Urban Anthropology

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TOPICS: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES METHODOLOGY SOURCES WEB LINK

1. Basic premises

The distribution of urban anthropologists favours clearly sociocultural anthropology, however, they recognize that archaeology has made significant contributions to the study of civilizations and urban spatial systems.

The term „urban revolution" was introduced by V. Gordon Childe (1950), a (Marxist) Old World historian, to describe the process by which complex, civilized societies emerged. This process, although in Childe's view based on a shift in economic productivity, seems to have occurred independently and at different times in several areas of the world. Thus, the precise criteria by which this process can be recognized, are not always the same, however there may be underlying regularities that appear in all the separate manifestations or the process.

The basic criteria that Childe has isolated are: classes of full-time specialists and elites exempt from subsistence tasks, mechanisms such as taxes or tribute by which the „social surplus" could be concentrated in the hands of elites, monumental public buildings, a writing system, extensive foreign trade, and the emergence of a political organization. Although archaeology with its genuine interest in „civilizations" has pioneered in the study of the rise and collapse of complex societies, however, it is less interested in urban phenomena per se.

Only in the second half of this century, especially in the 1960's, urban societies and cities came into the attention of cultural anthropology, although anthropologists were already conducting research on cities before the term „urban anthropology" began to be used in the 1960's. With this shift in focus, „urban anthropology" counters anthropology's traditional emphasis on „primitive" and peasant people to the exclusion of urban, complex and industrial societies (Basham 1978). This shift accompanied the deconstruction of primitivist anthropology and the acknowledgement that all cultures are part of the modern world and do not form isolated, self-contained entities. A further motivation was the observation that cities in the 20th century cities are more rapidly growing as ever before. This new emphasis can be also understood as a way of „studying up", a shift from the periphery to an analysis of the center.

In the understanding of urban anthropologists, it is not only a new „pop" field added to traditional anthropology or intends to neglect less complex societies, but to the contrary is concerned with rehabilitating the so-called „primitive". It considers itself as in opposition to colonial anthropology that assumes „primitive" people from being essentially different from „western civilization" (which has been usually ceded to the field of sociology, generating a division of labor between anthropology and sociology). Thus, the emergence of urban anthropology was also inaugurated by the consequences of the II. World War and process of decolonization. In the eyes of urban anthropologists, the interest in cities has reaffirmed the traditional claim of anthropology to concern with all and the variety of human cultures and societies. They see the separation of anthropology as the study of „primitives" and sociology as the study of industrial societies is not justified, because the West as industrial and the rest as primitive is no longer valid opposition and no society in the world has not been profoundly touched by industrialization. Theoretically, urban anthropology involves the study of the cultural systems of cities as well as the linkages of cities to larger and smaller places and populations as part of the world-wide urban system (Kemper 1996).

2. Methodology

The move to large-scale societies forces to a reconsideration of traditional anthropological methodology, the so-called „participant observation". Ethnographic work for a long time was understood as the close rapport with a small number of informants, which however is impossible in an urban context. Urban anthropologists therefore are required to extend their scope, to develop other skills and to take into account written materials, surveys, historical studies, novels and other sources. This does not necessarily imply a sacrifice to participant observation or holism. The challenge for urban anthropologists is to order all these different sources

and to grasp the realities of larger groups without sacrificing the vivid description that characterizes ethnography and anthropology in general. Often traditional anthropological topics, such as kinship, social stratification etc., are transplanted to the city. On this basis urban anthropology did not only move anthropologists to different theoretical and methodological frameworks, but also reworked those, which already existed and still exist (see for the distinctive problems of doing fieldwork in urban settings: Foster and Kemper 1974).

A problem of a too strong emphasis on the participant observer approach in the urban context is a lost of the holistic perspective. A focus lying on the family (like in traditional anthropology on the tribe or other social units) leads to a fragmentary picture of urban reality, and thus to an „urban mosaic" (Fox 1977: 2-9). Concerning methodology, an analysis of the journal Urban Anthropology revealed that on the large scale end following studies dominate: comparative studies within a single community, multi-community studies, regional surveys, national-level analyses, comparative multinational studies, and general theoretical and methodological studies. On the small scale end, studies are mainly focused on individuals in the form of life histories, specific social contexts, (such as marketplaces, gangs, shopping centers), residential units, and workplaces (Kemper 1991b).

