

Smart city

Sociology



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As an unprecedented proportion of world populations find themselves living in cities, it is beyond question that initiatives such as the global TheSmarterCity. com are invaluable. By observing and sharing how other urban centers have faced the challenges of city planning, participants can design more and more efficient social systems. The website for Smarter Cities is very effective in illustrating the common facets of social systems by choosing a user friendly and easily understandable model of an urban center. The manner in which the major players in a discrete and sustainable social system are clearly depicted in one easy to perceive city map allows visitors to piece together the separate parts that create a holistic social system. One can clearly picture how physical systems (Traffic and Energy and Utilities), and technical systems (Communications and Energy and Economic Development) interact to provide an ecosystem for the human animal. While Smarter Cities has not overly complicated the social system it presents by limiting the number of components and processes it includes, it does effectively capture the complicated and interconnected nature in which inputs and outputs work together in their various functions. Initially, though I found the overview provided in each wheel a little vague and abstract, I began to see how things could disparate components could " gel" together when I explored the Social Services wheel and it summed up very neatly how social services case workers could benefit tremendously from a coordinated and integrated electronic system that delivered comprehensive profiles of individual clients. It became abundantly clear to me how this sort of holistic access to information, accompanied by the elimination of paper trails and service gaps, could benefit contemporary societies immensely. So while things were a little unclear to me on a macro level, as soon as the wheels got

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into specifics regarding actual programs that can be implemented, it became very clear to me how they worked on the micro and individual level. By engaging urban participants in coordinated collectives and cooperative activities, Smarter Cities shows how the small scale (micro-sociological in nature) can inform the grander macro-sociological apparatus of the city-state and their functions. The example of Alameda County under the Social Services wheel was particularly eye-opening in how different institutions pooled resources (under an IBM platform of tools and aids) from welfare systems, adult and aged systems, child care systems, etc. to bring together five systems that would allow case workers to tailor services to particular clients. The new "super" system even allowed caseworkers to draw connections between different clients by using common addresses and telephone records to detect linkages that facilitated more efficient aid deliveries. Wow. In the Education Wheel, I quickly realized the importance of "culture" in urban planning. I was also met with aspects of "social systems," "class structure and social stratifications in the education children obtained. Teachers expressed how they tailored their lessons to be accessible via mobile phones, laptops, mp3 players, notebooks, and tablet devices, this was a clear reflection of how Communications and Energy and Utilities might change the culture of learning and accessibility to learning materials. Separate processes and multiple factors that were turned by the one wheel not on the Smarter Cities map, the human wheel (a wheel which permeates all their wheels), came together. We zoomed in from above, as if landing in a plane, as if transported by some Communications gizmo that zapped people about, and boarded a school bus. From the macro of a world-encompassing eye, we found ourselves on a bus, being deposited neatly in time for class.

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Then we witnessed the children in micro, and how city youth may experience frequent migration, urban congestion and crime, and lack of parental supervision. We are privy to how educators came together to set benchmarks, mapped to match both local as well as national standards. Thus, micro meets macro again, social systems reveal patterns and reveal how differentiated groups and "cultures" responds to structural stimuli. In some instance, we see how fortunate (and unfortunate) individuals respond to the increasing travel permitted by their dynamic wheels of Traffic, Rail, and Airports. We also see how the "social institutions" of government, economics, and family interact inform the Education Wheel. We see how all are both together with components of the Communications Wheel in which data silos are updated cost effectively, how viability and sustainability is attained with constant adjustments made by "social institution", their system never sleeps, all its eyes stay open. We can also surmise how different wheels, institutions, and maps maybe be established by variations in the manner in which its components function; as per a "functional perspective, " social components and systems vary in response to the biospheres and ecospheres they inhabit. The government, or state, provides education for the children of the family, which in turn pays taxes on which the state depends to keep itself running. Each aspect of society is interdependent and every single one contributes its own unique share, each one carries its own load, and holds together the fabric of the whole, functioning almost like a kindly machine. 2 The different wheels I explored were the Communications Wheel, the Education Wheel, the Social Services Wheel, and the Traffic Wheel. As I live in Dallas, I am especially touched by the last one particularly. While I witnessed how Communications and data

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enable those in Traffic to form templates to combat traffic, pollution, and even crime, I am dismayed by evidence that points to a social system, to institutions that do not cater to the economically disadvantaged.

