The Location of Culture: The Urban Culturalist Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

This article is less about the culture of cities than it is about the ways urban sociologists look at, and away from, the culture of cities. In what follows, I discuss a few important works that provide the foundation for a revitalized approach to researching and interpreting urbanism. It is a perspective that is separate and distinct from the traditional Chicago School, the neo-Marxian Urban Political Economy approach, and the postmodernist Los Angeles School. Advocates refuse to cast off culture as a mere by-product of economics and politics and acknowledge the important relationship that exists between culture and the places where shared meanings are negotiated, constructed, and reconstructed. The persons who created, and are currently creating, the urban culturalist perspective collectively consider culture worthy of serious empirical and analytical attention. As will be demonstrated below, this perspective recognizes cities as places of and for local sentiment, personal and collective identity construction, and community building. Cities, consequently, are not approached simply as forums for economic and political confrontations but as places rich with meaning and value for those who live, work, and play in and near them.

Because “the city” remains, to paraphrase Lewis Mumford, the greatest stage on which we enact and reenact our cultural dramas (1938/1971), the study of urban cultures is an
important and worthwhile task. This article identifies a strand of scholarship primarily within urban sociology that purposely attends to the everyday dramas of urban life. The urban culturalist perspective is aimed at exploring the lived culture of cities and not merely their economic or political “structures” and demographic profiles.

The reasons for outlining this “school” are threefold: (1) to acknowledge ways of studying cities that have been underdeveloped and thereby locate potentially important units of inquiry; (2) to identify recent scholarship that both implicitly and explicitly follows in the footsteps of past works, recognize their “family resemblance,” and provide a comparative theoretical framework for analyzing persons’ lived experiences in and of urban places; and (3) to provide an intellectual foundation for urban sociologists who are interested in cultural questions and a resource for cultural sociologists interested in urban ways of life. Furthermore, I accept Michael Dear’s “invitation to a debate” published in the inaugural issue of City & Community (2002a). Urban culturalists, collectively, have a share in the debate, were silenced in Dear’s presentation of urban research, and challenge Dear’s (postmodern) assumptions about the current state of urban studies.

Presenting the urban culturalist approach, I will, first, discuss the odd analytical separation between culture and place and the consequences of such contentions. Next, the three dominant schools of thought in urban sociology are discussed in regard to their respective conceptions of culture. Then I will present a framework for recognizing and analyzing the connections between culture and place. The framework consists of six distinct but related areas of research: (1) images and representations of the city; (2) urban community and civic culture; (3) place-based myths, narratives, and collective memories; (4) sentiment and meaning of and for places; (5) urban identities and lifestyles; and (6) social interaction places and practices. Emblematic studies from each domain will be discussed, providing a solid foundation for the study of urban cultures. This perspective offers a clear window into the ways that people use places as part of their cultural repertoires and how those repertoires can affect a city’s social and physical environment. As such, place is recognized as an empirical mediator between individuals and institutions. Moreover, I hope to extend and strengthen Thomas Gieryn’s call for a “space for place in sociology” (2000) by showing how the study of place can direct urban sociologists to important questions and findings about the culture of cities.

MENDING THE RIFT BETWEEN CULTURE AND PLACE

“Culture” is one of the most elusive words in the English language (Eagleton, 2000). Nonetheless, people certainly do not shy away from talking about culture or using the term to identify themselves, their tastes, or their way of life. As Geoffrey Hartman notes in The Fateful Question of Culture, we are now surrounded by “camera culture, gun culture, service culture, museum culture, deaf culture, football culture . . . the culture of dependency, the culture of pain, the culture of amnesia, etc.” (1997: 30). On television, on the subway, and in lecture halls, “culture” is shorthand for a number of things, often with overlapping and sometimes contradictory meanings.

Our ideas about “place” are a bit easier to grasp and hold onto, but the definition of “place” is deceptively slippery and, like culture, is often taken as a given. Of course, all actions take place somewhere and everyone is always doing something somewhere. Yet, what persons do in certain places and at certain times is often very different from
what they do in other places and at other times. People act differently in a church on Sunday morning than they do in a football stadium on Sunday afternoon. Those differences are cultural, and so are the similarities. The perceptions and understandings of a church and a sports stadium are part of the same cultural repertoire or “tool-kit” (Hannerz, 1969; Swidler, 2001).

The ways that people make sense of the world they live in, once lived in, or hope to build are tied to the places where they practice their culture. Many observers of contemporary America doubt that people find significance in these places. Such places are assumed to be either mere backdrops, like movie sets, for the more “important” realms of political and economic discourse, or indications of Americans’ forged and fabricated culture. We are told today that the American landscape is littered with historical facades and “theme parks” that are devoid of spirit or authenticity (Zukin, 1991; Sorkin, 1992; Kunstler, 1996; Gottdeiner, 1997; Hannigan, 1998). These claims give rise to criticisms that American culture is superficial, depthless, fake, and full of kitsch (Jameson, 1984; Baudrillard, 1988; Sorkin, 1992; Clarke, 1997; Dear, 2000, 2002a, 2002b). If these critiques are right, then the places where we live, work, and play, and the culture we have made for ourselves in those places, are useless and probably even harmful, though we are not exactly sure why.

In a world where people and information move around frequently and at unprecedented speeds, some persons assume that the connection between culture and place has been severed beyond repair. “Classical” social theorists credited the rupture of that connection to the advent of cities and the supposedly impersonal and flimsy social life that cities create and nourish. European and American cities and the ways of life within them have been subjects of scorn and reproach. A good portion of studies done by both urban and culture specialists have kept that tradition alive and well (Lees, 1985; Lofland, 1998: Ch. 5).

