Some Problems of and Futures for Urban Sociology: Toward a Sociology of Settlements

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Forty years ago, Manuel Castells asked whether urban sociology had a subject matter and whether the term urban still had meaning—and this article reopens these and related questions. It also wonders why today's American urban sociology has concentrated on cities, especially big ones, concurrently virtually ignoring the three other types of communities—suburbs, towns, and rural areas—in which a majority of Americans live and work. Further, it argues that this four-community typology is logically dubious and empirically obsolete. If the field were redefined as a sociology of settlements, analytically more logical and substantively more relevant typologies could be developed. Another politically and organizationally more realistic alternative would split the field into four: a sociology of the city and one concentrating on other settlements, with a third field devoted to community studies, and the fourth to spatial sociology.

In 1968, Manuel Castells asked, "Is there an urban sociology?" and answered his question by noting that "after fifty years existence, only one subject for research in urban sociology remains untackled: its subject matter" (Castells, 1976, p. 59). Castells was commenting on European as well as American urban sociology, and a few years later, he wrote a book about what was now the urban question, in which he added that "from the point of view of scientific vocabulary, I could well do without . . . certain terms . . . 'urban,' 'city,' 'region,' 'space,' etc." (Castells, 1977, p. 441; see also Gottdiener, 1985).

Castells' skepticism was belied by the massive amount of analytic work he devoted to his questions, the terms he dismissed, and the related questions he eventually answered. Now 40 years have passed and the kinds of questions he raised then still deserve to be considered.[1] My article is narrower in scope than Castells' articles; moreover, it is limited to American urban sociology. Also, my analysis is not intended to do away with the field but to propose some intellectual reorganizing to encourage needed research and suggest a few new research questions.

SOME PROBLEMS

Although American cities have long been diverse in many characteristics, in 1938, Louis Wirth unintentionally covered up that diversity by an all-embracing definition of cities as large, dense, and socially heterogeneous (Wirth, 1938).[2] That definition also implied a

definition of the rural areas to which he compared cities as lacking this trio of character-istics, but strangely enough, Wirth failed to refer to other major kinds of communities, for example, towns and suburbs.[3]

Today, a majority of Americans live in the suburbs and a growing number of these are becoming larger, denser, and more heterogeneous than many cities, while truly rural communities are few and far between (Gans, 1962). In any case, Wirth's still widely used definition and the comparison that accompanies it have lost their usefulness.

More important, today most American research in urban sociology focuses on cities, mainly very large ones. Actually, the significant portion of that research deals not with cities *per se* but with topics, topical issues, and problems that are located *in* cities, cur-rently, for example, around race and class. However, topic- and problem-centered urban sociology is as old as the hills.

Park's (1915) essay "The City," which is said to have initiated empirical urban sociology in America, is actually not an analysis of the city but a survey of general sociological topics, especially of course the immigration and ethnic (or "race relations") questions in which Park and his colleagues were especially interested.[4] Many of these topics showed up again as chapter heads in the introductory text that Park wrote with Ernest Burgess a few years later (Park and Burgess, 1921)—a text that, incidentally, did not include a chapter on the city. However, the ecologically inclined among Park's colleagues were interested in cities, or at least in urban growth and in the competition for space.

Interestingly enough, a couple of generations later, when ecology had long ago lost its dominance in the field and the neo-Marxists had moved urban sociology toward study-ing the urban economy, growth was still on the agenda. Indeed, the growth machine (Molotch, 1976) continues to be a much cited concept in the field.

Park and his colleagues wrote about a Chicago that was growing rapidly, with most of the growth coming from, by WASP standards, strange immigrants. The neo-Marxist approach to the urban economy coincided with the urban financial crisis. It should thus not be surprising why today's urban sociology is particularly concerned with is-sues of race and class and more recently also with spatial sociology, which reflects in part a political concern with privatization and the disappearance of urban public space (e.g., Mitchell, 2003; Kohn, 2004).[5] Thus, I think it is fair to say that the field called urban sociology is really problem- and issue-oriented sociology in and about American cities.

