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SOCIOLOGY

The sociological 'urban'

John Joe Schlichtman

1 Introduction

When a sound engineer is mixing a live recording—say, for instance, a jazz track—she employs a sound board with levers that control the volume of multiple channels, with each channel containing the recording of one section of the ensemble or even a single instrument. When I once utilized such a console, it was my first inclination to turn all of the channels off but one. This way I could concentrate on what that particular channel offered and determine its place and fit. I would then proceed to do the same with each of the remaining tracks. Once the one section—percussion, for example—is understood, its proper place within the mix can be better judged. This is not, of course, how the instrumentalists experience a live recording: They experience it as an ensemble. And their performance would have actually been different in some way if they had been playing alone in different studios and their tracks were mixed into the ensemble later.

I learned urban studies as the combined “live” performance of an ensemble of scholars whose places in the urban literature were inextricably tied to the work of thinkers beyond their discipline. Therefore, an urban sociology extracted from urban studies lacks the luster of the full ensemble as it existed in the performance: the urban planners, economists, geographers, political scientists, historians, architects, and anthropologists that have made our scholarly grasp of the urban what it is today. This sociology also obfuscates the fact that these disciplines were all interacting with, benefitting from, and “riffing” off one another. Nevertheless, that is how I see my charge in this chapter: to extract urban sociology from the dialogue that would develop into “urban studies.”

“Urban phenomena attract sociological attention,” stated Kingsley Davis (1908–1997) in *The Origin and Growth of Urbanization in the World* (1955), “primarily for four reasons.” These reasons actually apply quite well to the past century and a half of urban sociology generally (Davis 1955, 429). First, “cities appeared only yesterday, and urbanisation ... in the last few moments of man’s existence” (ibid.). Second, “urbanism” tends to impact the “whole pattern of social life” and “affect every aspect of existence,” even life outside of city limits (ibid.). Third, cities are centers that exert “power and influence” far beyond their boundaries (ibid.).

Fourth, many issues associated with urbanization are unresolved so that their “future direction and potentialities are still a matter of uncertainty” (ibid.).

This chapter examines the contribution of sociology to the interrogation of such “urban phenomena.” This examination will be organized, quite roughly, into the three periods outlined in Section 2. Based on this historical overview, Section 3 considers the methods utilized in urban sociology. Section 4 attempts a brief unravelling of the cross-fertilization of sociology with other disciplines within urban studies. Finally, Section 5 offers some final thoughts concerning a sociological definition of the urban.

2 The evolution of sociology’s interest in the “urban”

2.1 *The urban as the new industrial reality, 1840–1920*

For nineteenth-century scholars, the sociological need to unravel the “urban” was not as much a dreamy intellectual pursuit as it was—like so much good scholarship—driven by a pressing need to describe and interpret a changing world. Urban sociology sought to describe and look for patterns in the urban, and in some sense to explain it. This 80-year period, which I call *the new urban industrial reality*, encapsulates efforts to grasp the concepts, theories, and language with which to analyze urbanization and industrialization, twin processes that structured the realities of the theorists’ surroundings.

Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) sought to make sense of “an industrial revolution, a revolution which at the same time changed the whole of civil society.” While his mentor Karl Marx did not take on the city as an object of inquiry, he did argue in *Capital* [1867] that “every division of labour” that (a) “has attained a certain degree of development” and (b) “has been brought about by the exchange of commodities” has at its “foundation” the “separation of town from country” (Marx, Fowkes, and Fernbach 1976, 462) Engel’s *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1845) was an exploration of unregulated industrial capitalism. In it, he describes in detail what he viewed as the brutalizing impact of the capitalist industrial city. The urban per se was not the problem here as much as the capitalist mode of production. In this formulation, it was capitalism that fostered the rapid transformation of the urban condition in the industrial city. Capitalist logic, for instance, produced a huge pool of wage laborers and the “industrial reserve army” of desperate workers who would be willing to replace them, eventually driving down wages.

Engels’s “urban,” then, was merely the instantiation of the contradictions of an economically and spatially stratified society in which an elite controls and exploits the means of production for capital accumulation. Engels noted that “after visiting the slums of the metropolis, one realizes for the first time that these Londoners have been forced to sacrifice the best qualities of their human nature, to bring to pass all the marvels of civilization which crowd their city” (Engels, Kelley, and Wischnewetsky 1887, 26) Engels, in a sense, chronicles the landscape of what Marx would term in *Capital* the social relations of production. According to Gottdiener (1994, xi–xii), Engels showed how the categories of political economy—rent, profit, value, the organic composition of capital, and so on—could be applied to the analysis of urban dynamics. That is, along with the means of production deployed within the city, there were also social relations through which specific interests and classes were constituted.

In the slums, Engels noted, “the working-class is crowded together,” while the poorer class “often dwells in hidden alleys close to the palaces of the rich” (Engels, Kelley, and

Wischniewetsky 1887, 26). Yet he also explained that “owing to the curious lay-out of the town it is quite possible for someone to live for years in Manchester and to travel daily to and from his work without ever seeing a working-class quarter or coming into contact with an artisan” (Henderson and Chaloner 1958, 10). Engels noted further that “he who visits Manchester simply on business or for pleasure need never see the slums, mainly because the working-class districts and the middle-class districts are quite distinct” (ibid.).