The urban culturalist approach aims to rescue place and culture from the grave that so many theorists have consigned them. Even when we define culture as the way people make sense of the world and the symbolic and material products that express that way of life (Wuthnow, 1987; Schudson, 1989; Swidler, 2001; Spillman, 2002; Hall et al., 2003), which is the definition that is most consistent with the urban culturalist perspective, it is still necessary to find a “space” for place. Thomas Gieryn’s definition of place provides a good and succinct starting point. Places have three “necessary and sufficient features”: (1) a unique geographic location (irrespective of scale), (2) a material form (either natural or artificial or both), and (3) are invested with meaning and values (that are flexible and malleable between and within communities) (Gieryn, 2000: 464–465). As such, a place is only a place if it has culture makers—human beings—to create it, use it, live with it, live through it, and consider it significant. In turn, cultures need places to showcase their work and maintain their most valued assets so they can be passed from one generation to the next, introduced to newcomers and visitors, and given a facelift or more thorough makeover when big changes are deemed necessary.

People are drawn to those places where a culture’s narratives are not only told but also play an important role in defining that town’s or city’s or nation’s character and identity, helping to remind them not only who they are but also why they are is important (Maines and Bridger, 1992; Barthel, 1996; Bridger, 1996; Zerubavel, 1996; Monti, 1999; Borer, 2006). Sociologists have paid far too little attention to the ways that people use both everyday “familiarized” and extra-ordinary “memorialized” places to physically and
symbolically structure their lived experiences in and of their cities and neighborhoods (Lofland, 1998: 66). As Gieryn notes, “place becomes a stand-in for clusters of variables located in spaces chosen for their analytic utility but generally denuded of architecture, landscape, and actors’ own narrations” (2000: 466, emphasis added). The study of place, however, moves beyond simple acknowledgements of “context” toward the realization and documentation of meaningful places and how they facilitate or hinder individual and collective urban experiences. The emerging “fourth school” of urban sociologists that has not, until now, been identified as such, provides the most appropriate “lens” for seeing and addressing the relationship between culture and place. Steps toward the urban culturalist perspective will be made after a brief exposition of the limited visions of culture advanced by urban sociology’s three dominant schools of thought.

A MODEL OF A CITY IS NOT A CITY

For those interested in the everyday cultural practices of people within cities, the models posited by the three dominant schools in urban studies are unsatisfactory.4 Proponents of these perspectives approach the subject from the wrong angle for that task by positioning urbanization over urbanism. That is, an urban way of life is viewed only as a derivative of the ways cities and metropolitan areas are built and populated by different types of people and activities. The city’s governance, the way cities grow, and how different people and activities tend to be identified with some areas and not others take precedence over the way people approach and use the city’s environment as a means to foster and reconstruct their personal and collective beliefs and practices.

For all three schools of thought, culture is understood as a by-product of economic and politically interested decisions and actions (See Table 1). Consequently, urbanism can only be approached as a dependent variable, as something that is caused by more “important” forces, often from outside of the city and usually not amenable to control by

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everyday people. Even proponents of the newly designated Los Angeles School, who call their approach “postmodern urbanism” (Dear, 2000; 2002) in order to assert the radical difference of their approach, have erred in exactly the same ways as their predecessors by overlooking the ways that persons use culture to structure the presumed chaos of urban life.

All three schools look at the city and see “social disorganization” as its organizing principle and interpretive framework. Whether they describe the city as “a mosaic of social worlds” (Park, 1925/1967), residually and racially “hypersegregated” (Massey and Denton, 1993), or a Keno-like parcelized collage (Dear, 2002) does not matter. They all see the city as fractured and fragmented and, perhaps, inevitably so.

Despite the rich ethnographic studies of the Chicago School that documented “deviant” and “dysfunctional” urban types like the “hobo,” “the peasant,” and paid-for dancing girls (see Hannerz, 1980: Ch. 2), their idea of culture never moved beyond Burgess’s static definition: “Culture, as the social heritage of a group, implies both a locality to which it is indigenous and a constant, rather than a changing, social situation” (1925/1967: 150). Basically, the built environment may change and the economy perpetually fluctuates, but culture is fixed and stable within the cities’ segregated “natural” areas. The Chicago School researchers and theorists, however, never tell us how or why such stable cultures endure or how they might overcome the city’s environmental changes.

Coupling Burgess’s definition with Park’s statement that the city “is the natural habitat of civilized man” (1925/1967: 3), we can speculate that “culture,” for the Chicago School, was the province of traditional, “primitive,” Gemeinschaften societies and that “civilization” is the domain of modern, complex, Gesellschaften societies. They seemed to assume that the city dweller was a product of a later evolutionary stage and a more refined being than his or her rural cousins were. Louis Wirth makes such a claim in a little cited article, “The Urban Society and Civilization.” In the abstract to the article, Wirth writes, “The urban community offers an economical field for social research and a suitable platform from which to view the two poles of human existence: the civilization which has grown up in cities and the culture of folk societies” (1940: 743, emphasis added). Urban life and rural life were treated as entirely different social entities, “two poles of human existence.” These distinctions were concrete. Even when the Chicagoans found Gemeinschaft holdovers in the city (e.g., Wirth’s The Ghetto), they were deemed out-of-date, out-of-sync, and provided no lessons that could be exported or used to bridge different “natural” areas.

Members of the Chicago School were interested in culture, but mainly how it was affected by the city’s physical environment, whereby culture was always dependent upon something else. The vast majority of their studies sought to depict the ways that the urban environment affected its inhabitants’ social lives and ultimately produced a new fragmented way of life. As explained by Wirth, the increase in size, density, and heterogeneity of populations within cities produced a social life defined by increased rationality and superficial relations (1938). And, even though it was supposed to be a summary of earlier Chicago School studies, Wirth’s pessimistic essay “failed to document persisting bases of social order and local sentiment that were also a part of the Chicago findings” (Hunter, 1974: 75). Such findings were put aside as aberrations or minor exceptions, whereby “social disorganization” could still rule the day.

Researchers who adopt the paradigm of neo-Marxian, conflict-oriented Urban Political Economy do not have much to say about urbanism and urban culture, nor do they seem to want to (see Walton, 1993). From their perspective, cities cannot have a “real” or unified
culture, because the city forces people to view others only as players of segmented roles or cogs within the urban “growth machine” (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Gottdeiner and Feagin, 1988). They never investigate culture explicitly because, within their paradigm, culture is dependent upon other forces, especially material interests. Accordingly, culture merely becomes something else to be bought at the market and either consumed in private or showcased as a “public service” that really enriches a private party (see Susser, 2002, for a collection of Manuel Castells’s texts that support and influence this position).

