

BOOK REVIEW ARTICLE

THE STUDY OF URBANIZATION*

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RESUMEN

El trabajo de siete años del Comité sobre Urbanización del Consejo de Investigación de Ciencias Sociales, ha dado como resultado El Estudio de la Urbanización. Aunque el libro es una excelente serie de documentaciones sobre tendencias en campos específicos, falta un intento de unificar las contribuciones en una definición concisa de Urbanización.

La mayor parte de los colaboradores ve la urbanización como un proceso de agregación, pero este no es más que un indicador impreciso del proceso fundamental operante, y cada disciplina explora solamente el aspecto que le corresponde de todo el proceso. Así, por ejemplo, se ve la ciudad como una división del espacio localizado; como un complejo de mercados de tierra, trabajo, vivienda, y bienes y servicios; o como un conjunto de unidades de mercado social. Por el contenido de este volumen, uno se siente inclinado a pensar que la sociología no puede encontrar un enfoque comprensivo para diseñar un modelo general de urbanización.

Si bien tres de los trabajos se acercan a definir la urbanización como sustancia y proceso y constituyen un recuento ordenado de, cuando menos, los principales rasgos de la urbanización a través de sus fases primitiva, transicional y ulterior; la urbanización como proceso en diferentes áreas culturales, es un tema que se trata muy superficialmente. Mientras que el mismo concepto de urbanización implica la recurrencia de hechos comunes, aún se necesita un conjunto de criterios para evitar la preocupación por lo exótico e intrascendente en diferentes culturas. Necesitamos estudiar el significado del hecho de que la gente de diversas partes del mundo, ha entrado en la urbanización en diferentes puntos de la tecnología industrial, institucional y administrativa. Aquí, la organización, que es la variable sobre la que hay más acuerdo en este libro, no es una explicación suficiente.

En suma, el tema es muy amplio para un acuerdo completo, pero el fracaso del libro en lograr este objetivo, es compensado por la calidad de las contribuciones individuales.

SUMMARY

Seven years' work of the Committee on Urbanization of the Social Science Research Council has produced The Study of Urbanization. Although the book is an excellent series of documentations of trends in specific fields, it lacks any attempt to unify the contributions to a concise definition of urbanization.

Most contributors view urbanization as a process of aggregation, but this is no more than a rough indicator of the fundamental processes at work, and each discipline explores only the matter confined to its assigned segment of the process. Thus, for example, the city is viewed as a sub-division of localized space; as a complex of markets for land, labor, housing, and goods and services; or as a set of market-social units. From what is offered in this volume, then, one is led to think that sociology cannot find a comprehensive approach to fashioning a general model of urbanization.

While three papers come close to defining urbanization as substance and process and are an orderly account of at least the salient features of urbanization through early, transitional, and late phases, urbanization as a process in different areas and cultures is a subject which is treated casually. While the very concept of urbanization implies the recurrence of common features, a set of criteria for avoiding preoccupation with the exotic and inconsequential in different cultures is still needed. We need to study the significance of the fact that peoples of various parts of the world have entered urbanization at different points in industrial, institutional, and administrative technology. Here, organization, the most commonly agreed upon variable in this book, is not a sufficient explanation.

In sum, the subject is too broad for close agreement, but the failure of the book to achieve its objective is counterbalanced by the individual quality of the contributions.

In 1958 the Social Science Research Council created a Committee on Urbanization "to review critically the extant assumptions and generalizations regarding

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the phenomenon of urbanization, its determinants, concomitants and consequences, including their applicability cross-culturally and historically." The Committee labored six years and on the seventh brought forth *The Study of Urbanization*.

The volume comprises fifteen essays by as many different authors, who represent anthropology, economics, geography, history, political science, and sociology. An introductory "Urbanization: An Overview," by Philip Hauser, traces out broad trends and thereby frames a context for the discussions to follow. Five succeeding papers describe the currents of interest, past and present, in each of several disciplines; four more are concerned with topics related to comparative urban research; and the last five deal with selected research problems. In quality they range from dull and pedantic reporting to highly seminal explorations of the implications of certain propositions. But there is no summing up, no attempt to pull the various contributions together into some kind of state-of-knowledge summary. The book ends abruptly, without even an index, as though the participants were so wearied by the project that they were glad to have done with it.

A synthesis, of course, is too much to ask of a committee. What, then, can be accomplished in an inter-disciplinary colloquy? Conceivably, the long conversations in committee contributed to the mutual education of the authors. Such an experience might have been necessary had the participants in this case been novices, which these authors are not. Most of them were already so knowledgeable of what has been going on in neighboring disciplines as not to have needed a period of instruction. In general, the state of affairs is very much as Vernon and Hoover comment in reference to spatial patterns in cities: "On the basis of perusing a specific analysis it is often impossible to determine whether the author is an urban economist, an urban geographer, an urban ecologist, an 'urban regional scientist,' or even just

an 'urbanist.' All have jumped into a common pool, though from different spots or the bank." If there is to be any synthesis at all, it can only occur in the individual mind.

