URBAN ANTHROPOLOGY

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Keywords: cities' diversity, ethnographic methodology, human mobility, regional diversity, space and place, urban research, urbanism, urbanization.

Contents

Summary

Established academic disciplinary distinctions led early anthropologists to study tribal societies, or village communities, while ignoring the city as a field of research. Thus, urban research became established in some academic disciplines, particularly sociology, but struggled to achieve such a status in anthropology. Over the years, historical events and geo-political changes have stimulated anthropologists to address processes of urbanization in developing countries; yet, urban research in western industrial societies continued to be left out of the mainstream disciplinary agenda. In this chapter we examine major debates in the development of this sub-discipline and discuss the complex methodological and theoretical challenges posed by field-research in urban settings, clearly identifying the significance of the anthropological paradigm in urban research and its centrality both to mainstream academic debates and to the broader society.

Today an increasing number of anthropologists carry out research in cities. With half of humanity already living in towns and cities, growing to two-thirds in the next 50 years, there is no denying that research in urban settings is topical and needed as western and non-western society is fast becoming urban or mega-urban. Having outlined the background to current trends in this field of research, the discussion builds towards an assessment of the contribution that empirically-based anthropological analysis can make to our understanding of our increasingly urban world.

1. Introduction: Urban Anthropology in the Disciplinary Tradition

Since the 1990s an increasing number of academic events have focused on urban issues and publications have flourished in this field, its world-wide critical importance unmistakably testified by the establishment of the permanent UN-World Urban Forum. In part due to the rapid growth of cities in the twentieth century, such interest in urban research has included significant contributions from anthropologists and yet, for a long time, mainstream anthropologists, especially in the British tradition of social anthropology, had been reluctant to recognize urban settings, particularly in industrialized countries, as legitimate fields of enquiry.

Urban anthropology is a relatively recent new field of study within socio-cultural anthropology. While twentieth-century sociologists paid great attention to the study of cities and urban phenomena, social and cultural anthropologists stayed largely away from this important field of research. One reason for such a choice was rooted in late-nineteenth century disciplinary divisions, identifying social and cultural anthropology as principally concerned with the comparative study on non-Western societies and cultures. To simplify, until relatively recently, following academic classification, anthropology focused on so-called 'primitive' societies (otherwise described as 'tribal', 'exotic', or 'folk'), whereas Western industrial societies were the designated realm of sociological enquiry. Thus, until the 1970s, urban research remained associated mainly with sociology.

Although for many years anthropologists had conducted research in urban areas, especially in African and Latin American countries, only in the late 1960s did the anthropological establishment cautiously begin to acknowledge the relevance of such research. The 1970s saw the publication of several books and articles, as anthropologists became engaged in debating the conceptual and theoretical definition of 'urban' and the extent to which 'urban' anthropology differed from 'traditional' anthropology. Such a debate never ceased. Both the definition of urban and the very definition of urban anthropology are thorny issues that continue to be the objects of academic dispute. For some, urban anthropology is 'simply' (more or less classical) anthropological research carried out *in* urban areas; others endeavor to define the city as a specific 'social institution' with its dynamics and social, economic and political relations, thus maintaining that urban anthropology is anthropology *of* the city.

However defined, the emergence of urban anthropology, and its growing strength, can reasonably be seen as a consequence of historical events, for its development has been intrinsically linked to worldwide geo-political changes and to their impact on the discipline as a whole. Today more than ever, this is unmistakably the case. Over several decades, varying, though more often than not fast processes of urbanization in so-called tribal societies and the crisis of European colonialism have posed new challenges to anthropologists who began to turn their attention to Western industrial societies, the (improperly) so-called 'complex societies'. In brief, for us to understand what it exactly is and what it studies, this sub-field must be contextualized within the tradition of socio-cultural anthropology, taking appropriately into account the disciplinary and paradigmatic changes that have occurred at key historical junctures.

In order to clarify such a context and the attendant changes, the following sections offer brief examinations of significant cross-disciplinary theoretical influences; of the early anthropological interest in processes of urbanization and of the consequent development of 'urban anthropology', including influences from cognate disciplines. Then, the discussion moves on to outlining key methodological issues and new developments in the field of anthropological urban research.

