

Assignment 5

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“I pledge my honor that I have abided by the Stevens Honor System.”

Prompt

Among classical sociologists (Marx, Engels, Tönnies, Durkheim, Simmel, Weber)’s ideas of the city, which idea sounds most interesting to you? Please, explain.

Response

I find Marx’s analysis of urban sociology to be the most intriguing of the classical sociologists. I wholeheartedly agree with Marx’s conclusion that nearly all of the social dynamic of an urban society is determined by the economic structure it is supported by. After all, for almost every average citizen throughout history, the thought at the forefront of their mind throughout the day is how they’ll get by, get food, water, shelter and what they need to survive and live a good life. For the large majority, especially in an urban society, meeting these basic needs for survival involves interacting with other people constantly, whether for trade, performing labor for a wage, or buying a service or good. Depending on how the economy is structured, it affects the social dynamic and the societal classes that people are within. Outside of paying them for labor, capitalists almost never interact with proletariats, because their economic wealth separates them from needing to interact with more people throughout the day to get by. They pay to have everything provided for them, and little work is involved in their daily lives. Additionally, his argument that issues like poverty and unemployment are systemic failures inherent to a free market system, rather than a product of certain individuals lack of success or motivation, makes a lot of sense to me. After all, I’ve found that nearly all of the people I’ve spoken with who were experiencing economic hardship are not simply choosing to earn less money, but rather are willing to do almost anything they can to get by.

Marx’s view that urban relationships between individuals are largely determined by economic opportunity and gain coincides with another classical sociologist’s take: Ferdinand Tönnies’. Tönnies contrasted two different styles of living that sociological gatherings tended to fall into: *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, the former referring to large urban dwellings like cities and the latter referring to smaller, tight-knit communities like villages or townships. In *gemeinschaft*, people share a common sense of unity, togetherness, and often work for the common good of everyone in the village. However, in large urban areas like cities - or *gesellschaft* - people almost never shared a common goal, there was a lack of unity, and people were often cynical and hostile when interacting with one another. Everyone in the city was out for themselves, and only cared about relationships they thought they could gain something for themselves out of, he

argued. This idea of *gesellschaft* closely resembles Marx's ideas that economic opportunity and the structure of the economy within a society largely shapes how the social life within that community is.

Having lived in an urban area for nearly four years now, it is easy to understand where Marx and Tonnies were coming from. Walking down the streets of New York City, especially in crowded Manhattan, everyone is so cold to one another: I hardly see anyone holding the door for one another, saying excuse me, thank you, or ever greeting anyone with a smile or kind gesture. In fact, everyone on the street seems to do their absolute best to ignore everyone else as best they can. Those people who you do see walking about, talking to one another are usually the ones in suits, clearly having a business discussion that only serves to further their own economic gain. It can be disheartening to see, coming from a small town where the opposite is true, and hardly anyone is a stranger to one another, let alone cold or callous like citygoers can be.