One exception to Urban Political Economy’s reluctance for cultural analysis may be Sharon Zukin, though she might be more of a postmodernist, or at least some postmodernists would adopt her as one. Zukin’s studies of urban culture, however, only address culture as commercial goods and products or as lifestyles determined by economic status (1991; 1995; 1998). For Zukin, “Cities are no longer seen as landscapes of production, but as landscapes of consumption” (1998: 828). Certainly consumption is an important part of urban development and redevelopment, but what can it tell us about the ways that people make sense of the city? How does consumption function as a means for social interaction, creating meaning, and structuring everyday city living? This last question falls well outside both the neo-Marxian and postmodern agendas, and would be dismissed as overly naïve or conservative despite findings that suggest that consumer activities can function as important “community-building” practices (Stone, 1954; Hutter, 1987; Katovich and Reese, 1987; Monti, 1999; Simpson, 2000; Borer and Monti, 2006). Everyday people, and not just the elite power brokers, are far more active in the production and consumption of cultural ideas and amenities than the Urban Political Economy approach allows (Lloyd, 2002: 519).

Without an adequate appreciation of culture, proponents of the Urban Political Economy approach, especially “foundational” theorists like Castells, Henri Lefebvre, and David Harvey, cannot account for individual or group behavior without recourse to economic motivations and interests. Even when they focus their attention on the city’s “symbolic economy” (Zukin, 1995; Clarke, 1997), they fail to look at the customs, codes, and ceremonies that are the very practices that comprise a city’s civic culture and make consumption possible.

While adherents of the LA School and their fellow postmodern theorists have invited and celebrated a “cultural turn” in urban studies (Byrne, 2001), they too lack a systematic analysis of cultural beliefs and practices. Following the Urban Political Economy paradigm, chronologically and theoretically, the LA School continues to approach culture as a commodity for sale, manipulated by the “visible” hands of self-interested capitalists. Rampant consumption and instant gratification are the leitmotif of life in postmodern cities.

Addressing urban sociology’s “postmodern challenge,” Kevin Fox Gotham correctly detects the similarity between the LA School and the political economists. “Despite [the postmodernists’] different analyses and conclusions, their work remains rooted in Marxian theory, highlighting the centrality of economic and material processes in cultural analysis” (Gotham, 2001: 66). The LA School adherents, despite their attempted intellectual patricide, also remain “rooted” in the Chicago School in their attempts to grasp the city from afar, like Park’s “mosaic” (see Michael Dear’s photo essay “Imagining Postmodern Urbanism” (2002b) for a stark example).

The LA School, however, differs from the Chicago School and the neo-Marxists because they have a pointed interest in culture and its effects, especially media-based manipulation. Unfortunately, when they discuss culture as a “text,” an “image,” or a “story,” they are
referring to nothing more than commodities to be bought and sold at the whim of restless consumers (see Byrne, 2001). As believers and participants in postmodernism, the LA School is wed to the use of metaphorical language for analyzing contemporary urban life. Of course, the use of metaphors is an effective, and sometimes necessary, rhetorical device for deciphering complex problems. And metaphors have played important roles in the ways urban sociologists view and discuss cities: “the city” as a bazaar, a jungle, an organism, a machine, etc. (Langer, 1984). But postmodernists’ metaphors, purposefully, never refer back to anything socially or morally substantial because, so the argument goes, the “real” is only a representation that “bears no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard, 1983: 11). Postmodern urban studies are intended to disrupt and demolish the boundaries between “the real city” and “the discursive city” in irreparable ways (Wolff, 1992: 553). From this point of view, there is no difference between what we talk about and our talking about it.

Once stripped of their neologisms and abstruse references, the city and the people within it are hard to find. Barred by the trappings of postmodernism’s “architectural determinism” (Lees, 1994: 446), the LA School forgot to include the most important part of urban studies: the people who live, work, and play in the cities we study. In response to an article by Michael Dear and Steven Flusty (1998), Peter Jackson correctly spotted the LA School’s “ethnographic void.” He found “no ethnographic component to Dear and Flusty’s review of current work on Los Angeles and no reference to such work in the agenda outlined for future research. Instead, their prose is populated with the cool abstractions of social polarization and fragmentation” (Jackson, 1999: 401). As such, they have no way of knowing how people practice urbanism and thereby are unable to evaluate how well their practices work.

It seems likely that Los Angeles is much more than just “a giant agglomeration of theme parks, a lifespace comprised of Disneyworlds” (Soja, 1989: 246). Postmodernists have no way of differentiating between fantasy and reality, nor do they care to. The LA School adherents, reminiscent of the most problematic elements of the Chicagoans and the neo-Marxists, have lost sight of the incurable fact that a model of a city is not a city. And the intellectual portrait of it is even less. Approaching and interpreting the city as if it were a text does not mean that the city is a text. The literary critic Kenneth Burke may have said it best when he reminded his readers that “there is a difference, a radical difference, between building a house and writing a poem about building a house—and a poem about children by marriage is not the same thing as having children by marriage” (quoted in Trencher, 2002: 225). Persons’ experiences in and of the city are not just a matter of meanings and representations, but of the consequences of those meanings and representations as well. A full sociological account of cities would need to examine both the representations and symbols of the city and the conditions under which those representations and symbols emerge, solidify, and/or mutate (Schudson, 1989). As such, the symbol, the text, and the image are not autonomous floating signs, but are embedded within a particular cultural context in which real people live, work, and practice the art of community and politics, together.

All three dominant schools in urban sociology lack a sufficient and thorough understanding or appreciation of culture and the work that people, in their everyday lives, do to maintain and/or reconstruct their symbolic and physical environments. Gerald Suttles’ remark that “Practically everyone seems to give local sentiments and culture passing attention, but that is usually the end of it” (1984: 283) still rings true over twenty
years later. Ignoring culture has left us with a diminished understanding of urbanism and the everyday experiences of people in the city.

