



An Overview of the History of Studies on Urban Theories

Çilga RESULOĞLU

*Atılım University, Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, Department of Interior Architecture and Environmental Design, Ankara, Turkey.
cilga.resuloglu@atilim.edu.tr*

ABSTRACT

One of the key questions regarding the attempts to define urban studies as an independent discipline and a research area is about what to include and what to exclude. The question of how and with which criteria the focus areas of urban studies need to be identified, has paved the way for the formation of different urban theories. Classifications of the definitions for urban space can be made either according to different approaches by choosing general categories such as liberal/Marxist, modern, post-modern, geographic and socio-cultural approaches or according to spatial, economic and political categories. In both cases, the discussions on urban space will undoubtedly unfold in line with the concepts developed by the selected theoreticians. Therefore, in this study, the intention is not to generate a full discussion or even a comprehensive analysis of all theories about urban space or city but rather to understand an overview of the historical perspective about the touchstones of some urban theories. This study aims to ensure a thorough understanding of different definitions of urban space and various approaches through studies conducted by some critical theoreticians playing important role in grasping the notion of urban space. The classification made involves the desire to point out that the discussion leading to various analyses and definitions for urban space or city belongs to the tense relationship between place and social process. To this end, initially a chronological reference point was determined, and then views and notable works of specialists engaged in urban theories from various disciplines including architecture, city planning, sociology and history is discussed. In conclusion, results of the mentioned efforts suggest that although specialists from various disciplines have come up with novel theories for the creation and development of urban space throughout history, all of those theories meet on a common ground of the human dimension and place relationship.

Keywords: Urban theory, urban history, urban space and human dimension.

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of discussions on city inevitably brings along the discussions on certain ways and process of social relationships. This situation becomes even more outstanding especially in empirical and theoretical studies conducted on modern cities. Such studies absolutely encompass a discussion of capitalism/modernism either in the form of subtexts or by locating themselves right in the center of the analysis. Parker (2004) also referred to this situation in his work through which he aims to provide a systematic analysis of urban theory and urban experience. He claims that the chronology is important because it spans the period that many social scientists and cultural theorists identify as the era of modernity. City is the interface between modernity and how we both think about and live in it.

Attempts to classify various perspectives on city are based on the history of urban studies on Weber's work called *The City*. Attempting to come up with such a classification, Dunleavy (1982) also suggests that the first awareness on city emerged in 1890s with Weber, Tönnies and Simmel and that it emerged as a particular area of study with the Chicago School in 1920s and 1930s.



Weber and Simmel, as producers of major classical sources inspired many urban theoreticians in theoretical and analytical terms, are regarded as the chronological starting point in this study. Such a reference point is taken as these sociologists also focus on the urban fact directly. Yet, the fact that classical sources, contributing either directly or indirectly to urban theories, are much more various ranging from the works of Weber to Marx, from Durkheim to Tönnies should be also noted. Chicago School is identified as the second starting point in development of urban theories since the most important role in evolution of urban studies under social sciences into an independent discipline is played by Chicago sociology. It can be safely argued that Chicago sociology theorizes the city by elaborating on the social relationships and as a network of social relationships as well as rebuilds place as a function of urban ecology, which are most apparent in works of Park and Wirth. Lefebvre, Harvey and Castells then monitored the development of the critical urban theory besides the mainstream, and identified the spatial perception of city.

Regarding modern approaches, influence of culture-centered approach to theorizing the city and post-modernism on urban theories have continued. Culture-centered modern city theories focusing on the relationship between the urban place and social processes in the context of identities and differences seem to have formed a dialogue between different definitions of city. Certain theoretical approaches in definition of city and the map drawn up in relation to the definitions of city is eventually of subjective quality. As Giddens (2000) also argued, all idea disciplines have their constructed history and founders of all disciplines are parts of their initial myths: "All disciplines have their fictive histories, all are imagined communities which invoke the myths of the past by means of both charting their own internal development and unity, and also drawing the boundaries between themselves and their neighboring disciplines". In this case, a map drawn up with other selections would undoubtedly involve another construction.

