

Cities and Society

Edited by

Nancy Kleniewski

Cities and Society

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Preface

This volume represents some of the major research in urban sociology during the past 25 years. I selected the readings with three tensions or balances in mind:

- to include a broad range of topics but focus on the most significant issues for scholars and policymakers;
- to emphasize works by sociologists but incorporate work from other disciplines; and
- to be accessible and interesting to undergraduates but include enough scholarly substance to engage graduate students.

The works included here are by no means a comprehensive survey of urban sociology. Space limitations forced me to make some difficult choices, including the omission of many important writings that are available in other collections.

The intent behind this volume is to collect the original work of contemporary scholars in slightly abbreviated versions. Of the 20 readings in this collection, 16 are excerpts from books and 4 are articles from scholarly journals. Although they are recent works, they are likely to stand the test of time because of their solid contributions to central questions in the field of urban sociology.

Many people assisted with this project. Malcolm Crystal recruited me to take on the project for Blackwell. My editors, Ken Provencher and Justin Vaughan, helped shape my approach to the contents. Their professionalism and good cheer made working with them a delight. In addition, several anonymous reviewers gave thoughtful comments on the prospectus. I owe a debt of gratitude to my assistants at Bridgewater State College, Sandy Christoun and especially Kelly Duarte, for their active help in preparing the manuscript. I am fortunate to have such capable and caring colleagues. As always, I am grateful to Bill Davis for his understanding and support.

In recent weeks, one of my most important teachers and mentors passed away. Sister Marie Augusta Neal, SND, was a creative thinker, innovative instructor, scrupulous researcher, and champion of social justice. I dedicate this book to her memory.

Nancy Kleniewski, March 2004

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Introduction: Contemporary Issues in Urban Sociology

Nancy Kleniewski

“Ford to City: Drop Dead!” was the headline in New York’s *Daily News* the day after President Gerald Ford’s 1975 speech refusing to assist the nearly bankrupt city with a loan guarantee. Although its social and economic problems were extreme, New York was not alone in its plight. Cities in the United States, United Kingdom, and other industrialized nations began to face massive problems in the 1970s caused by worldwide economic changes. In this volume we explore these ongoing global changes, their impacts on cities, and responses by policymakers.

The readings in this book are divided into four sections exploring four major approaches to cities. The first section addresses theoretical perspectives and debates among urban scholars. The second section explores the impact of the global economy on cities. The third section describes the changing urban economy and its impact on different groups of people. The final section describes some key issues and choices for public policy. This Introduction sets the stage for the readings by discussing the overall context of urban sociology in the four areas that make up the collection. It is followed by a list of key references for further reading.

Recent Theoretical Perspectives on Cities and Society

During the past 30 years, our sociological understanding of cities has undergone a major change. From the early days of urban sociology until the 1970s, the dominant paradigm (or way of understanding) in urban research was the theory of *human ecology*. This theory, developed at the University of Chicago, interpreted city life and form as an extension of the processes of the natural world. The most important assumption of human ecology was that the city was like a living organism that consisted of interdependent parts. The parts (or natural areas) of the city, according to the theory, were arranged in a regular pattern with a central business district surrounded by concentric rings of other land uses. Changes in patterns of land use or residential location were thought to be driven by a competition for space in which groups that could bid more for space were able to obtain better locations. The patterns of social norms that differentiated urban life from rural life were presumed to be the result of the larger, denser, and more heterogeneous

population of the city in contrast with the smaller, less dense, and relatively homogeneous populations of rural areas.

Human ecology produced a large body of research, exploring many urban issues and processes. By the 1970s, however, new urban problems and new realities prompted researchers to question the continued usefulness of human ecology as a research tool. Some of those new issues included declining populations in the central cities, increasing racial polarization, government intervention in the real estate market, economic instability, and the growing differences between cities in the rich and poor nations. Human ecology theory was unable to explain these phenomena, prompting the search for alternative theoretical perspectives.

The emergence of political economy

In the 1970s, several French sociologists turned their attention to urban studies, and some of this early work was translated for an English-speaking audience. The French sociologists were trying to understand the relationships between the real estate market, the government, and social policy that resulted in major urban upheavals. Another source of innovation was the work of British geographers and sociologists, whose studies helped reinterpret urban issues. These new writings set off a series of conferences and publications that brought scholars together around a common research agenda and a theoretical perspective known as political economy. (Other labels for the emerging perspective included neo-Marxist, neo-Weberian, and the new urban sociology.)

