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THE URBAN SOCIETY AND CIVILIZATION¹

LOUIS WIRTH

ABSTRACT

By placing the understanding of the city into the center of social science research interests at the University of Chicago we have acquired a perspective for the comprehension of the salient problems not only of urban civilization but of contemporary society as a whole. The urban community offers an economical field for social science research and a suitable platform from which to view the two poles of human existence: the civilization which has grown up in cities and the culture of folk societies. The methods appropriate to these two phases of social life differ for reasons inherent in the data themselves. The use of statistical techniques, representative samples, and personal documents is largely confined to urban societies. The Chicago studies have profited by the older theories concerning social structure but have relied predominantly upon empirical evidence. The studies which have been given a systematic framework through Park's 1915 paper on "The City" have ranged from the ecological and economic to the cultural and political aspects of the metropolis. These research enterprises have yielded a wealth of knowledge about Chicago and about cities and modern civilization. They have, in addition, helped significantly in advancing the theoretical and methodological phases of empirical social science research.

Those who seek to advance knowledge of the social world through the assiduous accumulation of facts may be no less mistaken than those who have an eye only for cosmic generalizations. We cannot discover a fact without first postulating both a frame of reference within which it has a place and a set of criteria by which we identify it and distinguish it from fancy. Neither can we arrive at any valid generalization that has any relevance to actual human problems without proceeding from some prior generalizations which we modify so that they take account of the specific new facts of experience which we discover. Advance in social science, as in other fields of knowledge, is most likely to come by looking at what appears to be a miscellaneous collection of facts from some relatively novel point of view, or by widening and differentiating our perspectives in such a way as to embrace the recalcitrant facts which had hitherto resisted rational analysis within the existing perspectives. In this way we raise some relatively new questions and perhaps advance toward some new answers. Give us a favorable place to stand and we may hope to understand—if not to move—the world.

¹ This paper was read at the tenth anniversary celebration of the Social Science Research Building, University of Chicago, December 1-2, 1939.

By placing the urbanization of the Western world in the center of our perspective, there is some promise that novel understandings will emerge. Lest it be thought, however, that I am proposing that we indulge merely in a scientific parlor game of peek-a-boo in which one perspective has no better claim than another, let me suggest that there are substantial reasons for selecting the platform of urbanism for our analysis of the contemporary social scene. What we call civilization as distinguished from culture has been cradled in the city; the city is the center from which the influences of modern civilized life radiate to the ends of the earth and the point from which they are controlled; the persistent problems of contemporary society take their most acute form in the city. The problems of modern civilization are typically urban problems.

While some could be persuaded that it is legitimate enough to advance urbanism as the central theme of a good share of current social science interests, they might be disposed to argue that this, after all, would constitute merely one among many possible points of view, and much that is vital and interesting about human social life would be left unaccounted for and much more would be distorted. But this would probably be equally true of any alternative conception designed to integrate the highly specialized and far-flung interests of social scientists. The fact, however, that the population of the present-day world is so largely urban and that the process of urbanization and the mode of life congruent with it has radically transformed the whole of the occidental world in so short a time suggests that almost every significant proposition that can be advanced about contemporary society contains urbanism as one of its causal terms. Furthermore, almost every proposition designed to explain the problems which involve our cultural values must necessarily include the modern urban social structure—either as the independent or as the dependent variable. Conversely, the attempt to understand the city inevitably leads to the major facets of civilization.

Perhaps these comments will impress some as mere rationalizations concocted after the fact to justify what was done through accident. I would not minimize the fact that in developing this perspective the social scientists in this university were challenged by

the throbbing life of the exuberantly growing metropolis in which they live, and were inclined, if only for the sake of economy in research, to formulate their problems in such a way that they could utilize the observations from their very doorsteps to answer them. They, and other social scientists elsewhere, however, soon discovered that the concrete and immediate social problems of Chicago and the processes underlying them were, in their essential features, the problems and processes of every city; that they were, in fact, typical of the whole of our industrialized, urbanized world, and if properly analyzed would expose what this twentieth century cosmos (or chaos) is and how it came to be.

