

THE MYTH OF URBAN CULTURE

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When one speaks of 'urban society', what is at issue is never the mere observation of a spatial form. 'Urban society' is defined above all by a certain culture, *urban culture*, in the anthropological sense of the term; that is to say, a certain system of values, norms and social relations possessing a historical specificity and its own logic of organization and transformation. This being the case, the qualifying term 'urban', stuck to the cultural form thus defined, is not innocent. It is surely a case, as I have indicated above (see Part I), of connoting the hypothesis of the production of culture by nature or, to put it another way, of the specific system of social relations (urban culture) by a given ecological context (the city). (Castells, 1969.)

Such a construction is directly linked to the evolutionist – functionalist thinking of the German sociological school, from Tönnies to Spengler, by way of Simmel. Indeed, the theoretical model of 'urban society' was worked out above all in opposition to 'rural society' by analysing the passage of the second to the first in the terms used by Tönnies, as the evolution of a *community form* to an *associative form*, characterized above all by a segmentation of roles, a multiplicity of loyalties and a primacy of secondary social relations (through specific associations) over primary social relations (direct personal contacts based on affective affinity). (Mann, 1965.)

In extending this reflection, Simmel (whose influence on 'American sociology' is growing) managed to propose a veritable ideal type of urban civilization, defined above all in psycho-sociological terms: on the basis of the (somewhat Durkheimian) idea of a crisis of personality – subjected to an excess of psychological stimulation by the extreme complexity of the big cities – Simmel deduced the need for a process of fragmentation of activities, and a strong limitation of the commitment of the individual in his different roles as the only possible defence against a general imbalance resulting from the multiplicity of contradictory impulses. Among the consequences that

such a process brings about in the social organization, Simmel indicates the formation of a market economy and the development of the great bureaucratic organizations, instruments adequate to the rationalization and depersonalization demanded by urban complexity. On this basis, the circle closes upon itself and the 'metropolitan' human type, centred on its individuality and always free in relation to itself, may be understood. (Simmel, 1950.)

Now although, in the work of Simmel, there remains an ambiguity between a metropolitan civilization conceived as a possible source of social imbalance and a new type of personality that adapts to it by exacerbating his individual freedom, in the prophecies of Spengler the first aspect becomes overtly dominant and urban culture is linked to the last phase of the cycle of civilizations in which, every link of solidarity having been broken, the whole of society must destroy itself in war. But what is interesting in Spengler is the direct links he establishes, first, between the ecological form and the 'spirit' of each stage of civilization and, secondly, between 'urban culture' and 'western culture', which seems to have been manifested, above all in this part of the world, by virtue of the development of urbanization. (Spengler, 1928.) We know that Toynbee took these theses as his basis when proposing, quite simply, an assimilation between the terms 'urbanization' and 'westernization'. Spengler's formulation has, no doubt, the advantage of clarity; that is to say, he carries the consequences of the culturist perspective to their logical conclusion, by grounding the historical stages in a 'spirit' and linking its dynamics to a sort of natural, undifferentiated evolution. Max Weber's *The City* (1905) which, in fact, formed part of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, has sometimes been interpreted as one of the first formulations of the thesis of urban culture. In fact, in so far as he strongly specifies the economic and political conditions of this administrative autonomy which, according to him, characterizes the city, I think that it is rather a question of a historical localization of the urban, opposed to the evolutionist thesis of the culturist current, for which urbanization and modernization are equivalent phenomena.

All these themes were taken up again with a good deal of force by the culturalists of the Chicago School, on the basis of the direct influence undergone by Park, the founder of the school, during his studies in Germany. This was how urban sociology, as a science of the new forms of social life appearing in the great metropolises, came about. For Park, it is a question, above all, of using the city, and particularly the astonishing city that Chicago was in the 1920s, as a *social laboratory*, as a place from which questions would emerge, rather than as a source of explanation of the phenomena observed. (Park, 1925.)

On the other hand, the propositions of his most brilliant disciple, Louis Wirth, are really an attempt to define the characteristic features of an urban culture and to explain its process of production on the basis of the content

of the particular ecological form constituted by the city. In all probability, it is the most serious theoretical attempt ever made, within sociology, to establish a theoretical object (and, consequently, a domain of research) specific to urban sociology. Its echoes, thirty-three years later, still dominate discussion. This has induced me, for once, to attempt a succinct, but faithful, exposition of his point of view, in order to define the theoretical themes of 'urban culture' through the most serious of its thinkers.

