

Factors influencing social change in the city



In society today, how does a city's heterogeneity and growth of its population help to generate a new and distinctive city life? This essay explores the argument that social change in the city is a result of the growth of its population and its heterogeneity. This essay would also examine the impact of urban growth on cities. I will first introduce the sociological definitions of social change and urbanization then, I will be discussing perspectives of some sociological 'thinkers' towards city life. Subsequently, I shall examine the impact of heterogeneity and growth of population in a city by citing prevalent examples. In conclusion, I shall summarize the impact of urban growth on cities and its prevalence on city-dwellers in our society today.

Social change in the city and urbanisation

Social change refers to the transformation of culture and social institutions over time. (Macionis & Plummer, 2005) Social change is diverse and multiple with different social outcomes affecting different groups of people. Thus, different groups of people experience social changes differently. For example, the poor may not be able to benefit from the introduction of electricity as they do not have access to such resources due to their financial status. (Jordan & Pile, 2002)

Urbanisation basically refers to the social process whereby cities become bigger and more concentrated with the migration of people; or in other words, a process in which a place becomes a 'city'. (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2005)

From these definitions, we can clearly see the close relationship between urbanization and social change; in which social change occurs when urbanization takes place. To illustrate this, let us look at football in the 1900s. Back then, anyone associated with football were considered violent and thuggish due to some unruly behaviour of supporters during matches, which has even contributed to some scenes of violence (i. e. Liverpool team supporters ‘ attacked’ Juventus team supporters in the 1980s). As a result, football had a very negative public image and people associated with the game could not even wear their jerseys out for fear of being ‘ labelled’ or ‘ looked at differently’. However, the football scene today has evolved due to the influx of people from diverse backgrounds. Soccer players today are idolized and considered as celebrities to even ‘ endorse’ popular products (for example, Adidas, Nike, etc). Young boys are also influenced by football as it is viewed as a sport to show off their ‘ masculinity’. (Audiovisual materialxxx,??) This shows a social transformation and shift in the mindsets of people as urbanization takes place.

Some sociological ‘ thinkers’ accounts on city life

There were three eye-witnesses to account for social change, namely, Georg Simmel, Louis Wirth and Robert Park.

Georg Simmel observed how urban life shapes people’s attitudes and behaviour. His observation of Berlin, particularly of people’s changing consciousness noted a ‘ metropolitan personality’ among city-dwellers. He noted that people kept their distance with each other due to the money economy evident in the city, however, people also became tolerant and even

more sophisticated as a result of urbanization, hence, the ' metropolitan personality'. (Jordan & Pile, 2002)

Louis Wirth reasoned that large dense, heterogeneous populations created a distinctive new way of city life characterized by impersonality, self-interest and tolerance of people's differences, thus, urbanities become ' cultural hybrids'. He also acknowledged that urban life may not always be harmonious it could also be antagonistic and conflictual. (Macionis & Plummer, 2005)

Robert Park on the other hand, viewed cities as a site to facilitate greater social freedom, which could also lead to potential social disorders. (Jordan & Pile, 2002)

Impact of heterogeneity and growth of population in a city

Heterogeneity or the ' mixing' up of people and growth of population has impacted the city life both positively and negatively.

For instance, if we were to examine the history of Josephine Baker, the African-American dancer whose career took her from St Louis, to New York, to Paris ; we could see different variations of social mobility through the different places, and also, that class improvement is not rigid. One's life chances and quality of life in a city can improve the same way Baker's did. Baker grew up in poverty and harsh living conditions and faced racial discrimination however she eventually became a popular celebrity as she left her country for work. (Jordan & Pile, 2002)

This example clearly illustrates Simmel's, Wirth's, and Park's theory of urbanization that cities are intense sites of social change which offers possibilities for social mobility by interfering with clear-cut social stratification.

In Simmel's observation, we realize that the blasé attitude of people in the city has enabled Baker to climb up the social ladder. In Wirth's theory, we can see that Baker was socially accepted due to the urbanites tolerance of people's differences. Through Park, we could clearly relate that social mobility was possible in the city due to social freedom that existed.

Friedrich Engels and Harvey Zorbaugh on the other hand, observed city life through the lens of Manchester (1845) and Chicago (1929) respectively.

Engels zoomed into the physical space of the city and noted the city as being crowded, disorganized, dirty and smelly. He felt that the interrelationship between the bourgeoisies and the proletariats created class conflicts within cities. Zorbaugh on the other hand, examined how diverse groups of people come together and live. He viewed city life as cosmopolitan, hybrid and confused. He also observed that the urban-dwellers were 'many-tongued', or were able to speak several languages due to the immigration of people from diverse backgrounds into the city. On the other hand, he also noted that family life in the city was broken and disorganized due to the influx of individuals from diverse backgrounds in the city. (Jordan & Pile, 2002) From this, it is clear that both Engels and Zorbaugh emphasized that it was "hard to see" in cities, possibly due to the heterogeneity and size and density of the population, which in turn leads us back to the works of Wirth.

Hence, heterogeneity and the growth of population in a city have resulted in many positive and negative impacts. Baker's story shows how small-scale 'micro' change has large-scale 'macro' angles in society (especially on one's social freedom); showing a positive impact. It also shows a negative aspect to it, especially through the portrayal of Baker's childhood, as the whites 'attacked' the blacks as they tried to get away. Engels and Zorbaugh's account, describes both positive and negative impacts of urban growth in cities.

Conclusion : City-dweller's in today's societies

Cities are viewed as sites of social change, which carries both positive and negative aspects to it. Heterogeneity and growth of a city's population contribute to that "urban, city life" that we are experiencing today. We should also bear in mind that, this 'mixing' up of migrants in a city can lead to fierce and even violent antagonisms. For instance, in Singapore, between Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) government and some, mainly foreign critics, who created some criticism that policies made by the government are "innately hostile, unwarranted and based on preconceived ideas rather than the actual situation", there are also some endemic misunderstandings concerning the "banning" of chewing gum. The practice of chewing gum is not actually illegal, only importing it for sale is illegal. (Diane & Milne, 2002). This shows a negative aspect of heterogeneity.

In addition, a city allows chances of social mobility for people to move up the social hierarchy. For instance, in Singapore, marriage to a person belonging to another race or religion or caste seems to be socially accepted these

days. In 2006, the proportion of Indian men who marry outside their race was at 36%, and for Malay men and Chinese women at 22.5% and 7.6% respectively. Intermarriage is viewed as an evidence for integration, which occurs in a city like Singapore, and it also, shows a narrowing of social distance between the different ethnic groups in Singapore. It is also evident that “we’re quite racially blind. It’s the mothers who sometimes insist that the brides be from the same race”. (Tan, 2010) This clearly shows that Simmel’s perception of a ‘metropolitan personality’ is dying out in cities like Singapore, however, it also agrees with Park’s and Wirth’s observations that urban life may not always be harmonious, and that eventually people’s lives are still guided by social division and inequality.

Personally, as an urbanite myself, I can see that the city that facilitates social freedom, though at times, people’s lives are still guided by social division and inequality to a certain degree. I can also conclude that the impact of urbanization results in social change which is heterogeneous, diverse and multi-faceted as discussed in this essay. Simply put, social change may be experienced differently by different people, within a single city.

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