The study of the city has suggested itself as crucial not merely for the scientific understanding of the city itself but also for understanding and coping with the contemporary social order in some of its broader ranges. Despite the intellectual and practical challenge of the great city in which they lived, the small company of social scientists that were assembled here in the nineties might, of course, have continued in the well-beaten paths of the traditional scholarship and learning as practiced at the time by European and American universities generally. It happened, however, that this university was founded at a time when this phenomenally growing city was still very young and when the social studies, and especially sociology and political science, were just beginning to seek an empirical base instead of bowing to the prematurely formulated grandiose systems which had formerly dominated them. Almost from the very inception of the university, therefore, the social science group here turned to the homely but interesting problems that had broken out on the body domestic, economic, and politic of the city of Chicago. They had one eye cocked to the traditional theory, while the other was busy observing the living city before them. From the very beginning of our short life as an academic institution, theory and empirical investigation have never been divorced but have enriched each other.

Only two years after the university opened its doors, there appeared two documents by members of its social science faculty which, while they may well appear to us as curiosities today, were indicative of an early and abiding interest in the study of urban life.

One was a *Catechism for Social Observation*² by Charles Richmond Henderson, and the other an account of an American city³ by Albion W. Small and George Vincent. The work of Charles Zueblin on municipal problems and government followed shortly thereafter, and by the beginning of the first world war a whole generation of graduate students in economics, politics, and sociology had already been initiated into the mysteries of research on the urban social structure. It was not until 1915, however, that there appeared some evidence that a concerted program of investigation was emerging, for in that year Robert E. Park published a paper entitled, "The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the City Environment"⁴ which was designed to call attention to the opportunities for empirical research and to offer a systematic body of hypotheses for the would-be social scientist who could be lured from the library long enough to look urban life square in the face. The intellectual ferment stirred up by this (at that time unconventional) paper by a sociologist with a flare for news, or rather a newspaperman disciplined by a wide and thorough training in philosophy and social science, did not really begin to take shape until the end of the war. Meanwhile a host of Doctor's dissertations, ranging all the way from descriptions of social problems in the Stock Yards to "A Study of the Higher Life of Chicago,"⁵ had appeared. They were, on the whole, modeled after the pioneer studies of American communities begun at Johns Hopkins University in 1883 under the editorship of Herbert B. Adams, but were distinguished from these by the fact that they were based upon firsthand observations of life rather than the perusal of books. Not that the studies at Chicago were oblivious of what had gone before. There is ample evidence that these budding social scientists were familiar with the classic work of Sir Henry Maine, of Tönnies, and of Durkheim. Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London*⁶ was still news; the studies of the Webbs and of James Bryce were very much in the minds particularly of

² Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1894.

³ *An Introduction to the Study of Society* (New York: American Book Co., 1894).

⁴ *American Journal of Sociology*, XX (1915), 577-612.

⁵ Thomas James Riley (Ph.D. thesis, Chicago, 1904).

⁶ New York: Macmillan Co., 1903.

those who followed the scent of politics in the city. The muckraking literature was avidly read and feebly imitated, and the more prosaic, though perhaps more scientific, social survey had already come into its own.

What was lacking, however, and what Professor Park's stimulation supplied, was a coherent body of concepts which would furnish a suitable optic for the formulation of problems and the selection, description, and systematic interpretation of facts. In this, the categories in which the polar concepts were status and contract, symbiosis and consensus, community and society, mechanical and organic solidarity proved themselves useful enough as general orientation points. No student of the American urban scene, moreover, during the first three decades of this century, could be oblivious to the fact that what was challenging public attention in the form of urban turmoil was in part a symptom of the growing-pains of an order that had taken the leap from a simple agrarianism to a complex urban industrialism in the short span of a few generations. The facts of this development were well enough known and were even statistically documented by such works as that of Adna F. Weber's *The Growth of Cities in the Nineteenth Century*.⁷ But the fundamental factors responsible for the emergence of urban civilization in America and a method adequate to comprehend the strange new forms that social life was taking in the urban centers were still wanting.

Fortunately the financial assistance of foundations served not merely as the catalytic agent at an opportune moment to crystallize the research interests that were evolving in the minds of men like Park and Merriam into co-ordinated research programs which had hitherto been made contingent upon modest support which was not always forthcoming, but it served also to bring into being an organization, unprecedented in academic history, designed for the special purpose of facilitating social science research. This was the Local Community Research Committee, which undertook to explore the *terra incognita* of the city of Chicago. But while Chicago was the main center of operations, the outer limits fortunately were never specified. In the period from 1923, when the Committee got under way, until 1929, when this building to house its activities was dedi-

⁷ New York, 1899 (Columbia University Ph.D. thesis).

cated, a series of pioneer studies were completed which were reported on a decade ago in the volume by T. V. Smith and L. D. White, entitled *Chicago: An Experiment in Social Science Research*.⁸

In the ten years that have elapsed, some notable advances have been made. What was then regarded as an experiment has resulted in a body of organized knowledge which in its implications far transcends the local scene, and in research methods which have found acceptance by social scientists in all parts of the world.