2. Cross-disciplinary Influences

Before looking at the development of urban anthropology, we need to address the underlying theoretical, mainly sociological, influences. Early anthropological theorizations on the specificity of urban life, institutions and social relations reflected the classical sociological framework developed in the industrial society of the nineteenth century. Most of such analyses were based on the assumption that there was a sociologically significant distinction between urban and rural (and, more generally, non-urban) life. Notable among the sociological classics is Ferdinand Tönnies's work on Community (*Gemeinschaft*) and Society (*Gesellschaft*), published in 1887 (Tönnies 2002 [1887]), which established a distinction between the feudal community, characterized by intimate relations and collective activities, and the capitalist society, characterized by impersonal relations and contractual bonds. On a similar line, in his work on *Suicide* (1951 [1897]), Emile Durkheim introduced the concept of *anomie* to argue that anomic suicide occurred among those who lived in impersonal settings, such as modern cities. More generally, anthropologists appear to have been influenced by the nineteenth century sociologists' view of the city as a fragmenting, rather than unifying place; that is, a place of greater freedom and opportunities for the individual but also a place of isolation, conflict and bureaucratization of all aspects of life (see, for example, Simmel 1990 and Weber 1958). Most interestingly, especially in view of North American anthropologists' interest in urban research, de Tocqueville's analysis of *Democracy in America* (1945), in which he described the expanding US urban areas as places of identity that transcended social division, was virtually ignored by both urban anthropologists and urban sociologists.

Initially, alongside classical sociological works, anthropologists were strongly influenced by the production of what became known as the Chicago School of Urban Ecology (for short, the 'Chicago School'), bringing together urban sociologists who worked under the leadership of Robert Ezra Park at the University of Chicago. This group of scholars basically drew on the conceptualization of cities as ecosystems segmented in 'natural areas' (Park, Burgess and McKenzie eds 1925), which included 'ordinary' neighborhoods and slums and ghettos for immigrants and African Americans. According to the Chicago School's approach, these areas were subject to laws of residential succession; thus, a major aim was to study changing residential patterns as part of the broader investigation of cities' 'social problems'. The research methods adopted by these scholars reflected such a broad interest, focusing on historical evidence, interviews and, especially, quantitative demographic and statistical material. This kind of quantitative empiricism was rejected by a new generation of sociologists who instead favored a more qualitative 'ethnographic method'; they became the most influential inspiration to anthropologists. Their production is exemplified by Carolyn Ware's *Greenwich Village, 1920-1930* (1935) – on the incorporation of Greenwich

Village into New York and the process by which it maintained its distinctive character; William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1955 [1943]) – a study of an Italian neighborhood, in which he applied the classical anthropological method of participant observation; and W. Lloyd Warner's *Yankee City* (1963) – a study of a New England city, which combined an ethnographic perspective with formal interviews.

While the Chicago School influenced the methodological approach of the early anthropologists who worked in urban settings, theorizations of 'urban life' were influenced above all by the work of the sociologist Louis Wirth. In his essay *Urbanism as a Way of Life* (1938), Wirth described the city as a specific 'social institution' with distinctive attributes, which were reflected in the urban physical structure – that is, the urban plan and the city's size – in the urban social organization and in the attitudes and ideas of city-dwellers. According to Wirth, the city's social heterogeneity and population density promoted differentiation and occupational specialization. Therefore, he argued, social relations tended to be impersonal, transitory, superficial and instrumental. Such a weak social integration would eventually result in anomie. Wirth maintained that, in contrast to rural communities, in a city 'the juxtaposition of divergent personalities and modes of life tends to produce a relativistic perspective and a sense of toleration of differences which may be regarded as prerequisites for rationality and which lead toward the secularization of life' (1938: 15), adding that 'urbanism as a way of life' was not confined to city-dwellers but extended its influence beyond the city's boundaries. His work was later criticized for having focused on a kind of urbanism that was culturally and historically specific to the North American city and to the capitalist economy of his time (see, for example, Fox 1977: 58-9; Hannerz 1980: 68, 74).

3. Early Anthropological Studies in Urban Areas

In contrast with the received, and for a long time unquestioned, academic division between sociology and socio-cultural anthropology, in the late 1930s, the American anthropologist Robert Redfield (1947) began to carry out field research among peasant city-dwellers. Influenced by the work of the sociologist Wirth (1938), he theorized a 'folk-urban continuum' in which 'folk' societies and 'urban' societies were the two opposite ideal types. Quite unmindful of Raymond Firth's conclusion that the difference between types of economic system is one of degree, not one of kind (Firth 1939: 355), Redfield argued that folk societies consisted of small-scale, isolated and homogeneous communities, had a rudimentary division of labor and were economically self-sufficient. On the basis of research carried out in developing countries, such as India, he went on to suggest that, contrary to folk societies, peasant communities were not isolated, for they were linked, for example, to economic forces outside their own communities. They were, thus, part of a larger social set up, specifically the city and its 'great tradition', as opposed to the 'little' tradition of the small village.

