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Urbanization

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The Nature of Urbanization

Urbanization is the process whereby large numbers of people congregate and settle in an area, eventually developing social institutions, such as businesses and government, to support themselves. Urban areas, or those pockets of people and institutions thereby created, are generally characterized as relatively dense settlements of people. Furthermore, it is claimed, they sometimes originate from the effort by authorities to consciously concentrate power, capital, or both at a particular site.

The process of urbanization has gone on throughout history. Large congregations of people have existed across the world, from ancient China to ancient Rome and Greece. Although the numbers of residents of such cities pale by comparison with urban areas today, the relatively large and dense congregations of people still helped to foster new institutions and, in general, to make urban life in many ways preferable to that of living in relatively isolated rural areas. Urban residents typically benefit from better forms of education, improved medical care, the availability and distribution of information, and the greater supply of life-sustaining goods, such as food and shelter.

Today, more than half the world's population resides in urban areas. Furthermore, demographers project that between 2000 and 2025 the population growth of urban areas will constitute about 90 percent of all world population growth. Major concentrations of people today can be found on all continents (see [Table 1](#)).

Yet urbanization is more than just the process leading to dense settlements. Social theorists across the ages have wrestled to understand it. Indeed, one might say that the process of urbanization is a focal point for many sociological concerns; the urban area serves, in effect, as a major stage on which social change plays itself out. If one takes a dim view of such change, then urbanization tends to be criticized for the evils it unleashes. Yet if one takes a positive view of social change, then urbanization is claimed to produce many benefits. The next section examines the varying theories of urbanization more closely to discover how, and why, social theorists differ in their views of the process.

Name	Size
Tokyo (Japan)	33,750,000
Mexico City (Mexico)	21,850,000
New York (United States)	21,750,000
Seoul (South Korea)	21,700,000
Sao Paulo (Brazil)	20,200,000
Bombay (India)	18,800,000
Delhi (India)	18,100,000
Los Angeles (United States)	17,450,000
Osaka (Japan)	16,700,000
Jakarta (Indonesia)	16,300,000
Cairo (Egypt)	15,600,000
Moscow (Russia)	15,350,000
Calcutta (India)	14,950,000
Manila (Philippines)	14,000,000
Buenos Aires (Argentina)	13,900,000
Source: Thomas Brinkhoff, City Population http://www.citypopulation.de , as of September 2003.	

Theories of Urbanization

Even though observers generally agree on the nature of urbanization, there is widespread disagreement both as to its social sources and consequences. Moreover, there is also disagreement over the extent to which human actors can intervene in the process. Here, some of the leading views [p. 854 ↓] are considered, noting how, and why, they differ from one another.

The German Perspective

One of the first theorists to acknowledge the deep and important impact of urbanization on social life was the German scholar, Georg Simmel. Simmel developed a sociology that focused on the special ways that forms, such as the numbers of people in groups, influenced social life. His effort to understand the nature of urbanization and, in particular, the metropolis of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, displayed his characteristic method of analysis.

In a famous article, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," Simmel argued that there were certain features of the modern metropolis that rendered it different from all prior forms of social organization. In particular, life in the metropolis requires that people engage in social interactions with large numbers of different people. It also requires that they carry on their social life with a good deal more rapidity than other forms of settlement. The characteristic type of relationship in the metropolis, he suggested, was the relationship between the customer and clerk in a business exchange. Both treat one another not as intimates but, rather, simply as people engaged in business with one another. The impersonal and instrumental qualities of such relationships were, Simmel argued, essential features of the modern metropolis. Moreover, these features extended to life throughout the metropolis. People tend not to know one another as individuals but, rather, as passersby or mere acquaintances. The consequence of all such relationships was to give life in the modern metropolis an air of anonymity. Money, not interpersonal trust, lies at the heart of the metropolis, so Simmel insisted.