The urban pattern involves extreme spatial segregation, so that different lived realities exist for different social classes. The slum, therefore, usually has “a separate territory ... assigned to it, where, removed from the sight of the happier classes, it may struggle along as it can” (Engels, Kelley, and Wischniewetsky 1887, 26). And it is “equally arranged in all the great towns of England, the worst houses in the worst quarters of the towns”; there is a landscape characteristic of the social relations of production (Engels, Kelley, and Wischniewetsky 1887, 26). This is Engel’s “urban.” It is an artifact of the push for capital accumulation in a society based upon property ownership and factory production and all of its attending contradictions.

For Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936), the city represented a moment in a dangerous evolutionary process. The urban was embodied in a social structure that constrained human agency and behavior in ways that were profoundly inhumane. In *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* [1887], he outlined two different types of human association. In *gemeinschaft*, there is a common purpose, a shared sense of the common good. Kinship ties of immediate and extended family bind each person into a tight-knit community. Pseudo-kinship ties of religious congregations and neighborhoods create a sense of intimacy bolstered by common language, tradition, and worldview. This marks a profound feeling of “us” and “we,” marking the boundaries of insider and outsider. The *gesellschaft*, on the other hand, is marked by disunity and self-centeredness. The focus of existence shifts from the group to the individual, as life becomes governed by rational calculations and formulas. Each person’s value is derived from his role within the division of labor—and this does not seem a good thing. According to Tönnies, the *gesellschaft* undermines the very fabric of healthy social life.

Similar to Tönnies, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), in his seminal *The Division of Labour in Society* [1893], considered two types of social solidarity. Mechanical solidarity references social bonds that are predicated, much like Tönnies’ *gemeinschaft*, upon similarity of belief, customs, religions, languages, and worldview. Organic solidarity is based upon social differences and the interdependence that develops due to the specialization of roles in society’s division of labor. Such roles are not only occupational, as Durkheim is quick to point out, but also social. While Durkheim did not examine cities directly, Adna Ferrin Weber (1870–1968) stated in *The Growth of Cities in the Nineteenth Century America* (1899) that “the city ... analyses and sifts the population, separating and classifying the diverse elements. The entire progress of civilization is a process of differentiation, and the city is the greatest differentiator” (Weber 1899, 442). Weber suggested that the industrial city could be likened to “a great organism composed of heterogeneous parts” operating within this Durkheimian division of labor (Weber 1899, 169).

There is a clear tension between Tönnies and both Durkheim and Weber in relation to which of these forms of community seems healthier and more robust. For Durkheim and Weber, there is liberation and harmony in organic solidarity. For Tönnies, there is a kind of spiritual slavery in the parallel *gesellschaft*. While it is the next step in a natural evolution, there are “inner hostilities and antagonistic interests” that are repressed only by the contract, policing, and other powers of the state (Tönnies and Loomis 1957, 227). The “elements of life in

the *gemeinschaft*,” germane to the “house, village, and town,” constitute “the only real form of life”; life beyond the *gemeinschaft* is vacuous (Tönnies and Loomis 1957, 226–227).

For Tönnies, “the city is typical of *gesellschaft* in general” (Tönnies and Loomis 1957, 227). He notes that “the more general the condition of the *gesellschaft* becomes in a nation or a group of nations, the more this entire ‘country’ or this entire ‘world’ begins to resemble one large city” (Tönnies and Loomis 1957, 227). “The city” marks a stage in the evolution of a community when “these characteristics,” the “lasting types of real and historical life,” are “almost entirely lost” (Tönnies and Loomis 1957, 226). As larger society loses this authentic, sincere, “real” life, it becomes more urban, and “commerce dominates” the “productive labour” of the city (Tönnies and Loomis 1957, 227). The wealth of the city “is capital wealth which, in the form of free trade, usury, or industrial capital, is used and multiplies” or accumulates (Tönnies and Loomis 1957, 227). Capital is the means for the appropriation of products of labor or for the exploitation of workers. Like Marx and Engels, then, a “dual character”—one that is “divid[ed] in itself”—conceptually “constitutes the city,” but only inasmuch as it “is also manifest in every large-scale relationship between capital and labour” (Tönnies and Loomis 1957, 227). Tönnies expressed, however, that “the scattered seeds” of the *gemeinschaft* could “bring forth [its] essence and idea,” thereby “fostering a new culture amidst the decaying one” (Tönnies and Loomis 1957, 231). The idea that a “warm” town *gemeinschaft* can be cultivated within the “cold” urban *gesellschaft* is an idea that would become a mainstay—at least an implicit one—of urban sociology from Park (1925) to Wirth (1938) to Gans (1962) to Fischer (1982). (Sections 2.2–2.3).

Georg Simmel (1858–1918) utilized a micro-level lens to understand the city. In his essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” [1903], he addressed the intensification of nervous stimuli as an inherent part of city life. In rural life, where one would find Durkheim’s mechanical solidarity and Tönnies’ *gemeinschaft*, life is slower, and “impressions” on one’s mind and “the slightness in their differences” from other impressions create a “habituated regularity of their course” that requires little mental energy (Simmel 1971, 325). This is in contrast to the “violent stimuli” of the city, where “pronounced differences” must be “grasped at a single glance,” with “every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational, and social life” (Simmel 1971, 325).