BRINGING CULTURE TO THE FOREFONT

This concern about the symbolic meanings attached to urban places is not new, but has often been overlooked. We have learned little from the three dominant schools about the ways people attach meaning and symbolic value to their neighborhoods, local stores, playgrounds, parks, civic monuments, and historic landmarks. Urban culturalists explicitly investigate the symbolic relationship between people and places and the ways that persons invest places with meaning and value in order to make sense of their world. In fact, they have looked at the development and redevelopment of the built environment as a means for understanding cultural values, ideas, and practices (e.g., Monti, 1990; Bridger, 1996; Lofland, 1998; Milligan, 1998; 2003; Borer, 2006).

The distinction between material and ideal culture, between the physical and the symbolic, like the distinction between anthropology and sociology, obscures more than it reveals (Hall et al., 2003). Because the disciplinary histories of anthropology and sociology have had different agendas (i.e., the crude distinction of the study of “them” versus the study of “us”), their approaches to the study of culture have traditionally been set apart. “Culture” in the anthropological sense often refers to a “whole way of life” of a people. In sociology, however, the term has usually been applied in a more specialized manner, referring to particular subjects (like the arts) or to symbols, meanings, and values in particular social locations (e.g., mass culture, popular culture, folk culture, subculture, counterculture) (see Spillman, 2002). Urban culturalists, individually and collectively, draw on both senses of the term, investigating the meanings and values implicit in everyday social practices and the organization and outcomes of explicit specialized institutions and methods for cultural production.

Classical sociological studies of culture were primarily concerned with social order as a means of control and authority. Culture is, then, understood as something that is done to people. In other words, people are somehow passive in relation to culture: they receive it, transmit it, express it, but do not create it. There is some truth to that perspective because individual choices and tastes are constrained by the options and perceptions available to them within their cultural milieu. During the last few decades, however, there has been increased interest in questions about the relationship between the individual and society, with a focus on culture as practice, in action, as something that people do (see Spillman, 2002). In such studies, the processes by which certain ideas and objects become meaningful are explored. Under the rubric of “dramaturgy,” persons are decision-making social actors, performing parts and interacting and improvising with others (Goffman, 1959; Becker, 1982; Wuthnow, 1987). This “on the ground” approach offers a proper corrective to approaches that deem individuals as mere passive receptacles of culture who follow their scripted roles without conscience, care, or resistance.

From the outside, it might seem that there are only two choices: either approach culture as an objective social structure, as something “out there,” or as the subjective thoughts, perceptions, and consequent actions of individuals, as something that is “in us.” But these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. The urban culturalist perspective requires that attention should be given to the “two faces of culture” (Laitin, 1986). Collectively, urban
culturalists have accounted for both the “first face,” the conservative, given, “top-down” aspects of culture (i.e., what culture does to people as a set of imposing ideas that define social order), and the “second face,” the liberal, voluntaristic, “bottom-up” side of culture (i.e., how culture is passed down and used by individuals as a repertoire of practices). Most of the debates about agency (individuals’ ideas and actions) versus structure (social order and conditions) are fundamentally about the way that each “face” of culture affects and can change the other (e.g., Hays, 1994). And most of the debates in urban sociology never connect the two faces of culture nor do they recognize that culture is both “out there” and “in us.” Perhaps it is best to say that culture is “through us.”

Consequently, we can begin to see how an urban way of life is neither consensually stagnant nor unilaterally novel. As Monti puts it, “There is nothing static or necessarily permanent about an urban way of life. Nor is there much about it that has not been borrowed from another people or adapted from an earlier time” (1999: 101). Paying attention to the places where people practice culture, the ways they identify with certain places, and how they adopt and adapt various places for varying individual and collective interests, points us toward the ways that culturally shared meanings are constructed, maintained, and reconstructed.

**THE URBAN CULTURALIST PERSPECTIVE**

While most sociologists begin with a social problem or phenomenon then seek out places where that problem or phenomenon happens or happened, the urban culturalist perspective prompts the researcher to begin with a place and ask an open and inductive question: “what happens or happened here?” Starting from a place, then moving outwards can yield important findings. Even though most sociologists take for granted the fact that culture happens somewhere, the examination of those somewhere can reveal important insights about the use of places as meaningful community “building-blocks” and personal identity markers. Shared places that groups and individuals use for celebration, commemoration, dialogue, and protest (Monti, 1999: 10; Lees, 1994) function as meaning holders that constitute “webs of significance” to be “suspended” by and reflect upon (Geertz, 1973: 5). These places are more than simply grist for the “cultural” mill; they are, in actuality, where culture is empirically located.

We can identify six areas of research that urban culturalists have contributed to and continue to cultivate: (1) images and representations of the city; (2) urban community and civic culture; (3) place-based myths, narratives, and collective memories; (4) sentiment and meaning of and for places; (5) urban identities and lifestyles; and (6) interaction places and practices (see Figure 1). These six domains, while overlapping somewhat, provide a comparative model for studying culture-place relationships in general, while allowing for distinctions between types of places and the people who use and inhabit them. This framework can be applied to various places, including places that are not specifically urban like record shops (Simpson, 2000), rural places like county fairs (Paulsen, 2000), and tourist or pilgrimage sites like Colonial Williamsburg (Bruner, 1994) and Graceland (Hecht, 2004). The objective here is to recognize the functional and substantive meanings of urban places.

Table 2 shows three loosely defined “waves” of urban culturalist studies. These scholars are primarily urban sociologists, but it is their interest in and examination of place and/or
FIG. 1. Culture-place issues from the urban culturalist perspective.

TABLE 2. The Genealogical Development of the “Urban Culturalist” Perspective and the Six Domains of Culture-Place Research

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their contribution to subsequent renderings of place as sites of cultural praxis that are the
criteria for their enlistment. Collectively, the representative works listed in Table 2 suggest
that the symbolism and narratives attached to places do not merely exist in urban areas as
scenic wallpaper but play essential roles in the social life of cities. Accordingly, the city and
the smaller public and semi-public places that constitute it are both symbolic and material
products that, literally and figuratively, “ground” people in history and tradition and help
them make sense of their world.

