THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF NEIGHBORHOODS AS URBAN SOCIAL SPACES

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ABSTRACT: *The urban neighborhood has traditionally been defined as an urban space where residents share a communal bond built upon social networks. The nature and geographical structure of social bonds, however, seems to be changing. This paper explores these changes, and identifies alternate ways for theorists to envision the urban neighborhood in a post-industrial era.*

In social science, the neighborhood has historically been characterized as "a defined area within which there is an identifiable subculture to which the majority of its residents conform (Johnston et al., 1994)." Implicit in this definition is that residents share a socio-cultural bond that unifies a neighborhood. The nature and geographical structure of social bonds, however, seems to be changing. Many American cities are in a state of transition from the industrial to the post-industrial city. The transition is reflected in high-speed travel and telecommunications. In order to investigate the transition of the neighborhood from an industrial to a post-industrial construct, it is useful to ask if the socially constructed space of urban residents coincides with the traditional definition of the neighborhood. I argue that the historic boundaries that confined the traditional neighborhood and social space of the contemporary residents do not coincide for most people. As a result of this change, it seems likely that traditionally defined urban neighborhoods no longer contain the areas over which individuals build their social networks. If traditional neighborhoods do not reflect meaningful areas to most residents then many efforts to revive neighborhoods, which depend upon relevance to inhabitants, may be doomed to failure and new strategies for increasing resident's welfare will have to be devised.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section will deal primarily with the traditional definition of neighborhood as it has come to be understood by sociologists and geographers.

The second section will critique urban theorists' traditional understanding of neighborhoods through use of contemporary social theory as well as empirical examples. With this critique I will illustrate that the traditional understanding of neighborhoods is not only incomplete, but may be flawed conceptually due to its inability to address issues pertaining to the changing roles of capital as well as social and physical space in the post-industrial city. In the third section I will use the critique of traditional neighborhood theory to establish a framework which is more applicable to the post-industrial city.

THE TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE URBAN NEIGHBORHOOD

The attempt to understand urban neighborhoods has plagued urban theorists for some time. On the most basic level traditional neighborhoods are made up of individuals who share meaningful relationships, but there are certainly more elements that make up the substance of a neighborhood. To urban scholars identifying the more obscure elements that comprise the social and physical make-up of a neighborhood is critical. Academics state that the way to understand the workings of the traditional neighborhood is not by excluding those neighborhoods that are somehow not traditional, but by incorporating those commonalities

that most urban neighborhoods share (Keller, 1968; Abrahamson, 1996; Litwak, 1970). Urban theorists traditionally argue that there are three essential components of the traditional neighborhood: distinctive status, cultural signifiers and place identification (Keller, 1968; Abrahamson, 1996; Litwak, 1970). Urbanists describe the first component of neighborhoods as a concentration of residents who share a distinctive status that is important to their identity (Cuba and Hummon, 1993; Lindstrom, 1997). This means that those people who are alike in some important way generally wish to live together. The individual chooses the group that shares a distinctive status (or dominant identity) with them (Abrahamson, 1996). This could mean wanting to live among wealthy neighbors, regardless of race or religion. Of course the other element of this is acceptance. Regardless of how you see yourself, if the neighborhood does not accept you, then you will not be part of the community.

The second characteristic of the traditional neighborhood is that specialized stores and institutions serve a role as cultural signifiers and are needed to provide localized support and some degree of identity for the neighborhood. Scholars suggest that for neighborhood and community to be conjoined there must be some type of space recognized by the entire community as a focal place. The focal place is considered a key in establishing the place-based identity of the residents (Abrahamson, 1996). Focal places serve many purposes. Among these purposes are a site for social interaction, community economic support and symbolic value (Lay, 1983). No matter what the purpose of the place, the result is the same; place-based identity. For example, a bookstore in a gay or lesbian neighborhood may serve as a symbolic center. It may rarely be used as a site for social interaction, but many of the residents may base the identity of the neighborhood upon it. In an Irish neighborhood, there many be many clubs that serve as focal places. These clubs may have little symbolic value, but they may be a venue for communication, socializing and economic support for the community. What is key, is that residents both in and out of the neighborhood will distinguish the clubs as Irish. These clubs will enable both members of the community and outsiders to identify the neighborhood as Irish. Of paramount importance is

that these establishments, either the bookstores or the clubs, are universally recognized. This helps to form and maintain the identity of the neighborhood by allowing and encouraging group interaction, defining the dominant culture and the building of place-based identity (Litwak, 1970).