But this “physiological” influence on urban life combines with economic influence or the “money economy” (Simmel 1971, 329). In such an economy, “money takes the place of all the manifoldness of things and expresses all qualitative distinctions between them in the distinction of how much” (Simmel 1971, 330). The money economy, then, “hollows out the core of things, their peculiarities, their specific values and their uniqueness and incomparability in a way which is beyond repair” (Simmel 1971, 330). The first influence causes a physiological “indifference” or even “aversion” to people, so that “we do not know by sight neighbours of years standing” (Simmel 1971, 331). The second results in a complementary “de-colouring of things, through their equation with money” (Simmel 1971, 330).

Like Tönnies (and unlike Durkheim), Simmel sees the advanced economic division of labor as potentially alienating. Describing something similar to Durkheim’s organic solidarity, Simmel suggests that “in the measure that the group grows numerically, spatially, and in the meaningful content of life, its immediate inner unity and the definiteness of its original demarcation against others are weakened and rendered mild by reciprocal interactions and interconnections” (Simmel 1971, 332). This movement towards organic solidarity, results, for Durkheim, in the liberation of our “lively desire to think and act for ourselves” (Durkheim and Simpson 1933). But for Simmel, while in “an intellectualized and refined sense the citizen

of the metropolis is 'free' ... it is by no means necessary that the freedom of man reflect itself in his emotional life only as a pleasant experience" (Simmel 1971, 334).

Max Weber (1864–1920) likely wrote *The City* in the early 1910s, although it was published posthumously in 1922. To Weber, the city is most fundamentally a place based upon the relations of trade and commerce rather than upon agriculture. "We wish to speak of a city," he stated, "only in cases where the local inhabitants satisfy an economically substantial part of their daily wants in the local market. It is only in this sense that the city is a 'market settlement'" (Weber 1958, 66–67). Furthermore, the city has a court and a law that is its own and, similarly, it has some degree of political autonomy. There is social participation in city life as there are organizations and associations that create a network of engagement.¹

2.2 *The urban as an organism, 1920–1970*

The flux of the urban environment in the late 1800s and early 1900s begged for analysis. Much of the response of US scholars to this challenge would be based at the University of Chicago and would come to be known as the Chicago School. Chicago School thinkers developed and refined theory based upon qualitative community analyses. Through ethnographic immersion in the habitat of their subjects, they examined the city as interdependent parts that each had a unique impact on human behavior and interaction. This "ecological" approach highlighted the similarities between biotic systems and social systems (see also Chapter 7). These urban systems constituted a social structure that shaped the day-to-day agency of their inhabitants.

Robert Park (1864–1944) expressed in *The City as a Social Laboratory* [1929] that "if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live" (Park and Turner 1967, 3). It is in the city that "man has remade himself," and it is



FIGURE 2.1 Contemporary downtown Chicago.

Source: iStock.com/Maciej Bledowski.

thus “a social laboratory” (Park and Turner 1967, 3). This social laboratory was unique among other human-made settlements. As Park noted to the American Sociological Association in 1925, cities, and “particularly great cities, where the selection and segregation of the populations has gone farthest,” tend to “display certain morphological characteristics which are not found in smaller population aggregates” (Park 1926, 2). Park’s reference to “selection” and “segregation” are indicators of his belief that the city is a social organism bound together by its own internal processes rather than the product of either chaos and disorder or some external structures that define it.

Park further argued that human settlements could be analyzed in the same way that one can analyze the development of semi-autonomous plant or animal communities, that is, through the examination of habitats and processes such as evolution, invasion, and succession. In fact, Park opened his address with a reference to the work of botanist Eugenius Warming’s *Plant Communities*, noting that “ecology . . . is in some very real sense a geographical science” (Park 1926, 2, 2). According to Park (1926), “within the limits of every natural area the distribution of population tends to assume definite and typical patterns.” In this view, all communities, whether human, animal, or plant, are interdependent, rooted in some way to a territory and organized within that territory. This predictable pattern “constitutes what Durkheim and his school call the morphological aspect of society” (Park 1926, 2).

Park was very much attuned to social structure and micro-level agency, but such a structural analysis was more or less limited to the built environment, that is, to the city’s physical form. In his view, human society makes the city, which therefore is a reflection of it. The resulting structure (i.e., the city’s physical form) then recreates human society in its image as people adjust to their social ecology. Their agency is thus constrained or enabled by that structure.

A sense of survival of the fittest was inherent in Park’s ecological model, in that the most resourced actors access prime space and leave marginal space for the less resourced (see Chapter 6). In addition, that marginal space can be inexpensively redeveloped into prime space, also by the resourced, leading to a pattern of “invasion” and “succession.” Park was also attuned to the need for a semblance of social order in the *gesellschaft* of the modern world. This sense of order could be found within the “natural area”: the habitat where similar people could reconstruct some “seed” of the *gemeinschaft* as Tönnies had suggested (Section 2.1).

It can be inferred from the above that according to Park, the urban was organized on a symbiotic level and a cultural level. The former is driven by the competition over scarce resources and for economic and territorial control (or domination). The latter, on the other hand, is driven by a “way of life” that is an adaptive response to the biotic level.

