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Urban Sociology
Critical Review #1
Critical Review of Readings

In the readings of the various books assigned to the course. It is evident that there are several central arguments, and themes. The authors of the readings assigned vary in methodology and sources. This essay will attempt to briefly dissect the various issues that I encountered as interesting with the readings. It will not cover the readings in its entirety as this would take much more than just four pages.

Early Urban Sociological Theory

The first thing I encountered as interesting was the section on early theories and paradigms of urban centres. The two main paradigms discussed were *urban ecology* and *urban political economy*.

Urban ecology was predominant at the turn of the century. Its basic concept was that of groups of individuals and their function. It attempted to categorise the social structure of urban centres and attribute their functions. This wasn't very surprising to me considering the prevalent theory of *structural-functionalism* to all aspects of society and social research. Early social theorists believed in the existence of parts that make up the whole. And that each part was essential for the survival of the whole. They believed that each neighbourhood gained something from each other- a sort of symbiotic relationship. With this came the searching for physical patterns to denote various sections of the urban locality. Some such models included: the concentric model, the multiple nuclei model, and the sector model.

Drawing upon my personal experience of New York City, I see that the most valid approach (should we *need* to accept this structural-functionalist theory) is the multiple nuclei model. In NYC there are various sectors that are obviously commercial and residential. For example, if you go into Yorkville, you will see that 86th and Lexington Ave. Through 86th and 1st Ave. is the commercial centre. Across the Central Park to 86th and Amsterdam Ave. Through 86th and West End Ave. Is the commercial centre for the Upper West Side (which has been exceedingly gentrified in the past several years.) In El Barrio, or Spanish Harlem, we see that 104 and 3rd Ave. Through 110th and 3rd Ave. Is the commercial centre. In Harlem, it's 125th St. Surrounding each of these commercial nuclei, there are residential zones that act as buffer sites. You go to the one that you are the closest. There are other examples of such nucleus type models (for example, 34th Street.) This

theory (it seems to me) is the one which complements the Bid Rent Curve discussed on page 99 of the Kleniewski book. Except since NYC is so large, or rather dense, it's not the distance from the centre of the city, rather the distance from the nearest nuclei.

The second theory discussed, political economy paradigm, is one which many sociologists take up at the latter half of the 20th century. It seems to be founded more solidly on theories derived from Marx, Engels and Weber. I may (with some degree of bias) like this theory due to my Weberian outlook on society. The basis for this theory is that cities are 'part of the political, economics and social arrangements of their times rather than products of natural processes.' The urban centre is continually changed and influenced by powerful political and economic actors, rather than by the people who inhabit them. The emergence of urban ghettos, and racial (class) segregation is an example of the *results* of these processes.

An examples of such strong actors is developer like Donald Trump. He has built various buildings in NYC, one of which I was able to see the start and finish of Trump Tower on 59th and Columbus Circle. This is a place, which i can be sure to say that i will never afford to live in. However, it's there at the gates of Central Park, on a site marking the discovery of the New World, how ironic.

Historical Perspective

Tracing the history of the urban development cycle was a rather interesting section of the book. It started with the development of villages and the rationale behind it. There was mention of the agricultural revolution as the primary reason for the development of urban life. The rationale was that since people didn't have to be nomadic and search for food; they could plant what they needed and the surplus could be saved for hard times. Intensified food production allowed for the development of division of labour (a foreshadowing of the future).

Kleniewski covered the early urban centres (including Jericho, Ur, Catal Huyuk.) It was also explained that these early urban centres (although they emerged so early in human history) lacked some key features to support dense populations over any long period of time. The city back then and the city now showed very little in common on the surface. But there were some key characteristics pointed out that made these "large villages" into cities rather than just large villages. Some of these key factors (which are present today) was a division of labour, public space and buildings, and social classes. Specifically where social classes were involved, the book made reference that

the ancient cities had a very restrictive class system. Many of the members of the urban centre contributed to the construction of the city, while only the elite reaped the rewards of urban life.