The last characteristic cited by urban theorists is the strong tie that exists between the sense of identification of the residents and the physical space that the residents occupy (Keller, 1968). In other words, the neighborhood, its name, the roads that run through it, the shops and the houses, the churches and the services, the parks and the schools, all become elements of not only what the neighborhood is, but how the individuals who live within the neighborhood identify themselves. If an individual is from South Buffalo or from Beacon Hill, or from the Castro District, this conveys information about that person to other people in the metropolitan area. When the neighborhood collective identity is established, the sum becomes greater than its parts. Who you are and how you live becomes so strongly associated with a neighborhood that it forms a great deal of an individual's identity. This is an important component of urban theorists' traditional view of neighborhood. The idea is that a neighborhood is not simply the area that lies between four streets, but rather that the residents who live between those four streets define the neighborhood's identity as a distinct bounded place. If we are to take traditional neighborhood theory to its logical extent we see that individuals not only affect each other's identity, but affect the identity of the neighborhood, which in turn, affects individual identity. Thus, the individuals define the neighborhood, but then the neighborhood helps to define the individual.

THE TRADITIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD: A CRITQUE

What is apparent is that, due to their social and economic structure, traditional neighborhoods were important elements of the city. It is also apparent, however, that the social and economic structure of the city has changed in the post war

period. During the Roepke Lecture in Economic Geography L.S. Bourne (1991) states:

"Cities, and the broader urban systems of which they are a part, have inherited a staggering inventory of problems from this volatile postwar chronology. They must face the prospects of continued international economic ... rapid ethnocultural and demographic transformations, and, despite the overall prosperity of the 1980s, persistent poverty and social alienation. They are also confronted by an increasing deterioration of their build environments and natural ecosystems and by a widening deficiency of public and private infrastructure...The result is a mounting debt of socioeconomic inequalities, environmental degradation, and waste" (pg. 185).

The changes and turmoil Bourne discusses directly affects the way in which urban theorists must attempt to conceptualize the urban neighborhood. The neighborhoods that had been traditionally defined by three characteristics, distinctive status, cultural signifiers and place identification, must be contextualized within the new social and economic structures of the post-industrial city. Within this section, each of these three traditional neighborhood theories will be examined within the context of new studies and theoretical grounds. The goal of which is to create a framework for a post-industrial theory of neighborhoods that will be established in the next section.

Distinctive Status

Distinctive status has traditionally been dealt with in an unproblematic manner (e.g., Keller, 1968; Morrison, 1997). Case studies investigating the formation of neighborhoods, however, suggest that distinctive status can have a negative impact on residents. Studies suggest that far fewer residents have an equal of choice residential locations than traditional theory would lead us to believe (Tuckel and Maisel, 1998; Rosenbaum, 1994). Segregation and prejudice in general, is a reaction to an individual's "undesirable" distinctive status. Such undesirables tend to be grouped, by either the social or economic structure, within certain areas in a city. Examples of such trends range from MacFadyen's (1983) and Lin's (1998) research on "China"- towns to Tigges et al.'s (1998) research on African American ghettos.

Lin's research, not only discusses the concepts of isolation associated with distinctive

status, it expands the frequently homogeneous view of ghettoized areas held by traditional neighborhood theorists to include a more heterogeneous vision of residents. Lin describes "China"-towns as fragmented communities, not unified ones as their name might suggest. Within "China"-towns Lin describes diverse ethnic groups (not exclusively Chinese) and classes (not solely poor), that potentially have very little in common and have been forced to live together because of social and economic structures that restrain residential and employment opportunities for Asian Americans outside of a "China"-town (MacFadyen, 1983). There is however, another side to Lin's argument. Rather than viewing ethnicity solely as a liability that impedes socioeconomic and residential integration into American society, Lin presents a more nuanced picture of ethnicity. She views "China"-towns as a collective resource that is both enabling and exploitative. It creates opportunities for new immigrants such as the ability to learn English, and work in a non-discriminatory environment. Once these opportunities have been exhausted (the resident has learned English or is ready to move outside of a localized, exploitive, labor market), the isolation of the distinctive status still remains.

