Much of urban sociology takes the city for granted as the prevailing spatial container for social interaction. Yet how we conceive of this social container belies macro and micro assumptions that shape how we understand and conceptualize our urban world. For example, while segregation is not a social fact unique to cities, sociologists who view cities as natural ecological process instead of as a spatial concentration of surplus labor will interpret segregation as a natural social process instead of resulting from social competition for limited resources. Interrogating these assumptions is the important task of the urban sociologist.

**How is the City Defined?**

While not the first to write on the subject, Louis Wirth’s “Urbanism as a Way of Life” has become the foil against which many other conceptualizations of the city struggle. He defines the city as “a large, dense, and permanent settlement of heterogeneous individuals;” a uniquely modern artifact. He argues that cities can be characterized by their large numbers, their density, and their heterogeneity. The large number of people account for the variation among individuals and depersonalizes relations. A city’s density creates specialization (also, areas of the city take on special functions), increases diversity, and causes people to be more tolerant. This fits into a larger Durkeheimian understanding of society that envisions a division of labor predicated on specialization. Finally, Wirth views cities as heterogeneous, that is, consisting of diverse individuals and personality types. Wirth sees this as a mechanism that breaks social hierarches and creates a more ramified and diversified framework. In other words, for Wirth, the physical characteristics of cities (size, density, and heterogeneity) condition the social organization of the city (impersonal relations, division and specialization of labor, tolerance, social mobilization, and segregation).

As a part of The Chicago School of sociology, Wirth’s vision of the city is but a small piece of a larger vision of a natural, ecological process of city development and growth. With rapid urbanization of Chicago as the backdrop for the development of The Chicago School of sociology, which was viewed as the inevitable end result of natural processes. The city served as a laboratory for social research that reflected lager social processes, much like a living organism reflects human nature and organization. They viewed people as spatially distributed according to principles and processes of competition, invasion, succession, and segregation (145). In thinking about city development and growth in particular, they developed the concentric zone model, which designated specific types of areas as successive zones of urban extension and expansion (50). The model consists of **the loop** (a central business district), **a zone of transition** (business, light manufacturing, slums, ghetto), a **zone for workingmen’s home** (that was home to industrial workers and second generation immigrants), **a residential zone** (for high-class, single-family apartments and homes), and **the commuters’ zone** (a suburban area for commuters and satellite cities). The present-day city is the result of a history of the **successive invasion** of each zone into the next, a **concentration** local and outside transportation in the central business district, and the **decentralization** and re-organization of sub-groups into new sub-areas dominated by a central business district. They saw social forces as consisting of **ecological** (those having to do with the process of competition and the consequent distribution and segregation by residence and occupation), **cultural** (the social heritage of the group that implies both the local indigenous and constant social situation), and **political forces** (that have to do with control of public opinion and law).

Wirth and the Chicago School’s vision of the city dramatically contrasts with that of Engels’, who writing in the mid 1840s, viewed the city as a concentration of the **surplus labor** (the proletariat) resulting from the industrial revolution, advances in manufacturing, and technological innovation. Like the Chicago School, the city was a reflection of something larger—a social system of organization rather than a natural ecological process. He viewed the individual’s physical location and living conditions in the city as a reflection of their distance in relation to the means of production (e.g., their relative distances from other classes). The proletariat usually ate rotten food, had no time for leisure, wore tattered garments, and lived in houses constructed in ways so as to minimize further capital investment. For Engels, the city is not the result of a natural process, but rather an artifact of a social system in which the proletariat serves as a tool of capital accumulation for the capital class. The conditions in which the proletariat exists are morally reprehensible, but the city is designed in such a way as to hide their misery from the eyes of the bourgeoisie as they travel among them to do their shopping and conduct their business. The juxtaposition of these two visions of the city could not be any more different.

**What are the effects of living in a City?**

The theoretical orientations that shape conceptions on the city highlight questions about the effects that result from living in a city. Viewing the city as a site of heightened cultural development and consumption, Georg Simmel highlights the effects that city living has on the individual. These concerns are enduring in sociological literature because they mirror they modern debate between structure and agency. Specifically, Simmel is concerned with the ability of the individual to maintain their independence and individuality against the sovereign powers of society, history, and the culture. He argues that individuals living in cities must develop a specific mode of being in the world as a result of the "continuous and swift flow of internal and external stimuli” (329). Like Engels, Simmel also locates the money economy in the city and sees money as an element of socialization (332). However, unlike Engels who places primacy on the social organization of the city and society writ large as producing capital by exploiting the proletariat, Simmel focuses on the effects of money as a “frightful leveler” that “hallows out” particularities and individual characteristics. Simmel is less interested in the exploring the role of economics and more in the role of culture in the city in shaping the individual’s action.