Redfield's work stimulated anthropologists' interest in studying society from the perspective of the city. American anthropologists in particular began to address rural-urban migration in peasant societies without, however, paying sufficient attention to the relevant macro-processes beyond the community under study. Thus, from the 1930s to the 1950s, anthropologists mainly focused on rural migrants in slums and shanty towns

in Mexican and other Latin America cities, and on the impact of 'urbanism' on their lives. Robin Fox (1977) aptly criticized these studies pointing out that, following the established anthropological tradition, they focused on small-scale units (minorities or small communities within the cities); an approach that was reflected in these anthropologists' interest in the 'exotic others'. It is in such a context that, heavily influenced by the dominant functionalist methodological paradigm and by the sociology of the Chicago School, still in the 1960s North American-trained anthropologists engaged in problem-centered studies, focusing on minorities, urban adaptation and poverty.

The development of urban anthropology among British social anthropologists was significantly slower and fraught with serious difficulties, notwithstanding the seminal work of Raymond Firth, who in 1947 stimulated members of the Department of Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics to engage in a study of kinship in a South London borough, which resulted in a an important contribution to the intensive study of modern urban society (Firth 1956; see also Firth, Hubert and Forge 1969). Nonetheless, in the late 1930s the process of urbanization in many African countries caught the attention of British anthropologists. Although research carried out in African cities was not really regarded as *urban* research (Grillo, 1985), the Rhodes Livingston Institute, based in the British territory of what was then called Northern Rhodesia, did give a major contribution to urban African studies. The Institute, established in 1937 and initially directed by the British anthropologist Godfrey Wilson, encouraged a relatively large number of young researchers to investigate the social transformations that were occurring in Central Africa, including the process of urbanization. One of the earliest studies was carried out by Godfrey and Monica Wilson on 'detribalization' in Central Africa (see G. Wilson and M. Wilson 1945). In 1941, the appointment of the South-African-born anthropologist Max Gluckman to the directorship of the Institute gave new impetus to research in urban areas. In 1940, Gluckman drafted a 'Seven Year Research Plan' aimed at stimulating research in both rural and urban areas with particular reference to the rural areas affected by the migration of the labor force to the new mining towns. Such intense research activity focused on the mining area known as the Copperbelt and, under Gluckman's leadership, addressed the effects of colonialism on tribal economies and their inclusion in the market, focusing on the different economic structures and the kind of social relations that were emerging in the new urban areas. Significantly, the population of the Copperbelt mining towns was made up mainly by immigrants from the surrounding rural villages, who were employed as cheap labor force. As, according to Gluckman, these urban immigrants had entered a new web of relationships that were believed to be typical of the 'urban system' (1961), anthropological research in these towns was to be regarded as the study of processes of social transformation and of the situations in which such processes took place (Mitchell 1966). The works of Epstein on African politics (1958) and of Mitchell on urban social relations (1957) exemplify this approach.

Until the mid-twentieth century, the research produced by British anthropologists under Gluckman's direction provided the main body of African urban ethnography. Following Gluckman's appointment in 1949 to a Chair in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester, this group of anthropologists became known as the 'Manchester School'. Soon after, in the 1950s, the Manchester group launched a 'school in urban

anthropology', which had a limited impact for, by the late 1960s, the leading scholars who had been engaged in this project had moved on to other fields. It is important to bear in mind that, although such urban anthropology was later criticized for its functionalist approach, it did contribute to the development of new research methods – particularly case- and network-analyses – which are widely regarded its major legacy (see, for example, Mitchell 1966 and Mitchel ed. 1969).

While attention to the city as an important field of anthropological enquiry grew, urban research in Western industrial societies continued to be excluded, particularly though not only in the UK, from the anthropological research agenda. When historical events in the aftermath of the Second World War and the process of decolonization forced anthropologists to turn their attention to Western society, they were famously encouraged to carry out research in rural villages, not in cities. As Cole (1977) noted, anthropologists focused on processes of modernization in rural European villages, believing that the analysis of these processes would provide a blueprint for an understanding of the changes that were occurring elsewhere in the world. As we have argued elsewhere (Pardo and Prato 2010), the anthropological study of Western society, especially in Europe, contributed to push the discipline backward rather than encouraging its advancement (see also a later section). It can indeed be reasonably argued that, while holding on to the then still dominant functionalist paradigm, anthropology appeared to be rediscovering its nineteenth century evolutionistic roots.