THE STUDIES ON URBAN THEORIES

Urban studies date back to late 19th century. In 1845, Engels wrote an article called *The Great Towns* to tell about the poverty and hopelessness he witnessed as he walked down the streets in the neighborhoods resided by worker communities. He emphasizes that the workers employed in the factories of the city, formed neighborhoods nearby the factories. Besides, he states that the factory owners mostly live in the suburbs with luxury houses with gardens. Engels emphasizes in his article that working classes had to live in the worst houses located in the worst neighborhoods, even in cottages. He, therefore, illustrates that the city is physically segregated into classes and that the poverty that the workers face is made invisible through the use of place, as well as how the relationships between different classes based on inequality are reproduced. (Engels, 1996)

In that period, during which the industrial revolution was ongoing and modern societies and modern cities began to form, Simmel also headed towards the understanding of metropolitans, focusing on the way of life brought along with modernization, unlike what Engels did. Simmel, who is of Jewish origin and living in Berlin, embarked on his studies with the view that suggests money economy radically changed the social relationships. He then directed his studies to the impact of the way of life in metropolitan cities on social relationships. He stated that metropolises, which he defined with their characteristics of density and over-alerting, created formal and distanced human relations that are far from intimacy, as a result of which people act on their reason instead of their emotions. Hence, he argued that rationality and interests have domination over people's relationships and that such type of relationships and way of life will spread to all segments of society with the influence of modernization going beyond the life in metropole. (Simmel, 2004)

Weber (1958) developed a multi-dimensional and ideal-typical approach in order to highlight the essential characteristics of the city form, which he thinks is unique to western civilization. (Kaesler, 1988) According to the mentioned approach, a city is basically a settlement where houses that are separate but located within the vicinity of each other are gathered. However, city is actually a settlement where the people live on craftsmanship



and trade rather than on agriculture. Weber's (1958) work entitled *The City*, in which he studies the emergence of cities, and Simmel's article entitled *The Metropolis and Mental Life* which is the only work of him directly studying the nature of urban life and is recognized as a classical work in urban sociology, have assured the place of both sociologists as classical references. Same as Weber, Simmel regards metropolis as a historical development and his aim is to define the general characteristics, *sui generis* of urban life. Different from Weber, Simmel's approach towards people in metropolises involves observing of behaviors at micro level with an anthropological and social psychological content. Simmel's socio-psychological analysis on the new individual emerging in cities, affected the Chicago sociology the most, as well as the culture-centered approach to theorizing the city.

Establishing themselves in the framework of urban culture, Simmel's works then influenced a group of scholars embarking on their research on urban studies in Department of Sociology at Chicago University. These academicians studying under the leadership of Robert Park, whose main job is journalism, started to create their own paradigm after they were influenced by Simmel's ideas. However, in time the emphasis made by Simmel on money economy and modernization vanished within this group known as Chicago School. As a result of this, city was excluded from general developments in the society and started to be studied as an independent concept. In this framework, Wirth (1996) defined city with variables of population size, population density and social heterogeneity and advocated the idea that urban life creates a certain urban character and way of life. According to Wirth, it is possible to explain the characteristics of urban life and measure the differences between cities of various sizes and types based on these three variables. Unlike Simmel, Wirth believed that metropolises, which do not allow formation of communities that are existent in rural settlements, isolate people and drag them into depression. Therefore, he was pessimistic about this point. Wirth made his most well-known contribution with his work entitled *Urbanism as a Way of Life* of 1938, in which he developed a comprehensive theory on urban life. In this work, Wirth (1996) does not only point out the possible dangers of confusing urbanization with industrialization and modern capitalism but also aims to theorize urban form as a social/sociological fact. Wirth mentions the mobility and dynamism within the urban social life in order to define heterogeneity that is specific to urban life. Living with a high level of mobility, an individual is exposed to numerous alerts coming from other individuals and subjects, which puts him/her in varying statuses within different social groups forming the social structure of a city. (Wirth, 1996)

