

URBAN GEOGRAPHY

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Summary

The main concerns of urban geography are explained calling attention to the two basic approaches in urban geography: the first refers to the spatial distribution of towns and cities and the linkages between them, the study of *systems of cities*; and the second refers to the internal structure of urban places, this can be named the study of *the city as a system*. The main approaches that have characterized urban geography's studies in the post-1950 period are explained, with particular emphasis on five of them: site and situation and urban morphology, where physical characteristics were the determining factors in the location and development of settlements; positivism, based upon the belief that human behavior is determined by universal laws and displays fundamental regularities; behavioral and humanistic, that tried to articulate more richly the values, goals and motivations under-pinning human behavior; the structural analysis, that incorporated the political economy approach in the urban analysis; and the postmodern theory, with its focus on differences, uniqueness and individuality.

The contemporary city is linked to the changing economic context that has switched from farming, mining and heavy manufacturing into the provision of services, the organization of international business, and the administration and provision of all kinds of public goods and social welfare services. The growth of the service economy has had important consequences for the social geography of cities: the tendency to reinforce social polarization; the so-called feminization of employment; increasing competition

among cities for employment; or the emergence of the *global cities*. The urban structure arising from this modern economy is epitomized, in its extreme form, by the *megalopolis*, a multi-city, multi-centered urban region. Continuation of present trends means that by 2025, 65 per cent of the world's population will be urban dwellers. Urbanization and urban growth in this unprecedented scale pose fundamental questions as to whether this magnitude of urban development can be sustained.

1. Introduction. The Scope of Urban Geography

Urban Geography is concerned to identify and explain the distribution of towns and cities and the socio-spatial similarities and contrasts that exist within and between them. Following this there are two basic approaches to urban geography: the first refers to the spatial distribution of towns and cities and the linkages between them, this can be considered the study of *systems of cities*; the second refers to the internal structure of urban places, this can be named the study of *the city as a system*.

While every town and city has an individual character, urban places also exhibit common features that vary only in degree of incidence or importance within the particular urban fabric. All cities contain areas of residential space, transportation lines, economic activities, service infrastructure, commercial areas, and public buildings. Cities also exhibit common problems to varying degrees, including inadequate housing, economic decline, poverty, ill health, social polarization, traffic congestion and environmental pollution. Many characteristics and concerns are shared by urban places. These shared characteristics and concerns represent the foundations for the study of urban geography.

Urban Geography maintains important links with other branches of geography, and its main power is to synthesize many different perspectives so as to advance our understanding of urban phenomena. This eclectic approach to the analysis of urban places extends beyond geography to incorporate research findings and knowledge across traditional disciplinary boundaries. The integrative power of urban geography is a key characteristic of the subdiscipline. Another principal characteristic of geographical analysis of the city is the centrality of spatial perspective. This distinguishes urban geography from cognate areas of urban study such as urban economics, urban sociology or urban politics. But by acknowledging the importance of spatial location we are not implying that space per se is the key explanatory variable underlying patterns of human activity in the city.

2. Changing Approaches in Urban Geography

Urban geography is a subdiscipline that comprises a combination of past ideas and approaches, current concepts and issues that are still being worked out. While the significance of the different philosophical perspectives for the practice of urban geography has changes over time, none of the main approaches has been abandoned completely. Two main groups can be identified for these approaches: early and modern approaches. Whereas the former were associated primarily with the infancy of urban geographers, a greater diversity and maturity was evident in the latter that came to dominate in the post-1950 period.

2.1. Site and Situation and Urban Morphology

In the early approaches, site and situation, and urban morphology were relevant. For the first, studies for the early twentieth century were concerned primarily with the physical characteristics as the determining factors in the location and development of settlements. This concern has been long superseded in all but historical and some rural studies as cities have grown in both size and complexity. Original location factors have tended to be overridden by the scale of subsequent urbanization or have greatly declined in importance as the form and function of urban areas have changed. Secondly, urban morphology was an important root of urban geography that developed particularly strongly in German universities in the early twentieth century. It was a descriptive approach that sought to understand urban development through examination of the phases of growth of urban areas. Using evidence from buildings and the size of buildings plots, it aimed to classify urban areas according to their phases of growth. This approach came in for heavy criticism in the 1950s and 1960s as more scientific approaches came to dominate the subject and the social science generally. Recent work has concentrated on the role of architects, planners and other urban managers in the production of the form and design of urban areas. Nevertheless at mid-twentieth century the focus of urban geography was primarily on land use and related issues.

