Conceptualizing the Urban Process

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Urbanism as a Way of Life

The representatives of the Chicago School of Sociology indicate the outsized impact this school of thought had on the disciplines of urban studies and geography. Louis Wirth, in *Urbanism as a way of Life*, identifies the impact of urbanism and urban settlements on society at large, and attempts to situation "urban-ness" and aspects of density (though not merely so) into more particular theoretical perspective. He notes that while size and density are necessary features of urban settlements, they do not necessarily *characterize* them. Neither, in fact, do arbitrary spatial boundaries;

> Urbanization no longer denotes merely the process by which persons are attrracted to a place called the city and incorporated into its system of life. It refers also to that cumulative accentuation of the characteristics distinctive of the mode of life which is associated with the growth of cities, and finally to the changes in the direction of modes of life recognized as urban which are apparent among people, wherever they may be, who have come under the spell of the influences which the city exerts by virtue of **the power of its institutions and personalities operating through its means of communication and transportation.**

Wirth here seems to be describing what Harvey (and others) would call the "urban process," lived practices that are structured by both the built environment and urban/regional institutions that taken together constitute the "city-ness" of Soja. These include, but are not reducable to, occupational characteristics, specific terrain or buildings, ethnic organization, etc. Wirth defines the city in a minimal fashion, on the basis of a physical characteristic, density (along with settlement size), and a social characteristic, social heterogeneity. Wirth first links city size to an increase in social segmentation; there is a biological-social limit to the networks an individual human person can maintain, with respect to numbers. As the population of a settlement increases, interactions necessarily begin to be governed by impersonal institutions, interactions between *organizations* rather than *people*. He also notes, importantly for us, that this social segmentations is co-incident with the deepening of the economic division of labor– Wirth notes the instability that this produces, and a point particularly

notable to be is the form that this instability takes. This is a contradiction, between the increasing segmentation and alienation between individuals on the one hand, and the increasing and deepening of *interdependence* of individuals on the other. As this happens, the importance of well-functioning institutions to coordinate the functions between disparate sections of the urban space becomes more and more important.

Aside from population (or network) size alone, density in itself has a similar effect upon specialization. Wirth seems to make an argument based on market processes here, as economic values pass through the filter of competition and crystallize into the various differentiated regions of the city; rich versus poor, industrial versus residential, White versus Black, and so forth. In this way, economic specialization leads to spatial specialization in a manner that results in abrupt transitions from neighborhoods of one character to another: "The city consequently tends to resemble a mosaic of social worlds in which the transition from one to another is abrupt."

This density and abruptness combine to produce the third feature of urbanism, heterogeneity. Social heterogeneity becomes spatial heterogeneity, which counteracts the differentiating tendency of specialization and produces a "leveling" effect as the individual travels through a multitude of social modes of existence on even a day-to-day basis. The existence of "city-ness" itself, in my view of Wirth's interpretation, is itself the leveling factor; urban institutions, by virtue of the packed-ness and diversity of urban life, by necessity provide a sort of synthetic social social experience that caters to the widest set of individuals possible. Counterintuitively, it is the heterogeneity of urban space itself that provides for the creation of a relatively-homogenous urban culture, and it is this process that I see as the fundamental process of urban growth: the diffusion of elements of disparate social elements into one discrete, spatially specific whole.

The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the City Environment

According to Park, we must begin the analysis of the city as, rather than a collection of physical places and people alone, an institution:

> We may think of it as a mechanism– a psychophysical mechanism– in and through which private and political interests find corporate expression.

Park frames the (organic) growth of the city-as-city against the (inorganic) implementation of the city plan. The city plan generates the monolithic superstructure upon which subsequent growth occurs, according to the interplay of economic, political, and cultural forces, which in turn *themselves* further alter the physical geography of the urban space. He develops a taxonomy of urban

divisions and interactions, starting with the *neighborhood* as its basis. Neighborhoods begin in most cases before the planned construction of the city, and develop through interactions with the civil infrastructure and cultural development that come after, giving rise to phenomena such as isolation and segregation.