Ernest Burgess (1886–1966) wrote in *The Growth of the City* [1925] that “all the manifestations of modern life which are peculiarly urban,” “—the skyscraper, the subway, the department store, the daily newspaper, and social work—are characteristically American” (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1967, 47). The “problems that alarm and bewilder us” such as “divorce, delinquency, and social unrest,” he continued, “are to be found in their most acute forms in our largest American cities” (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1967, 47). These unfortunate effects were “wrought” by “profound and ‘subversive’ forces” related to the growth and expansion of cities (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1967, 47) (see also Chapters 8 and 14). While Burgess touched on some of the same issues of community addressed by Tönnies, Simmel, and Durkheim (Section 2.1), what was most notable about Burgess’s perspective is the bold meso-level scale of his analysis, in which he actually diagrammed the organism of the city.

Like Park, Burgess makes it clear in his model of growth that the city functions and develops as an organism found in nature. As he unpacks his concentric zone hypothesis, he explains that “in all cities there is the natural tendency for local and outside transportation to converge in the central business district” and that “quite naturally, almost inevitably, the economic, cultural, and political life centres here” (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1967, 52) (see Chapter 6). This five-zone organization² “sifts and sorts and relocates individuals and groups” in one consistent pattern “with only interesting minor modifications” (ibid.).

To Burgess, the city is the seemingly autonomous unit of analysis. This allows him to inquire how changes in it are “matched by a natural but inadequate readjustment in the social organization” (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1967, 53). “Natural” too were the “economic and cultural groupings” for which “segregation offers . . . a place and a role in the total organization of city life.” “Disorder, disease, vice, insanity, and suicide” can be explained by “the excess of actual over the natural increase of a population,” which overwhelms the urban “metabolism” (ibid.) (see also Chapters 3, 8, and 14). Mobility is “the best index of the state of metabolism of the city,” much “like the pulse of the human body” (ibid.).

Louis Wirth’s (1897–1952) essay “Urbanism as a Way of Life” (1938) endeavors to provide a “sociological definition of the city” and city life. A city, explained Wirth, is a “relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals” (Wirth 1938, 8). “The dominance of the city, especially of the great city,” may be the consequence of a large concentration of “industrial, commercial, financial, and administrative facilities and activities, theatres, libraries, museums, concert halls, operas, hospitals, colleges, research and publishing centers, professional organizations, and religious and welfare institutions” (Wirth 1938, 5). Within Wirth’s explanation, the three criteria that determine the degree of urbanism found in a given community are size, density, and heterogeneity.

Wirth drew directly upon Simmel in his idea that social relationships within the city have an inherent shallowness due to the size of the community. These relationships are mostly instrumental (see Tönnies, Section 2.1) and, in a way, are often merely resources to be used to accomplish a goal. Also in line with Simmel and Durkheim, Wirth notes that the urban resident gains freedom over the constraint of folk ties or ties of mechanical solidarity. However, there is a sense that this freedom comes at a cost—“loneliness in a crowd,” as Simmel would put it.

When population increases within a circumscribed area, density increases and, due to this density (again, in line with Simmel), people tend to ‘read’ their neighbors utilizing superficial cues rather than intimate knowledge. According to Wirth, due to this increase in density, human settlements naturally segregate to the degree that their “natural areas,” their little disparate worlds, are not compatible with one another. Finally, Wirth, much like Simmel, Durkheim, and Tönnies, claimed that the city dweller occupies a heterogeneous milieu, one that holds few unwavering allegiances to any particular broadly defined group. These multiple allegiances pull urbanites and, in a sense, all of “mass society,” in competing, conflicting, and confounding directions (Gans 1968).

Underlying these three criteria, and especially heterogeneity, is Wirth’s presupposition that all of society is now urban (Wirth 1938). Wirth also felt that the social system of the city would be more or less dominated by a *gesellschaft*-like force, which is again reminiscent of Tönnies (Section 2.1). Wirth suggests that “if the individual would participate at all in the social, political, and economic life of the city,” then “he must subordinate some of his individuality to the demands of the larger society” (Wirth 1938, 18); or, as Tönnies suggested, “men

change their temperaments with the place and conditions of their daily life, which becomes hasty and changeable through restless striving” (Tönnies and Loomis 1957, 225).

The organic approach of the Chicago School is today charged with overlooking other characteristics (e.g., social, relational, political) that would be of extreme importance to subsequent theorists (Section 2.3). St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton may reflect this transition. While their *Black Metropolis* [1945] followed the methodological approach of the Chicago School and was dedicated to Robert Park, their massive study of race and class conflict in Chicago’s South Side ultimately concluded (in over 700 pages) that “forces which are in no sense local will in the final analysis determine the movement of this drama” (Drake and Cayton 1993, 767).

2.3 *The urban as a political and economic node, 1970–present*

A very different sociological approach towards the urban was developing by the 1960s. This approach looked less for harmonious interdependence in the city and rendered conflict a foundational assumption. This political economy approach, by its very name, inserts politics, economic position, power, and decision making into the analysis (see, e.g., Chapter 18). Looking more to Marx than to Park, these critical urban theorists turned to macro-level tendencies like “capital accumulation” and rejected the notion of the city as a natural process. Urban sociological theory transitioned to an era when the “urban” would be, first and foremost, a scale. These new critical urban theorists do, perhaps, agree with Park on one issue: that people “created” the city (Park 1926, 2).