Simmel was not the only German theorist to take the difference between the metropolitan form and prior social forms seriously. Ferdinand Tönnies, a fellow German, insisted on a somewhat similar contrast. Unlike Simmel, who cast his argument in terms primarily about the modern form, that of the metropolis, Tönnies developed a theoretical polarity between what he termed *Gemeinschaft*, on one hand, and *Gesellschaft*, on the other. The former represents the close-knit community, whereas the latter refers to society. *Gemeinschaft* suggested intimacy, warmth, and human closeness, whereas *Gesellschaft* clearly suggests impersonal exchanges, based on forms such as business exchanges. Like Simmel, Tönnies's intention was to capture in theoretical analysis a

real social change that was unfolding across Europe over the course of the eighteenth and, especially, nineteenth centuries.

The Chicago School

These themes—impersonality, anonymity, and economic exchange in the metropolis—heavily influenced the writings of American sociologists in the early twentieth century as they sought to unravel the nature of the expanding metropolis. The influence was by no means accidental. The leading figure of what came to be known as the Chicago School of Sociology—so-called because all the sociologists were located at the University of Chicago—was Robert Park, a man trained as an American journalist who studied in Germany with Georg Simmel.

The central theoretical argument about the nature of urbanization, the metropolis, in particular, is to be found in the writing of Chicago sociologist, Louis Wirth. In another famous article, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” Wirth (1938) amplified themes that first appear in the writing of Simmel and, to a lesser extent, Tönnies. Wirth insisted that urbanism, or urbanization, produced any of several important social consequences among people: (1) impersonality and anonymity in everyday life, (2) loss of trust among people, and (3) various forms of social disorganization, as in higher rates of crime than in rural areas. Yet unlike Simmel and Tönnies, there was growing empirical evidence on which Wirth could draw. Like other members of the Chicago School, his attention was principally focused on the city of Chicago and the period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during which it multiplied in size enormously. Chicago, in fact, seemed to fit all the theoretical forecasts of urbanism, showing, among other things, a high crime rate and an abundance of urban gangs. In effect, the theoretical portrait that first emerged in the writings of Simmel and Tönnies, later appearing in that of Wirth, was more than just a social theory: It was a theory that seemed to be well grounded in empirical facts.

While Wirth's work expanded on the broad social consequences of urbanization, other Chicago sociologists expanded on other parts. Ernest Burgess, a longtime collaborator of Robert Park, produced a famous model of the growth of the urban area. The model consisted of a series of concentric zones. Each zone was composed of a different set of

businesses and residential characteristics. The interior zone, for example, consisted of major business and financial firms; the immediately adjacent zone consisted of the red-light district as well as certain ethnic settlements, such as Little Sicily. And in the farthest reaches of the metropolis, one found wealthier residents as well as the apartment houses and fancier hotels. The model was based entirely on the city of Chicago, yet it eventually gave rise to many efforts to discover the extent to which it reappeared in many other growing metropolises. Moreover, there were additional efforts to show that the concentric pattern of growth was not the only one; other theories suggested, for example, that cities could develop in the form of a variety of different social and economic nuclei.

Human Ecology. Besides the theory of urbanism and the concentric pattern of metropolitan growth, the Chicago School [p. 855 ↓] also gave rise to a general theoretical perspective on the nature of the metropolis, one rooted in a view of the city in terms of its population and broad social environment. Robert Park was the major developer of this view. And because it was inspired by the writings of ecologists—again an influence Park came under in Germany—it became known as the “human ecology” paradigm. The human ecology perspective was especially focused on the ways in which the population of areas expanded or declined. It concentrated its attention on how the change of specific areas of the city occurred, and which economic social actors were winners and losers in the process. Any of several outcomes could happen, Park believed—among them, conflict, accommodation, and in certain cases, assimilation by the newcomers of the cultural patterns of the natives. Indeed, it was Park’s conception of human ecology and the city that eventually gave rise to his theory of the race relations cycle, and the nature of assimilation among immigrants, in general.