SmarterCities opened my eyes to how in Dallas, it seems there are few provisions made for those that need late-night public transportation. It is no surprise that most Dart Stations in the city house the vast majority of the urban homeless. The Rail and Traffic Wheels in Dallas, Texas bear testament to the fact that the key idea of Conflict Theory may well be alive today.

Moreover, if we consider how the national wheels of Economic Development have been churning widespread protests, demonstrations, rallies, arrests, and employee walkouts in Walmart, it becomes apparent that there is indeed a need for changes in the social order. The key ideas of "social order" (aka "social solidarity") and "social stratifications" were two other key ideas I focused on. It seems that as people from certain cultures, guided by similar economic interests, banded together to represent their cause. While this meant in some cases Papa John's patrons refusing to buy pizza from them anymore due to their stand on employee health-insurance, in other cases it meant large multinationals backing certain politicians in the recent elections. As millions were poured into a campaign which promised fewer social services, promised even to do away with PBS, youths with masks and a penchant for social transparency hacked into the bastions of the affluent and disabled their systems. Throught the lens SmarterCities, I see how my own city stumbles on its knees, how people help each at bus-stops at 2am, how someone wakes up a sleeping passenger to let them know their stop is next. But Walmart, Burger King, or IHop executives do not care how their employees get home after work in the middle of the night. It feels as if

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sometimes, those in the rarified atmospheres of the highest economic strata, fiscal moguls and financial potentates, band together to push everyone else down. They form select groups, cabals, which in the tradition of those that met at JPMorgan's Jekyll Island (Morgans, Rockefellers, and Vanderbilts) meet discretely to influence judges, senators, and congressmen. It became evident to me that the "social orders" defined by the possession of power and wealth, were clearly set in their strata to combat those that they perceived as outsiders. The key idea of "culture" also prefigures here. In an optimistic reading, it seems the social climate in the US has become one where more and more citizens are waking up to the fact the vast majority of national wealth should not lie in the coffers of a select few. The "culture" of technological activism has sprung groups like "Anonymous" who tear down financial and corporate veils with bytes and blogs. 3. As a sociologist, there is a great deal I would wish to change in my community. I work in the healthcare industry, and know many to have to rely on public transportation for their commute. I myself am fortunate enough to have a car, and try to help others with rides when I can, but sometimes I cannot believe the vast extent of the transportation problem we face in "inner-city" Dallas. The conditions at work are sometimes extremely difficult: our outdated hospice systems often make it difficult for us to efficiently perform our duties. After long shifts, you would think there might be a system to assist health care providers return home. I also know how many of my workplace colleagues are barely holding things together, barely paying their bills, and worrying about college educations for their children. Night after night, I have seen how certain health providers unwrap plan bread sandwiches, scraped together from home, as we treat people who have no health insurance and

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are suffering. As we help people knowing that many will probably not be able to afford the medicines our doctors will prescribe them. And we help them knowing that they will be back, that our system is simply putting band-aids on them, whereas they need surgery. After all this, and the memories we carry after our shifts are over, many have to face a rail/bus wheel that cares little for their comfort, or their safety. I want to bring this to the attention of our Nursing Union. Similarly, I think someone should be fighting for the poor, for them to be given critical healthcare therapies whether they can afford it or not. To better amplify our voices, to better organize our efforts to bring to public attention the needs we demand, as a sociologist I am well aware that we would benefit from Communication wheels to relay our plight. I am well aware that we need to convey our fears to those in the Public Safety wheels, to those steering the helms of Economic Development. We would need to punch them where it hurts, in electoral booths, in community and town hall meetings, in blogs and internet activism. As an admirer of Noam Chomsky, I am optimistic that with great technological networks and better tools to broadcast the revolution, the fires of the "hacktivist" culture can indeed burn down social systems that are no longer acceptable. In truth, they never were, but just as they evolve, we, those that stand against, have also evolved, and will fight the good fight dictated by our place in the social strata.