3. History of the discipline

Urban anthropology „crept up" gradually and was almost unnoticed until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Its roots lie rather in sociology as the study of industrial societies. Therefore early sociologists were the first to turn their attention towards urban life. From the 1930's to the 1950's, there was a grow of cultural anthropologists' interests in the study of peasants and the impact of cities on their lives (Redfield 1947). By the 1950's already a number of anthropologists and sociologists were conducting research on urban phenomena (Childe 1950, Bott 1957, Sjoberg 1960). The expansion of urban anthropology in the 1960's reflects the recognition that traditional target groups, such as tribal and peasants people became increasingly integrated in an urbanized world. Particular attention was given to rural-urban migration, urban adaptation, ethnicity, and poverty (Lewis 1968, Hannerz 1969). By the 1970's, urban anthropology was

already being defined as a distinctive field within cultural anthropology, with the result of a significant growth in textbooks, readers, and reviews (Chrisman and Friedl 1974, Gulick 1973, Southall 1973). Additionally, the first integrated textbooks appeared: Fox (1977) identifies five different types of cities, and discusses the relationship between cities and the wider society they are embedded in. Basham (1978) offers a discussion of the study of urban societies and various related topics. During the 1980's, a second generation of textbooks and studies emerged (Collins 1980, Gmelch and Zenner 1980, Hannerz 1981, Press and Smith 1980)

3.1 Early urban sociology

Ferdinand Tönnies (1887) made his distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) on the basis of the concept that impersonal, contractual bonds characterize the capitalist society in contrast to the intimate relationships and collective activities of the feudal community. Emile Durkheim who introduced the term „anomie" followed this school of thought. In his study „Suicide" (1897) he suggested anomic suicide as being characteristic of those who live in isolated, impersonal worlds. Both concepts rooted in the theoretical assumptions about what constitutes the essence of urban and non-urban life.

More important to the later development of urban anthropology however was the sociologist Louis Wirth's essay „Urbanism as a way of life" (1938). He developed a theory of the characteristic influences of urban life on social organization and attitudes, arguing that urban life is marked by impersonal, instrumental contacts which tend to free individuals from the strong controls of such primary groups as the extended family, but, at the other hand this freedom of individual action is accompanied by the loss of collective security.

Robert Redfield (1947) adapted Wirth's formulation of these characteristics to his folk-urban continuum concept, by characterizing the urban pole in Wirth's terms, and the folk pole as its opposite (small, homogeneous, isolated, traditional communities which were economically self-sufficient and has only a rudimentary division of labor). He went a step further by elaborating the role of cities as „Great Tradition" as opposed to the „Little Tradition" of local villages. Both scholars' influence on the development of the anthropology of complex society was significant. Critiques, however,

addressed that the cocept of „urbanity" as typically western and „the rural" as non-western are eurocentric ideal-types.

3.2 The Chicago School of Urban ecology

A major contribution to urban sociology came from Robert E. Park and his „school" at the University of Chicago. The focus was on demographic and census information, interviews and historical data, with an emphasis on cities' social problems rather than on abstract theorizing about urban life. In this school of thought, cities were viewed as ecosystems requiring energy to maintain their structure and which are segmented into „natural areas" subject to laws of residential succession (natural areas are for example slums neighborhoods, and vice areas). A major premise was the „concept of succession". With this model, scholars analyzed changing residential patterns, for example the development of ghettos for the African Americans who moved to Chicago in search for jobs (Duncan and Duncan 1957). Later, however, the school turned to rather empiricist, quantitative and statistical reworking of census data, evoking following theoretical reactions.

3.3 The Community Study Approach

This approach in early urban anthropology was the most „anthropological" in the traditional sense. It developed partly in reaction to the abstract empiricism of the later Chicago School. One of the key figures is Carolyn Ware who in „Greenwich Village, 1920-1930" examined the incorporation of Greenwich Village into New York through the expansion of the metropolis, and the process by which it maintained its distinctive character. Although this represents one of the earliest Community Study research, in the contemporary debates around the global integration it still very current today. W. Lloyd Warner's „Yankee City" attempted to merge an ethnographic perspective gained in fieldwork among Australian aborigines with information gathered from formal interviews for his social study of a New England city, Yankee City. William Foote Whyte's: „Street corner society" is the ethnography of an Italian slum, which he named „Cornerville". His study was in conception most familiar to the anthropologists and the method of participant observation: he rented a room with an Italian family and participated in their social life for several years.