Park’s theory was relatively simple and never extensively developed as a fully integrated theory. Amos Hawley, a sociologist who taught at the University of Michigan and North Carolina, took it upon himself to make the human ecology paradigm far more systematic. He fleshed out the ideas of the environment as well as the processes of adaptation and competition through which social groups adjusted both to one another and to the environment. Moreover, he advanced certain ideas about the nature of dominance and power among actors, among them the claim, later confirmed, that metropolitan areas with higher concentrations of professional and managerial workers

would be more effective in getting broad civic actions implemented than those with smaller concentrations.

Theoretical Alternatives to the Chicago School

The Chicago School's theories of urbanization remained dominant among sociologists until the early 1970s. Then they were challenged by other points of view. The result was to create both reforms in the theories as well as to provide other theories grounded in different principles about the working of societies.

The City as Neighborhood and Community. One of the first and most important critiques of the Chicago School view of the city came from the sociologist Claude Fischer. Fischer challenged the Wirth/Simmel interpretation of the city. Fischer argued that the city was not characterized by impersonality and anonymity but, rather, by a variety of social ties and subcultures that connected people to one another. Fischer found the characteristic form of urban life in the neighborhood, not, as Wirth and Simmel had, in business or economic exchanges. Thus, he insisted, cities are not sites of impersonality but, rather, sites of trust and friendship: Such relationships are to be found in the neighborhood, not in the department store.

The Political Economy Perspective. The dominant critique and most substantial alternative to the view of the Chicago School came, as one might anticipate, in the writings of Marxist scholars who began to build their alternative theory in the early 1970s. There are several variants of this perspective; although each is a rich and compelling portrait by itself, the discussion here must be abbreviated because of space limitations.

The leading Marxist theorist on the city is Henri Lefebvre, a French scholar. Lefebvre argued that the urbanization process is not one driven by population expansion and mobility, per se, but rather by the actions of key social actors. Social agents, he insisted, produce, and reproduce, the spaces in cities; and, to the extent that such agents reflect the dominant forms of social and economic inequalities, those inequalities will be re-

created in the nature of metropolitan space. Lefebvre extended his basic insights in several directions, insisting that we must study not simply the different parts of the metropolitan area but also the way that social rhythms are created therein, such as the rhythm to work life and that to the nature of life on the streets.

Lefebvre inspired several important theorists. Among them are the sociologist Manuel Castells. Castells leveled the most major charges at the Chicago School view of the city. He argued specifically that it was not simply population growth that created the various forms of social disorganization, such as higher crime rates in the city, but instead it was the forces of capitalism. Capitalism created the inequalities, between residents as well as between sectors of the city. Moreover, Castells suggested, the Marxist view of the world, when applied carefully to the city and to the process of urbanization, emphasized the forces of collective consumption, not those of production, as Marx himself originally argued. Thus, Castells argued, it is the conditions of public housing and of other forms in which urban laborers are exploited as consumers, to which sociologists, studying urbanization, must turn their attention and seek to correct.

A third Marxist writer on urban areas is the British geographer, David Harvey. Harvey has had the widest influence over modern writings about the city. He maintains that from a Marxist perspective the major economic activity in urbanization is that which deals with the use and value of land. Thus, those social actors, such as real estate developers and bankers, actually exploit the value of urban space through their investment and selling strategies. Whereas capitalist employers secure profit by, for example, paying workers low wages, real estate developers and bankers secure their profits by setting high prices on the land in cities. Furthermore, Harvey argues, the inequalities characteristic of urban areas, such as the wide differential in values between suburban and inner-city areas, are also the product of how capitalism [p. 856 ↓] manipulates the value of land. There is nothing natural to the disparate values of suburban and inner-city land; it is simply that bankers and real estate developers constantly seek to divest themselves of property that produces little income, as within the interior of the city, and reinvest their funds in other portions of the city, those especially in the outlying areas, where they can expect both to set higher prices and secure greater profits from the sales of land and housing. In recent years, it might be noted, that process has been reversed to some degree, as bankers and developers now turn their attention back to the central city, creating new housing developments where

they can expect to lure both wealthy young professionals and older former suburban residents.