Though there seems to be some benefit to residential life in immigrant neighborhoods, the same can rarely be said for other ghettoized areas. This has been demonstrated most clearly within groups that have been spatially maginalized by the joint problem racial and class motivated segregation (Tigges et al., 1998). In their study Tigges et al. (1998) found strong evidence that poor African Americans are disadvantaged in nearly all measures of socialization. Their connections to non-ghetto society is weak in that they are substantially less likely than other groups to have a college-educated acquaintances. According to Tigges et al. (1998) some, but not all, of their disadvantage is due to the effect of race alone. Non-poor blacks also are more socially isolated than their white counterparts by all measures. Most importantly in their investigation of the social isolation thesis, they find that neighborhood poverty asserts an independent effect on access to social capital. They state that high neighborhood poverty severely reduces network size. Because network size is a major determinant of the probabilities of having

"mainstream" connections in that network. neighborhood poverty produces a cyclic effect: poverty leads to less mainstream contacts, which leads to a lower level of social capital, which leads to greater poverty.

These two examples, "China"-towns and African American ghettos provide context for the condition of those with distinctive status in post-industrial urban areas. What is clear is that urban theorists' traditional view of distinctive status is incomplete. Distinctive status has tended to be viewed as a defining factor between groups. However, the consequence of the separation of groups by ethnicity, race or sexuality has not been fully flushed out. Although, there is certainly a cannon of literature on racism, segregation, the underclass and ghettoization, it seems that this literature has not been fully incorporated within the academic understanding of neighborhood formation. If we as academics are to attempt to understand the role of neighborhoods in the post-industrial city, we must address the fact the few urban dwellers have complete choice in residential location. We must address the fact that frequently neighborhoods are formed, not on the basis of a "neighborly" way of life, but by outside forces that are intent in confining certain groups to a marginalized space.

Localized Identity, Cultural Signifiers and Place Identification

The role of identity as a building block in traditional neighborhood theory is based on two assumptions: (1) all members of a neighborhood share universally known cultural signifiers which encourage localized identity; (2) identity is consistently linked to place. I argue that both of these assumptions are problematic, due to the changes in urban structure (e.g. high levels of suburbanization) and the recognition of previously marginalized groups.

The first assumption has been called into question by numerous studies on groups maginalized within neighborhoods. These studies illustrate that neighborhoods, which were once considered homogeneous, have, under closer scrutiny been seen as far more diverse. An example of such a study is Valentine's (1995) study of "queer space."

It has generally been assumed that queer culture formed in neighborhoods in much the same way as any other specialized group. This assumption has increasingly been called into question by studies of maginalized gay and lesbian subcultures within oppressive urban environments. Valentine's (1995) study illustrates how cultural identity may exist in nearly invisible ways. Her study focuses on how certain types of music can become almost unperceivable cultural signifiers, except for those within marginalized groups. She examines the way that K.D. Lang's music creates a lesbian identity for establishments within oppressive urban environments. The establishment that plays Lang's music continues to have cultural significance in much the same way that an Irish club or Polish church might (i.e. as a symbolic or communal space). However, where the club or church may be a cultural signifier that is recognized by all, lesbian establishments are intentionally inconspicuous to those who are not part of the subculture. The music creates what Valentine calls "queer space", which embodies lesbian identities, although, due to the oppressive environment the space is kept secret. What is important though, is that the physical space is not hidden from view, only the perception of those outside of the queer community. The "queer space" still is imbued with placed-based identity (those who use the space tend to understand its meaning), yet this space is not universally recognized and therefore the perception of identity by the outside ceases to be important. Valentine's and other such studies question whether or not universal recognition of a cultural signifier is a necessary component for place-based identity. They illustrate that marginalized groups build place-based identity much the same way mainstream groups do, however they do so in such a way as to not be noticed by an oppressive environment.

In Valentine's example social oppression appears to be the dominant marginalizing force. However, the second assumption, that the consistent link of identity to space is somehow an essential component of neighborhoods, is problematic for economic reasons as well as social ones. Cultural groups that were traditionally urban in the industrial period have been suburbanizing at a rapid pace. As these groups have left the city, many cultural

signifiers that were once localized have regionalized. An example of this is my own research on the agglomeration of ethnic churches, restaurants, social clubs and specialty stores that has taken place in Worcester Massachusetts (Gibs, 1996). In Worcester, many of the ethnic Jewish, Polish and Russian populations have chiefly moved from older multifamily homes to wealthier suburban neighborhoods. In order to remain in business, the European ethnic stores have moved from their initial neighborhoods (now mostly populated by Asian and Latino groups) to an old Polish neighborhood, which is adjacent to an interstate highway and is accessible from the suburbs. Now instead of just shopping at local stores, residents make a weekly exodus from their suburban neighborhoods to the regional center for specialized goods and services.