Needless to say, this is all to the good, partly because it keeps sociology publicly relevant and useful, although one must add that urban sociologists do not study these topics in very many cities. Ever since its beginnings, American urban sociology has concentrated on Chicago—and especially its ghetto (Small, 2007), as well as a few other, mostly large cities, including New York, Los Angeles, and at the moment, post-Katrina New Orleans. Conversely, the field has paid virtually no attention to the suburbs, as well as the small towns and rural areas (America's villages) that remain culturally and politically significant even if their past demographic domination has ended.

Although part of the explanation for the field's concentration on a few cities must be the government's and the foundations' interest in them, one can only speculate about some of the other causes. For one thing, other fields conduct specific studies in the sub-urbs, small towns, and rural areas, especially those easily accessible to busy scholars. For example, an immigration researcher and his urban sociologist colleague were the first to look at the suburbanization of brand new immigrants (Alba and Logan, 1991).

Furthermore, a field that studies the entire range of communities in which Americans live and work may be logistically and otherwise unworkable. Communities, whether they are big cities or villages, are immensely complicated agglomerations of primary and secondary groups and networks, as well as an array of economic, political, religious, cultural, and many other institutions and structures, most of them organized hierarchically. These are, in addition, connected ecologically and in other ways to a set of yet other interrelated hierarchies that often extend far beyond the official boundaries of the community. Urban sociologists have not fully acknowledged the extent to which their research has simplified the empirical reality with which the field is concerned.

URBAN SOCIOLOGY'S ILLOGICAL TYPOLOGY

One form of simplification results from what I think of as the field's four-item naming system: city, suburb, town, and rural area. This is, in addition, an illogical typology. Thus, cities and suburbs are distinguished literally by their location on other sides of the "city limits," whereas towns are distinguished from cities and from each other mainly by their size, and rural areas refer to communities attached to a practically obsolete type of agricultural economy.

All of these communities are defined by their boundaries, which often began as cow paths or in other random ways but now have a variety of political, financial, and other functions. However, these are only the official boundaries. Economic and other institutions inside them serve market or service areas within boundaries unrelated to the official ones. Some of the market areas are now becoming global in size. Furthermore, the people who live in these communities create their individual boundaries depending on where they work and play and where they find the goods and services they prefer and the relatives and other people they visit regularly.

Each of the four community types is burdened by other definitional and measurement problems. For example, the communities that have been or that are currently called cities range from today's versions to places once reserved for gods, priests, kings—some of them called divine—the dead, the military, and others.[6] In size, cities have ranged from minuscule, like King David's Jerusalem or the Troy of the Trojan war, to today's metropoli with populations of over 20 million (Gans, 1991).

Similarly, suburbs lie not only on the other side of city limits but may also be bedroom communities, which resemble in some respects the bedroom neighborhoods of many outer cities. Towns are sometimes politically differentiated from cities, but otherwise, there is no consensus about when they are small enough not to be called cities. A rural area without farmers seems a contradiction in terms.

In part because of their vagueness, these types have lent themselves easily to stereotyping. Thus, urban is now shorthand for very big and crowded cities, often occupied by the poor and the dark skinned; suburban usually refers to low-density bedroom communities.

In reality, each of these community types is itself immensely diverse, and the within-type variations may well exceed the between-type ones. How does one compare a suburb of mass-produced tract houses like Levittown with one consisting of architecturally designed and individually built mansions—or a very rich one like Scarsdale, New York, with an extremely poor one, such as Robbins, Illinois. What is to be done with Stamford, Connecticut, a city in Connecticut that is also a suburb for commuters from New York

City and other nearby workplaces? And how can one compare rural areas dominated by the weekend and summer homes of affluent urban residents with those occupied by industrial-size farms and the migrant laborers that tend the fields?