Looking into the researches of the day, we understand that the city of Chicago became a center of interest for sociologists owing to the population explosion that the city went through and the cultural diversity in it. Chicago sociologists did not only collect key empirical evidence and data related to urban society but also tried to develop a rich perception encompassing various dimensions of urban life in general. It can be safely argued that the most significant contribution made by Chicago School to urban sociology is that they turned the city itself into a laboratory for current researches. As three sociologists who share common interest of cities, attempt to study the city of Chicago as an urban laboratory and meet in Chicago School in early 1910s, Park, Burgess and McKenzie opened the first school of urban studies. Until 1940s, they published fruitful works - with their students - containing first systematic field researches and ethnographies written by professional sociologists. (Gottdiener and Budd, 2005)

Hence, they created the paradigm known as human ecology. According to this paradigm, which considers urban development a natural development and ignores government's intervention, people of different classes and cultural groups have engaged in competition with each other in order to reserve an advantageous place and location for themselves in the city, which is quite similar to what happens in nature during processes by which ecological balance is maintained. Moreover, those with superior qualifications settle in advantageous locations nearby city center. This view, which can be also interpreted as a sort of *social Darwinism*, gained a functional role with a number of empirical studies and provided models to predict the way of development of urban form. For instance, Burgess



suggests that cities that grow in such competition are generally composed of concentric zones: In the center, there is downtown with multi-story office buildings, banks, shopping malls, hotels, theatres and museums and art galleries. In the 1st zone, there are people who are looking for employment or those already employed as well as unskilled worker neighborhoods living in poverty. 2nd zone is home to neighborhoods where qualified workers of second belt who move up social class and are adapted to the society live. In 3rd zone, there are middle-income residential areas. In 4th zone and in particular in 5th zone, the outmost circle, there are suburbs with villas and luxury homes where upper-classes. (Burgess, 2004)

The influence of the human ecology paradigm was felt until 1960s. This approach, which is in support of status quo dominating the world and is interpreting the inequalities in cities in natural terms maintained its dominance. Critical opposing movements in the world in 1960s had also impact on the area of urban studies, and city was started to be re-interpreted from a point of view criticizing the capitalist system. *Urban political economy* formed the new paradigm. Aiming at practicing Marxist theory in order to explain city from the perspective of political economy, David Harvey defined land as a tradeable meta. He put forward the situation of making profit from land. Moreover, he stated that the investments made to city arise from capital accumulation processes: if the capital accumulation provided through production stops due to overproduction, the capital directs its investments to city and city lands (the 2nd circuit of capital accumulation) and makes capital profit temporarily from the land rather than production, which is a process supported with the state's guidance through credits and similar means just like in suburb development of USA in 1950s. When the overproduction is consumed and a need for production reemerges, the capital draws itself away from the developments in city and directs towards production again. Hence, development pace of cities either increase or decrease, depending on the capital. (Katznelson, 1992)

Although Harvey generally adopts a structuralist approach, for which he is sometimes criticized, he accepted to some extent that individuals can have influence on structural conditions (agency). He also mentioned that groups can organize social movements and make efforts to prevent the halting of investments made to the city. Harvey (2004) stated that Marx also, referring to the same idea with Park, mentioned that we change our worlds in order to change ourselves (and vice versa). He emphasized that all human labor stems from this dialectic relationship.

Krier's work entitled *Urban Space* (1979) emphasizes historicalness and provides a typological and morphological analysis of urban space. In Alexander's book entitled *A Pattern Language* (1977) a structuralist perception is presented through evaluation of space from the aspects of functional relationships and requirements. Aiming to explain urban social movements within a structuralist framework and adopting Marxist approach, Castells employed the term of collective consumption in his book *The Urban Question* (1977) According to Castells, main contradiction in cases where social needs such as housing, health, education and public transportation which are consumed collectively are addressed by the government takes place between decision makers who will bring these services and the people themselves. People aim to grow the share they take from the collective consumption by creating social movements. Emphasis on city in social movements that Castells developed through collective consumption stems from the fact that cities are places densely populated by people: The government realized collective consumption in cities, which therefore emerged as places where the social movements would take place.