This type of suburbanization and agglomeration is one example of how the traditional view of neighborhoods is not only problematic in terms of its insensitivities towards marginalized groups, but also in its inadequate vision of the post-industrial economy. I argue that where urban neighborhoods were based, in some part, on individual and place-based identity, as addressed earlier, the ethnic agglomeration mentioned above, is the commodification of cultural identity. Many of the ethnic cultural signifiers (clubs, shops, restaurants etc.) discussed above maintain the same name that they have for generations, but the ownership and product served has changed. For example, many of the grocers changed from stores that served basic needs with a small number of specialized ethnic goods to specialty shops which only sold products of an "ethnic" nature. This shift was the result of competition for suburban customers among the stores. As suburbanites increased their trips to this area, other services (which did not previously exist) became available, such as ethnic clubs and restaurants. The commercial strip began to grow out of a mere relocation of previously existing stores to a fully functioning commercial strip with a life unto itself. As the strip grew, so did the prices of the goods and services offered. In fact, the prices grew to such a level, that the current residents of the neighborhood (mostly Latino) could no longer afford them. Here we see cultural signifiers that do not, in

fact, reflect the current neighborhood at all, but a commodified version of urban ethnic life.

As of 1996 many of the residential units in the area had begun a process of gentrification. The primary target for development were young adults who wished to return to a more traditional version of urban life. This concept of the control of the economy over the social development of our neighborhoods, and thereby over the identity of their residents is simply not addressed by most traditional theories. This becomes problematic when applied to a discussion of the cyclical formation of place-based identity (i.e. the resident defines the neighborhood and the neighborhood in turn defines the resident). In the case of the commodification of place-based identity, the commercial structure defines the identity of the neighborhood. Individuals are able to react or adapt to the changes only if they are in a class of structural power, such as the young adults moving into the gentrified community.

THE POST-INDUSTRIAL "NEIGHBORHOOD"

In her book, *Space, Place and Gender* Doreen Massey (1994) states that in the post-industrial era the phenomena of 'time-space compression' appears to be gaining momentum. The effects of this could have staggering consequences on way in which individuals understand and identify with specific places. I argue that the acceleration of "time-space compression" has changed the way in which individuals with power over information technologies and automobiles, form the place-based identity that traditional theorists state is key in the formation of neighborhood. Related to this, I ascertain that the greater the level of mobility an individual possess, the less likely he will be to form an identity based upon a defined physical space. Rather, he is likely to form an identity based upon a non-spatial community. This argument is supported by Massey's suggestion that:

"One of the problems here has been the persistent identification of place with 'community'. Yet this is a misidentification. On one hand, communities can exist without being in the same place...On the other hand, instances of places housing single 'comminutes' in

the sense of coherent social groups are probably"...quite rare (pg. 153)

The non-spatial communities that I suggest are based upon social rather than physical space. When I refer to social space, I mean it in much the same way that Lefebvre (1991) defined spatial practice: a perceived space that is constructed by social interactions within the physical structure of the city. In other words, social space is constituted of the social contacts that an individual builds within the physical limitations of their lives. In this way, a person with a high level of mobility may maintain a broad social existence through use of a telephone, although they are physically distant from friends. Alternatively, an individual with a low level of mobility may live within an enormous urban area, but is physically constrained due to a lack of public transportation. These differences in social space are constructed because the effects of "time-space compression" vary in relationship to which social group has power over movement of individuals and the flows of information. In essence, those with power have the benefit of creating and maintaining non-spatial communities, whereas those without power remain bounded and isolated by the friction of space.

The non-spatial communities built identity in much the same way as traditional neighborhoods. Such social space can possess boundaries that reflect proximity just as physical space does. It is more likely, however, that a class or racial difference will causes such boundaries, in much the same way that the concept of distinctive status (as discussed earlier) can separate and/or isolate individuals. Within social space, cultural signifiers are also visible. For example, one shopper at the ethnic commercial strip in Worcester considers her shopping a

"Nice place to come and see friends...and meet new ones. Everyone knows everyone down here. And everyone knows why everyone is down here. This is almost as good as synagogue, or dinner parties at friends but it's more spontaneous, yah, know?" (Gibs, 1996, pg. 31)

Her social space is clearly spread about the metro-region. The shopping and synagogue (which are about 40 miles apart) are cultural signifiers for her as well as others. A Puerto Rican man said about the ethnic commercial strip:

"No, I don't go to those shops, you know, they're like those suburban women. They don't like Puerto Rican's over there. Besides, I can't afford anything" (Gibs, 1996, pg. 47).