For Wirth (1938; 1964), the characteristic fact of modern times is a concentration of the human species in gigantic urban areas from which civilization radiates. Faced with the importance of the phenomenon, it is urgent that we establish a sociological theory of the city which, on the one hand, goes beyond simple geographical criteria and, on the other hand, does not reduce it to the expression of an economic process, for example, industrialization or capitalism. To say 'sociology', for Wirth, is equivalent to centring one's attention on human beings and on the characteristics of their relations. Given this, the whole problematic is based on a definition and a question. A sociological definition of the city: 'A permanent localization, relatively large and dense, of socially heterogeneous individuals.' A question: What are the new forms of social life that are produced by these three essential characteristics of *dimension*, *density* and *heterogeneity* of the human urban areas?

It is these causal relations between urban characteristics and cultural forms that Wirth tries to stress. Firstly, to take the *dimension* of a city: the bigger it is, the wider its spectrum of individual variation and, also, the greater its social differentiation; this determines the loosening of community ties, which are replaced by the mechanisms of formal control and by social competition. On the other hand, the multiplication of interactions produces the segmentation of social relations and gives rise to the 'schizoid' character of the urban personality. The distinctive features of such a system of behaviour are therefore: anonymity, superficiality, the transitory character of urban social relations, *anomie*, lack of participation. This situation has consequences for the economic process and for the political system: on the one hand, the fragmentation and utilitarianism of urban relations leads to the functional specialization of activity, the division of labour and the market economy; on the other hand, since direct communication is no longer possible, the interests of individuals are defended only by representation.

Secondly, *density* reinforces internal differentiation, for, paradoxically, the closer one is physically the more distant social contacts are, from the moment when it becomes necessary to commit oneself only partially in each of one's loyalties. There is, therefore, a juxtaposition without mixture of different social milieux, which leads to the relativism and secularization of urban society (an indifference to everything that is not directly linked to the objectives proper to each individual). Lastly, cohabitation without the possibility of real expansion leads to individual savagery (in order to avoid social control) and, consequently, to aggressiveness.

The *social heterogeneity* of the urban milieu makes possible the fluidity of the class system and the high rate of social mobility explains why membership of groups is not stable, but linked to the transitory position of each individual: there is, therefore, a predominance of *association* (based on the rational affinity of the interests of each individual) over *community* as defined by membership of a class or possession of a status. This social heterogeneity is also in keeping with the diversification of the market economy and a political life based on mass movements.

Lastly, the diversification of activities and urban milieux causes considerable disorganization of the personality, which explains the growth of crime, suicide, corruption and madness in the great metropolises.

On the basis of the perspectives thus described, the city is given a specific cultural content and becomes the explicative variable of this content. And urban culture is offered as a way of life.

In essence these theses concerning urban culture in the strict sense constitute only variations on Wirth's propositions. However, they have been used as an instrument of an evolutionist interpretation of human history, through the theory developed by Redfield (1941; 1947) of the *folk—urban continuum*, which has had an enormous influence in the sociology of development. (See also Miner, 1952; Redfield and Singer, 1954.)

Indeed, Redfield takes up the rural/urban dichotomy and situates it in a perspective of ecologico-cultural evolution, identifying traditional/modern and folk/urban. With this difference that, setting out from an anthropological tradition, he conceives of urban society in relation to a previous characterization of *folk* society: it is a question of a society 'small, isolated, non-literate, and homogeneous, with a strong sense of group solidarity. Such a system is what we mean in saying that the folk society is characterized by a "culture".' Behaviour is 'conventional, custom fixes the rights and duties of individuals and knowledge is not critically examined or objectively and systematically formulated . . . behaviour is personal, not impersonal . . . traditional, spontaneous and uncritical.' The kinship system, with its relations and institutions, is derived directly from the categories of experience and the unit of action is the familial group. The sacred dominates the secular; the economy is much more a factor of status than a market element.'