W.E.B Du Bois’ *The Philadelphia Negro* deals with the impact of living in a city upon a specific racial group. His work seeks to answer the question of the “negro problem”—the failure of the black community to fully integrate into larger American society across several measures. The implication is that there is something about the black individual—something biological or cultural—that prevents them from doing so. Du Bois’ incredible work systematically dismantles these prejudices and shows that their origin lines in the web of social relations, whereby structural racism that prevents blacks from getting well-paying jobs, living in good housing, receiving a proper education, maintaining healthy lives, living in safe environments, etc. Specifically, this relates to this discussion on urban sociology here because it is yet another example of how the spatial distribution of people is anything but natural or random. A full-throated rebuttal to both the Chicago School and the Marxist visions of the city, Du Bois clearly demonstrates the extent to which one’s position in society’s racial hierarchy conditions their experience of city life. There is nothing natural about the black community’s spatial segregation—they are forced to live in specific areas or face further social, cultural, or economic ostracism. Moreover, there exist plenty of upwardly mobile, “middle class” blacks that do not live in an area of the city that corresponds to their spatial relation to the means of production. In short, Du Bois powerfully demonstrates that racial structures intersect with ecological factors and class dynamics to shape the lives individuals and communities within cities.

**How are the concepts useful?**

For many reasons, the Chicago School has held such storied place in US urban sociology, and sociologists keep returning to their visions of urban life and the city. I specifically love their idea of the city as a social laboratory where social theory can be tested empirically. This is an extremely useful metaphor for thinking of my own research. However, the ecological and natural implications that accompany their vision of the city is problematic. While I think that competition, invasion, succession, and segregation are common processes in the city, they are the result of larger structural forces that divert resources and benefits to some groups and concentrate them for others. Engels (and Marxism) helps tell part of this story, but conceptualizing of individuals and groups as pawns in a class war between the proletariat and capitalists is too reductive, no matter how much closer to the truth it might be. Segregation within cities, for example, is not only a result of natural sorting processes, but also the distribution of economic resources and political incorporation that does not always match the Marxists framework (thinking of Alejandro Portes and Logan and Molotch’s growth machines as alternative frameworks). In short, these thinkers offer various lenses with which to view the city, and no one fully captures the entirety of city life.

Simmel’s concept of the blasé attitude is not only illustrative of the individual’s response to cultural and neurological stimulation then and now, but it is also an important example of how urban sociological research can create theory that helps to explain how cities (social structure) affects city dwellers (agency). Similarly, Dubois’ analysis of how structural barriers prevent Philadelphia’s black community from full integration with the larger city is the epitome of sociological research—dissect wide help beliefs and locate their origins in larger structural, social processes. His work is an important methodological achievement that demonstrates how socioeconomic, political, and physical location within a city impact the quotidian lives of entire social groups. The city—whether a natural or social organization—doesn’t affect all agents in the same way. Rather, sociological inquiry must probe the way in which social structure alters how various groups experience the city.

**With which current questions are they in dialogue?**

Sampson’s *Great American City* and Patrick Sharkey’s *Stuck in Place* have renewed fundamental challenges to the Chicago School’s vision of neighborhood change. They—and others before them—have argued that neighborhood change and the concentric zone model whereby groups “move up and out” does not apply to all communities. Rather there are structural impediments that have “locked these communities in place.” Their research attempts to—in my opinion somewhat unsuccessfully—identify the social and structural mechanisms that prevent those movements. Additionally, I think that gentrification broadly conceptualized as a return to the city center directly contradicts the concentric zone model. While there is a cacophony of research that looks to address these issues from various viewpoints, they have yet to coalesce around a single vision of city development akin to the prescriptive concentric zone model.

In the Result Chapter (67), Engels seems to argue that it is social structure, not cultural habits that can explain the working classes’ habits of drunkenness and sexual frivolity. While there is a tendency in more contemporary literature to moralize the undesirable habits of the poor while ignoring those of the wealth and middle class, Engels sees social structure as the source of what working classes’ “tendency towards drunkenness and sexual frivolity.” The work requirement of capitalism whittles away at the physical energy, steals time, and leaves little for pleasure. Unlike William Julius Wilson’s work that fed the culture of poverty argument, Engels—and Du Bois as well—adequately evaluate how larger social, economic, and political structures inform cultural habits.

Finally, I think there is an interesting application of urban studies concepts to the realms of technology and politics. Specifically, there seems to be an interesting application of Simmel’s notion of the blasé attitude to better understanding how social media users handle the onslaught of social, cultural, political stimuli or how individuals deal with the increasingly polarized political climate. Similar to how the urban dweller must enact a blasé attitude in order to survive, the social media or the civic-minded individual must not react to every tweet and even sometimes take a “break.”