So, although the Puerto Rican man's identity is very much isolated to the neighborhood space (he possess little power over mobility), he recognizes not only the separation of the physical spaces, but he recognizes how he has been separated by his own class identity.

The differentiation of social space between the Puerto Rican man and suburban woman is essential in understanding the future of urban neighborhoods. In the post-industrial era we may see a disturbing divergence between non-spatial and spatial communities. The non-spatial neighborhood will be made up of what Massey (1994) calls the "Jet-Setters". These are individuals with complete access to and control over information, transportation and capital. The "Jet-Setters" will be those who do not rely on the industrial economy for financial mobility. They will rely more and more on the flows information capital.

Spatial communities, however, will be much like those of the past. The residents of such a neighborhood will be isolated; there will be both social and economic marginalization of this population. This has clearly begun to happen. There has been an exodus of mid-skill, mid-pay jobs from urban areas (Wilson, 1997). In addition, there has been a reduction in the level of mobility of the urban poor. Without access to the mid-skill mid-pay that enabled past generations of urban residents to better themselves financially, the effects of time-space compression essentially confine the urban poor. They are stuck in a situation where there are 14 applicants for every person hired by places like McDonald's and less then one half of the urban population is employed (Wilson, 1997). If these trends persist we can assume that the price of labor will continue to decrease, worker exploitation will increase and the level of mobility for the urban poor will continue to contract.

CONCLUSION

It is widely known that the American city has undergone rapid deindustrialization over the past 50 years. This has led to radical changes in the social

and economic structure of cities. As a result of this change the traditional components of the city, the neighborhoods, have been altered. We, as urban theorists, used to view neighborhoods as unproblematic spaces made up of complicated but understandable elements. These elements were distinctive status, cultural signifiers and place identification. This unproblematic view with three complex, but understandable characteristics, however, is no longer useful.

The fundamental elements of urban neighborhoods have changed. Distinctive status, which has never been all together unproblematic, has led to isolation and marginalization of disenfranchised classes. Cultural signifiers have now become commodified to a degree that one must wonder if they represent culture or capital. Place identification is no longer even entirely relevant due to time-space compression. In fact, the concept of place itself becomes fuzzy, when all suburbs and all malls are essentially the same.

I began this paper with the following definition of neighborhood: "a defined area within which there is an identifiable subculture to which the majority of its residents conform (Johnston et al., 1994)." I stated that implicit in this definition is that residents share a socio-cultural bond that unifies a neighborhood. It has become clear that much of Johnston's definition is no longer accurate. Neighborhoods, even spatially based ones are certainly not a defined area. As Valentine and Lin showed successfully, there is certainly not one subculture to which all of the residents conform. The socio-cultural bond, which is repeated throughout neighborhood literature, appears not to exist, even in the most homogenous "China"-town.

In many ways this is due to rapid suburbanization, and the introduction of information technologies, leading to a relocation of capital from most post-industrial cities to suburbs. This removal of capital has created incredibly impoverished urban neighborhoods with thinning population and a decaying housing stock. The result, on a superficial level, is poor cities and wealthy suburbs. However, the story of the decline of urban neighborhoods is not simply one of rich and poor or black and white. It is more appropriate to investigate the new urban/regional power structures as a maginalizing

force. A force that drives some groups into near invisibility while it drives others to become an exploited, isolated, workforce trapped by a system, in need of cheap labor. While at the same time, this force allows a select few to control the mobility of individuals and the flows of information and capital as these few form placeless communities for a post-industrial age.

Where does this leave us as urban geographers? Massey (1994), Bourne (1991), Cuba and Hummon (1993), Geddes (1997), Wilson (1997) and others seem to think that urban America is beginning a massive transformation. The growth in the urban poor, the reduction in mobility, the increase in information and the widening disparity between the rich and the poor, are only symptoms of a much greater concern. Cities in the United States are shifting from an industrial era, and, as is true often of significant changes, we do not know the result of the shift. The key to understanding these changes will be knowing what to look for, and how to look for it. The notion that a neighborhood is a set of unproblematic social relationships locked in space and devoid of any capitalist influence is flawed. We as urban geographers must realize this if we are to understand what the next era will bring.

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