

America's Two Urban Sociologies

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America's urban sociology has always been a very broad field. Over the years, it has been divided into several "schools" beginning with the Chicago School; and into various theoretical approaches, including the ecological, neo-Marxist, and cultural.

Today, however, it seems to me to be divided also into what I call an object-centered and a people- or relational-centered conception. A full description of each would require a lengthy paper, but here I propose them as ideal types, with all the oversimplification that usually accompanies such types. Only an empirical study of the recent literature in urban sociology would reveal whether the two ideal types can be found in reality.

The object-centered conception of the field studies the city as an object, also objectifying its various components, from land uses to neighborhoods. Since they involve people, the objects are always social but they are also conceptual objects, as is even the notion of "the city," given the considerable variety of characteristics among actually existing cities. A few cities, including the most studied ones, are even seen as iconic objects.

Currently, some object-centered researchers are especially interested in novel big-city institutions, especially those found in gentrifying neighborhoods, and so-called neobohemian ones. These urban researchers study new locations for public social life, such as parks, also meeting places, restaurants, and places for leisure, entertainment, and culture.

However, the primary objects of study of this branch of urban sociology are *space* and *place*, viewed as physical entities that include land uses and structures, as well as the activities associated with them. It also studies the people and institutions involved, but it is typically more interested in the uses to which land is put than in the users of that land.

People-centered urban sociology sees space as a physical entity and studies the social, economic, and other relations and processes by which space is transformed physically and constructed socially into place. Thereafter, the relations of people, institutions, and organizations involving the uses (and exchanges) of particularly places become the major topics of study.

If people-centered urban sociologists examine space and place, they do so only when these affect or are otherwise relevant to the social arrangements under study. They look at growth, decline, residential mobility, and other social processes involving space and place in terms of who and what makes it happen. Unlike object-centered researchers, they are less interested in what makes communities urban or suburban.

They also pay less attention to new public social life, but those that do focus on what happens among the people who frequent the bars and other places for sociability and entertainment. Still, people-oriented urban sociology seems to pay more attention to

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everyday life, making a living, politics, and a variety of economic, social, and political conflict.

Both urban sociologies are now concentrating a good deal of research energy on neighborhoods. Object-centered urban sociology is currently preoccupied with neighborhood effects, as part of its broader concern with the social effects of place. It sees the neighborhood itself as an independent social body with causal powers over its residents as well as over other parts of the urban object.

People-centered sociologists view neighborhoods not as objects but in terms of who does what inside the socially constructed boundaries that constitute the neighborhood. They are more likely to see the neighborhood or the block as an imagined community.

They are also interested in the social, political, and economic forces and agents that affect what goes on inside neighborhoods. While they too concern themselves with the social effects of place, they begin by looking at the economic and other actors that cause the creation of place, and eventually bring about its effects.

They have been particularly interested in the movement of poor people to middle-class areas and in recent class- and racial-mixing projects.

Object-centered students of urban poverty see neighborhoods as concentrated and distinguish them by the percentage of poor residents. People-centered researchers emphasize the forces and processes that cause poor people to be concentrated with people of similar income and skin color.

Another way of comparing the two approaches brings in the widely used container metaphor, which, for urban sociologists is the city, and typically the big city. Object-centered sociology emphasizes the container and finds social phenomena inside it. Thus, Louis Wirth found population size, density, and heterogeneity in it, and viewed these as effects or qualitative correlates of urbanism.

People-centered sociology sees all these phenomena too but is concerned with their relations and connections. It will also see the container, but more likely as a set of boundaries, though only if and when some social, economic, political, or other forms of power are exercised in their name.

Object-centered urban sociology can be traced back many centuries to celebrations of the city as unique settlements which housed secular and sacred power holders, and later which produced cultural, intellectual, political, and other forms of creativity and innovation.

The predecessors of people-centered urban sociology are probably found mostly in the urban novels of past centuries, but this conception of the field made its American debut in Chicago. Although the Chicago school viewed itself as ecological, its leading members were actually more interested in how humans constructed the urban environment. They looked at how people distributed themselves in the environment but paid little attention to the environment itself.

Robert Park's seminal essay may have been titled "The City" but Park devotes most of his attention to social processes he associated with the city, including immigration, race and ethnic relations, communication processes, and others. Ernest Burgess will forever be associated with urban zones, but he constructed the zones to understand the residential mobility of the city's socioeconomic classes and ethnic groups.

Today, the people-centered approach seems to be employed mainly in community studies, for while its researchers are ostensibly studying urban neighborhoods, street corners, and housing projects, their empirical work is mostly devoted to the social life taking place

within these areas. Community studies rarely look closely at the physical characteristics of communities they study. Although in retrospect, the Lynds are associated with an urban object called Middletown, and Lloyd Warner with Yankee City, they actually studied the residents' class relations, structures, and conflicts.

Although I have described the two conceptions as dichotomous, the boundaries of the dichotomy are fuzzy. More important, in reality, many urban sociologists include both in their work, or switch from one to the other depending on the research questions they are trying to answer. This is all to the good, for while people cause space and place to be constructed physically and otherwise, space and place also cause effects in and on people, even though many of the effects are indirect.

Still, sociology is primarily the study of social life and the people-centered conception enables researchers to connect urban sociology to the rest of the discipline. Meanwhile, the object-centered approach has awakened other parts of the discipline to so-called spatial analysis.

ASA's section recognizes both urban sociologies, though probably not intentionally. The section is called Community and Urban Sociology; the section journal is called *City & Community*.

But the section's mandate is "to explore new social theory and develop research on groups living, working and communicating across geographical boundaries . . ."