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Urbanism Changes Personality Types, or Is Just a Way of Life? —Contrast in Simmel's and Wirth's Metropolis

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Abstract

One is regarded by sociologists as one of the founders of the discipline of sociology, the other is the representative figure of the Chicago School, Simmel and Wirth's works both attracted great attention and interpretations. After more than a century of Simmel's death and half a century of Wirth's death, their work still remains a source of puzzlement. This article aims to give a fresh look at their two great works, and come up with a contrast in their theme and analysis. Though both are about metropolis, they differentiate from each other profoundly.

Key words: Urbanism; Simmel; Wirth; Metropolis

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INTRODUCTION

Big cities offer rich opportunities to people. However, many people actually find them lonely or unfriendly places. Why? One distinctive characteristic of modern urban life is the frequency of interactions between strangers. In order to understand city and urban life, it's necessary to consider some of the main theories of urbanism, and some of the important contemporary trends in urbanization around the world. Not surprisingly, rapid globalization is having an enormous impact on city-living.

What is a city? A simple working definition is: an inhabited central place differentiated from a town or village by its greater size, and by the range of activities practiced within its boundaries, usually religious, military-political, economic, educational and cultural (Jary & Jary, 1999, p.74). The urban sociologist Louis Wirth's definition is that "A city is a large dense permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals." We can say then that cities are relatively large forms of human settlement, within which a wide range of activities are performed. Many early sociologists were fascinated by the city and by urban life and were concerned with the way in which the development of cities changed the social as well as the physical environment.

1. CITY SHAPES THE MENTAL LIFE OF THE DWELLERS IN GEORG SIMMEL'S METROPOLIS

Many people saw that large-scale urbanization fundamentally changed societies, but what effects would such a shift have on individuals? How would it alter their attitudes and behavior? And what exactly is it about city-living that produces such dramatic effects? Simmel (1858-1918) provided just such a theoretical account of how the city shapes its inhabitants' mental life; his "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903) had managed to capture the flavor of the metropolis.

Simmel's study would today be described as an early piece of interpretative sociology, seeking to understand and convey something about how city life is actually experienced by people. City life, says Simmel, bombards the mind with images and impressions, sensations and

activity. There is a deep contrast with the slower more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the small town or village. In this context, it is not possible for individuals to respond to every stimulus or activity they come across, so how do they deal with such a bombardment?

Simmel argues that city-dwellers protect themselves from the unexpectedness of violent stimuli and the assault of changing images by becoming quite blasé and disinterested, adopting a "seen-it-all before" attitude. They tune out much of the urban buzz that surrounds them, focusing on whatever they need to, just in order to get by. The result of this blasé attitude thought Simmel, is that although city-dwellers are part of the metropolitan crush, they distance themselves from one another emotionally. Typically, the myriad fleeting contacts with people they do not know result in an "urban reserve" in interactions with others, which can be perceived as emotionless and rather cold, leading to widespread feelings of impersonality and even isolation. Simmel points out, though, that city people are not by nature indifferent to others and uncaring. Rather, they are forced to adopt such modes of behavior in order to preserve their social distance and individual selves in the face of pressures from the densely populated urban environment.

Simmel notes that the sheer pace of urban life partly explains the typical urban personality. But he also argues that the fact that the city is "the seat of the money" must be taken into account. Many cities are large capitalistic financial centers, which demand punctuality, rational exchange and an instrumental approach to business. This encourages relentless matter-of-fact dealings between people, with little room for emotional connection, resulting in calculating minds capable of weighing the benefits and costs of involvement in relationships. Simmle's study points out some of the emerging problems of living in the modern urbanized world.

Critics of Simmel's study have raised a number of objections. His arguments seem to be based on personal observation and insight rather than on any formal or replicable research methods, thus the findings can be seen as somewhat speculative and not rooted in empirical studies. Also, despite Simmel's insistence that he set out merely to understand urban life and not to damn it, many critics have suggested that the overall tone of the study is negative, revealing a value bias against the capitalist city. It is certainly true that his work seems to focus on the ways in which individuals can resist being "leveled down and worn out by a socio-technological mechanism" (Simmel, 1950, p.409). In this sense, critics say, Simmel plays down the liberating experience of many people who move to cities to experience greater freedoms and room for individual expression. Finally, the study may be guilty of over-generalizing from a specific type of large city to cities in general. After all, only a minority of cities are financial centers and those that are not may well have less alienating and isolating effects on people than Simmel allows for. We can not really say that all urbanites have the same experiences. German sociologist Jazbinsek regards that Simmel's essay on big cities defies a straightforward summary, and he puts forward three reasons for that. But he draws a table to convey the many layers of the original text.