One of the ways urban sociology has dealt with these complications is by ignoring them; another is by inventing adjectives to deal with at least some of the variations. There have long been central, inner, and outer cities, but there are now also inner and outer suburbs; edge, edgeless, satellite, and global cities, as well as metropoli and megacities. Suburbs are subdivided among other things into streetcar, commuter, industrial, tract, and bedroom suburbs, as well as exurbs and that leftover from the ecological era: the urban-rural fringe. But some researchers argue that many Americans actually live in metropolitan and micropolitan areas and polynucleated regions, without much attention to city limits or other official boundaries.

Some of the field's typological concepts also have normative associations that influence empirical analyses. Urban sociology has often celebrated the city, even if the Chicago ecologists and others denigrated the urban poor. The urban celebration is ancient, which should not be surprising because the city has often welcomed scholars, especially free-thinking ones, when other communities have been hostile. In addition, the city has long been a surrogate and proxy for a variety of values treasured by intellectuals, among them modernity, high culture, urbanity, cosmopolitanism, and democracy.[7] Conversely, the suburbs still evoke, including in some urban sociology texts, the stigmatizing images of sterility, conformity, and homogeneity that they acquired in the 1950s.

A SOCIOLOGY OF SETTLEMENTS

Most other sociological fields are burdened with similarly problematic typologies and other handicaps, and more thought needs to be given to reducing or eliminating them. In the case of urban sociology, doing away with the typology might encourage and perhaps even force urban sociologists to find a single term to delineate what they study. The word that immediately comes to mind and that I have already used here is community, but it has given rise to so many definitions—and sentimental associations—that another term is needed.

My first choice would be settlement but aggregation would do too, for in a way the term itself does not matter. A single term might encourage a focus on what all settlements have in common as well as on how they differ, which in turn should encourage more attention to the entire range of concurrent activities and processes to be found inside every settlement. Such a frame would in turn encourage new distinctions between settlements as well as raise empirical and theoretical questions that probably would not come up when settlements are from the outset classified as urban, suburban, town, or rural. Indeed, in a world beset by energy shortages and global warming crises, distinctions based on the distance people live from their workplaces and mass transit are far more relevant than whether they live on this or that side of the city limits.

Furthermore, as long as race and class remain such important issues, settlements should be compared in terms of their racial and class composition and segregation; a comparison that should precede such variables as size. For example, there may be patterns that distinguish mono-, duo-, and multi-racial settlements.

Given the importance of local economies, settlements with predominantly labor-intensive economies can be compared to those that are capital intensive. The term

settlement itself suggests that there are places in which a majority of groups and institutions are settled and those in which various portions or segments are transient or in other kinds of flux.

The shift to the settlement does not rule out traditional topics, however. Size and density are still relevant research topics, although a perhaps more relevant spatial analysis would examine whether and how settlements use urban design, street plans, highway location, and other devices to separate land uses and classes or isolate racial minorities.

Perhaps, it is even time to end the long preoccupation with boundaries and bounded communities. If a widget maker somewhere in Long Island ships its products largely to California and Europe but the social service agency a few blocks away finds that most of its clients come from within a two-mile radius, why does it matter that both are located in a settlement with the same boundaries? True, the widget maker pays taxes and the service agency is funded by some of these taxes, but in most other respects, their boundary sharing is irrelevant.

Perhaps a study of boundaries could determine whether and how settlements are bounded, separating official boundaries from the unofficial and informal ones that various groups and institutions create for themselves or are created out of competition. Then, one could look at the effects of the various kinds of boundaries on different people, institutions, and interests.

Currently topical issues can also stay on the research agenda, but analyzing them in settlements may encourage looking at today's "urban" topics in other places. For example, what is concentrated poverty like in a small settlement; what kinds of growth machines, if any, operate in the settlements in which industrial agriculture is pursued; and what happens to neighborhood effects in settlements composed of only two or three official or unofficial neighborhoods. At the other end of the spatial scale, the time is more than ripe to determine how multinational corporations operate in diverse settlements, from metropoli to tiny localities.