2.2. Positivism

The first major paradigm shift to affect urban geography reflected the desire to make geographical investigation more scientific. Modern approaches started with the introduction of the philosophy of positivism that is characterized by the adherence to the scientific method of investigation based on hypothesis testing, statistical inference and theory construction. This philosophy is based upon the belief that human behavior is determined by universal laws and displays fundamental regularities. Positive approaches can be subdivided in two types, ecological and neo-classical approaches. Ecological approaches are based upon the belief that human behavior is determined by ecological principles, namely that the most powerful groups, would obtain the most advantageous positions in a given space, the best residential location for example. This school of urban geography goes back to the Chicago school of sociology from the 1920s, and their contributions include the concentric zone, and the sector model of land use. The ecological approach developed during the 1960s in that the model were refined with the increasing sophistication of computers. Neo-classical approaches were based on the belief that human behavior was motivated primarily by rationality. This means that each decision was taken with the aim of minimizing the cost involved (in terms of time and money) and maximizing the benefits. This type of behavior was referred as utility maximization. Although evident in the central place theory on the spatial patterning of settlements, positivism blossomed in the late 1950s with the development of the spatial analysis school, which led to multivariate classifications of settlements type, investigations of the rank-size rule for the population of the urban places, and analysis of spatial variations in urban population densities. During the 1970s the development of a range of multivariate statistical techniques extended the social area approach of the ecologists in the form of factorial ecologies designed to reveal the bases of residential differentiation within the city. However, their very poor approximation to reality was the source of much of the criticism directed at these models and reflected the overly

simplistic assumptions upon which they were based and the important factors and motivations they ignored. Their failure to recognize and account for the idiosyncratic and subjective values that motivated much human behavior was criticized by behavioral and humanistic approaches that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s.

2.3. Behavioral and humanistic approaches

Behavioral and humanistic approaches were united in their belief that people, and the ways in which they made sense of their environment should be central to their approach. Behaviorist approaches can be regarded as an extension of positivist approaches; they sought to expand positivism's narrow conception of human behavior and to articulate more richly the values, goals and motivations underpinning human behavior. However, despite this they were still concerned with uncovering law-like generalizations in human behavior. In a radical departure from the scientific approaches of the 1950s and 1960s, the humanistic approaches brought techniques more associated with the humanities to understand people-environment relationships. They sought to understand the deep, subjective and very complex relationship between individuals, groups, places and landscapes. This was reflected in the sources they utilized that included paintings, photographs, films, poems, novels, diaries, and biographies. The humanistic perspective has been criticized for placing excessive emphasis on the power of individuals to determine their own behavior in the city, and affording insufficient attention to the *constraints* on human decision-making. The influence of humanism in urban geography was limited.

2.4. Structural analysis

Structural analysis in urban geography has been based primarily on the work of K. Marx. The political economy approach entered urban geography in the early 1970s in response to the continuing social problems of urban areas. Cities are viewed as an integral part of the capitalist mode of production by providing an environment favorable for the fundamental capitalist goal of accumulation. Much attention has been directed to the analysis of urban property and housing markets, and studies of residential patterns. This approach interpreted urban residential segregation primarily as a result of decisions by those with power in the property market, including building society managers, estate agents, and local authority housing managers. The political economy approach has had a major impact in urban geography and has provided real insight into economic and political forces underlying urban change. However, the dominance assigned to social structure over human agency in this perspective was rejected by humanistic geographers; critics have attacked the emphasis attached to class divisions in society to the neglect of other lines of cleavage such as gender, ethnicity and sexuality.

2.5. Postmodern theory

Postmodern theory began to exert an influence on urban geography in the late 1980s and 1990s. The postmodern perspective is characterized by a rejection of grand theory and an emphasis on human difference. The most visible impact of postmodern thinking on the city is in its architecture where the concrete functionalism of the modern era is replaced by a diversity of styles. In terms of the social geography of the city, the most

important contribution of a postmodern perspective is how its focus on differences, uniqueness and individuality sensitizes us to the needs and situations of all members of a society. This emphasis has been reflected in studies of gender differences in urban labor markets, “spaces of exclusion” occupied by minority groups, marital status, sexuality, race age, and disability. A major criticism directed at the postmodern approach to the city is its apparently unlimited relativism. Because it privileges the views of all individuals, there appears to be no limit to the range of possible interpretations of any situation, there is “no real world”.

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Biographical Sketch

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