The *urban type* is defined by symmetrical opposition to the set of factors enumerated above. It is centred, therefore, on social disorganization, individualization and secularization. The evolution from one pole to the other occurs almost naturally, through the increase in social heterogeneity and possibilities for interaction, as the society grows; furthermore, the loss of isolation, caused by the contact with another society and/or another culture, considerably accelerates the process. Since this construction is ideal-typical, no society corresponds to it fully, but every society is placed somewhere along this continuum, so that the different features cited are present in various proportions according to the degree of social evolution. This would

indicate that these characteristics define the central axis of the problematic of society and that, consequently, the gradual densification of a collectivity, with the social complexity it gives rise to, is, then, the natural motive force of historical evolution, which is expressed materially through the forms of the occupation of space.

It is in this sense that Oscar Lewis's criticisms of Redfield's thesis, showing that the 'folk' community, which had served him as his first terrain of observation, was torn by internal conflicts and accorded an important place to mercantile relations, are somewhat ill-founded (despite their verve), for the theory of the *folk-urban continuum* is intended as a means of defining the essential elements of a problematic of social change, rather than of describing a reality. (Lewis, 1953, 121-34.)

On the other hand, Dewey's fundamental critique (1960) constitutes a more radical attack on this perspective by indicating that, although there are, obviously, differences between town and country, they are only the empirical expression of a series of processes that produce, at the same time, a whole series of specific effects at other levels of the social structure. In other words, there is a concomitant variation between the evolution of ecological forms and cultural and social forms, without it being any the more possible to affirm that this co-variation is systematic, let alone that the second are produced by the first. This may be proved by the fact that there may be a diffusion of 'urban culture' in the country, without any blurring of the difference of ecological forms between the two. We must, therefore, keep the descriptive character of the 'folk-urban continuum' thesis, rather than treat it as a general theory of the evolution of societies.

This critique of Dewey's is one of the few, in the literature, that go to the root of the problem for, in general, the debate on urban culture, as formulated by Wirth and Redfield, has revolved around the purely empirical problem of establishing the historical existence or non-existence of such a system, and around discussion of the anti-urban prejudices of the Chicago School, but without going beyond the problematic of the culturalist terrain in which it had been defined. Thus, authors such as Scott Greer (1962) or Dhooge, (1961) indicate the importance of the new forms of social solidarity in modern societies and in the great metropolises by exposing the romantic prejudices of the Chicago School, who were incapable of conceiving the functioning of a society other than in the form of community integration which, of course, had to be restricted to primitive and relatively undifferentiated societies. In reopening the debate, other sociologists have tried to revive Wirth's theses, either on a theoretical plane, as Anderson has done (1962), or by 'verifying' them empirically for the umpteenth time, as Guterman has tried to do, to mention one of the most recent examples. (1969.)

More serious are the objections raised in relation to possible causal connections between the spatial forms of the city and the characteristic social content of 'urban culture'. At a very empirical level, Reiss showed, long ago,

the statistical independence (in the American cities) of 'urban culture' in relation to the size and density of the population. (Duncan and Reiss, 1956.) Again, in an extensive inquiry, Duncan found no correlation between the size of the population, on the one hand and, on the other, income, age-groups, mobility, schooling, family size, membership of ethnic groups, active population – all the factors that ought to specify an 'urban' content. (Duncan and Reiss, 1956.) Again, Sjoberg's great historical inquiry (1965) into the pre-industrial cities shows how completely different in social and cultural content are these 'cities' and the 'cities' of the early period of capitalist industrialization or of the present metropolitan regions. Ledrut has described in detail and shown in its specificity the different historical types of urban forms, with extremely different social and cultural contents, which are not located on a continuum, for they are spatial and social expressions qualitatively different from one another. (Ledrut, 1968, Ch. 1.)

Must we, then, with Max Weber (1905) or Leonard Riessman (1964), reserve the term *city* for certain definite types of spatial organization, above all in cultural terms (the cities of the Renaissance or 'modern', that is to say, advanced capitalist, cities)? Perhaps, but then one slips into a purely cultural definition of the urban, outside any spatial specificity. Now, it is this fusion–confusion between the connotation of a certain ecological form and the assignment of a specific cultural content that is at the root of the whole problematic of urban culture. One has only to examine the characteristics proposed by Wirth to understand that what is called 'urban culture' certainly corresponds to a certain historical reality: the mode of social organization linked to capitalist industrialization, in particular in its competitive phase. It is not to be defined, therefore, solely in opposition to *rural* but by a specific content proper to it, above all at a time when generalized urbanization and the interpenetration of town and country make their empirical distinction difficult.