In what follows, I introduce each domain by briefly discussing a few seminal works that
show the relevancy of that domain of inquiry.

THE IMAGE AND SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF THE CITY

In their essay, “Symbolic Representations and the Urban Milieu” (1958), R. Richard Wohl
and Anselm Strauss were concerned with the ways that urbanites construct symbolic
images of the city in order to avoid an “anomic” breakdown in the face of the vast metropo-
lis. In some ways, they echo Simmel’s concerns, showing that the creation of symbolic rep-
resentations of the city is a coping mechanism, like the blasé attitude (Simmel, 1903/1971;
Wirth, 1938), acquired in order to deal with the city’s potentially overwhelming physical-
ity. Because the city is so large, these representations are necessary for urban living and
become the foundation for a common language within the city and between other cities
and regions. Wohl and Strauss showed that people attach these representations to both
natural and artificial objects. Artifacts located throughout the city (e.g., trees, rivers, parks,
buildings, street corners and neighborhoods) can all become symbolic markers. Some of
these, in fact, become synonymous with the city itself.

Thus the delicate and majestic sweep of the Golden Gate Bridge stands for San
Francisco, a brief close-up of the French Quarter identifies New Orleans, and... a
view of the New York skyline from the Battery is the standing equivalent for the city.
So well understood is this symbol that a movie can establish its locale by doing no
more than flashing a picture of (New York’s) skyscrapers on the screen for a moment
and then directing the camera into the opening episode of the film. This coded,
shorthand expression is at once understood by the audience (Wohl and Strauss,

These objects, these places, help groups identify the city and also provide a means for
personal identification with the city. Viewers see these widely known images and are able to
situate the characters in their appropriate context. Cinematic or televised representations
of cityscapes can be useful supplements to local accounts.

Most of the Chicago School and post-Chicago ethnographic studies have in common
that they study one or two “natural areas” or ethnic neighborhoods (Hannerz, 1980).
These studies primarily approach community and/or culture as something that is funda-
mentally exclusive. Even contemporary sociologists, who have rightly up-ended the classical
theorists’ belief in the polar shift from rural Gemeinschaft to urban Gesellschaft, defend the
existence of primary social groups on the basis of blood line or skin color, two markers
of exclusive community or cultural membership. But as Wohl and Strauss make clear,
symbolic representations are potentially open to all, inside and outside the city. Sym-

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a means into an inclusive urban community. Various groups may interpret these representations differently, but these types of public symbols create common reference points for all to interpret as they wish. In this sense, the acts and objects of interpretation become the common threads between supposedly incommensurable groups. Such images or representations can create “common referents” as part of a common “cultural literacy” for urban dwellers and visitors (see Demerath and Levinger, 2003: 221). As common reference points, they allow for the possibility of dialogue between groups within the city.

Gerald Suttles called attention to various cities’ respective “urban iconography” by clarifying the physical and spatial objects that are deemed meaningful in cities. He sought to make the analysis of cultural meanings objectively accessible and empirically observable by focusing on urbanites’ “collective representations.” In order to detect the “cumulative texture of local culture,” Suttles directs our attention toward the things that people put in museums (i.e., high culture) and what they put on their car bumpers and T-shirts (i.e., popular culture) “because these objective artifacts give local culture much of its stability and continuing appeal” (1984: 284).

While each social group, taste culture, or subculture may possess its own image of the city’s texture, Suttles’s approach recognizes the existence of overarching and inclusive place-specific urban symbols. These symbols and their meanings are both given and passed down by “expert” culture makers and workers (e.g., novelists, journalists, architects, museum curators, and archivists) and acted upon and reworked by both residents and visitors.

Consider New York as the “Big Apple” or the “city that never sleeps” with its “city slickers,” Boston as “the Hub of the Universe” or “Beantown” with its “proper Bostonians,” and Los Angeles as “Tinsel Town,” the City of Angels with its “stars” and “Valley girls” (Ibid: 291). As stereotypical as these impressions may be, they are the common and shared reference points that help define the “texture” of the urban community. Most of all, they are the representations that people use to identify the city and their relation to it.

Claiming that the symbolic expressions of the city are “extrinsic” or “out there,” rather than merely subjective or personal expressions, Suttles showed how a city’s texture is grounded in its history, architecture, street names, accents, and quirky sayings. Suttles points us toward the existence of such a thing as a common urban culture, common within the city in question and possibly between cities as well.

He tells us that “expert” culture makers and workers maintain such a culture through their creation and reformulation of the city’s “urban iconography,” though often based on “a selective reading of the present in the light of a believable past” (Ibid: 302). It is important to recognize that these “experts” do not create or select the city’s images out of thin air. As members of the urban community, they are affected and influenced by the rituals and experiences that are played throughout the city, some of which they are involved in themselves. Moreover, the images and ideas they explore or exploit, or both, were a part of the city’s cultural milieu before any of them attained their positions as cultural producers. By situating culture producers within a particular context and recognizing that their interpretations of the city are never wholly their own, we can further elaborate the micro-structural conditions that influence certain types of “meaning-making” (Becker, 1982). As Barry Schwartz contends, “to focus exclusively on the use of [images] by a dominant class or dominant institution is to offer a supply-side theory that attends to the production of images and ignores how the images are used” (Schwartz, 1996).
Recent works by urban culturalists have highlighted the dynamic and grounded social processes behind the construction of place identities, characters, and images. They have shown how the meanings of specific places, like blues clubs in Chicago (Grazian, 2003), sidewalks in New York (Duneier, 1999), and Fenway Park in Boston (Borer, 2006), are constructed by the people who use these places but are also indebted, for better or for worse, to the overall “symbolic representation” of the city. These places, in turn, help create and foster the overall image of the city as well. While images of Fenway Park, the oldest active ballpark in major league baseball, are used in corporate and tourism advertisements, they are also used by everyday people in and outside of Boston as a symbol of Boston. Even though certain meanings of Fenway Park and its relationship to the city vary between and within groups, there are certain features that remain constant, such as the outer red brick façade, the towering left-field wall (a.k.a., the Green Monster), and bright lights that shine during home games and other events. These features provide insight about the types of objects and places that are deemed significant in the lives of both the many and the few.