The rise of the political-economy approach in the United States can perhaps be dated from 1976, when Harvey Molotch published the article that begins this collection, "The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place." Its appearance was highly symbolic, since the journal in which it appeared, *The American Journal of Sociology*, was founded by University of Chicago-based human ecology theorists. While Molotch was using political economy to explain urban growth, a number of other scholars were using political economy to explain urban population decline, urban redevelopment, the persistence of poverty, and racial inequality. Various streams of research converged on two principles: that the capitalist economy structures opportunities that result in differential access by social group and location; and that economic changes influence political and social life. The research agenda that emerged from these studies pinpointed the phenomenon of economic restructuring as the key to understanding other urban issues.

To grasp why economic restructuring was so important in the late twentieth century, we must understand the global context in which nations and cities are situated. From the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, manufacturing was the engine driving economic and urban growth. In the latter part of this period, from the end of the Second World War in 1945 until the early 1970s, the industrialized nations of the world experienced a period of sustained

economic growth and a rising standard of living. As the suburban middle class grew, it demanded (and industry provided) mass-produced consumer goods such as automobiles and appliances. Strong labor unions were able to win increased wages and benefits in return for an atmosphere of labor peace and few strikes. Despite social and racial inequality, real wages were rising, unemployment was relatively low, and the middle class was expanding. At the same time, national governments in Europe and North America instituted comprehensive social welfare systems including education, healthcare, old age pensions, and child welfare support.

Gradually during the postwar period the world economy changed in ways that destabilized the industrial economies. These changes, generally known as *economic restructuring*, involved three trends that changed the economies and social structures of industrial nations. They are: a *shift from manufacturing to services* as the engine of the economy, *changes in the process of production* due to new technologies and forms of organization, and *globalization* and the spread of industrialization around the world. We will explore the first two trends here and address globalization in detail in the next section.

The Growth of the Service Economy: Economic historians generally agree that up to the 1880s, agriculture, mining, and other extractive industries were the core of the US economy. From the 1880s to the 1950s, manufacturing was the engine for economic growth. By the 1960s, however, the service sector grew to employ more workers than manufacturing. The shift to services opened up many new jobs, for example in information technology, communications, financial services, legal services, hospitality, and other nonmanufacturing employment. Because wages in the service sector tend to be divided into very high-paying jobs (physicians and attorneys) and very low-paying jobs (fast food, security guards), the growth of service jobs had a profound effect on the distribution of income, which we will explore below.

New Technologies and Forms of Organization: Capitalist economies are characterized by economic and political systems that analysts call *regimes of accumulation* (after Aglietta 1976). From the 1940s to the 1970s, at the height of the manufacturing economy, the regime of *Fordism* was dominant. Fordism involves vertical integration of manufacturing, standardization of products for mass consumption, unionized labor forces with generally good wages, and a social safety net of government services. Picture a vast Ford plant with iron ore going in at one end and new cars coming out the other end; with unionized employees who work for the company until retirement, with high pay and good benefits. The plant, representing a huge investment, is built to produce millions of standardized cars, and the workers repeatedly perform specialized functions on an assembly line.

The regime of Fordism was gradually replaced by the regime of *flexible production* (sometimes called post-Fordism). Instead of large, vertically integrated companies, flexible production fosters networks of small companies producing parts for

each other. Picture an electronics company that subcontracts with small providers to have circuits made and delivered for assembly into several different products. The amount of investment in the plant is relatively small, and the computerized equipment can easily be converted to make different products. The production schedule at the assembly site varies constantly depending on the number of orders being placed. Parts are shipped to assembly points from half a dozen contractors whose workforce is hired on an as-needed basis at relatively low wages with no job security.

Although analysts differ on the long-run effects of flexible production, they generally agree that in the short run it caused dislocation of many workers who were beneficiaries of the Fordist system. In addition, because many communities in the North American and European industrial heartlands were built around large manufacturing plants, the shift from Fordism to flexible production affected entire communities and regions.

Gender and urban research

Urban sociologists traditionally saw cities through the lenses of race, ethnicity, and social class. Until the 1980s they seldom discussed or studied the ways in which men and women lived different lives or experienced different realities. Early studies of gender, especially coming from feminist geographers in the United Kingdom and Canada, investigated the empirical differences in the daily rounds of the two sexes. They focused on such issues as housing needs, job location, transportation, recreational opportunities, unpaid household work, and community involvement. Researchers began to discuss the ways in which city planners made assumptions about “proper” household composition, laid out transportation routes that favored male work patterns, and encouraged the separation of homes from schools, shops, and other daily needs.