A detailed analysis of each of the features that characterize it would show without difficulty the causal link, at successive levels, between the structural matrix characteristic of the capitalist mode of production and the effect produced on this or that sphere of behaviour. For example, the celebrated 'fragmentation of roles', which is the foundation of 'urban' social complexity is directly determined by the status of the 'free worker', which Marx showed to be necessary to assuring maximum profitability in the use of labour force. The predominance of 'secondary' relations over 'primary' and the accelerated individualization of relations also express this economic and political need of the new mode of production to constitute as 'free and equal citizens' the respective supports of the means of production and of the labour force. (Poulantzas, 1968, 299ff.) And so on, though we cannot develop here a complete system of determination of cultural forms in our societies, the purpose of my remarks being simply to treat this social content other than by an analysis in terms of *urban*. However, a major objection might be raised against this interpretation of urban culture. Since the Soviet,

non-capitalist, cities present similar features to those of the capitalist societies, are we not confronted by a type of behaviour bound up with the urban ecological form? The question may be answered on two levels: in fact, if we understand by capitalism the legal private ownership of the means of production, this character is not enough to ground the specificity of a cultural system. But, in fact, I am using the term 'capitalism' in the sense used by Marx in *Capital*: the particular matrix of the various systems at the basis of a society (economic, political, ideological). However, even in this vulgar definition of capitalism, the resemblance of the cultural types seems to be due, not to the existence of the same ecological form, but to the social and technological complexity that underlies the heterogeneity and concentration of the populations. It would seem to be a question rather of an 'industrial culture'. The technological fact of industrialization would thus appear to be the major element determining the evolution of the social forms. In this case, we would be coming close to the theses about 'industrial societies'.

But, on the other hand, if we hold to a scientific definition of capitalism, we can affirm that in historically given societies where studies have been made of the transformation of social relations, the articulation of the dominant mode of production called capitalism may account for the appearance of such a system of relations and of a new ecological form.

The observation of similar behaviour patterns in societies in which one may presume that the capitalist mode of production is not dominant, does not invalidate the previous discovery, for we must reject the crude capitalism/socialism dichotomy as a theoretical instrument. At the same time, this raises a question and calls for research that should have as its objective: 1. to determine whether, in fact, the real and not only the formal content of these behaviour patterns is the same; 2. to see what is the concrete articulation of the different modes of production in Soviet society, for, indisputably, the capitalist mode of production is present there, even if it is no longer dominant; 3. to establish the contours of the new post-capitalist mode of production, for, although the scientific theory of the capitalist mode of production has been partially elaborated (in *Capital*), there is no equivalent for the socialist mode of production; 4. to elaborate a theory of the links between the concrete articulation of the various modes of production in Soviet society and the systems of behaviour (see Part I).

It is obvious that, in such a situation, the problematic of urban culture would no longer be relevant. However, in the absence of any such research, we can say, intuitively: that there are similar technological determinants, which may lead to similarities of behaviour; that this is reinforced by the active presence of capitalist structural elements; that formal similarities in behaviour have meaning only when related to the social structure to which they belong. For to reason otherwise would lead us to the logical conclusion that all societies are one because everyone eats or sleeps more or less regularly.

This being the case, why not accept the term 'urban culture' for the system

of behaviour bound up with capitalist society? Because, as I have indicated, such an appellation suggests that these cultural forms have been produced by the particular ecological form known as the city. Now, one has only to reflect for a moment to realize the absurdity of a theory of social change based on the growing complexification of human collectivities simply as a result of demographic growth. In effect, there has never been, there can never be, in the evolution of societies, a phenomenon apprehensible solely in some such physical terms as, for example, 'size'. Any development in the dimensions and differentiation of a social group is itself the product and the expression of a social structure and of its laws of transformation.