Manuel Castells, in *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach* [1972], explicitly rejected the Chicago School’s idea that “the city is given a specific cultural content and becomes the explicative variable of this content” (Castells 1977, 78). He rejected too, then, the idea that the city can be an independent variable with its own explanatory power. Instead, Wirth’s three determinants of the urban and urbanism actually correspond “to a certain historical reality: the mode of social organization linked to capitalist industrialization” (Castells 1977, 81). It is immediately clear, then, that Castells’ new approach was in fact a scalar approach that is centered upon influences beyond (i.e., “above”) the city.

Mark Gottdiener’s *The Social Production of Urban Space* [1985] was also a scathing indictment of the ecological approach. The approach’s “organic metaphors, which ignored both the class structure and the specificity of capitalism,” “struck” Gottdiener (1985, vii). His approach would not “assume” urban space but rather interrogate its “production and consumption relations” (Gottdiener 1994, vii). In the age of suburbanization and gentrification in which he wrote, examining the city itself as a closed system also seemed a bit preposterous. Gottdiener sought to examine, instead, “the regional metropolitan space” (Gottdiener 1985, ix), which was itself influenced by large scale “supply-side forces” such as “state intervention and government programs, the real estate industry, and the effects of global capitalism” (Gottdiener 1985, x).

Gottdiener also noted that the spatial fixity of the “urban” had become de-anchored. For one, the hyper-development of communication technologies and the further development of transportation technologies were changing the rate at which previously “peripheral” places could become “central.” Supranational political and economic institutions were facilitating where, when, and how this development occurred. With a growing cadre of global real estate developers, planners, and architects and an increasingly “footloose” population of

business travelers and visitors sharing similar demands and tastes, the “urban experience” seemed increasingly manufacturable. Gottdiener recognized a profound shift: It was possible to “assemble market, government, and construction forces that will raise an ‘urban’ development within a short period of time” (Gottdiener 1994, 4). In an important sense, “urban life has become portable and, thus, so has the ‘city’” (Gottdiener 1994, 4).

In considering such development, Logan and Molotch claimed in *Urban Fortunes* [1987] that a central reality of urban space is that it is essentially a “growth machine,” a tool utilized by powerful actors for their benefit. Central within the growth machine are speculators, people who buy land hoping that it will increase in value as they hold onto it (see Chapter 3). Real estate developers, another growth machine actor, build on the land to make it more profitable. Politicians benefit not only from the increased taxes that development brings but also from the attention-grabbing headlines that come along with it (see Chapter 6). At the heart of contested space lies the Marxian conflict between pro-growth leaders, who seek to maximize the exchange value of space, and residents, who pursue its use value as a living space. While exchange value is the quantitative worth of a place in the free market, use value is the qualitative benefit that residents experience in utilizing that place.

In *Landscapes of Power* (1991), Sharon Zukin articulated a similar tension and a “crucial distinction” between “landscape—the spaces of power dominated by capital and state institutions” and “vernacular—the spaces of everyday life” (Zukin 1991, 137). In Zukin’s formulation, this tension is manifested in the physical landscape of a city’s environment. The landscape of power bears the “imprint of powerful business and political institutions on both the built environment and its symbolic representation” (Zukin 1991, 139). Vernacular, on the other hand, expresses “the resistance, autonomy, and originality” of residents (Zukin 1991, 139).

Manuel Castells deserves further mention for also helping to re-theorize the global and the local with his distinction between the space of flows and the space of places. This distinction was introduced in *The Informational City* [1989] and incorporated into his *The Rise of the Network Society* [1996]. To Castells, the space of flows is “the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows” (Castells 1996, 412). These flows generally are the “purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors in the economic, political, and symbolic structures of society” (ibid.). Castells is particularly concerned with the “organizations and institutions” that play “a strategic role in shaping social practices” (ibid.). Flows are not physical places, but they impact physical places. They hit the ground, we might say, most obviously at what are (in network-based analyses) called *nodes*, where the network of placeless flows “links up specific places” (ibid.) (see Chapter 21).

Saskia Sassen’s work has been central in giving special attention to the analysis of cities as nodes in the global context. Sassen’s ideas were articulated in depth in *The Global City* (1991) and have been refined considerably in the decades since. Global cities, as she defined them, are types of cities that serve as “strategic sites for the management of the global economy and the production of the most advanced societies and financial operations” (Sassen 1991, 21). In concert with other sociologists—but more so urbanists in other disciplines—Sassen has endeavored to work out exactly what makes a city a strategic site and what this means for cities of more or less stature in the global economy.

In her oft-revised *Cities in a World Economy* (2012), Sassen draws out many such characteristics, for example the agglomeration of advanced producer firms (i.e., firms that service other firms operating within global networks), which benefit from proximity. For these firms, “the



FIGURE 2.2 New York City, one of Sassen's (1991) "global cities."