Other writers, taking a similar political economic perspective on urbanization, have developed similar critiques of the Chicago School as well as their own special theoretical portraits. John Logan and Harvey Molotch, in a famous work, argue that the city must be viewed as a “growth machine.” Cities expand not because of the dynamics of population but, rather, because there are key social groups that benefit from such expansion. Such groups include, among others, real estate developers, bankers, and even political officials. All of them profit from growth, Logan and Molotch insist: Developers and bankers gain financial profit, while political officials garner the key political support of the business community if they insist on expansion.

Modern Forms of Urban Growth

Urbanization today is different in important respects from its form in the past. Here are a few of the significant twists and turns it has taken.

The Megalopolis

In the early 1960s, the urban scholar Jean Gottesman sought to capture the novelty of the growing interconnectedness of various major metropolitan areas in the world. He claimed that regions such as that from Boston south to Washington, D.C., along the Eastern seaboard of the United States represented new forms of metropolitan expansion in which major cities came to overlap with one another. He insisted that in the future more and more such megalopolises would emerge in the world, providing ever more dense concentrations of people. Such patterns, in fact, are to be found increasingly in the United States, in the West as well as the Southwest. There are many other countries as well, such as Japan, in which similar patterns of urban expansion are also to be found.

Suburbanization

Urbanization that produces new residential communities on the outskirts of major cities has become known as suburbanization. In the United States, suburbanization has become the fundamental form of urban growth since the end of World War II, suburbs taking root outside virtually all major cities. There are different explanations for the process. Unlike the Chicago School, which insisted that suburban growth was a simple part of the inexorable expansion of the city, the historian Kenneth Jackson has argued convincingly that the suburb represents a symbolic place rooted deep in American culture, a setting rooted in the imagination wherein people come to expect they can live a satisfying life, with their own yards and neighbors, intimately embedded in the natural environment. But Jackson has also shown that political actors play a key role in the creation of suburbs. In particular, he shows, the Federal Housing Agency after World War II provided low-interest loans to returning veterans, the effect of which was to make suburban housing far more affordable than it had ever been in the past. To this day, the process of suburbanization continues to engage the writings of social scientists as they seek to better understand the nature of urban growth, especially in the United States.

Edge Cities

Yet an even newer wrinkle to the process of urbanization today is the growth of what the journalist, Joel Garreau, has called “edge cities.” Edge cities are those congregations of people, residences, and businesses that have grown up alongside major thoroughfares and, especially, highways around cities. They seem to occur everywhere that the highway system transports people, and they account for much of the most recent urban growth. Places such as Naperville, Illinois, and Georgetown, Texas, serve as examples of such expansion: Indeed, without the highway system, such rapidly growing cities would never have developed.

Global Cities

The growth of megacities such as London, Shanghai, and Mexico City, cities that number in the millions, has given rise to various explanations. Some, of course, would simply see such cities as the inevitable outcome of the urbanization process. But other scholars see in such megacities a new historic phenomenon.

The most popular writer on large cities today is the sociologist Saskia Sassen. Sassen argues that over the course of the last three decades the urbanization process has produced a tendency for people to congregate in enormous numbers on relatively small spaces. Three cities typify the process of urban globalization: Tokyo, New York, and London. All three cities, Sassen finds, are based on new and emerging economic foundations, in particular, the concentration of financial, real estate, and communications industries. Moreover, the growth of these cities has also led to their bifurcation along economic lines. Two major economic groups have emerged: on one hand, a large and [p. 857 ↓] expanding class of service employees and, on the other hand, a much smaller but far more wealthy group of professional workers. The effect, she argues, is to increase economic inequalities in the city; moreover, she insists, the growth of the service sector jobs has also prompted the influx of many immigrants who are willing to take on the low-paying positions. Finally, she argues that these global cities have become disconnected from their nation-states; they tend to act as strong political and economic actors on their own, relatively autonomous from nations. Sassen's argument has proven very influential, but it also has its critics, some of whom charge that she underplays the key political role of the nation-state in today's world.

