such as a group of cousins (as among East European Jews in the United States) or a common surname (as among Chinese immigrants)—may be the organizing principle, rather than the place of origin. While not all immigrants join such groups, they are quite common.
A consequence of large-scale migrations into cities and of other massive changes is that cities are often subject to housing shortages, especially low-cost affordable housing. The way in which the cities respond to these needs varies. Not only economic forces but also legal and political decisions may influence the form of settlement. The building of tenements with small apartments in Northeastern American cities in the late nineteenth century and of high-rise public housing in the United States in the mid-twentieth century are only two possible accommodations to this problem. The loss of low-cost housing due to a combination of features—including the gentrification of many neighborhoods, the abandonment of rent-controlled apartment buildings (for example, in New York City), the release of many previously institutionalized mental patients from hospitals, and decisions not to build public housing—led to an increase in homelessness in the United States.

In many countries, especially in Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia, squatter settlements on vacant land near cities have been built by migrants. In spatial terms, such improvised housing in the “suburbs” follows the preindustrial pattern of elite residence at the city center and marginal groups on the outskirts. For the most part, the migrants live on land that does not belong to them; the land laws in many of these countries, however, prevent the government from easily removing the “squatters.” In the case of the planned city of Brasilia, planners made little provision for the residence of poor workers in this new capital city and did not realize the extent to which “unskilled labor” would be needed. Over time, the government came to tolerate lower-class squatters.

The type of housing in squatter settlements often is poor in quality and violates housing codes, yet it is built to fill a need by those who are required to fend for themselves. The squatter communities often reproduce the rural communities that the migrants left behind. In Istanbul (Turkey), as in many other cities, rural migrants usually have gone to live near relatives and other people from their home villages. They maintain many ties to their home towns. Often urban employers hire villagers from the same place. Thus hometown ties are reinforced for a long time, both in terms of residence and employment. These neighborhoods based on previous rural ties often make cities look like a mosaic of urban villages.

While most research has focused on how migrants have adapted to and been changed by the demands of cities, it is important to remember that mass migrations of peasants or other peo-
ples may also affect the character of the cities they settle in. For example, whether the migrants come from nearby rural areas and therefore can maintain their ties with the countryside or come from a distance too great to allow regular contacts with their rural homes may influence how much of their rural background they introduce to the city.21

Western social scientists have often assumed that movement to modern cities will almost automatically result in the way of life that we associate with cities in Europe and North America. For instance, in these areas small families—either nuclear family households (parents and unmarried children), single-parent households (usually mother and children), or “empty nests”—are the rule. Scholars generally expected other varieties of households, such as those where men had more than one wife (called polygynous), to become extinct. Yet in some places in Africa and among some Mormon traditionalists in the United States, some men practice polygyny. In some cases, some male migrants have one wife in the country and take another one in the city. In other cases, however, they have formed polygynous households in which several co-wives live with one husband in the city. This is particularly true for men who have achieved prestige and affluence. In some African cities, men who are Western-educated may still wish to use their achievement to maintain a traditional polygynous household. For some women, polygyny may fulfill needs such as providing child care when they work.22

What has been said with regard to polygyny can apply to other aspects of life as well. Just because many outward forms have become identical in modern times—with people living in similar houses, wearing clothing manufactured on international designs, and watching the same television programs—does not mean that they have become clones of each other.

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**The Study of Cities and Social Problems**

In these few pages we have been able to touch on only a few of the topics involved in the study of urban places. Even these topics have not been exhausted.

For instance, if we want to better understand the origin and
development of cities, we need to do much more research on cities past and present. The archaeology and social history of cities all over the world provide us with the possibility of understanding these processes better. Of particular note are the relationships between men and women in these places, which we touched on in our discussion of Ma’aruf and the polygynists. Because urban places make for contact between strangers, women may fear that there will be opportunities in these places for men to harass them sexually, while men may fear that women will be seduced easily in such places. As Ma’aruf became “urbanized,” we noted, the Druzes there kept the factories employing women in town, while also insisting that women wear traditional head dress and not travel outside alone. American women are not veiled, but more often than men they are afraid to venture out alone at night in many U.S. cities.

In studying urbanization, we have considered the way in which migrants and the poor have learned to survive in cities. The same is true of the unemployed, who form a large part of what has been called the “informal sector” of the economy, whether they beg, sell pencils or apples on the street, or are employed in illegal activities.

Through detailed observations of the way in which poor and affluent city dwellers live, social scientists such as anthropologists can contribute to the understanding and solution of urban problems. Comparison of housing shortages in different countries throughout the world can point to different ways in which ordinary people and governments have tried to resolve the problem of shelter.

Sometimes observers can also point to subtle assumptions and misunderstandings that can arise when people from different classes of society or different cultures clash. For instance, Ellen Pader, an anthropologist with experience both in Mexico and the United States, gives us an example: American housing officials who come from relatively affluent backgrounds have come to assume that a house or apartment in which more than two people sleep in a bedroom is unhealthy. So they fail to understand how people may prefer different sleeping arrangements. They showed this lack of understanding in dealing with Mexican immigrants in California. In Mexico people often sleep in bedrooms with more than two persons; single bedrooms are rare. Crowding is not to be avoided— isolation is. Because of this cultural difference, U.S. officials have avoided placing children in Mexican-American foster
homes. Pader suggests that policies regarding foster placement should be modified to be sensitive to different perceptions of proper sleeping arrangements.23

The study of urban life is not only a study of how people relate to each other, but also a study of how human beings adapt to new environments. Through cross-cultural comparison of different cities, we are able to test the abstractions of sociological theory by observations of human beings in the urban environment. These comparisons help make us more sensitive to the cross-cultural differences that exist in this increasingly diverse world, and they may help us to understand ourselves better.

NOTES


SUGGESTED READINGS


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