One of the most striking contrasts between the urban and the rural mode of life suggested by the literature is the difference between societies based upon kinship as distinguished from those based upon territory. The recognition of the significance of this difference has led to a preoccupation with the spatial order of urban life arising from the dense concentration of large masses of people into a compact territory, and with the manner in which men and institutions arrange themselves under these conditions. In the past decade or so what amounts to a new discipline within the social sciences, human ecology, has emerged and has become widely disseminated. Through the studies of Park, Burgess, McKenzie, and others⁹ the physical structure and the ecological processes of concentration, dispersion, segregation, and succession of men, institutions, and cultural characteristics as between the various natural areas and communities that make up the physical framework of the urban world have been revealed through indices which are quite precise, quantitative, and adaptable to comparison as between cities. The dominance of the city over its hinterland has been revealed through the ever widening range of influence in economic, political, and cultural affairs. It has been shown that not only do our political units within the city proper often show great variance from the ecological and cultural areas, but the city, given the proper sustenance, eventually develops into a metropolis, since its actual orbit of life tends to spill over legally established, static boundaries. As a result we get on the periphery of every growing city a no man's land of social control which accounts for much of our waste, our disorder, and our problems. Con-

⁸ Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929.

⁹ For these and other references see James Quinn, "Topical Summary of Current Literature on Human Ecology," in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal*.

cretely this expresses itself in the maze of governmental units and correspondingly numerous, overlapping, and conflicting services and powers. Among studies of this type that have been carried out here are those of health organization, taxation, marketing, transportation, policing, education, water supply, judicial agencies, the political and administrative implications of which have been treated by Charles E. Merriam and associates in their volume on *The Government of the Metropolitan Region of Chicago*,¹⁰ and which we are now engaged in synthesizing with the economic and sociological investigations into a volume designed to furnish a basis for a comprehensive plan for metropolitan Chicago.

In recent years, as these issues have taken acute form in the Chicago area, we have shifted our emphasis from the minute analysis of the local communities within the city to the larger sectors and zones in the metropolitan region. The concept of the metropolitan region has been sufficiently well established, in part through our labors here, so that many of the baffling problems arising out of the growth of the city and its interrelations with the hinterland have become amenable to analysis and treatment. The orderly presentation of the data on urban areas and growth, on a regional scale, has already proved indispensable in the practical problems of land utilization, housing, transportation, public services, and planning. The hypothesis upon which these regional studies have been proceeding is that the metropolitan region of Chicago is, in fact, an economic and social unit to which due political and administrative consideration has not been given owing to the relative inflexibility of legally established boundaries. A problem of statesmanship in this region, to the solution of which we have been attempting to contribute, is how to extend into politics and administration the unity which already exists in the economic and social spheres. Through a fortunate coincidence of interests we have seen our own local and regional studies projected on a national scale through collaboration with the National Resources Committee which has resulted in the series of publications on urbanism,¹¹ and which in turn have come to be regarded as a

¹⁰ Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933.

¹¹ *Our Cities: Their Role in the National Economy* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1937); and *Urban Government* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1939).

model of research by many countries touched by the magic wand of urbanization. In this way we have aided in the recognition of the strategic significance of the city for the weal or woe of national life.

The city is not merely the point at which great numbers are concentrated into limited space, but it is also a complex of human beings exhibiting the most extraordinary heterogeneity in almost every characteristic in which human beings can differ from one another. In this respect the city represents perhaps the most striking contrast to the social entities that we call primitive, folk, and peasant societies. Consequently, the methods adapted to the understanding of the population of the metropolis are strikingly different from those suited to simpler and more homogeneous societies. This accounts for the fact that in attempting to understand the city we have had to resort to extensive statistical inquiries to determine the human elements of which it is composed. They differ, as do all societies, in sex and age, but they show peculiar distribution of age and sex groups and great variations in these respects as we pass from area to area. They differ widely from one another in occupation, in view of the more extensive division of labor which the growth of the market has made possible. They differ in wealth and in income, ranging from the extreme of affluence to the depths of the direst poverty and insecurity. The city, moreover, by virtue of its focal position in the complex of capitalistic civilization, has attracted within its confines the racial and ethnic stocks of all the world and has more or less amalgamated them and blended their traits into a new aggregate of hybrids, here mingling with one another and there segregating themselves from one another, here collaborating and there at war, but in any case building a complex of cultures unprecedented in human history. This heterogeneity of the human materials in the city is at once a source of the ferment and stimulation, and of the frictions and conflicts that characterize modern society.