**URBAN COMMUNITY AND CIVIC CULTURE**

Norton Long, a political scientist who was interested in the ways that cultural practices influenced the social life of cities, approached the city as an “ecology of games” (1958). He contended that while each social grouping or “game” has its different rules and roles for its “players,” no game within the city is so isolated that it would not come into contact with another or, for that matter, does not need to come in contact with another. Instead of Park’s understanding of the city as a mosaic that’s social worlds do not interpenetrate, Long saw that often proximity was enough to foster at least weak civic bonds between presumably incompatible interest groups. As Long describes it, “sharing a common territorial field and collaborating for different and particular ends in the achievement of overall social functions, the players in one game make use of the players in another and are, in turn, made use of by them” (1958: 255). Interdependence is necessary between specialized occupations and lifestyles.

While the games have their own places to be played, they also occur in commonly shared places. These places aid the construction of “communities of limited liability” for each local game (Suttles, 1972). They also foster citywide “communities of interdependence” whereby individuals play multiple roles across “games” or “fields.” Small business places like coffee shops or pubs (Oldenburg, 1989; Milligan, 1998; Borer and Monti, 2006) provide settings for the “games” played by business men and women (the owners, managers, and employees), patrons (playing leisure “games”), and other groups who use the sites for gatherings and displaying information for various causes, retail opportunities, and local events.

Because individuals exist within what Simmel called a “web of group affiliations,” urban inhabitants learn multiple ways of practicing urban culture and community (i.e., they learn the rules to multiple “games”). And the rules of these games usually involve a hodgepodge of liberal and conservative values. In Daniel Monti’s historical analysis of civic culture in American cities, liberal and conservative communalists see the world very differently, in theory. But, they reconcile their different points of view in everyday practice in ways that neither tend to recognize nor are loath to acknowledge.
The type of civic culture that has been built and continues to be built in American cities is neither liberal nor conservative, but a hybrid culture made up of a hybrid collection of individuals and groups. And even though communities are collective accomplishments, not everyone plays an equal role in making those decisions or practices them exactly the same way all the time. As such, urban culture is continually changing, bouncing between the two extremes, and sometimes leaning more one way than the other. Urban dwellers can change their ways of thinking and acting, but only tend to do so within tolerable limits. This hybrid mixing is at the heart of what he calls the “paradoxical community.”

Monti’s “paradoxical community” paradigm sets up a useful framework for the questions that Mario Luis Small investigates in his study of Villa Victoria, a predominantly Puerto Rican housing project in Boston’s South End (2002). Complementing Monti’s structural “first face” analysis, Small attends to culture’s “second face” by employing Goffman’s notion of “frames,” among other concepts from cultural sociology, to attend to the perceptions of and experiences of Villa Victoria’s residents. He examines how these cultural frames change across what he calls “cohorts,” the successive waves of new residents, and how those mutable frames affect social participation and their overall understanding of the place they live. Even though Small only focuses on one place and thereby emphasizes the “neighborhood specificity” of these frames (2002: 44), he points future researchers in a positive direction for understanding persons’ relationships to and with their neighborhood and their city.

MYTHS, NARRATIVES, AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

“Collective memory” connects people in the present to the facts of yesterday and how those facts were ascertained and currently received. As Barry Schwartz contends, “collective memory is based on two sources of belief about the past—history and commemoration. Collective memory is a representation of the past embodied in both historical evidence and commemorative symbolism” (2000: 9, emphasis in the original). While the study of collective memory has taken a variety of interdisciplinary forms, it has a few traceable links back to Emile Durkheim’s discussions of commemorative rituals and sacralized objects and to his student Maurice Halbwachs’s seminal work, *The Social Frameworks of Memory*, published in 1925. By focusing on “groups” rather than taking a holistic view of “Society” like his mentor, Halbwachs purposefully attended to the gap between collective and individual memories or, in the terminology used above, between culture’s two “faces.” For Halbwachs, memories “are as much the products of the symbols and narratives available publicly—and of the social means for storing and transmitting them—as they were the possessions of individuals” (Olick, 1999: 335). A foundational cornerstone for this domain of the urban culturalist agenda is the notion that social, public, collective memories are “stored and transmitted” in and through places. As such, narratives about past occurrences in particular places help shape the identity of the place and the people who use it, care about, or are affected by the decisions made about and to it.

Place narratives are never filled with complete, unadulterated facts. Varying emphases on certain characters and plot lines offer multiple interpretations of similar events that affect the telling and retelling of stories about places. These stories are not any less real than the raw data of facts. They may even be more real because they are directly chosen,
felt, told, and retold. As Barbara Johnstone notes, “stories do not simply describe worlds; stories also create worlds” (1990: 26). The factual accuracy of a story is often less important than the purpose of the story or the way that it is used. Nevertheless, collective memories can favor powerful groups, those who chose which stories to commemorate or conceal, over those who accept such stories as a verifiable and irrefutable history.  

Published in 1959, W. Lloyd Warner’s *The Living and the Dead: A Study of Symbolic Life of Americans* is a landmark study of public commemorations and the consecration of local and national characters and places through the presentation and performance of symbolic civic narratives. Warner examined “Yankee City” in the days before, during, and after its three-hundredth year anniversary celebration.

Five days were devoted to historical processions and parades, to games, religious ceremonies, and sermons and speeches by the great and the near great. At the grand climax a huge audience assembled to watch the townsman march together “as one people” in a grand historical procession. . . . Those who watched saw past events portrayed with symbolic choice and emphasis in dramatic scenes of the tableaux that passed before them. At that moment in their long history the people of Yankee City as a collectivity asked and answered these questions: Who are we? How do we feel about ourselves? Why are we what we are? Through the symbols publicly displayed at this time with near and distant kin collected, the city told its story (Warner, 1959: 107).