It is notable that among these major novelties to urban growth in the recent past, only the work of Sassen on global cities and globalization is based on important theoretical work. The other new elements, such as edge cities and even suburbanization, are regarded by urban scholars as significant, although they have not yet prompted extensive theoretical work by sociologists.

Poverty, Immigration, and Urbanization

New patterns of urban expansion have helped to modify the earlier theoretical views of the city and suggested not only the limitations of such theories but also the importance of human actors in the construction of the metropolis. One of the most important areas of contemporary work on urban expansion and change lies in research on poverty and immigration.

Poverty and Urbanization

The sociologist, William Julius Wilson, has had an important impact on these writings. In his various writings Wilson inspired a line of research on the modern city in which work, and its absence, he believed, played a powerful role in shaping the urban area. His claim is that over the course of two decades, from about 1970 until 1990, the nature of cities in the United States changed dramatically. Parts of the city declined, while other parts expanded. Those parts that declined, almost always located in the inner-city areas inhabited by black residents, did so, he insisted, because major industries abandoned these areas in favor of labor markets elsewhere, especially overseas. The result was to create a huge group of unemployed people, those whom he came to describe as the “underclass.” In turn, new jobs tended to show up on the fringe of urban areas, at those sites generally occupied by the white middle class. Moreover, such jobs became part of the suburbanization phenomenon, even in many cases integral to the emergence of “edge cities.”

Unlike the Chicago School of sociologists, however, Wilson believed that such decline was not inevitable but, rather, directly traceable to the decisions of industries to leave the city. Hence, he became a strong advocate of efforts to encourage new public policies that would promote a revitalization of the inner city along with efforts to increase the growth of low-income housing in the suburbs, thereby bringing low-income people closer to the location of the new employment opportunities.

This work on poverty has also led to further studies of the nature of social disorganization and decline in the innercity areas of the modern metropolis. Sociologists

such as Robert Sampson have argued that some neighborhoods are much more able to deal with issues of social disorganization, attributing their success to the “collective efficacy,” or the capacity of residents to take common and effective local action. Many other social scientists are following up similar leads, with efforts now under way to create more viable and successful communities among the poor and minority residents of the inner city.

Immigration and Urbanization

Immigration in the contemporary period also represents an important new social element to the picture of urban growth. In the past, immigrants tended to settle in the interior of major cities, partly because that is where they first arrived and partly because, in the absence of highways, mobility to the outlying areas was virtually impossible. Today, however, there are new patterns of immigrant growth and communities in urban areas. Part of the difference is to be found in the vast numbers and movement of people across the world. Since 1945, there have been massive shifts of people from one country to another, most of whom settle in or around urban areas. In cities from London to Paris, Berlin to Toronto, one can find new and relatively large immigrant settlements. Some such settlements have arisen because of a government's selective use of guest worker programs, like the *bracero* program in the United States or the *Gastarbeiter* program in Germany; but many others have emerged simply because immigrants come to a new place for the job opportunities it offers. In the United States, today's immigrants are remaking the metropolitan area, not only through the introduction of groups of people from Latin America, Asia, and Africa—nations formerly underrepresented—but also by a host of new settlements across the entire metropolitan region. Thanks to the system of highways and public transportation, today's immigrants can settle not only in the inner core of the metropolis but also on the suburban fringes as well. Because of such new patterns of settlement by immigrants in the metropolis, sociologists have modified their older theories and developed new arguments about the growth of a multicultural metropolis.

The Future of Urbanization

Urbanization will continue as long as people form communities, move from one place to another, and settle in sites where new friends, old family, and good job opportunities [p. 858 ↓] can be found. Whether it will tend to improve the condition of humankind, or detract from it, depends on many things. One thing is now very clear: Human beings and social institutions can play a far more important role in the shaping of urban areas than early twentieth-century theorists ever thought possible. Indeed, one might say that the early theorists tended to view urbanization as a broad structural process, in part simply to make the new enterprise of scientific sociology a legitimate one. Today's urban writers and thinkers tend to see the process of urban expansion both as one more subject to the exercise of human agency as well as one heavily influenced by events and actions rooted in international circumstances.

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