Building on these empirical studies, urban research began to address the broader literature on gender, including women’s work, changing family patterns, and women’s political and economic status. As an example, Daphne Spain’s contribution in this volume (chapter 3) addressed the intersection of three variables: gender, space, and status. It thus contributed not only to how we understand women in cities but also to our understanding of how gender works as a key factor in social life. These important contributions laid the foundation for a growing body of research on gender and urban life.

Postmodernism and urban theory

Are cities of the twenty-first century fundamentally different from those of the twentieth century? Some urban analysts think that there has been a rupture from

the past of such significance to have ushered in a new era: the *postmodern era*. There are several scholarly definitions of postmodernism existing on a number of levels, from the concrete to the abstract. The first level is that of architecture: postmodernism is the practice of mixing a number of dissimilar architectural styles in a single building. In the 1980s, this eclectic style largely replaced the modernist style of simple glass-and-steel boxes. The second level is that of the city itself: postmodern cities are thought to consist of many centers without apparent spatial organization (e.g., Los Angeles), as opposed to the modern industrial cities with their central business districts and surrounding suburbs (e.g., Chicago). The third level is that of theorists's thought processes: whereas modernists use a linear thought process, believe in progress, and try to understand why things happen, postmodernists use a cut-and-paste thought process (or pastiche), see multiple, conflicting realities simultaneously, and do not believe that explanations of reality (or metanarratives) have any objective meaning distinct from the meanings given to them by individuals.

Rather than seeing cities as objective sites, many postmodern writers stress the varied experiences of individuals in cities and the different points of view that people have of urban life and events. A symbol of the postmodern viewer of the city is the *flâneur* or stroller – someone who casually observes others, enjoys the experiences that others are having, but does not directly engage with others as part of their social groups.

Globalization and Its Impact on Cities

Although the countries of the world have been integrated into an economic system for at least four centuries, recent improvements in transportation and communication technology have intensified and hastened the pace of global integration. The decline of the colonial empires and the more recent disintegration of the communist economies have contributed to the unification of a single global market for goods, services, and labor. As mentioned above, economic globalization is one of the major developments that have affected cities in the past three decades.

The globalization of the economy has weakened or removed barriers to the flow of information, goods, money, and people across national boundaries. International free-trade agreements have replaced the tariffs and immigration controls that formerly kept national economies somewhat insulated from each other. Consider how globalization has changed the nature and location of manufacturing, for example. Driven by competition, companies looking for cheaper labor have increasingly moved production offshore to the developing nations of the third world. Modern transportation and communication technology have made it possible for companies to coordinate a manufacturing process that takes place in several locations in different countries. This “global assembly line” has driven manufacturing wages down and moved manufacturing jobs out of the industrialized nations.

Globalization has created a new corporate environment, one that requires the coordination of geographically dispersed planning and production processes. Paradoxically, as corporations and their subcontractors have dispersed geographically, the functions that control the process of production have centralized in large cities. These control functions include corporate headquarters, large banks and financial services, and other advanced corporate services (e.g., advertising, accounting, law firms) that the global companies require. A relatively small number of “global cities” in the industrial nations have become central to the global economy.

Globalization has also had a major impact on labor. In the industrialized nations, many experienced workers have been displaced from stable, well-paying manufacturing jobs (steel, for example) and forced to work in the service sector. At the same time, new manufacturing positions are being created in a low-wage, downgraded industrial sector (clothing, for example) in which workers of the industrialized nations compete with workers around the world. In the rapidly industrializing nations such as China, globalization has opened up new jobs for women who previously would not have been able to obtain paid employment. In these societies, industrialization is also leading to ever more rapid urbanization, as rural residents who can no longer support themselves on the land migrate to cities, putting pressure on housing and services.

Economic globalization also encourages immigration. As money, ideas, and goods are freer to move around the world, so are people. People in poor countries move off the land and into the cities in search of jobs and a better life. For the same reasons, people move from the cities of the less industrialized to the more industrialized nations within all regions of the world. For example, large numbers of immigrants from Mexico and the Philippines enter the United States, immigrants from India and Jamaica enter England, immigrants from Spain and the former Yugoslavia enter Germany, and those from Korea and China enter Japan. Some immigrants are educated professionals, and when they have language proficiency they can often secure professional employment. Others, however, find jobs in low-wage manufacturing, the informal sector (or underground economy), and ethnic-oriented services such as restaurants and grocery stores.