Table 1
Synopsis of Simmel's Lecture Titled "The Metropolis and Mental Life"

Unit of comparison	Urban way of life	Traditional way of life
Main metaphor	Long chains	Small circles
Dominant economic system	Goods production and money economy Detailed division of labor	Subsistence production and barter economy Little division of labor
Core economic problem	Fight for man (instill new needs)	Fight with nature (satisfy elementary needs)
Consumer's relation to the product	Orientation to exchange value Blasé attitude toward things Consumption of final products	Orientation to utility value Sensitivity to differences Consumer's input
Consumer's relation to the manufacturer	Dependence on many people the consumer do not know Positive: predictability Negative: inexorability	Dependence on a few people the consumer knows Positive: latitude for judgment Negative: arbitrariness
General etiquette	Brevity and rarity of meetings Slight aversion	Length and frequency of encounters Solidarity
Benefit to the individual	Individual freedom	Collective support
Danger to the individual	Social isolation	Social control
Leveling of people	Adaptation to formal procedures (e.g., the obligation to be punctual)	Adaptation to group norms
Differentiation of people	Stylization of individuality in public	Knowledge of individualities in the group
Rhythm of life	Tempo Contrasts Incessant change	Leisureliness Evenness Constancy
Personality patterns	Intellectuality Tolerance Flexibility of roles played	Emotionality Philistinism Stability of character
Life horizon	The near is far; the far is near Cosmopolitanism	The near is near; the far is far Provincialism

Simmel's account of life in the modern metropolis provides a sociological explanation of some key characteristics of contemporary urbanism. His theoretical study shows how the quality of social interactions can be shaped by pressures arising from the wider social environment of the city, an important consequence of which is Simmel's view that the city "is not a spatial entity with social consequences, but a sociological entity that is formed spatially". This has proved a very productive starting point for later urban studies. Simmel's influence can also be felt in modern social theory. He argued: "The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces." There is more than an echo of this perspective in the work of other contemporary theorists of modern individualism.

2. URBANISM AS A WAY OF LIFE IN LOUIS WIRTH'S METROPOLIS

A number of sociologists associated with the University of Chicago from the 1920s to the 1940, especially Robert Park, Ernest Burgess and Louis Wirth, developed ideas which were for many years the chief basis of theory and research in urban sociology. The characterization of urbanism as a way of life developed by Wirth is worthy of special attention.

We know from Simmel that the urban environment tends to create particular personality types and that there is a certain pattern to the development of cities. But are such personality types limited to the cities? How do cities relate to and interact with the rest of society? Does urbanism exert any influence outside the city boundary? Louis Wirth (1897-1952) explored the idea that urbanism was in fact, a whole way of life, not an experience limited to just some areas of society.

While other members of the Chicago School focused on understanding the shape of the city—how they came to be internally divided—Wirth was more concerned with urbanism as a distinct way of life. Urbanism, he argued, could not be reduced to or understood simply by measuring the size of urban populations. Instead, it has to be grasped as a form of social existence. Wirth observed that:

> The influences which cities exert on the social life of man are greater than the ratio of the urban population would indicate; for the city is not only increasingly the dwelling-place and the workshop of modern man, but it is the initiating and controlling centre of economic, political and cultural life that has drawn the most remote communities of the world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, peoples and activities into a cosmos (1938, p.2).

In cities, large numbers of people live in close proximity to one another, without knowing most of those others personally. This is in fundamental contrast to small, traditional villages and towns. Many contacts between city-dwellers are fleeting and partial, they are means to other ends, rather than being satisfying relationships in themselves. Wirth calls these "secondary contacts", compared to the "primary contacts" of familial and strong community relationships. For example, interactions with salespeople in shops, cashiers in banks or ticket collectors on trains are passing encounters, entered into not for their own sake, as in communal relations, but merely as means to other aims.

Since those who live in urban areas tend to be highly mobile, moving around to find work and to enjoy leisure and travel, there are relatively weak bonds between them. People are involved in many different activities and situations each day and the pace of life in cities is much faster than in rural areas. Competition tends to prevail over cooperation, and social relationships can appear as flimsy and brittle. Of course, the Chicago School's ecological approach found that the density of social life in cities leads to the formation of neighborhoods having distinct characteristics, some of which may preserve some of the characteristics of small communities. In immigrant areas, for example, traditional types of connections between families are found, with most people knowing most others on a personal basis.