Source: iStock.com/ventdusud.

benefits of agglomeration in the production of specialized services are still extremely high," even in cases when the huge corporate headquarters that they service (i.e., corporate command and control centers) are not located within the same city (Sassen 2012, 139). This co-location produces a specific kind of "urban knowledge capital" in a particular city, giving that city a particular niche of "global control capability" (Sassen 2012, 139, 42). Sassen is quick to point out that the global city is not the only strategic site in the geography of capitalism, and she explains the importance of areas such as "export processing zones"—which can be inside or outside of metropolitan boundaries—to the global economy. This discussion of non-urban areas in a theory on the urban provides us with a helpful segue to understand the views of subsequent urbanists.

For example, Neil Brenner's addition to the urban discussion, *Implosions/Explosions* (2014), produced by Harvard's Urban Theory Lab, is also quite relevant in this respect (see Chapter 3). Brenner takes us back to the Chicago School theorists (and those preceding and following them) to call our attention to the idea that they "focused their analytical gaze primarily, if not exclusively, on 'city-like'" units (Brenner 2014, 12). Brenner then proceeds to explain that city-like is "nodal, relatively large, densely populated, and self-enclosed." In this sense, at least in Brenner's eyes, Ferdinand Tönnies, Robert Park, and Sharon Zukin may have a foundational commonality.

Despite "the tumult of disagreement and the relentless series of paradigm shifts," most perspectives conceive of the city as a settlement type "characterized by certain indicative features (such as largeness, density, and social diversity) that make [it] qualitatively distinct from a non-city social world (suburban, rural and/or 'natural') located 'beyond' or 'outside' [of it]" (Brenner 2014, 15). To Brenner, the city is merely "one dimension and morphological expression of the capitalist form of urbanization" (Brenner 2014, 12). In this way, the urban is actually "planetary," so that there is nothing beyond it. This is because the "socio-spatial relations of urbanism that were once apparently contained within these units [have] now exploded haphazardly beyond them" (Brenner 2014, 16).

3 Sociological approaches to studying cities and urban processes

The sociological approaches to studying the city are hardly unique to sociology. Ethnography is the one of the oldest—and perhaps the most popular—sociological approaches to studying cities. Indeed, Engels's (1845) approach showed many of the elements of good ethnography. Park (1925), for his part, wrote of the different urban characters in his exploration of Chicago as an urban field site, calling attention to “the shopgirl, the policeman, the peddler, the cabman, the night watchman, the clairvoyant, the vaudeville performer, the quack doctor, the bartender, the ward boss, the strike-breaker, the labour agitator, the school teacher, the reporter, the stockbroker, the pawnbroker”—which, to him, were all “characteristic products of the conditions of city life” (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1967, 14).

Some well-known examples of works that, spanning across three centuries, have employed the urban ethnographic method include W. E. B. DuBois' *The Philadelphia Negro* [1899], Harvey Warren Zorbaugh's *The Gold Coast and the Slum* [1929], William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society* [1943], St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's *Black Metropolis* [1945], Herbert Gans's *Urban Villagers* [1962], Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner* [1967], David Snow and Leon Anderson's *Down on their Luck* [1988], Elijah Anderson's *Streetwise* [1990], Mitch Duneier's *Sidewalk* [1999], Mary Pattillo's *Black on the Block* [2007], and Matthew Desmond's *Evicted* [2016].

Many great urban ethnographies have sought to connect urban theory with micro-level methods such as participant observation and interviews and meso-level methods such as archival and historical research, all while contextualizing the case in terms of larger macro-level issues and trends. Japonica Brown-Saracino's multi-sited ethnography *The Neighborhood That Never Changes* [2010] actually examines four distinct neighborhoods (allowing for powerful micro-level comparisons) as it works to formulate generalizations about the meso and macro levels.

The use of statistical data sets, at times supported with archival work and interviews, is another strategy used in addressing urban sociological hypotheses. In his highly celebrated *Great American City* [2012], Robert Sampson draws upon longitudinal data on children, family, and neighborhood collected within the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods. William Julius Wilson tends to utilize a similar approach, marshalling national data sets such as those from the Bureau of Labor Statistics in *The Truly Disadvantaged* [1987]. He not only explores the rise of an urban underclass, examining “broader problems” such as racially unjust policies, industrial restructuring, suburbanization, and increased global competition, but he also gives attention to “the social pathologies of the inner city” (Wilson 1987, viii) as he develops his argument. Wilson used national data sets in *When Work Disappears* (2007) but leaned upon the statistics and open-ended responses generated by the Urban Poverty and Family Life Study.

Sassen (1991, 2012) has also marshalled data from a variety of sources such as global organizations, national governments, and city governments. Sassen also fits into the analytical tradition of examining global urban networks and the urban nodes through which they are articulated. This approach is currently led by the Global and World Cities Research Network (GaWC), a research team mostly composed of geographers (Section 4). However, several sociologists have operated in this tradition—which certainly precedes GaWC itself—such as Saskia Sassen, Michael Timberlake, Arthur Alderson, Jason Beckfield, and Zachary Neal.

Understanding urban phenomena through examining only one single city or one single nation—or one single moment, for that matter—is limiting. For this reason, research that

examines one city has tended to carefully compare and contrast the focal city with (a) other cities that were researched with less depth (e.g., through archival research, interviews, or time spent there) or (b) the academic literature on other cities. However, some urban sociologists have taken a historical–comparative approach, which places historical time and cross-cultural comparison at the center of the researcher’s attention so that more than one place or time is under analysis. For example, while Janet Abu-Lughod’s *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles: America’s Global Cities* [1999] was framed within debates on globalization and world cities: it employs an in-depth historical analysis in three different locations in order to understand contemporary urban change.