To comprehend this aggregate, so imperfectly welded into a social unity, we have resorted first to a minute analysis of all those characteristics accessible to research in which the inhabitants of the city differ from one another. Chicago was one of the first cities to make available to the students of social science the rich and hitherto unexplored census materials in a form in which they lent themselves

to rigorous analysis. The Social Science Research Committee, through the efforts of Burgess and his associates, has built up a treasury of basic materials which have been exploited not only for theoretical but for practical purposes as well. In our forthcoming monograph on the population of the metropolitan region of Chicago, we have extended the description and classification, developed on the basis of minute census tracts and local communities, to the larger sectors and zones that comprise the metropolitan region, and we have projected it forward in time on the basis of experience and the contingencies that account for the slackened rate of growth and the redistribution of the people from the center to the periphery. It is clear that only the impersonal language of statistics was capable of dealing with such imposing mass phenomena.

For a more intimate knowledge, however, of the population of the city, knowledge which cannot be expressed in indices such as birth- and death-rates, sex ratios, median rentals, citizenship, literacy, educational status, occupational affiliation, racial and ethnic origin, and the like, it is not possible, and with our modern knowledge not necessary, to study everyone. In lieu of this we resort to the analysis of representative samples, a procedure which does not have to be resorted to in smaller numerical aggregates and less heterogeneous communities such as those with which the anthropologists are accustomed to deal. But the social scientist, since he deals with human beings in their interrelations, and with societies, i.e., a network of claims and expectations among men, as distinguished from a mere numerical aggregate, is compelled also to invent methods suitable to the exploration of these phenomena which are social as distinct from physical and which have inner as well as outer aspects. This requires communication, questioning, the interview, and what have come to be known as human documents. From the days of W. I. Thomas' study of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*¹² to the present, our social science studies have attempted to cope with the problem of how to make these human documentary materials amenable to scientific treatment. A long series of volumes combining the statistical, the case study, and field observation procedures attest to the progress that has been made in the perfection of a method which

¹² Chicago: University of Chicago, 1918; New York: A. A. Knopf, 1927.

would at the same time be as precise as possible and yet not confine itself to the externals of human life but be adequate to the understanding of meaningful conduct and of social values.

One of the most striking contrasts between the urban world of today and the rural and primitive prototype out of which it has developed is to be seen in the divergent social structures characteristic of these two ideal-typical poles of existing and historical societies. The anomalous situation symbolic of urban life consists in the presence of close physical proximity coupled with vast social distances of men. This has profoundly altered the basis of human association and has subjected the traits of human nature as molded by simpler social organizations to severe strain.¹³

The mere survival of concentrated millions far removed from tillable soil presupposes a vast technological apparatus which is the triumph of modern natural science and engineering skill. These technological innovations which have made cities possible are also continually remaking our cities. As steam, for instance, has herded us together, so electricity has the potentialities of redistributing and dispersing us. The technological revolution which underlies the development of urban civilization out of preindustrial folk society is by no means at an end. The complicated and highly efficient machines upon which modern society depends bring with them benevolent as well as disorganizing influences. In the study of the social aspects of invention and technology, probably no social scientist has done more than has William F. Ogburn. The family, for instance, which in a simple society is truly the social microcosm has, as Ogburn has shown, been transformed in its structure and in its functions by the impact of modern technology. Indeed, the study of the family in the city is not so much a study in family organization as in the process of disorganization. Burgess and his students Mowrer, Frazier, and others have explored these implications of urban life in great detail and have supported their conclusions with imposing bodies of evidence empirically derived from the family types as they are found in the different racial, national, and economic worlds of the city of Chicago.

¹³ Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *American Journal of Sociology*, XLIV (July, 1938), 1-24.

We have just recently begun a series of systematic studies of the socioeconomic stratification of urban society. Here we find that the economic, social, and political superstructure that has built itself upon the ecological and technological base substantiates the older hypotheses that in the course of the urbanization and industrialization of the Western world a new form of social organization, a new social structure, is emerging, characterized by impersonal relations and in which the pecuniary nexus is the most significant cohesive bond. Instead of kinship and tradition, interest and ideology come to serve as the cement that binds human individuals into effectively working groups. Relationships between men tend to be depersonalized, so that no one literally counts in the city except as his voice can speak for an organized group. The studies of Millis and his students in trade-unionism and collective bargaining document this generalization vividly, and the studies of our political scientists show the same tendency in the realm of politics. Merriam and Gosnell's studies of the electoral process and of political leadership indicate the painful process of transition involved in making our representative democratic forms, born in the New England village, work in modern polyglot cities.

