

# **Part I**

# **Theory**



# The Process of Urban Social Change

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Societies only exist in time and space. The spatial form of a society is, therefore, closely linked to its structure and urban change is intertwined with historical evolution. This formula, however, is too general. To understand cities, to unveil their connection to social change, we must determine the mechanisms through which spatial structures are transformed and urban meaning is redefined. To investigate this question based on the observations and analyses presented in this book, we need to introduce some fundamental elements of a general theory of society that underlie our analyses. But for these elements to be considered as the effective tools used in our research, we must first be more precise about our research questions.

Our goal is to explain how and why cities change. But what are cities? Can we be satisfied with a definition like, spatial forms of human society? What kind of spatial forms? And when do we know that they are cities? At which statistical threshold of density or population concentration does a city become a city? And how are we sure that, in different cultures and in diverse historical times, we are referring to the same social reality on the basis of a similarly concentrated, densely settled and socially heterogeneous population? Urban sociologists of course, have repeatedly asked the same questions without ever producing a fully satisfactory answer (Castells, 1968, 1969; Fischer, 1976; Saunders, 1981). After all, it seems a rather academic debate, too far removed from the dramatic issues currently arising from the worldwide reality of urban crisis. And yet it seems intellectually dubious to under-

take the explanation of change in a social form whose content we ignore or whose profile could be left to a category that is ill-defined by the Census Bureau. In fact, our basic theoretical perspective supersedes the question by studying the city from the viewpoint of historical change.

Let us begin, at the risk of appearing schematic, with the clearest possible statement. Cities, like all social reality, are historical products, not only in their physical materiality but in their cultural meaning, in the role they play in the social organization, and in people's lives. The basic dimension in urban change is the conflictive debate between social classes and historical actors over the meaning of urban, the significance of spatial forms in the social structure, and the content, hierarchy, and destiny of cities in relationship to the entire social structure. A city (and each type of city) is what a historical society decides the city (and each city) will be. Urban is the social meaning assigned to a particular spatial form by a historically defined society. Two remarks must immediately qualify this formulation:

1 Society, as we will discuss a few pages below, is a structured, conflictive reality in which social classes oppose each other over the basic rules of social organization according to their own social interests. Therefore the definition of urban meaning will be a process of conflict, domination, and resistance to domination, directly linked to the dynamics of social struggle and not to the reproductive spatial expression of a unified culture. Furthermore, cities and space

being fundamental to the organization of social life, the conflict over the assignment of certain goals to certain spatial forms will be one of the fundamental mechanisms of domination and counter-domination in the social structure.<sup>1</sup> For instance, to achieve the establishment of the city as a religious centre dominating the countryside is to obtain the material support for the exploitation of agricultural surplus by exchanging symbolic legitimacy and psychological security for peasant labour. Or, in another instance, declaring the city a free space for common trade and political self-determination is a major victory against feudal order. Thus, the definition of the meaning of 'urban' is not the spatialized xerox copy of a culture, nor the consequence of a social battle fought between undetermined historical actors in some intergalactic vacuum. It is one of the fundamental processes through which historical actors (social classes, for instance) have structured society according to their interests and values.

2 The definition of urban meaning is a social process, in its material sense. It is not a simple cultural category in the vulgar sense of culture as a set of ideas. It is cultural in the anthropological sense, that is, as the expression of a social structure, including economic, religious, political, and technological operations (Godelier, 1973). If the city is defined by the merchants as a market it will mean street fairs and intense socializing, but it will also mean the commodification of economic activity, monetarization of the work process, and the establishment of a transport network to all potential sources of goods and to all markets that maybe expanded. In sum, the historical definition of urban is not a mental representation of a spatial form, but the assignment of a structural task to this form in accordance with the conflictive social dynamics of history.

We define *urban meaning as the structural performance assigned as a goal to cities in general (and to a particular city in the inter-urban division of labour) by the conflictive process between historical actors in a given society*. We will examine below how societies

are themselves structured around modes of production. Thus, the definition of urban meaning might vary both with different modes of production and with different outcomes of history within the same mode of production.

The historical process of defining urban meaning determines the characteristics of urban functions. For instance, if cities are defined as colonial centres, the use of military force and territorial control will be their basic function. If they are defined as capitalist machines, they will subdivide their functions (and sometimes specialize them in different cities) between the extraction of surplus value in the factory, the reproduction of labour power, the extraction of profit in urbanization (through real estate), the organization of circulation of capital in the financial institutions, the exchange of commodities in the commercial system, and the management of all other operations in the directional centres of capitalist business. So we define *urban functions as the articulated system of organizational means aimed at performing the goals assigned to each city by its historically defined urban meaning*.

Urban meaning and urban functions jointly determine urban form, that is, the symbolic spatial expression of the processes that materialize as a result of them. For instance, if the city is defined as a religious centre, and if the ideological control by the priests over the peasant population is the function to be accomplished, permanence and stature, mystery, distance, and yet protection and a hint of accessibility will be crucial elements in the buildings and in their spatial patterning in the urban landscape. Few architects believe that the skyscrapers in downtown America only concentrate the paperwork of giant corporations: they symbolize the power of money over the city through technology and self-confidence and are the cathedrals of the period of rising corporate capitalism (see Tafuri, 1973; also 1968). Yet they also perform a number of crucial managerial functions, and are still major real estate investments in a space that has become a commodity in itself. There is

naturally, no direct reflection of the urban meaning and function on the symbolic forms, since semiological research has established the complex derivations of the language of formal representation and its relative autonomy in relationship to their functional content (Burlen, 1975; also Raymond et al., 1966; Dunod, 1971). In any event, we are not arguing that the economy determines urban forms but, rather, we are establishing a relationship and hierarchy between historical meaning, urban functions, and spatial forms. This is entirely different as a theoretical perspective. In certain urban forms, such as the early medieval cities for instance, the symbolic element of the cathedral was the major factor structuring urban form and meaning. But this was because the urban meaning was based upon the religious relationship between peasants, lords and God, with the Church as intermediary (Panofsky, 1957).