The telling and retelling of the city’s history, however selected, provided means for communal, familial, and personal identification with Yankee City, even for those whose social positions existed outside of the images rendered by the dominant local business elites. As S. Elizabeth Bird has shown, “local narratives are less about ‘history’ and more about how people construct their sense of place and cultural identity. . . [they] are not just about the site itself but about the particular concerns of the people who tell the legends” (2002: 526).

Even though place narratives are selective history, it would be a mistake to assume that the dominant narrative about a place is the only narrative that exists or the only one that counts. This makes the sociologist’s task especially difficult, because it is our job to account for the multiple ways that varying groups remember and represent the same the places and persons. As John Walton writes in the last chapter of his analysis of Monterey, California’s collective memory, “multiple historical narratives are the rule, sometimes as oppositional positions and other times in complementary relation” (2001: 299). Walton tracks the “waxing and waning” of Monterey’s collective memory through five diverse periods of dominance that begin in 1770 as a Spanish missionary settlement and end in the multicultural present. He shows how the interaction between dominant narratives and “countermemories” through these periods, seen from the contemporary viewpoint, become organizational strategies for civic action and interest group politics. The reworking of these stories creates powerful means for group solidarity, cohesion, and collective action whereby “public history is at once heritage and rhetoric” (Walton, 2001: 294). As such, it is necessary to draw out which groups highlight certain characters and events and seek to understand the purposes that such narratives are intended to serve and accomplish.
In 1945, Firey published a study on the sentimental value attached to certain areas in Boston and the way that land had been used throughout the city. In an essay entitled “Sentiment and Symbolism as Ecological Variables,” he showed that large areas of land in downtown Boston were not only reserved for non-economic uses, but were also left “undeveloped” because they had been collectively endowed with symbolic meaning. These areas could not be fitted into a model predicated on concentric circles, zones, or nuclei. Boston’s “sacred sites,” the parks, cemeteries, and the 48-acre area in the center of the city that formed the original “commons” of the community, had never been developed (Firey, 1945: 140). Furthermore, Beacon Hill, an upper-class residential neighborhood near the center of the city, was not taken over by the central business district and continues to maintain its privileged position inside the city.

Beacon Hill survives not merely because the people who live there share a common ecological space that serves a set of rational economic functions. Rather, the community’s existence and environment is caused by their cultural values, the sentiment they attached to their territory. According to Firey, the residents of Beacon Hill could have lived in less-expensive districts with an “equally accessible location and even superior housing conditions. There is thus a non-economic aspect to land use on Beacon Hill, one which is in some respects actually diseconomic in its consequences” (1945: 144). “Sentiment” and “symbolism,” which affect a range of related variables from social prestige to ethnic or racial prejudice, are therefore important ecological factors that influence spatial distribution and patterns of development and redevelopment. While Firey is often credited for “deconstructing” the Chicago School’s reliance on the biologically deterministic ecological model, his study has lasting impact by showing how cultural factors can affect political agendas related to land-use decisions (Maines and Bridger, 1992; Lofland, 2003).

Nearly twenty years after Firey’s study, Herbert Gans’ analysis of Boston’s West End, a predominantly working class, Italian American neighborhood, showed us the inconsistency and conflicts between city planners and urban residents when cultural meanings are either overlooked or ignored (1962). Boston’s redevelopment agency underestimated, or disregarded, the emotional value the residents had invested in their home turf and bulldozed the neighborhood against the residents’ better wishes. This is a good example of the “costs” of not taking the meaning of places seriously. Despite the West End’s outward physical appearance and being tagged by outsiders as a slum, Gans found that there were strong social ties within and between families. There were also strong ties to both personal places, like their homes and apartment buildings, and communal places, like the streets they lived on and the shops they frequented, as well as other civic institutions (Gans, 1962: 105).

Like people, locations have certain ascribed statuses or levels of prestige. So in some ways, “place” can also refer to social position, often reflected by the types of people allowed in and kept out of certain places. Even if the owners, employees, or patrons of a certain place make the decisions about who should or should not be included or excluded, “outsiders” also make judgments over which places are “better” than others (Lamont et al., 1996). Of course, what is meant by “better” depends on the people making the judgments and on what they want from or do at that place. It does not matter whether we know this because our friends told us, we read it in Zagat’s or some other cultural guidebook, or we figured it out ourselves. What matters is that we make these judgments about
places because we must. Being able to make or recognize the distinctions between places helps people avoid embarrassment, rejection, and sometimes danger (see Anderson, 1999).

**URBAN IDENTITIES AND LIFESTYLES**

Questions concerning the types of identities that arise within the city have been a part of both literary and sociological discourse since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Urban sociologists have succeeded in identifying many of the nuanced ways that identities are both constructed and maintained in cities. For our present task, Gregory Stone’s “City Shoppers and Urban Identification,” published in 1954, provides a useful analysis for linking identities to places, and to other people in public places, by demonstrating “the possibility that some urbanites, as a consequence of the relationships they establish with personnel of retail stores manage to form identifications which bind them to the larger community” (1954: 37). Stone found that many urban residents develop meaningful and valuable relationships with clerks and other personnel at the places they shop. Rather than treating the retail store employees as dehumanized automatons or utilitarian cogs in their own consumption machines, “customers injected elements of primary group relationships into what were ‘supposed’ to be purely secondary relationships” (Lofland, 1998: 3).

Of particular importance is “the personalizing consumer” and his or her relationship to and with the store as a meaningful place. Stone’s informants who had developed strong attachments to stores they frequented often talked about these places as their store. Stone unfortunately buried this important finding in a footnote:

> The personal pronouns “I,” “me,” and “my” found their way frequently into the interviews, one indication of the extent to which they built up strong identifications with the stories they patronized... the store has become incorporated into the social self of the customer. As [Charles Horton] Cooley put it, “The social self is simply any idea, or system of ideas, drawn from communicative life, that the mind cherishes on its own.” Hence the store may be seen as part of the social self of the personalizing type of consumer (1954: 40).