Politically cities were nodes to networks of power. Military leaders would often conquer cities to amass nodes in this network. This network of urban centres would become known as countries (or empires, e.g. Roman Empire, Persian Empire.) Often left out of this type of analytical work (especially in standard American history courses) are the cities and cultures of Asia, and Mesoamerica. Much of a surprise to me, the cities of Asia, and Mesoamerica flourished to a much greater degree than those of the Roman Empire and the Medieval Times. For example, the city of Beijing during the 1500's had a population of over two million people. The Aztec captial, Tenochtitlan, had a population of two hundred thousand.

With the evolution of countries and *industrial capitalism* there was less of a need for cities to defend themselves (on an individual basis.) Hence, cities were able to extend their borders outward and grow in physical size. Their layout changed such that it became an instrument of industry and trade. Here again, we see the fact that cities are being shaped by an economic force rather than "evolving naturally."

Modern Cities

Cities in today's time seems to be a social and cultural mecca. Many of them are the world's economic and political strongholds. Global cities provide a market for the goods and services (specifically financial services) and central locales for the world economy. They are also beginning to be very similar in look and feel, despite their cultural backgrounds.

For example, if you were to take a photograph of a Tokyo, London, or NYC street, they would all look very similar. This globalization is very much tied in with the McDonaldization of Society. Pop star David Bowie was interviewed recently regarding his song "I'm Afraid of Americans." Bowie stated that he was in Indonesia one day and found right in the middle of a city a McDonald's. This very much scared him.

I believe that urban centres around the world will be one of the first places which will become homogenised. In this increasingly globalized economy, there will be no city without it's own McDonald's, HMV, Gap, Tower Records/Books/Video, Blockbuster, Virgin Megastore. Eventually, no country will be immune to our cathedrals of consumption as George Ritzer put it.

Urban population trends were also an important issue covered in the

Readings. While in post-industrialised nations, and during the industrial revolution (in post-industrialised nations) the cities were able to support the rural to urban migration. As the cities turned towards industrialisation, it was able to support the increasing populations by providing jobs for the migrants. However, in current developing nations, there is an uneven scale of jobs for rural to urban migrants. Many of the cities of developing nations hold most of the countries' population and this is increasing at an alarming rate. Since developing nations have skipped or are in the process of industrialising there just aren't enough jobs for its population.

An increase in the informal sector of employment is another characteristic of the global city. This allows for individuals living in substandard conditions to make a living. These individuals do not have the luxury to abstain from work. Often, in developing nations, informal sector of work allows for the construction of infrastructure in shanty towns; this allows for the persistence of over-urbanisation and urban primacy.

Urban Development in the U.S.

There are three main portions of urban development in U.S. history. The layout, and development, of cities during the commercial, industrial and corporate stages, were such that it would allow them to make best use of the schema at that time (esp. based on technology.)

The commercial city, during the post-colonial, but pre-civil war era, was small size (space) and small population. Walking was the main mode of transportation, hence it wasn't a surprise that they were designed in such a way that you could traverse them in their entirety in very little time. They contained all of the elements of a European city (town hall, library etc.) They were mainly located along the ocean (as ports;) many important institutions were located relatively close to these major ports as well. The way of life was in check to the economic system of trade.

The industrial city shifted the importance of the docks, to mills and factories located inland. There were concentrated areas of industry, commerce, trade, and residence. This allowed for the segregation of social classes, as each of the residencies concentrated around the major mode of employ.

The corporate city, which is evident in many of the cities of today, concentrate mainly on service, and economic centralisation. Manufacturing plants and industry is built on the perimeter of the city. This allows for the creation of suburbia and larger metropolitan areas. These areas a congruous with the city, but are politically separated from the city. The advent of cars, and cyberspace has also helped to spread the city outwards, yet still be able

to thrive in a symbiotic nature. The downtown was no longer the industrial centre, but the economic centre of town.

Urban growth and change is characterised by real estate developers and *property capitalists*. Government also has a hold on the development of the city through zoning ordinances and the creation of infrastructure, as well as taxation (or conversely tax breaks.) Corporations are wooed to the cities through a series of negotiations between the political and economic factions.