Revisiting:


Petra Kupfinger’s invitation to reflect on how publishing two of my papers in early issues of City & Society affected my thinking as an urban anthropologist was most welcome. The two papers in question are a description of a “homegrown” transit system, consisting primarily of owner-operated “microbuses,” that had evolved in Lima, Peru over the preceding two decades (Uzzell 1987) and a second piece (Uzzell 1990) that was part of a special issue of City & Society, guest-edited by Martha Reese and Art Murphy. The special issue grew out of a 1987 SfAA symposium on whether or not urban phenomena could fruitfully be thought of in terms of two contrasting planning styles: 1) power-based “coercive or formal planning” and 2) information-based “generative planning,” the latter of which I found more common in the relatively “informal” economic activities of poor people such as those described in the 1987 paper, as well as in the private lives of people in all socio-economic strata.

Those two papers pointed backward and forward to two other papers with many of the same questions. The earlier piece, published in Urban Anthropology (Uzzell 1974), had proposed a conceptual language that would treat institutional change as emergent from individual decision making. The later paper (Uzzell 1994) was a chapter in the book, Contrapunto, in which the editor, Kathy Rakowski took on the
herculean task of bringing together a diverse group to discuss and evaluate the “informal sector” concept itself.

The two City & Society papers hold the middle of a kind of tetrahedron of conceptual issues through which I, and I suspect many colleagues, were groping with very modest progress and great frustration. This sense of dissatisfaction began in graduate school soon after my relatively late arrival in anthropology and third world development, and the more I learned, the less competent I felt to grasp the latter. It seemed clear that we needed a new paradigm, but neither I, nor anyone I talked to, seemed to know where to look.

Luigi Pirandello died a year and a day before I was born, and I have always fancied that a conversation with him would have been priceless and life-changing. At the very least, the epistemological questions he raised in Six Characters in Search of an Author, and in his later theatrical and fictional work remain alive and relevant today. A former English major and theatre dilettante, I thought of Six Characters often during the time when I was publishing the City & Society papers. Now, I will take the opportunity to frame my remarks with several pesky problems (reduced here to six in deference to Luigi) that, in a sort of upside-down way, were playing in my mental theater in the 1970s and 1980s and, to a certain extent, now. Here they are, more or less in their order of appearance here.

1. Is there a significant difference between “micro-” and “macro-” cultural phenomena, or is the difference just a matter of scale or level of abstraction? If the latter, is it most useful to speak of relationships between levels of abstraction?

2. How does the news of cultural (linguistic, technical, attitudinal, paradigmatic) change get disseminated, received, and operationalized, and how do some new ways of behaving become dominant and customary?

3. What is it about new space, both literal and metaphorical, that opens up new possibilities for ways of thinking and otherwise behaving?

4. What are the epistemological problems of anthropomorphizing the clusters of behavior that we are calling institutions, sectors, classes, castes (investing them with volition); and when does it become appropriate to treat changes in customary behavior (including technology, aesthetics, presentation of self, language, states of mind, and manners) as an institution?

5. How much can be learned from the metaphorical extensions of bounded space as a breeding site for new forms of action and interaction?
6. If we do not anthropomorphize them, what happens when our fictional “parallel” institutions collide?

Micro-Macro and Frozen Institutions

In the mid-1960s, the Department of Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin, adopted a new policy of admitting graduate students with advanced degrees in disciplines other than anthropology and giving us during the first year what amounted to an undergraduate specialization in anthropology by means of an arduous “core” seminar team-taught by multiple faculty members. The result, probably as intended, was a great feast of information, intellectual energy and diversity, and tolerance of each others’ informational deficits and surpluses. At that time the department at UT-Austin, and indeed anthropology as a whole, was still emerging from its 19th century positivist beginnings. “Culture change” was still taught as a separate course, presumably because change was thought to be rare. Psychological anthropology was “personality and culture,” each of which was presented as knowable, durable, and “real.” “Cultural” institutions were as stable and tangible as Lincoln Logs. Nevertheless, closed systems were discussed, and visiting professor Robert Kozelka offered seminars for faculty and students on math modeling, including linear programming, game theory, information theory, and decision theories. Meanwhile, I audited courses in finite mathematics, calculus, and decision theory.

Another paradigmatic puzzle for me at the time was that “micro” and “macro” studies seemed to be held as intellectual oil and water, with the latter somehow superior to the former. An advantage of my relative ignorance was that I could not see why “institutions” should not be viewed as “emergent” from a system of individual actions, a la Adam Smith, although a language for talking about the two together did not seem to be readily available.¹

Accordingly, I took a leaf from my dissertation on pueblos jovenes in Lima (Uzzell 1972), and published it as the 1974 article in Urban Anthropology. “Emergence” was, of course, already in use, but I did not have concepts for going beyond that. The analytical framework described in the Urban Anthropology article was based on a problems-solving taxonomy, with each “problem” defining a taxon, or domain of possible actions for its solution. The probability that an individual would choose a particular “solution” was weighted by her/his experience, communication with others, perceived difficulty, likely outcome, the demonstration effects of others choosing that solution, and perceived costs and benefits. This learning aspect addressed questions two and three above about the dissemination of information about certain actions, so that some actions would be chosen more frequently than others.
Using this point of view during field work allowed me to focus on observation of, and participation in, the decision-making as it developed through social interaction, and the growth of popularity of this or that strategy, pointing toward future emergence of new institutions. It seemed appropriate to speak of a kind of evolutionary “institutionalization” of the new strategies as a cumulative (unconscious) reaction to inadequacies in the formal institutions.