Furthermore, urban forms are not only combinations of materials, volumes, colours, and heights; they are, as Kevin Lynch has taught us, uses, flows, perceptions, mental associations, systems of representations whose significance changes with time, cultures, and social groups (Lynch, 1960, 1972). For our purpose, the only important question is to emphasize both the distinctiveness of the dimension of urban forms and its relationship to urban meaning and urban functions.

We therefore define as *urban form the symbolic expression of urban meaning and of the historical superimposition of urban meanings (and their forms) always determined by a conflictive process between historical actors.*

In any particular situation, cities are shaped by three different, though inter-related, processes:

- 1 Conflicts over the definition of urban meaning.
- 2 Conflicts over the adequate performance of urban functions. These conflicts can arise both from different interests and values, within the same accepted framework, or from different approaches

about how to perform a shared goal of urban function.

- 3 Conflicts over the adequate symbolic expression of urban meaning and (or) functions.

*We call urban social change the redefinition of urban meaning. We call urban planning the negotiated adaptation of urban functions to a shared urban meaning. We call urban design the symbolic attempt to express an accepted urban meaning in certain urban forms.*

Needless to say, since defining urban meaning is a conflictive process so is urban planning and urban design. But the structural role assigned to a city by and through the social conflict over its meaning, conditions the functions and symbolism through which this role will be performed and expressed.

Urban social change conditions all aspects of the urban praxis. The theory of urban social change therefore lays the ground for any other theories of the city.

Where does such a change come from? And how do we know that there is a change?

The crucial question here is to reject any suggestion that there is a predetermined direction of urban change. History has no direction, it only has life and death. It is a composite of drama, victories, defeats, love and sorrow, joy and pain, creation and destruction. We now have the possibility of enjoying the most profound human experiences as well as the chance to blow ourselves up in a nuclear holocaust. We can make the revolution with the people or trigger the forces of revolutionary terror against the same people. If we therefore agree that the outmoded ideology of natural human progress must be abandoned, we must also proceed similarly with urban social change. Thus by change we refer simply to the assignment of a new meaning to the urban realm or to a particular city. What does new mean? On the one hand, the answer is specific to each historical context and to each city we have observed, but on the other, the answer is related to a more general and theoretical assessment of social transformation. So we

must wait a few pages before settling this key question.

A major conclusion can, however, far be drawn from our definition of urban social change: its assessment is value free. We do not imply that change is improvement, and therefore we do not need to define what improvement is. As we have said before, our theory is not normative, but historical. We want to understand how processes happen that the most humanistic urban designers, such as Allan Jacobson and Kevin Lynch, would find positive for the well-being of our own environment. Although we generally agree with their criteria, our purpose is not to define the good city. It is rather to understand how good and evil, heaven and hell are produced by the angels and devils of our historical experience (our own feeling being that the devils are likely to be more creative than the angels).

Urban social change happens when a new urban meaning is produced by one of the four following processes (all of them conflictive and in opposition to one or more historical actors):

- 1 The dominant class in a given society, having the institutional power to restructure social forms (and thus cities) according to its interests and values, changes the existing meaning. We call this urban renewal (for cities) and regional restructuring (for the territory as a whole). For instance, if the South Bronx is deliberately abandoned, or if the Italian neighbourhoods of Boston are transformed into a headquarters city, or if some industrial cities (like Buffalo, New York) become warehouses for unemployed minorities, then we have instances of urban renewal and regional restructuring.
- 2 A dominated class accomplishes a partial or total revolution and changes the meaning of the city. For instance, the Cuban revolution deurbanizes La Habana (Eckstein, 1977), or the workers of Glasgow in 1915 impose housing as a social service, not as a commodity (Melting, 1980).
- 3 A social movement develops its own meaning over a given space in contradiction to the structurally dominant meaning, as in the feminist schemes described by Dolores Hayden (1981).
- 4 A social mobilization (not necessarily based on a particular social class) imposes a new urban meaning in contradiction to the institutionalized urban meaning and against the interests of the dominant class. It is in this case that we use the concept of urban social movement: a collective conscious action aimed at the transformation of the institutionalized urban meaning against the logic, interest, and values of the dominant class. It is our hypothesis that only urban social movements are urban-orientated mobilizations that influence structural social change and transform the urban meanings. The symmetrical opposite to this hypothesis is not necessarily true. A social change (for instance the domination of a new class) might or might not change the urban meaning; for example, a working class revolution that keeps the role of a city as the site for a centralized non-democratic state apparatus.

At this point of our analysis, it becomes necessary to make explicit some of our assumptions on social change to be able to establish more specific links between the change of cities and the change of societies. This task requires a brief and schematic detour into the hazardous land of the general theory of social change.

#### NOTE

- 1 Anthony Giddens insists on the mistaken neglect by the theories of social change of the fundamental time-space dimensions of human experience as the material basis for social activity (see Giddens, 1981, especially pp. 129–56).

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