In time, Castells walked away from this structuralist and Marxist approach to a great extent. For example, he (1983) explained urban social movements by putting emphasis on agency rather than on structure in his book called *The City and the Grassroots*. Castells argues that, transformations at city level do not necessarily bring along essential changes in the society's structure, but still pave the way for an overall improvement in society by



providing new initiatives through urban meaning. Castells makes an effort to prove that there is an ideological approach dominant in urbanization theories. The theme of transition from rural culture to urban culture actually provides a framework opening the issue of adaptation to new forms of society to discussion, in other words, defining urbanization through integration. Moreover, between 1920-60, as stated by Pevsner (1976) and confirmed by Trancik in *Finding Lost Space: Theories of Urban Design* (1986), modern architectural movements and buildings were considered as objects on their own. Despite the interest shown in these independent buildings, the quality and organization of the spaces between the buildings are largely left to chance. As a result, areas that remained from planning were formed, in other words, over-left spaces have emerged. In this sense, new urban theories have been developed.

Contribution made by Lefebvre to urban studies, where the policy-economy paradigm is dominant, is of importance. Mentioning urban revolution, Lefebvre (1991), advocates the idea that industrial revolution is now over and from now on cities are novel means to accumulate capital, carrying potential to radically transform. Suggesting that space is a social product, Lefebvre stated that decision makers plan the city by considering it an abstract space, while people experience, interpret and transform the city within their own spatial practices, bringing new initiatives to theorizing the city (social place) and space. Works of Lefebvre had a broad repercussion in France, although it was not until his works were translated into English that Anglo-Saxon world discovered his works, which took a while. Works entitled *The Urban Revolution*, *The Production of Space*, *The Right to the City* are the most notable texts that Lefebvre dwells on the subject of city. Parker (2004) suggested that Lefebvre's classical manifest on city is *The Right to the City*. The analysis provided by this work of Lefebvre centralizes on a contradiction getting even deeper between the demolishing of the city and the growth and densification of urbanization. According to this, a space that is urbanized becomes a struggle area, a collection of differences and priority of usage over the value of the change. (Lefebvre, 1996) Moreover, mathematical and geometrical representations of space are created, and social relations are based on a post-positivist perspective and analyzed in the work called *The Social Logic of Space* (1984) published by Hillier -an architect, scholar and sociologist- and Hanson.

An essential paradigm shift in urban studies was on in the 1980s. In comparison, urban studies which were previously based on the spatial initiatives put forward by Marxist theory, started to be built with a focus on representation and identity. In today's world, where service sector comes to the fore instead of industry, production is regulated globally and carried out in geographic locations providing the cheapest and disorganized labor and economy has become liberated, we now go through a new era (disorganized capitalism, post-industrialism, flexible accumulation, post-Fordism). City is no more the area in which industry is settled; on the contrary, industry has now moved away from the cities and even went abroad in case of Western industrialized countries. (Savage and Ward, 1993) Today's city is based on consumption. Class contradiction is no more an outstanding issue whereas rivalries persist in relation to identity and representation. In this context, urban studies started to consider cities a legible text instead of a physical entity from the emerging post-modernist approach. Hence, cultural studies have become significantly dominant in urban studies. (King, 1996) Poverty has tried to label itself as a 'difference' under the post-modern discourse that is based on difference and variety. Therefore, the required attention was not paid anymore. (Harvey, 1996) However, new problems and research questions to be studied in nowadays have emerged.

As an American intellectual closely interested in the issue of urbanism and writing in a wide range of areas including urban planning, history of technology, cultural history and literary criticism, Mumford had a broad repercussion in cultural analysis of city. In his widely-known article called *What is a City*, Mumford (2000) argues that city is subject to numerous discoveries as a pure physical fact. Mumford interprets city as an overall entity of the relationship between primary groups and goal-oriented functional institutions. The former corresponds to family and neighborhoods, and the latter to the characteristics of urban life.



Mumford adopts an urban approach that is integrated into that of Wirth. Similarly, he discussed the limits of population density, heterogeneity and size as a measurement to define city. Furthermore, what affected his following urban cultural analyses is his theorization of city as a social drama. Sennett (1996) then employed this metaphor of theatre as a means of analysis beyond an imagery to study publicness. Sennett based his views on the thesis that both are ways of expression and have foreign audience, with the aim of analyzing the publicness in 19th century-cities. He drew attention to the similarities and differences between the stage and the street. He particularly noted that theatre does not have a common ground with the society as a whole but with a very particular type of society, namely, that of the large city. He emphasized that he established this similarity due to the audience.