Park also comments on the integral role that the social division of labor plays (and played) in the physical and institutional organization of the urban space. Here again we see the processes of differentiation and specialization, as "…every vocation, even that of a beggar, tends to assume the character of a profession, and the discipline which success in any vocation imposes, together with the associations that it enforces, emphasizes this tendency." The division of labor imposes its own logic on the space of interaction between individuals in the city, again as a result of the increase in size and the decrease of the effectiveness of personal networks that occurs as a result. Though Park seems to take a rather dim view towards this depersonalization, it is my view that the development of this characteristic of urban life is not bad, and not necessarily detrimental to the human spirit. It does pose an interesting question, which many have attempted to answer: if the modern urban form, including and especially the social interactions of its people, is determined by the logic of the market, can we imagine a form which transcends this? What would it look like? Perhaps most importantly, how would we get there? If the driving process behind the growth of modern (capitalist) society is centered around the urban space, the process that supplants and ultimately transcends it must also be necessarily urban. And, it will necessarily be built on the concrete bones left behind by the order it replaced. Here are the spaces in which we should cultivate the radical imagination.

As an extension of the de-personalization of urban networks, Park notes that direct means of social control, suited to smaller settlements, have been substituted for more indirect, "secondary" methods of social control. On the one hand, this takes the form of centralized forms of the control of information and the cultivation of ideology– the transition from family-and-church-centered life to one centered around the school and the workplace, which take on ideological, informational, and disciplinary roles in manufacturing the collective ethic of the urban society (cf. Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America.* Also to be noted here is the conceptual ambiguity between constructing a *national* character and an *urban* character. Though these institutions are national, and very similar across nations, the values they promote spread outwards from the urban character of the locations in which the institutions are primarily designed and implemented. In other words, in an urban society, the national values are necessarily *urban* values. This is particularly striking in the case of the United States, where the agrarian origins of its political institutions come into often vicious conflict with the urban-capitalist orientation of its society at its most powerful). Park identifies urban politics as the means by which social control is enacted and implemented; in fact, the urban state is the locus of control of one group over another, and the field of battle over which control of the social development of the city is fought.

The way forward for the theory and empirics of the urban, for the Chicago School, relies first on discarding the notion of the city as a particular location with particular physical characteristics. Any analysis based solely on this will necessarily result in an incomplete picture, where the urban character of a particular location becomes simply a trivial fact. For example, without taking into account an explicitly urban view, the difference between two neighborhoods in Chicago and two neighborhoods drawn at random from the United States reduces simply to the physical distance between them and the characteristics of their firms, populations, and infrastructures. Both Park and Wirth instead view the city as a collection of practices, "the undesigned product of the labors of successive generation of men," can we understand the specific natures of cities themselves (i.e., the relations between two neighborhoods in Chicago, by virtue of Chicago-ness, will be vastly different than two arbitrary neighborhoods of similar size and characteristics in separate cities).

What does this mean for urban theory? It makes things messy. By necessity, an analysis of the urban requires a look into the social lives of city-dwellers. The picture is not complete without accounting for culture, politics, and psychology, as well as economy– it is impossible to account for spatial existence without a thoroughly multidisciplinary approach. This arises from the historical and spatial specificity of urban institutions, and from the peculiar and often "irrational" development of human urban culture. Urban politics also must occupy a privileged position in the analysis of urban development. Both Park and Wirth view the growth of the urban organism as an interplay between organic and inorganic (i.e., political) processes, both of which structure the development of the other.

The implications for empirical analysis are even messier. We can start with standard economic and geographic indicators: location, distance, time, income, investment, and so forth. There is nothing particularly urban about this, however. Rigorous analysis requires the quantification of ethnographic, sociological, and political data; how do the people of the city interact with each other? How do these networks form, spread and change? This question is more complicated than it seems at first glance. The existence of social networks may or may not follow any existing social or economic logic;, they may, in fact, develop their own historically particular logics of development, limited to a particular place and a particular time.