Overall, a focus on settlements would suggest examining and comparing the interactions, routine and unusual, peaceful and conflict ridden, and competitive and cooperative among and between all the various groups and institutions without concern as to whether they were urban or not but without losing sight of the fact that they are settlements. One likely result would be a much larger set of categories by which to classify settlements and a more logical array of typologies. That might encourage urban sociologists to study some of each of the kinds of settlements in which most Americans live, work, and play.

Once the intellectual borders in which the current typology has trapped the field are opened, researchers now called urban sociologists can take their concepts from all over the disciplinary map. In fact, because every last one of the structures, processes, cultures, and other phenomena that are studied in sociology's many fields take place in one or another kind of settlement, the concepts that are applied in all these fields can be used by settlement sociologists as well.

OTHER POSSIBILITIES

In theory, the concepts that scientists use do not have to reflect those of the lay world. Thus, theoretical physicists can work with string theory and dark matter but are not

required to conduct studies of heaven or even the sky. However, social scientists, and sociologists especially, cannot distance themselves quite as casually from lay concepts.

Thus, replacing the urban-suburban-town-rural area typology with a unitary concept like settlement would not be easy. Indeed, sociologists themselves will be hard put to look at settlements and not see them as cities or suburbs or small towns. Giving up the long-standing typology for a new concept would require the concurrent elimination not just of a traditional frame but of an equally long-standing mindset. Even the term urban evokes so many images, social processes, and structures that it is as difficult to drop from everyday discourse as from the field's conceptual repertoire.

Being realistic, the old typology will not soon disappear from sociological thought. However, in that case urban sociologists should begin to further develop and systematize the field's basic typology or formulate typologies that connect with the research questions being studied.

There is at least one other possibility: to divide what is now a single field into four. One field would essentially continue today's urban sociology for those whose interest is limited to cities. However, that field should then be renamed the sociology of the city. The second field would be the sociology of settlements I have outlined above.

A third field, which is especially necessary to grasp the complexity of settlements, would be devoted to community studies, a genre that has always been related to urban sociology but cuts across and is useful to other fields in the discipline. Qualitative community studies are particularly necessary, whether they involve participant observation or interviewing or both, because they can grasp the richness of social processes, structures, and cultures in ways other research methods cannot. They also permit thick descriptions of the everyday lives of people, groups, and institutions.[8]

The fourth field is spatial sociology, which needs to be separated from urban sociology because spatial analyses should be undertaken in virtually all fields of the discipline. As long as life on this planet is tied down by gravity, the humans studied by sociology must occupy "natural" or "physical" *space*, using the social and cultural tools available to them to make it into *place*—as well as built and unbuilt environments (Gans, 2002).[9] Whether it be a family, a governmental agency, or a corporate firm, it "sits" on space and creates the place from and in which it plays its roles in the larger society. Why spatial analysis has surfaced in and has been restricted to urban sociology as much as it has is therefore puzzling.

The separate field is needed for another reason; spatial analysis deviates too much from the other ways of doing urban sociology. Whatever the differences in their missions and underlying ideologies, ecology and neo-Marxist analyses are basically compatible because they have both studied the use, competition, exchange and regulation of land, and the various social structures involved in these processes. Community studies investigate these and other social structures, and the "cultural turn," when not seeking to replace structure *per se*, adds meaning, values, symbols, and other mainly noneconomic and nonpolitical concepts to structural and other analyses of settlements.

However, one of the dominant forms of spatial analysis has a very different agenda, to show that space and place have independent social effects that can shape a variety of aspects of social life prior to social intervention. Moreover, this spatial analysis takes such effects for granted and thus only needs to describe them rather than discover them by empirical study. Such "physical" determinism may facilitate architectural thought but it is not a sociological analysis.