Moreover, those anthropologists who took an interest in the city appeared to see this kind of setting as a new laboratory in which to carry out traditional studies on kinship, on belief and value systems and on small group dynamics. This trend prompted Ulf Hannerz (1980) to question whether urban anthropology did actually have a specific object of study. The key point is that early anthropological studies in cities focused on traditional anthropological topics, thus leading to the study of urban kinship, of ghettoes and slums in shanty town communities, of the perpetuation of folklore and rituals, and so on. Throughout the 1960s, such disciplinary interest focused on new urban residents; urban problems, such as poverty, urban adaptation and ecological factors; the role of dominant social groups; minority communities (the problem-centered approach); and traditional ethnographic studies which looked at the city as a laboratory. The overall, basic focus was rural-urban migration. However, it must be stressed that, notwithstanding their limitations and later criticism, such Anglophone pioneering studies did undoubtedly form the basis for the development of urban anthropology.

4. The Development of Urban Anthropology

In the 1960s, the worldwide increasing demographic movement to cities led to the expansion of urban anthropological research. With continued attention to 'problem-centered' studies, research focused on poverty, minorities – including ethnic minorities – and on urban adaptation. Some anthropologists who engaged in these studies developed such concepts as 'culture of poverty' (Lewis 1959, 1966), which over the years was fiercely criticized (see, for example, Valentine 1968; Eames and Goode 1996); others focused on ghetto culture and community dynamics (see, for example, Hannerz 1969), on interpersonal networks and collective identities (see, for example, Abu-Lughod 1962) and on the significance of so-called 'quasi-groups' in the context of

'complex societies' (see, for example, A. Mayer 1966). A more eclectic and regionally diversified urban anthropology emerged during the 1970s, as field research was increasingly carried out in Japan, India, South-East Asia and in various African and South and North American countries. Southall's edited volume, titled *Urban Anthropology* (1973), offered an initial insight into the variety of research that was being done at the time, bringing together methodological and ethnographic contributions and a seventy-page bibliography on the topic.

This new interest in urban research stimulated a multidisciplinary symposium on 'Processes of Urbanism' at the IX International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (ICAES) held in Chicago in 1973. The symposium was poorly attended and no further sessions were organized at the following Congress. In the US, given a strong home-oriented tradition, the American Anthropological Association took an interest in anthropological research in urban areas and, in 1972, initiated the publication of the journal *Urban Anthropology*. This initiative did not, however, lead to the establishment of 'urban anthropology' as a sub-disciplinary field. A further attempt was made in 1979 with the foundation of the *Society of Urban Anthropology* (SUA) but endless debate ensued and ostracism continued from 'traditional' anthropologists who believed that urban anthropology was not truly anthropology. So, after an initial, rather enthusiastic start, the relevance of the SUA faltered. Later, as part of the steps taken in the late-1980s in an attempt to revitalize this organization, the Society was renamed SUNTA (*Society for Urban, National and Transnational/Global Anthropology*) and the journal *Urban Anthropology* was renamed under the lengthy title, *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural System & World Economic Development*. A new journal called *City and Society* was also launched.

In spite of the reluctance and, in some cases, outright opposition of the wider anthropological community, in the late 1970s Cyril Belshaw, the then president of the IUAES (International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences), endorsed the establishment of a *Commission on Urban Anthropology* (CUA) within the IUAES. Ghaus Ansari and anthropologists like Fox and Southall – who had published textbooks and readers on urban anthropology (see, for example, Fox 1977, Southall ed. 1973) – were among the Commission's founding members. As the only international association of anthropology, the IUAES, through the CUA, aimed at promoting the establishment of an international network of scholars engaged in urban research and at stimulating debate on the variety of research identifiable as urban. Ansari was asked to coordinate the preparatory work for the organization of this new Commission and in 1982, following prolonged consultations with specialist anthropologists, the first International Seminar on Urban Anthropology was eventually convened in Vienna. The Seminar was attended by 15 participants from Austria, Canada, Egypt, India, Japan, Kuwait, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the USA and Venezuela. The proceedings were published in 1983 in a volume published by Brill and co-edited by Ansari and Nas. Titled *Town-Talk – The Dynamics of Urban Anthropology*, the volume aimed at providing a blueprint for the scientific program of the Commission, which gained full affiliation to the IUAES in 1983, at the Vancouver International Congress.

The CUA has since grown in strength, its membership including scholars based in universities across the world. It holds regularly its thematic Annual Conference and

promotes seminars and round-tables, bringing together strong fields of senior and younger anthropologists in discussing their work and debating key issues in this subfield. In recent years, the Commission has published its own web-site (http://urban.anthroweb.net/). Under the chair of Giuliana B. Prato, has established strong links with Ashgate Publishing through the Series *Urban Anthropology* and, in November 2011, has launched *Urbanities*, its open-access peer-reviewed on-line journal, which endeavors to provide the scientific community and the general public with up-to-date research findings, debates and news in urban anthropology. A key objective of this semestral journal is to bring out the relevance of this disciplinary sub-field in understanding social, cultural, political and economic changes worldwide.

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