3.4 Interactionism

This movement is also a response to the lifeless empiricism of the later Chicago School. The most important work (not only for urban anthropology) was Erving Goffman's microstudy of human interaction „The presentation of self in everyday life" (1959). He defined human interaction in terms of dramaturgical metaphor, by analyzing human behavior as a series of performances of parts. The value of this research for urban anthropology lies in its emphasis upon the subtle role playing in human interaction. Especially urbanites are constantly required to present fragmentary aspects of themselves to others, strangers or people who know them only as inhabitants of discrete occupational or ethnic categories. They are confronted everyday with numbers of different people and settings. It therefore offers a workable tool for the understanding of urban social structure.

4. Research traditions and criticisms

4.1 Anthropology of urban poverty

According to Fox (1977) there are different research traditions within urban anthropology that maintain continuity with traditional anthropology and its methods by not focusing on urbanism itself, but on smaller units within the cities. One example is the anthropology of urban poverty. Oscar Lewis introduced the term „culture of poverty", which he understood as a form of life that exists independently of economical and political deprivation, thus evoking a series of critiques (see Valentine 1968, Goode and Eames 1996). Equally does ghetto research and the exclusive study of migrant populations reflect the quest for the exotic, for minorities, poverty, ethnic enclaves, and for small-scale units on the cost of a holistic approach.

4.2 Network research

Other research objects in this tradition are household and family research and social network research. Network analysis roots in the study of rural communities and came to the city with Elizabeth Bott's „Family and social network" (1957). This book was part of an interdisciplinary study of „ordinary" families in London. The derived „Bott hypothesis" is based on the assumption that the

degree of segregation in the role-relationship of husband and wife varies directly with the connectedness of the family's networks. She outlined three kinds of organization: complementary organization, independent organization, and joint organization, and thus established the idea of a relationship between the internal structure of the family and the pattern of its external contacts (see for a discussion Hannerz 1980).

4.3 Anthropology of urbanization

The anthropology of urbanization (rural-urban migration) stands at the intersection between the urban and the rural. This field is especially strong developed in African research, mainly by British anthropologists, and in Latin American studies, mainly by American researchers. The emphasis here lies in large-scale physical movements of rural people to cities and the adaptations of these immigrant populations to the new environment with a focus on the alteration of social structure, interpersonal ties and collective identities within the city (see Abu-Lughod 1962).

4.4 Anthropology in cities and anthropology of cities

However, the „traditional" context of these studies should not be exaggerated. Although concentrated on certain target groups, these issues cannot be divorced from the urban context and urbanism itself. In order to avoid confusion, it is therefore useful to follow the distinction that was drawn by Kemper between the anthropology in cities, and the anthropology of cities, although both are intertwined: there is a distinction between „anthropologists who do research in a particular city, but without much, if any concern for the urban context; those concerned with the *structure of city life* and its impact on human behavior locally or cross-culturally; and those concerned with the development of *international urban systems* through time and space as distinctive social-cultural and political-economic domains" (1991b: 374). Large-scale social processes and transformations may be more pronounced in cities, but cannot be explained within these contexts alone. Equally, many studies that are categorized as urban anthropology make important contributions to anthropological topics in urban milieus, but do not concern the characteristics of cities themselves (1998: 120). However, as the fast trend of urbanization indicates, more and more people will be urbanized in the future. Thus the major fields of anthropology will be eventually converged into urban anthropology (Ansari and Nas 1983: 6).

Urban anthropologists themselves rarely address one point of critique: Although the goal of urban anthropology was initially to counter the dichotomy between „primitive" and „complex" societies within the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, the validity of this oppositional concept in the real world has never been seriously questioned. The major accomplishment of urban anthropology is the shift of focus; however, the terminology of „urban" and „rural" has not been transcended yet.