Whether space and place have social effects and if so, what kinds of effects, is a worthwhile question for empirical analysis. However, that analysis must also consider the likelihood that these effects are themselves socially caused. Consequently, the analysis must trace the causal processes by which settlement structures and institutions turn space into place, and then see what social effects follow. As long as turning space into place and a built environment costs money, one major social cause is generally to be found in the settlement economy and its distribution of capital and income.

For example, while high dwelling unit density, that is, the number of people per room, undoubtedly has social effects, these are themselves the effects of such social causes as the land values and building costs of the dwelling unit as well as the occupants' poverty or involuntary segregation that force them to live at such density. Thus, looking at the social effects of space and of place making is the last stage in a long causal analysis. Spatial research that incorporates this or similar models would be a useful field in any future urban sociology.

CODA

One of these days, the sociology of settlements, whatever it is called, will expand to cover virtual settlements. When more people spend a larger part of their lives on the web or its successors so that the places they create and the environments they build will be located in and on virtual space, the social effects and other complexities of physical space and place may become clearer.[10] Although corporate and other power holders that dominate physical space and place also seem to be influential in their virtual equivalents, there are many differences in the two kinds of spaces and places. The comparative study of physical and virtual settlements should be productive for our understanding of both.

Acknowledgments

Notes

[1] Castells has done so himself recently (Castells, 2002). He is now less skeptical about the field but his discussion of its future concentrates on the themes and research questions he has pursued in his own work.

[2] Actually, the definition seems to have originated earlier in the circle around Robert Park, for he discussed the three characteristics a decade earlier in a presentation to the American Sociological Society (Burgess, 1926, p. 4).

[3] Wirth did not explain the omission, but as many readers of his essay have noted, Wirth, like Simmel before him (Simmel, 1908), was also, or actually, comparing *Gesellschaften* with *Gemeinschaften*. Moreover, according to Lannoy (2004, p. 51), Park and his colleagues were making the urban-rural comparison to put the then fledgling urban sociology on an equal footing with the already large and well-established field of rural sociology.

[4] The topics Park discussed in the essay included, among others, work and industrial organization, mobility, primary and secondary groups, social control, deviance, and the mass media.

The same lack of interest in the city *per se* can be found in Simmel's 1908 essay about Berlin that is said to have influenced Park. Simmel paid virtually no attention to that city but dealt with urbanity, cosmopolitanism, and other "mental" effects of the metropolis on intellectuals.

Although Ernest Burgess is immortal because of his portraits of Chicago's concentric zones (1925/1967), a close look at the zones themselves display less interest in ecology than in the distribution of socioeconomic classes and ethnic neighborhoods.

[5] Perhaps, there is also a connection with the Marxist analysis of space (e.g., Gottdiener, 1985; Lefebvre, 1991), although its main agenda seems to have been a debate with Louis Althusser and his supporters about the Marxist analysis of capitalism.

[6] One should note, however, that most of these functions involved people holding power, and often absolute power. Mumford (1961) described some of the ancient cities as control centers.

[7] It is worth noting that when Wirth was writing "Urbanism as a Way of Life," many of America's most influential intellectuals were still living in New England small towns and villages. A number of them expressed the bitterly antiurban ideology that Jefferson and others already voiced at the country's beginnings.

[8] However, community studies conducted solely by participant observation are probably incapable of understanding large- or even medium-sized settlements unless conducted by teams (e.g., Warner and Lunt, 1941). However, individual researchers can analyze neighborhoods in large settlements.

[9] Although spatial sociologists, geographers, and others are still debating definitions of space and place (Hubbard, Kitchin, and Valentine, 2004), I choose to call the clusters of dirt to which gravity attaches us space and reserve place for the end product of what "society" and we do to put boundaries, a price, and uses on the clusters.

[10] They will be even clearer when the analysis considers the fact that all those participating in the virtual community are working on computers or their successors that, like they, sit on or are otherwise attached to physical space.

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