Consequently, the mere description of the process does not inform us as to the technico-social complex (for example, the productive forces and the relations of production) at work in the transformation. There is, therefore, a simultaneous and concomitant production of social forms in their different dimensions and, in particular, in their spatial and cultural dimensions. One may pose the problem of their interaction, but one cannot set out from the proposition that one of the forms produces the other. The theses on urban culture were developed in an empiricist perspective, according to which the context of social production was taken to be its source.

Another problem, our problem, is to discover the place and the laws of articulation of this 'context', that is to say, of the spatial forms, in the social structure as a whole. But, in order to deal with this question, we must first break up the globality of this urban society understood as a true culmination of history in modernity. For, if it is true that, in order to identify them, new phenomena have been named according to their place of origin, the fact remains that 'urban culture', as it is presented, is neither a concept nor a theory. It is, strictly speaking, a myth, since it recounts, ideologically, the history of the human species. Consequently, the writings on 'urban society' which are based directly on this myth, provide the key-words of an ideology of modernity, assimilated, in an ethnocentric way, to the social forms of liberal capitalism.

In a 'vulgarized' form, if one may put it in this way, these writings have had and still have an enormous influence on the ideology of development and on the 'spontaneous sociology' of the technocrats. On the one hand, it is in the terms of a passage from 'traditional' society to 'modern' society (Lerner, 1965) that one transposes the problematic of the 'folk-urban continuum' into an analysis of the relations internal to the imperialist system (see Part I, Chap. 3, Section II).

On the other hand, 'urban culture' is behind a whole series of discourses that take the place of an analysis of social evolution in the thinking of the western ruling élites and which, therefore, are largely communicated through the mass media and form part of the everyday ideological atmosphere. Thus, for example, the Commissariat Général au Plan (1970), in a series of studies on cities published as preparation for the sixth French Plan, devoted a small

volume to 'urban society' that constitutes a veritable anthology of this problematic.

Setting out from the affirmation that 'every city is the locus of a culture', the document tries to enunciate the conditions for realizing ideal models, conceptions of city-society, while taking into account the 'constraints of the economy'. This is highly characteristic of a certain technocratic humanism: the city (which is simply society) is made up of the free initiatives of individuals and groups, which are limited, but not determined, by a problem of means. And urbanism then becomes the rationality of the possible, trying to link the means at one's disposal and the great objectives one sets oneself.

For the urban phenomenon is 'the expression of the system of values current in the culture proper to a place and a time', which explains that 'the more a society is conscious of the objectives it pursues . . . the more its cities are typed'. Lastly, on the basis of such a social organization, one finds the ecological factors that have long been advanced by the classics of urban culturalism: 'The basis of urban society lies in the grouping of a collectivity of a certain size and density, which implies a more or less rigorous division of activities and functions and makes necessary exchanges between the sub-groups endowed with a status that is proper to them: to be differentiated is to be linked' (p. 21). Here we find a whole theory of the production of social, spatial and cultural forms, simply on the basis of an organic phenomenon of growth – as if it were a question of a sort of upwards, linear movement of matter towards spirit.

Now, although it is clear that there are cultural specificities in the different social milieux, it is just as obvious that the cleavage no longer passes through the town/country distinction, and the explanation of each mode of life requires that one should articulate it in a social structure taken as a whole, instead of keeping to the purely empirical correlation between a cultural content and its spatial seat. For our object is quite simply the analysis of the process of the social production of the systems of representation and communication or, to put it another way, of the ideological superstructure.

If these theses on 'urban society' are so widespread, this is precisely because they permit one the short cut of studying the emergence of ideological forms on the basis of social contradictions and class division. Society is thus unified and develops in an organic way, producing universal types, formerly opposed by way of being unsynchronized but never, within any given social structure, opposed by way of contradiction. This, of course, in no way prevents one from commiserating with the alienation of this 'unified Man', at grips with the natural and technological constraints that impede the full development of his creativity. The city – regarded both as the complex expression of its social organization and as the milieu determined by fairly rigid technological constraints – thus becomes, in turn, a focus of creation and the locus of oppression by the technico-natural forces brought into being. The social efficacy of this ideology derives from the fact that it

describes the everyday problems experienced by people, while offering an interpretation of them in terms of natural evolution, from which the division into antagonistic classes is absent. This has a certain concrete force and gives the reassuring impression of an integrated society, united in facing up to its 'common problems'.

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