5. Urban anthropology today and urban anthropologists as a social group

Today, urban anthropology distinguishes itself from urban sociology mainly in terms of a different perspective: while sociological studies are more focused on fragmented issues, urban anthropology is theoretically rather directed toward a holistic approach (Ansari and Nas 1983: 2). Whereas urban anthropology in the 1960's and 70's was focused on particular issues, for example migration, kinship, poverty and so forth, derived from or contrasted to traditional-based fieldwork, by the 1980's, they had expanded their interests to any aspect of urban life. As a result, urban anthropology became more integrated into the discourse of the other social sciences.

Practically, urban anthropology has merged to a major part with geography, ecology and other disciplines. Along with a theoretical interest in and conceptualization of urban space and urbanism, contemporary issues of urban anthropology are: Urban problems, rural-urban migration, adaptation and adjustment of humans in densely populated environments, the effects of urban settings upon cultural pluralism and social stratification, social networks, the function of kinship, growth of cities, crime (and other urban dilemmas), housing, architecture, transport, use of space, employment, infrastructure, demography and others.

1979 the Society for Urban Anthropology (SUA) was founded as a subdivision of the American Anthropological Association. A survey, undertaken by Kemper (1991) by analyzing information in the American Anthropological Association guides

from 1989 to 1992, revealed that the great majority, 70 percent, of urban anthropologists belong to the subfield of sociocultural anthropology. Compared to the results of a survey carried out in 1975 (Kemper 1975), this number however has declined from 86 percent, while the number of applied anthropologists has jumped dramatically from 0 percent, and that of archaeologists from 6 percent to 15 percent. This shows that applied work gained in significance, and that the interest of archaeologists in the anthropology of urbanism has grown.

	1975	*1991*
subfields	(450 individuals)	(900 individuals)
Socio-cultural Anthropology	86 %	70 %
Archaeology	6 %	15 %
Applied Anthropology	0 %	12 %
Linguistic and Bianthropology	8 %	3 %

Not all of the individuals who were covered by the survey called themselves „urban anthropologists". 55 percent identify their work using some variant of „urban", while the rest uses other terms to label their work.

	1991
	(900 individuals)
"urban"	55 %
„complex societies"	36%
„contemporary societies"	26%
„modern societies"	17%
„civilizations"	11%

A number of persons also would prefer to define their primary specialization with regional or topical interests. Regionally, the Unites States leads with 45 percent followed by Mexico and Central

America with 14 percent, Europe with 12 percent, and North and South America with each 10 percent. This result proves a trend that more urban anthropologists are involved in research in the United States, Canada and Mexico than before. A further factor is the availability of increased funding for applied projects in American cities that attracted a number of anthropologists who initially did fieldwork abroad. This is especially the case where urban anthropologists can use their international expertise to study immigrant ethnic populations in the United States or Canada. Topical interests, according to the survey, grew in diversity, with a growing trend in change and developmental issues, medical anthropology, political anthropology, the study of minorities and race, poverty, cultural ecology, gender, popular culture, and communication. With 26 percent, the field of social organization, kinship and family, however, is still the strongest. This overview shows that „peasants" have strongly declined as a target group.

According to Kemper, the trends revealed by the comparative analysis of the 1991 survey of nearly 900 individuals and the 1975 survey of fewer than 450 individuals are generally in accord with the broader transformations in North American anthropology. There are more female urban anthropologists, the Ph.D. is still the overwhelming choice to practice urban anthropology, there is a growth in the diversity of topical interests, there is a spread of the field among the subdisciplines, and there is still no agreement on the basic terms for the specialization of the field, but rather a variety of emphasis.

The analysis of the journal Urban Anthropology (UA), founded in 1972, shows that contributors belong to 39 U.S. American states and 18 foreign nations (Kemper 1991). Professional affiliations contain 150 institutions in the United States and 42 abroad. The leading U.S. American states are New York, California, Ohio, Texas, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Leading foreign nations are Canada, Great Britain, Poland, France, Australia, Bangladesh, Israel, and Mexico. Nearly all authors have academic affiliations, less than 15 percent are belong to non-academic institutions, such as the Hispanic Health council in Connecticut, the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the U.S Department of Agriculture, and the World Bank. When the Society for Urban Anthropology (SUA) decided to publish its own journal (City and Society), Urban Anthropology (UA) was renamed

into Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems & World Economic Development (UAS) in order to avoid competition and address a broader audience.

Similarly, the Society for Urban Anthropology is going soon to be renamed into the Society for Urban, National, and Transnational Anthropology (SUNTA).