The Changing Urban Economy

Since 1975, the restructuring of the economy, in combination with intensified globalization, has had a profound effect on the types of jobs available in the United States, United Kingdom, and the other industrialized nations. As industrial jobs have decreased, employment has grown in industries such as computer technology, medical services, corporate services, hospitality, and tourism. These jobs

tend to be either very high or very low paying. The current situation for employment is that highly-educated workers are finding their opportunities increasing, while workers with less than a college education are seeing opportunities for stable, well-paying employment decreasing.

As a result of these changes, income data show that social inequality is increasing. The middle class, which in the United States was growing until 1973, has been shrinking since then, and the proportion of the population that is either wealthy or poor has been increasing. One visible consequence is that the numbers of poor homeless people in cities has increased steadily, due to falling incomes, the disruption of social services, and increasing housing costs. Another consequence of economic restructuring is gentrification, or the influx of wealthier households moving into working-class neighborhoods. Gentrification has many causes, including an increase in the professional middle class working in the city, high prices for suburban housing, the availability of attractive older buildings in cities, and the growth in the number of childless households (both of young singles and empty-nesters) seeking alternatives to suburban housing.

As a response to changing urban economies, many cities have adopted economic development strategies to attract and retain employment. A typical mix of strategies for a city would include a combination of supporting new industries (e.g., tourism), strengthening existing industries (e.g., banking), and attracting mobile industries (e.g., high-tech manufacturing or “back office” work such as accounting). In addition, many cities have initiated urban redevelopment programs to modernize the physical plant of the city. Redevelopment schemes usually involve demolishing outmoded factories, housing, and transportation lines and replacing them with infrastructure suitable to the industries they hope to attract.

Public Policy Choices

It is clear that the trends of the past 50 years – suburbanization, globalization, and economic transformation – have had a major impact on cities. What have elected officials and other policymakers done to address the problems caused by these changes? As we saw earlier, one policy response has been to redevelop cities to facilitate the change from an industrial to a service economy. But as urban economies change, what is being done about the people who are not employable in the new industries of corporate services, tourism, and technology? As poverty becomes more concentrated in cities, what role should suburban communities play in assuring access to jobs and housing for all groups? This section will examine several policy choices relating to the increase in concentrated poverty among racial minorities, the increased separation of the rich and poor, and the relationships between cities and their suburbs.

Concentrated poverty

As suburbs have grown and businesses have moved out of the cities, some urban neighborhoods have been left with few or no economic resources. The hardest hit areas are inner-city neighborhoods that combine a high rate of poverty with large numbers of racial minority (particularly African American) residents. Widespread economic disruption and the migration of middle-class African American residents to better neighborhoods have combined to create areas of concentrated poverty in most large cities. Researchers have searched for the causes of concentrated poverty, investigating whether high unemployment rates in such areas are the result of a *mismatch* between the available jobs and the residents' skills. According to this line of reasoning, poorly-educated urban residents cannot qualify for the growing high-skill urban labor market, nor can they easily access the entry-level manufacturing and retail jobs that have moved to the suburbs. Another question about concentrated poverty is the extent to which residents of high-poverty neighborhoods constitute an *underclass* with a distinctive subculture. Although several authors have documented distinctive cultural traits in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, they disagree on the extent to which these cultural traits are causes or consequences of being poor.

Several policies have been proposed to address the problem of concentrated poverty. One strategy is to give residents of high-poverty neighborhoods better economic and educational opportunities by assisting them to move to better neighborhoods. This is embodied in a program called Moving to Opportunity (MTO), which the US Department of Housing and Urban Development initiated in five cities beginning in 1994. This program uses rent vouchers or certificates to subsidize rents in privately-owned apartments as an alternative to public housing in poor neighborhoods. A contrasting strategy is *community development*, that is, infusing resources to improve housing, education, and economic development in inner-city neighborhoods. Community development strategies assume that urban residents, even in poor neighborhoods, have assets including their labor, income, and community organizations that can help them improve their environments. They also note that although many poor people choose to leave poor neighborhoods, the remaining people, buildings, and institutions constitute assets that cities cannot afford to abandon. Some combination of both strategies is probably necessary to address the problem of concentrated poverty.

Social class separation and urban–suburban relations

We have seen that the United States is experiencing increased polarization into distinct social classes: the rich and the poor are becoming more numerous as the middle class shrinks. In addition to this income polarization, people of different