Received education both on architecture and anthropology, Rapoport (1977, 1982, 2004) analyzed spatial formations in different cultures by adopting a cultural approach towards the formation of urban spaces and urban components. Like Mumford, Lynch has also established the relationship between city and language in his work entitled *The Image of the City* (1960). Moreover, he mentioned the legibility of city, for which he proposed five basic elements. These are nodes, paths, districts, edges and landmarks. These elements are used by an individual to describe or depict an urban environment. The relationship between human and environment is a mutual one, and city is a physical place where this relationship takes place. Therefore, image of the city forms on a personal basis and may vary depending on the relationship and communication that an individual has with the city. In other words, such image is based on cognitive interaction between the urban place and its users. Moreover, Lynch stated that although there are similarities between identity and image in concept, they differ from each other significantly in one aspect: image is based on a personal assessment whereas identity relies on a collective assessment.

Zukin tried to understand the city by employing the symbolic language that she created. She argued that the city, itself, is the symbolic content of the cultural system. It can be noted that Zukin delved into an anthropological conceptualization of city. The first important dimension in this conceptualization is multiculturalism. The second dimension is the security issue emerged as a means to cope with cultural diversity and the third one is a place of symbols formed by all urban relations and the symbolic economy emerged as a result of this. (Zukin, 2000)

Jacobs and Fincher (2002) also studied the city as a symbolic content. By 1990s, they started defining cities under the theme of difference, which has influence on the urban approaches. In this context, different genders, races, nationalities and classes form the city. They analyzed cities as a whole of meanings and symbols as if they were written texts by turning them into a semiotic place. Soja (1989) is not only one of the geographers reformulating the conceptualization of space with Harvey which is put forward by Lefebvre, but also one of the most outstanding modern critical theoreticians owing to his conceptualization of city as a post-modern space. Soja (1989) stated that his purpose was to ensure spatiality of historical account. He aimed to read time from the perspective of space. According to Soja (1989), post-modern human geography should continue to be constructed as an initiative in order to rewrite and reposition the meaning and significance of space for a radical deconstruction, past accounts, history and historical materialism. As a result of globalization processes, the transformation of cities into a multicultural and identity structure and awareness of this is an important feature of today's cities, and the dominant paradigm is directed towards this situation.

CONCLUSION

Many theories have been developed on formation and development of urban spaces throughout the history. This study has focused on explaining what different perspectives are involved to interpret cities and urban spaces, as well as showing that such interpretations were approached with the adoption of rational methods within the bounds of possibility. Urban spaces can be investigated from various perspectives owing to urban



theories. More than one perspective can be also used for the solution of the same problem, depending on the quality of the problem. Therefore, it is not always possible to identify clear borders between perspectives. Yet, regardless of its size and scale, human factor should not be disregarded, since urban spaces are created for human just as other places are. What transforms an existing space/volume into a place is the ways in which it is used and experienced by human.

The grounds of urban space theories vary in concept. Most notable impact of urban theories is that they illustrate how deficient a social theory would be without consideration of places and that humans do not only make changes to the places by forming relationships with them just like they do with each other but also are affected by them, making the places an integral part of social processes. Throughout the study, a clearer quality that the dialogue between modern definitions of city, social processes involved in city and spatial structure have acquired owing to the development of inter-disciplinary approach and adoption of multi methodology is tried to be explained.

Many theories have been developed in relation to formation and development of urban spaces so far. Developers of such theories have been architects, urban designers, urban planners or specialists from various disciplines including sociology and history. When all the different approaches towards urban theories are taken into consideration, the least common basis turns out as the fact that city is a total of social, economic, spatial and cultural processes taking place within a city and as the importance of human factor. In modern cities, any kind of difference/inequality coexist without seeing and minding each other despite the physical contact, which makes these spaces not only home to freedom but also to alienation and existence, as well as loneliness. The said rich possibilities that the cities offer, make their definition and perception at the same level of richness through an interdisciplinary openness and plurality essential.

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