Returning to Lima in 1983 to work on Hernando de Soto’s study of the informal economy of Lima (de Soto 1986), I was gratified to see that, at least in the case of public transportation and housing, I had guessed right in the Urban Anthropology article about the coming institutionalization of what were now being called “informal” strategies. The “Homegrown Mass Transit System” article (Uzzell 1987) described what I understood as a case of institutional emergence, in this instance, an alternative to the “formal” transportation institution(s), which had grown moribund. The “microbus comité” was treated as the operational core of the newly emergent institution.

Even though I had learned from Henry Selby, chair of my dissertation committee, about using linear programming to model cultural processes, and I was aware of Prigogine’s work (Prigogine and Stengers 1984), I nevertheless remained ignorant of the developments elsewhere with non-linear processes. The term “complex adaptive systems” (cas) was still over my horizon.

Functional Spaces, Planning, and Cultural Change

_Pueblos jovenes_ in Lima were geographically defined spaces with legal, political, economic, and sub-cultural connotations in their boundaries. These spaces had been carved out of previously defined urban or rural space, by a variety of processes, including agreements with previous owners, actual or faux invasions, or government fiat (Collier 1976). These residential spaces generated both needs, such as transportation and urban services, and opportunities, such as employment in construction or sites for clandestine manufacturing. In these and many other ways, they served as a kind of core of cultural change in the city.

Paradoxically, while the residents saw the _pueblos jovenes_ as a solution, the Peruvian elite saw them as a problem. Legislation passed in the 1960s encouraged integration of the _pueblos jovenes_ into the existing formal housing institutions. The promise was that if residents arrayed their homes in grids, built them of brick and concrete, and acquired urban infrastructure, they would be rewarded with titles to their property, which they could then use as collateral for business loans and other
purposes. Even in 1983, only a relatively few titles had been awarded, and despite strong urging from Hernando de Soto in the late 1990’s, the rate of entitlement was slow. Ironically, the government’s coercive planning backfired, creating an impasse, during which the alternative institutions could continue to evolve. In the long hiatus, essential activities of building, transporting, manufacturing, provisioning, and trade (and political activities), continued to require continuous hands-on planning, which I suspect is a condition for rapid socio-economic evolution.

Noticing the apparent centrality of planning in the growth of the informal sector, Murphy and I invited a group of colleagues to evaluate the notion of formal and informal planning styles for describing urban situations where formal and informal sectors co-exist. That led to the symposium at the 1987 SfAA meetings, which in turn, led to the special issue of City & Society in 1990.

Sectors and the Boundaries of Institutionalized Behavior

Both of my City & Society papers dealt with the process of two-sector (or informal sector) development, so that when Kathy Rakowski began lining up contributors for her book on what she characterized as “the informal sector debates,” she invited me to contribute. Meanwhile, de Soto had introduced me to the work of institutional economists, such as Coase (1988; 1992) and North (1995), and particularly to the notion of “transaction costs,” which I now saw as a way to interpret the inter-sectoral dynamics of two-sector economies as a contest for control of transaction costs. In the paper (Uzzell 1994), I used the two planning styles as a vantage point for asking whether or not it was possible to reconcile the paradoxes.

The Role of City & Society

I am grateful to City & Society for bringing the two articles to the public, inviting comments on thinking that had already taken place and pointing to new thinking that evolved from the discussions. The special issue on planning styles was especially welcome, because it went beyond the original symposium, both by giving the original participants a chance to rethink and revise, and because additional contributors joined us. Above all, Reese and Murphy hammered out an exceptionally strong introduction to the issue that helped to ground the discussion. Luckily, Alvin Wolfe, then editor of City & Society, hired text editor Mary Floyd to work her magic on the issue, and she proved so
adroit with the language and adept at making us parsimonious, that I wondered at times if I should offer her joint authorship of my paper.

If the CAS paradigm (see for example Cilliers 1998; Holland 1996; 1998; Kochugovindan and Vriend 1998; Lewin 1999; Sawyer 2005; Waldrop 1992) and the new science of networks (Barabási 2002) had been available to us, we would have had a far more flexible, powerful, and elegant language to work in. Be that as it may, my debt to City & Society is that it secured a space to play in until the new paradigm that would satisfy the Pirandellian questions was ready to appear.

Note

Years later, I learned that the economics department at UT-Austin had been a bastion of institutional economics during the 1920s and 1930s, but I saw no sign of that when I was a graduate student.

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