Thus, the five papers that report how the various social sciences have approached the study of urbanization are interesting documentations of intellectual trends in the respective fields. From Charles Glaab's scholarly historiographical essay, one learns that the posture in his field is to hold history aloof from the methodological currents in other disciplines. Apparently the historian is unable to help the sociologist overcome his contemporary-bound education. In contrast, Harold Mayer's bibliographical account of urban geography indicates how his field has found salvation as a discipline by absorbing lessons learned from demography, economics, and human ecology. Between these extremes lie economics, political science, and sociology, and these have borrowed extensively from one another while retaining more or less distinctive approaches. But while Wallace Sayre's and Nelson Polsby's emphasis on the search for power elites in political science and Gideon Sjoberg's banal classification of "schools" in urban sociology do less than full justice to their fields, the Vernon and Hoover essay on "Economic Aspects of Urban Research" is crisp in its criticism and sharp in its delineation of the economic problem. Whether, however, the social scientist should be guided in his selection of research problems by a system of normative values to the extent that Vernon and Hoover suggest is debatable.

Limitations notwithstanding, there is still useful work that a multi-disciplinary group might do. It could serve, for example, as a forum in which to compare the modes of problem statement that characterize the different persuasions, to see some conciliation among the received notions of the various disciplines, and to investigate the translatability of variable into common terms. A direct confrontation with such issues might have yielded

unique contribution, especially valuable in the pursuit of comparative studies. Instead, the authors of the last two-thirds of the volume mount their respective interests and ride off in many directions, leaving the observer to grope in the dust for traces of common lineage or allegiance.

On the surface there appears to be a general disinterest in a definition of urbanization. The unwary reader is apt to wonder from time to time if all are talking about the same thing. There is, however, a slender thread of consensus running through the volume; namely, urbanization is viewed as a process of aggregation. This is stated explicitly by Eric Lampard, in his ecological analysis of urban history; it is assumed by the geographers Harold Mayer, Norton Ginsburg, and Brian Berry; it lurks half-concealed in the writings of Vernon and Hoover, Wilbur Thompson, and Nathan Keyfitz; and it is present by implication in Sjoberg's interest in the "structural correlates of urbanization." A process of aggregation, of course, can be no more than a rough, albeit sensitive, indicator of more fundamental processes at work. It would be interesting to know whether the committee was unable to reach agreement on anything beyond that first approximation.

In any case, the expressed conceptions of the locus of concentration, the city, fall across the social science spectrum. It is viewed as a sub-division of localized space; as a complex of markets for land, labor, housing, goods, and services; as a set of extra-market social units and associated ways of acting; as a political system centralized in a governing mechanism; and as a sub-system in an emerging supra-system. Thus, the various dimensions and classes of institutions that make up an urban structure are parcelled out to different disciplines.

But what of the interrelations among components? It appears that each discipline explores that matter only so far as is necessary to refine the analysis of its particular segment. That leaves the totality

unattended by all with the possible exceptions of sociology and history.

Sociology has no alternative to a comprehensive approach, for too narrow a view of the social would deprive it of substance. Yet, in view of what is offered in this volume, there is reason to doubt that sociology is qualified for the task. On the other hand, the catholicity of history might seem to hold some promise as a vantage point from which to bridge conceptual gaps. But, if it were to attempt to do so systematically, it would have to depart from its disciplinary tradition and then perhaps it would no longer be history. Short of actually trying to fashion a general model of the city, it might have been possible to have examined some of the specifications of such a model. So far as can be determined, however, the committee raised none of the questions that would have directed their thoughts into that channel.

Urbanization is, in fact, a complex process manifesting a centrifugal as well as a centripetal aspect. The building of cities is incidental to the growth and spread of organization over regional and national domains. A lucid account of how that development unfolds in an industrial setting is outlined by Wilbur Thompson. To him a city is a dependent, vulnerable economy, interlocked in a system of cities. Starting with a simple model of a local economy, Thompson elaborates it through an accumulation of external economies and through introducing interactive effects of demographic, technological, social, and political factors. He, however, has little to say about what takes place in the interstices among cities as the system develops. It is to that matter that Keyfitz addresses his remarks, for he is concerned with the modernization of underdeveloped nations as affected particularly by rapid population increase. The developmental problem, as Keyfitz sees it, is one of administering the allocation of surpluses between urban and rural sections so as to assure industrial capital formation while sustaining, at minimum levels during the

interim, an increasing mass of rural consumers. Full participation of the rural population in a mature, urbanized economy follows only after a period of repressive taxation during which capital funds are accumulated. The historian, Lampard, writes synoptically of the long course of urban history from primordial to industrial forms. He, too, regards the emergent city as a mobilizer of social savings gathered from an enlarging area, the investment of which eventually involves an entire regional population in a coherent system. These three papers come to close grips with urbanization both as substance and as process. Read in reverse sequence, they constitute an orderly account of at least the salient features of urbanization through the early, transitional, and late phases.