Our sociologists, however, have been preoccupied not only with the family but with other social institutions and structures. They have sought to understand such professional groups as the medical and legal professions, the real estate men, churches and denominations, recreational and cultural agencies, and bodies organized for every purpose that corresponds to a conceivable human interest in order to find effective expression for the needs and aspirations of urban man. Over a hundred years ago an understanding Frenchman, De Tocqueville, already pointed to the flowering of voluntary organizations of all kinds in American life.¹⁴ On the basis of our own studies today we find that one of the great problems of the city arises from the fact that people are interested in objectives which a disinterested spectator would conclude are not to their interest. Despite the complex network of voluntary associations that develops in the city, however, there is always a residue of fluid unorganized masses who can

¹⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (rev. ed.; New York: Colonial Press, 1899), II, 114.

fall prey to dynamic leaders and fascinating slogans and who can be buffeted about by assertive pressure groups stimulated by the modern agencies of opinion-making, no longer primarily the school and the pulpit but rather the newspaper, the motion picture, and the radio. If the studies in which we are now engaged on socioeconomic stratification and on voluntary organizations in the city turn out as successfully as we hope they will, we shall be able to furnish a more reliable account than has hitherto been given of the genesis of our problems of collective action in modern urban society, of the factors that control them, and of the adjustment in our institutional life necessary to deal with them. Many of these new forms of social organization have already been analyzed: the stock exchange, the credit market, private and public corporate enterprise, the professional organization, the sect, the club, and the political party. The studies of White on public administration, particularly on public personnel administration, and those of Leland on public finance indicate a growing body of scientific knowledge derived from the empirical study of the effect of the new urban mode of life upon the functioning of the body politic.

Not only the basic processes, however, but also the practical problems arising at the point where traditional institutions and controls break down under the stress of urban life, have systematically come under the scrutiny of our social scientists. The studies of Burgess and his students on delinquency, crime, insanity, suicide, and family disorganization, the studies of Douglas on unemployment, the political scientists' studies of graft, bossism, and corruption, and the numerous contributions made by the faculty of the School of Social Service Administration to the techniques of dealing with the ills that beset man in his as yet unaccustomed urban setting, have raised our methods of dealing with social problems from the level of magic closer to those involving rational procedure.

All these characteristically urban phenomena have been dealt with on the basis of material which formerly was largely unavailable or neglected because it was not considered amenable to scientific treatment. In the attempt to collect the material, new techniques have been developed which frequently have been found adaptable to wider uses. We have not generally been able or willing to continue with the collection of routine materials where no

further scientific purposes could be served by them or where this function could be transferred to other agencies with more adequate resources and direct responsibilities. Thus, for instance, the experimentation with the registration of social statistics begun by McMillen and Jeter was carried out far enough until it commended itself to a governmental agency and was taken over as a regular function of government. The same applies to the costly publication of census materials with which we experimented. In the pioneer *History of Chicago*¹⁵ project under the direction of Miss Bessie L. Pierce a similar pathfinding venture is at stake. It is carried out to demonstrate the possibilities of exploiting the data of local history by means of the techniques of modern historical analysis. Its findings will be important as a background for all our other social science studies, but its importance transcends the historical information which it will furnish us. Especially in the most recent periods of Chicago's history, it will only sketch the major outlines of urban development, leaving to other scholars the task of filling in the monographic pieces which will ultimately compose the mosaic. It will be another demonstration that the history of civilization can be written in terms of the history of cities, and that our American cities, like modern cities everywhere, constituting as they do the frontier of civilization, are parts and products of the expansion of Europe.

It is characteristic of revolutions that they are not recognized until they are in their final dramatic stages. This applies to the revolution in social life which has transformed the world in which we live from a relatively isolated series of local, simple handicraft, static, caste societies into a single interdependent complex, technological, dynamic, and internally highly differentiated cosmos. Our cultures are still many, but our civilization is one. The city is the symbol of that civilization. We will either master this ominously complicated entity or perish under it. The common life for a noble end, of which Aristotle spoke, probably can, as human experience seems to show, be better lived in cities. To this end, which calls, as a first prerequisite, for a scientific understanding of the basic processes of this new mode of life, our studies are directed.

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¹⁵ Vol. I (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1937).