The urban has always been in profound flux, a flux that is empirical and profoundly visual. Bruno Latour and Emilie Hermant’s *Paris Ville Invisible* [1998], Duneier’s *Sidewalk*, Caroline Knowles and Douglas Harper’s *Hong Kong* [2009], and Jerome Kruse’s *Seeing Cities Change* [2012] all adopt a case-study approach that, in concert with other methods (e.g., ethnography), privileges a visual sociological analysis of the urban environment. In some sense, all these studies engage the idea of urban semiotics, the embedded messages in urban environments and the way these messages are crafted, employed, and interpreted. Such an idea is also a key theme in several of the works discussed above, such as Sharon Zukin’s *Landscapes of Power* [1991].

4 Urban sociology’s cross-fertilization with other disciplines

It could be said that urban sociology emerged with Engels’ insights in 1845 (Section 2.1) and developed into a somewhat free-standing (although neither autonomous nor homogeneous) discipline in Chicago during the early twentieth century (Section 2.2). However, by the end of the twentieth century, determining what urban sociology is—as opposed to, say, urban geography, political science, economics, planning, or history—was quite an exercise.

Today, cross-fertilization is the norm. While I have worked diligently here to maintain disciplinary boundaries, it should be noted that the contribution of urban sociology would have been vastly different had it not been for urban sociologists being “in concert with” their colleagues in related disciplines. The cross-pollination of the 1960s is indicated in the uncertainty as to how to classify any thinker into a discipline. Do we examine how they were trained? What academic departments they have called home? For example, such ambiguity surrounds Henri Lefebvre.

Lefebvre’s *The Right to the City* [1968], *The Urban Revolution* [1970], and *The Production of Space* [1974] have impacted much of the urban dialogue to the present day. Sociologists Mark Gottdiener, Neil Brenner, and others were greatly influenced by Lefebvre; Manuel Castells assesses his arguments extensively in *The Urban Question* [1972]. Marxist geographer David Harvey’s *Social Justice and the City* [1973] also shows similarities to Lefebvre’s *The Urban Revolution*, although in the concluding section of his book, Harvey explained that despite the parallels to Lefebvre, he had not yet studied Lefebvre’s book when he wrote it (Harvey 1973, 212).

David Harvey explained that the city is “a pivot around which a given mode of production is organized” (Harvey 1973, 202). The capitalist city was revolutionized by the practice of extracting rent from land, which was enabled by the “buying and selling of space as a commodity” to “consolidate space as universal, homogeneous, objective, and abstract in most social practices” (Harvey 1985, 13) (see also Chapter 6). In 2014, Harvey suggested that “the ‘thing’ we call a ‘city’ is the outcome of a ‘process’ that we call ‘urbanization’” (Brenner 2014, 61).

Saskia Sassen developed much of her theoretical underpinnings in dialogue with urban geographers, planners, and economists. The key research team at GaWC (Section 3) is largely composed of geographers such as Peter Taylor and Ben Derudder, with the center itself being located within the Department of Geography at Loughborough University.

Urban planner John Friedmann had a defining impact upon the nascent world cities literature. Friedmann, in his *The World City Hypothesis* [1986], synthesized the growing literature and proposed a direction for future research. Of course, another planner, Sir Peter Hall, had established this vein of inquiry in his book *The World Cities* [1966], suggesting that a considerable percentage of the world's commerce was concentrated in a limited number of cities.

Beyond his work on world cities, Friedmann's theories of urban space further influenced some of the sociologists discussed above. For example, his distinction between economic spaces and life spaces certainly shared a dialogue with Zukin's distinctions between landscape and vernacular (Section 2.3). Friedmann suggested that "economic space obeys the logic of capital" (e.g., it would, for instance, certainly privilege exchange value) and, as a result, "it is profit-motivated and individualized" (Friedmann 2002, 77). Economic space is "open and unlimited; it can expand in all directions" (ibid. 97). Life space is bounded as "places have names" and "constitute political" boundaries (ibid. 96). In life spaces, people's "dreams are made, their lives unfold" (ibid. 77). Nevertheless, "the dominant actors in economic space" do not recognize the value in this conviviality, as for them, "life space is nothing but a hindrance, an irrational residue of a more primitive existence" (ibid. 77–78).

5 Sociology's definition of *urban*

Developing a sociological definition for the urban would require us to examine the threads of the sociological literature discussed above and to distil the "urban" from it. In general parlance, of course, *urban* means "pertaining to the city." This could mean pertaining to the process of the city in line with Harvey, as Brenner noted (2014, 61), or pertaining to specific, geographically rooted areas—that is, rooted in some sense for some particular period (see also Chapters 3 and 21). In regard to the latter, the definition of the urban depends upon what we mean when we say "city."