One would like to know, of course, whether the urbanization process is repeated in essential particulars in different eras and cultures. Although this issue was posed in the assignment given the committee, it is treated rather casually. First, on urbanization as substance, Oscar Lewis and Philip Hauser both discuss a related though hackneyed topic—the descriptive inaccuracy of the folk-urban continuum. Since each takes as his text a quotation from the other, both speak with one voice. Norton Ginsburg begins his survey of geographic studies of urban patterns with the question of whether culture is an independent variable. But he can find no support for anything other than an equivocal answer. The matter is investigated more thoroughly in Leo Schnore's comparative analysis of contrary residential patterns in Latin American and North American cities. He is led to the conclusion that each pattern may be a special case of a more general though unspecified principle.

Second, we do not find much enlightenment in the papers concerned with developmental processes. Lampard, on the one hand, argues that urbanization is an adaptive process that culminates in different outcomes in various situations. On the other hand, Keyfitz implies the existence

of a general principle which differs in details of operation from culture to culture. Thompson assumes that, regardless of divergences at beginning points, there is a necessary convergence in urbanization phenomena, a convergence due perhaps to the standardizing effects of spreading economic linkages and reliance on a common technology. Sjoberg's position appears ambiguous, though his preoccupation with values suggests an assumption of significant qualitative differences.

Doubtless, the weight to be given cultural peculiarities depends in some degree on the level of generality on which the student elects to formulate his problem. Still, the mere acceptance of the concept urbanization as denoting a phenomenon that occurs in societies spanning most of man's history implies the recurrence of enough common features to make particular instances recognizable as members of a class. To argue otherwise is to assert that there is not one phenomenon under consideration, but two, three, or more. Unfortunately, common features do not always appear in uniformly stark outline; they are usually embroidered with local custom and artifices of many kinds. What is needed is a set of clear criteria by which to distinguish between the trivial and the important in order to avoid falling into the culturological trap baited with the exotic and the inconsequential. Such criteria will almost certainly emerge as experience with comparative studies accumulates.

The importance of cultural differences aside, the fact remains that the peoples of various parts of the world have entered upon urbanization at different points in the development of modern industrial, institutional, and administrative technology. But what significance has that? Is it possible to skip stages in the process with impunity? Which stages, if any, can be skipped and which cannot? How, other than in rate of occurrence, does urbanization in developing nations today differ from that in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Certainly, there

is nothing novel about village and tribal enclaves in cities, nor is the labor entrepreneur an Asiatic or African invention. Likewise, problems of over-urbanization, of inculcating an industrial discipline in a peasant labor force, of adapting newcomers to an urban regime, and many others, reverberate familiar historical echoes. Are these merely superficial similarities beneath which lie fundamental differences? Here, in short, is set of problems on which the book has virtually nothing to say, other than that the "structural correlates" of pre-industrial and industrial cities (*sic!*) differ and that the folk-urban continuum is an overly simplified description of change.

But what of the variables employed by the several authors? In this respect there is a fair amount of agreement, up to a point, at least. Lampard declares that urbanization is a consequence of the interaction of four variables—environment, population, technology, and organization. These, however, are more in the nature of parameters than variables. Most, if not all, of the variables used may be construed as principles of operation for specific problem purposes of the parameters. Thus, environment appears as resource inventory, as resource productivity, and as location advantage. Population is viewed from the standpoint of redistribution, growth rate, size, and composition. While technology is not brought so clearly into the foreground, it is variously referred to in terms of tools—tools plus "know-how" and technical and professional skills. Even organization is given a technological import: surplus product, says Keyfitz, is produced by organization. No other author comes so close to the radical suggestion that all components of culture are technological in their instrumental aspects.

For most of the writers on urbanization

as process, organization is the *explanandum*. The sufficient cause is some form of interaction within a system of cities, between urban and rural sectors, or within an environmental field. But in Sjoberg's treatment, although his procedure is classificatory rather than developmental, organization appears to be self-generative. His occasional references to technology do not establish it as an independent factor. Rather it appears that social power, playing upon a class structure hedged about with social values, moves urbanization—that is—organization, from stage to stage. That power might be a system property and therefore a dimension of the phenomenon to be explained does not occur to him. Now and then, the driving force shifts to another quarter, however. For social values, that most opaque of all sociological concepts, are allowed to move about as hyperphysical causes, producing spatial patterns, dictating interdependence in the division of labor, and even bringing on the course of industrialization. It is as if, having in one word resolved all of the complex causal problems of social science, the only task remaining is to catalogue the effects. It is difficult to believe that these impressions are true reflections of Sjoberg's thinking. Quite possibly his effort to compress too much material into a given number of pages led him to write in an overly elliptical style.

If this book fails in its purpose, it is not because of the quality of the individual contributions. Most of them exhibit a mature scholarship of the first order. That is enough to endow the volume with importance. The misfortune is that each essay stands alone and apart. Evidently urbanization, when left undefined, is too broad a theme on which to rely for close agreement among so many different contributions. But, if one is not disturbed by the failure of a mission, he can relax and enjoy the essays one by one.