However, although Wirth accepted this, he argued that the more these areas became absorbed into the wider patterns of city life, the less such community characteristics would survive. The urban way of life weakens bonds of kinship, thus eroding families, communities are dissolved and the traditional bases of social solidarity are rendered ineffective. Wirth was not blind to the benefits of urbanism. He saw that modern cities were centers of freedom, toleration and progress, but he also saw that urbanism spread beyond city boundaries, as the process of suburbanization, with all of its necessary transport systems and infrastructure shows. And in that sense, modern societies themselves are necessarily shaped by the forces of urbanism.

Critics have pointed out the limitations of Wirth's ideas on urbanism. Wirth's thesis is rooted in the experience of American cities, and cannot be seen as a general theory of city life. Urbanism is not the same at all times and all places. Ancient cities were quite different from modern ones, for example and cities in developing countries today are often very different from those in the developed ones. Critics argue that Wirth also exaggerates the extent of impersonality in modern cities. Communities involving close friendship or kinship links are more persistent than he thought. Herbert Hans (1962) argued that "urban villagers"—such as Italian-Americans living in inner-city Boston—were quite commonly to be found. Critics question Wirth's picture of modern cities by showing that city life can lead to the building of communities rather than always destroying them. Fischer regards Wirth's theory as a hypothesis to be subjected

to the test of empirical research (p.188). He presented a model abstracted from Wirth's article, and used this model as a framework to examine the empirical status of his propositions. Guterman examined the criticisms that sociologists have voiced of Wirth's essay. He argued that the evidence on which these criticisms rely contains several inadequacies. To support Wirth's theory, he presented data based on adequate measures and adequate design showing a negative correlation between the size of the locality a person lives in and the intimacy of his friendship ties.

Wirth's ideas have deservedly enjoyed wide currency. The impersonality of many day-to-day contacts in modern cities is undeniable and, to some degree, this is true of social life more generally. His theory is also important for its recognition that urbanism is not just one part of society, but actually expresses and influences the character of the wider social system. Given the expanding process of urbanism in many developing countries and the fact that a majority of people in the developed world already live in urban areas, Wirth's ideas will continue to be a reference point for sociologists looking to understanding urbanism as a way of life.

SUMMARY

Among the founders of sociology as a distinctive discipline at the turn of the twentieth century, Georg Simmel is distinguished from other major figures. Like them, he constituted sociology through its relation to other fields of knowledge, but alone among the founders his primal discourse was philosophy, which provided him with a totalizing viewpoint from which he could enter a wide variety of areas. The great theme of the essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" is the struggle between individual and society, interpreted as an agonizing tension between what Simmel called "objective" and "subjective" culture. "The Metropolis" is the story of how the development of modern social relations, culminating in the site of the metropolis, has deprived the individual of any intelligible or meaningful unity to life. Simmel's overriding project in "The Metropolis" is to inquire into "the inner meaning of specifically modern life and its products, into the soul of the cultural body", and he proposes to execute it indirectly and sociologically by solving "the equation which structures like the metropolis set up between the individual and the super-individual contents of life". Social structure here is the mediator between objectivity and subjectivity, the bridge between circumstance and self. Simmel's proximate aim in the essay is to "answer the question of how the personality accommodates itself in the adjustments to external forces", since "the deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life" (p.409). The mental life of the metropolis is a series of compensations for the inadequacy of objective culture to the individual's subjective demand for an integral personality. On the other hand, early approaches to urban sociology were dominated by the work of the Chicago School, whose members saw urban processes in terms of ecological models derived from biology. Louis Wirth developed the concept of urbanism as a way of life, arguing that city life breeds impersonality and social distance. These approaches have been challenged, without being discarded altogether. Louis Wirth's classic essay stresses the relative weakness of primary relations as among the distinguishing characteristics of the urban way of life. Wirth argued that the city's gigantic size, along with its density and its social and cultural heterogeneity, fosters an absence of personal acquaintanceship among interacting individuals. Interaction is based on segmentalized roles with a corresponding impersonality, superficiality, and transitoriness of social relations. All of these factors weaken, if not destroy, the bonds of sentiment and intimacy among the inhabitants.

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