

Lecture 1: About urban sociology: origins, tools, methods and key questions.



Introduction

I. What is a city? Different possible definitions

II. Qualities of Urban landscapes

III. City is...

Text: G. Simmel, 1903

Introduction

- Sociologists are not the only ones interested by cities. Historian, geographers, demographers, have studied the urban phenomenon
- The specificity of urban sociology is not to study “everything that is going on in the city”, but the specifically urban dimension of social life and activities
- The study of urban dimension of... the city has been studied since the end of nineteenth century. At that time, urban development was massive and amazing.

I. What is a city? Different possible definitions

Let's start with a question: *what is a city?* Different points of view are expressed among “users” and “makers” of the cities (Urban makers: urbanists/ architects/

engineers/builders/inhabitants/ merchant and traders/ Governments/ Local authorities/ administrations etc.) but also according to the type of scientific approach in the social sciences: economists, demographers, historian, geographers develop other specific tools and concept to study urban phenomenon. Sociology has its own tools, concepts and research questions.

According to their internal organization and to their relation with the whole society (social classes and division of labour and power, juridical autonomy, technological development and networks) different types of cities have been identified. The main types are:

Medieval city as ideal type (M. Weber)

City of industrial times

Colonial city

Suburbanisation

Towards Global city? The idea of a city that becomes disconnected from the territory

- Exercice: listing the words of “your city”. Example from a Paris 8 student
“Tramway; metro; street lamp; building; housing estate; hall; urbanization; urban; ruffraff; road; motorway; car; meeting pot; language; work; dream; disillusion; need to change air; pollution; big store; neighborhood; market place; delocalization; light city (ville lumière); bus; gang; segregation; sharing; urban policies; associative movement; grayness; Paris, Tokyo, New York, Berlin, Bamako, Dakar, Singapore, Rap; Edith Piaf; Renaud.”

II. Qualities of urban landscapes

Some photos of urban landscapes have been presented and discussed (16 in total, past and present, Europe).

Main qualities:

1. density/ 2. human presence/migrations/ 3. high buildings/4. commercial activities/5. organized green spaces/ 6. lights in the dark/ 7. traffic/ 8. cross points/ 9. public services/ 10. places and signs of power/ 11. housing structured by industry/ 12. memorial, symbols, ancient monuments.

None of these qualities are independently sufficient to define urbanity. Density is not sufficient to define a city (E. Durkheim), circulations of goods and men do not necessarily

imply “moral density”. Moral commitment of individuals is necessary to define an urban community.

III. City is...

Cities are relations. Between territory and population, material environment and location of collective life, physical configurations and relations between individuals.

Cities are places where social division of labour has developed complex social relations.

These social relations are characterised by figures related to interactions and identities/ juxtapositions and neighbourhoods/ circulations, mobility/ transformation and temporality.

G. Simmel argues that urban life requires and develops specific competences and “mentality”:

text: *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben*, G. Simmel, 1903.