Interestingly, Gottdiener *et al.* (2015, 3), much like Wirth, define the city as "a bounded space that is densely settled and has a relatively large, culturally heterogeneous population," see also Chapters 3 and 21. It is this very idea that Brenner (2014) critiques. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to explore whether the definition can stand without one of its components. I undertake a bit of a thought experiment here as I consider these "urban" characteristics, that is, size, density, and heterogeneity.³

To start, "relatively large" is rather benign, as the city will likely be larger in some measure (e.g., area, height, population) than the non-city area with which it is compared. However, many urban theorists, especially those who examine cities in a global context, warn against using population size as either an indicator of a city's importance or of the impact of urbanization processes (Bell and Jayne 2006) (see, e.g., Chapter 3). We might argue that a city must be a node in some sense and that there must be some agglomeration, some centralization of people and/or built environment.

"Densely settled" may be a bit more problematic. If due to some unprecedented and heretofore unimaginable magnitude of external threat (e.g., a great flood, terrorism), we imagine that the population of London is forced to reconfigure in a rural density in the same

proximate region, would the “urban-ness” of London necessarily cease? What if such a city maintained its components of a global strategic node? What if it retained its political system, its commerce, and its cultural institutions? If indeed, as Sassen has suggested, “time replaces weight as a force for agglomeration” in the contemporary city, is not a 10-minute commute a 10-minute commute whether one travels eight blocks on foot or 30 miles by bullet train (Sassen 2012, 138)? So what if we were to recalibrate our new London to maintain the same timing of the old city, and thus many of its meetings, encounters, or “collisions” remained intact? What has been lost with the loss of density? This has been an enduring question, to which some—like Jane Jacobs (1964)—have a definitive answer (see Chapter 12).

Thinking about density from a different vantage point, do new small city environments (e.g., a new city in the developing world) or cities with suburban-like landscapes (e.g., a US city without a “downtown”) really become more “urban” through concerted campaigns to build a tall, dense skyline of government complexes, commerce, and residences in their center? Is such a place now more “urban,” or is the density just a stage set, an image, an attempt at an urban aesthetic?

And if you were willing to accompany me on that thought experiment, certainly you can imagine a city that is not “culturally heterogeneous,” however we choose to unpack this concept. Could we imagine a city composed completely of one class, ethnicity, and/or a similar occupation? And if we could, would such a place lacking heterogeneity—however we choose to operationalize it (for example, it is “all” transnational capitalist class or “all” of one ethnicity)—really cease to be urban?

And what of urbanism, the supposed result of these characteristics? Like Wirth before, Gottdiener and colleagues (2015, 164) characterize urbanism as “a way of life characterized by density, diversity, and complex social organization” or, more generally, as the “culture of cities.” However, the culture of cities has long been understood to exist beyond city limits, so ultimately, urbanism is the transportable way of life of the urban. This “way of life” might not simply connote a cultural tool kit from which urbanites and non-urbanites knowingly or subconsciously draw meaning, but might also connote the political and economic influences of urbanization.

In the same way, when we think about urbanization from a sociological perspective, we must incorporate processes (e.g., economic, social, cultural, political, environmental) that affect places beyond those recognized as cities, however we categorize or conceptualize them. The “urban,” then, must contain room for what is “beyond” the urban. Interestingly, even Kingsley Davis, whom Neil Brenner critiques in his recent reformulation of “urban,” noted 60 years ago that urbanization “exercises its pervasive influence not only in the urban milieu strictly defined but also in the rural hinterland” (Davis 1955, 429). Going back another 70 years or so, Tönnies lamented that “the more general the condition of the *Gesellschaft* ... the more ... the entire ‘world’ begins to resemble one large city” (Tönnies and Loomis 1957, 227).

If this “pervasive influence,” this “resemblance,” this city-ness, is not merely cultural (e.g., gleaned from popular culture) but also social, economic, and political, are the areas under its influence not urban? Perhaps there has always been a place, then, for a sociological “urban” that is not dependent upon the “established understandings of the urban as a bounded, nodal, and relatively self-enclosed sociospatial condition” and one that is “more territorially differentiated, morphologically variable, multiscalar and processual” (Brenner 2014, 12). Perhaps the sociological “urban,” then, is the political, social, economic, and cultural processes that both produce and are produced by urbanization.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to extract urban sociology from the dialogue that would develop into what we now know as “urban studies.” Such an attempt only highlights the interdisciplinarity of urban inquiry. Urban studies comprises of an ensemble of scholars who each have a valuable place in the urban literature, a place that is inextricably tied to the work of thinkers beyond their discipline.

A sociological approach brings to this conversation the discipline’s attention to relationships and contexts, whether this is an individual’s relationship to local governance, a local growth machine’s relationship to national politics, a family’s relationship to their neighborhood, or a downtown’s relationship to the global space of flows.

At the center of this is a sociological framework that elucidates how the agency of individuals, groups, or communities is constrained and/or enabled by their context. This is often referred to as the *social structure*: the fixed regularities and patterns that they “make up” as it “makes up” them. Of course, such a framework is hardly the proprietary bailiwick of sociology, but it is an emphasis of the contribution of urban sociology. This contribution has spanned three centuries and has contributed significantly to urban studies.

Notes

- 1 Finally and anachronistically, to Weber, the city is also militarily self-sufficient.
- 2 The five-zone organization consists of a central business district, a zone in transition, a zone of workingmen’s homes, the residential zone, and the commuters’ zone.
- 3 It worth noting that at least one of these three components has played a key role, either explicitly or implicitly, in the definition of the urban from possibly each discipline, profession, and emergent field discussed in this volume.

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