Everyday places become important loci for the development of urban identities and relationships. Even though Stone did not use the term “culture,” he evidently was concerned with the processes and practices of creating shared meanings in cities. Claude Fischer’s “subcultural theory” deals with urban culture and identity explicitly and supports claims that culture has analytic autonomy apart from economics and politics (1975; 1976). In order to explain the lack of “anomic” psychological disorders in the city, evidence that opposes one of Wirth’s key propositions, Fischer found that people sought out similar types of people based on strong identity markers like ethnicity, race, class, lifestyle, or profession, or some combination of these attributes. Instead of spawning only impersonal and superficial relationships, the city was home to many close-knit social networks. Fischer claimed that urban areas allow for the creation and maintenance of new subcultures that mold the tastes of the city’s diverse population. Only cities with large populations contain enough people to provide the critical mass necessary for such groups to emerge and evolve (Fischer, 1976: 37).
Diverse identity and lifestyle groups supply the city with a variety of relatively available leisure, recreation, and entertainment activities. John Irwin, applying a Goffman-influenced “dramaturgic” approach to city life, clearly shows how these activities can develop and evolve into public “scenes” that become important settings for the development of urban identities (1977). Rather than viewing the leisure activities associated with scenes as merely hedonistic and self-indulgent, Irwin argues, following both Stone and Fischer, that participation in scenes signifies a very real way that urbanites create emotionally sustainable and meaningful relationships and identities.

Subcultures and identity enclaves can create scenes that enliven certain aspects of the city’s overarching culture because of the scenes’ public availability and accessibility. “Many people go to the scene locations to engage in the activities and to be among others and to meet new people and to share meanings of the scene with friends and strangers. What they are after is not just the enjoyment of activities, but to become involved in collective expression or ‘action’” (Irwin, 1977: 27, emphasis in the original). Cities provide a multitude of places that allow for differing levels of commitment to the scene. As such, people in cities can be involved in a number of scenes because most of their activities, for business and recreation, are not confined to one area or neighborhood. One of the remarkable aspects of city life is that it affords residents and visitors opportunities to try on different hats, so to speak, and be a part of more than one social circle.

Mapping individuals’ fluctuating identities between places is a useful way to both recognize urban lifestyles and the ways people use places to define themselves. These differentiations can be seen by acknowledging the places people occupy or inhabit at different times of the day. David Grazian makes the distinction between an individual’s daytime self and their “nocturnal self,” which he defines as “a special kind of presentation of self associated with consuming urban nightlife” (2003: 21). The places where people go at night for leisure and pleasure, the places that define a city’s nightlife, are important sites for the enactment and reconfiguration of personal and collective identities and fantasies. As part of their identities, the places people go to live out their fantasies are no less real than other status/identity markers that sociologists tend to favor (e.g., income, political affiliation, gender).

By forging a nocturnal self in the city’s bars, nightclubs, restaurants, and cafes, late-night revelers achieve a very personal kind of satisfaction that cannot simply be reduced to social status gain; the self-esteem generated by their successful negotiations of the city’s entertainment options seems to represent the fulfillment of a dream (Grazian, 2003: 22).

Grazian shows how people can, and often do, internalize the meaning, character, or status of the places they patronize.

Other recent studies have pointed to the importance of leisure sites for urban identity construction, while acknowledging that the same process of internalization can occur for owners and employees as well. And the types of places that people adopt and adapt as significant identity markers can range from the mundane, like a department store, coffee shop, cafeteria, bar, or sidewalk (e.g., Hutter, 1987; Oldenburg, 1989; Duneier, 1992; 1999; Milligan, 1998; 2003; Simpson, 2000; Borer and Monti, 2006), to the spectacular, legendary, or sacred (e.g., Smith, 1999; Bird, 2002; Borer, 2006).
To study places as sites of interaction and social gatherings, it is important to acknowledge the range of places, in regard to scales, style, and utility, and “ask what these places . . . have in common and how they differ” (Gieryn, 2000: 464). Addressing the similarities and differences between places provides a way to study one culture or compare separate cultures. For instance, there are noticeable and seemingly obvious differences between the way persons act in their homes and in their workplaces. But there are also similarities. And there are other places where people spend their time, such as “third places.” Ray Oldenburg defines “third places” as “public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (1989: 16). The activities in such places are important practices and strategies that people employ to create, maintain, and modify the meaningful “boundaries” between “home,” “work,” and “third places” (see Nippert-Eng, 1996).

Deciding which places to go and which scenes to participate in, and, for that matter, how to participate in them, persons in cities need to acquire the meanings and skills to act aptly. Lyn Lofland discusses “urban learning,” which can be used for both “avoidance” and “adventuring,” as an achievement of modern cultures (1973/1985). She acknowledges the importance of both cultural institutions (e.g., the mass media) and personal interactions as means for making the city manageable and meaningful. With varying indebtedness to Gregory Stone, Erving Goffman, Jane Jacobs, and William H. Whyte, Lofland constructs a useful vocabulary for recognizing face-to-face interactions in public as well as the visually, physically, and emotionally enticing elements of urban places. These attributes consist of a mixture of “esthetic pleasures” that are influenced by the design of places and “interactional pleasures” that come from the people who occupy such places (Lofland, 1998: Ch. 4).

Lofland correctly and persuasively shows how the sociological study of esthetics should not begin with a set of universal, “pan-human,” principles, but rather from a more inductive sensibility whereby such principles could be inferred from observations of persons’ reactions to and interactions with a range of places. In doing so, we can attend to the qualities of the place itself. These qualities can affect the types of interactions and the pleasures derived from them. For instance, “people-watching,” which is one of the pleasures that Lofland identifies, is dependent upon, most obviously, the presence of crowds or at least a flow of people. In order to “people-watch,” certain architectural or structural elements of the site must be present, such as clear lines of visibility, proper placement or mobility of seating, and enough space for action to ensue and entice.

Melinda Milligan adds two useful terms, “interactional past” and “interactional potential,” for depicting the intersections between the physical structure of a place and the types of interactions that happen within its boundaries (1998). In her study of a relocated coffee house, Milligan shows how both elements aided employees’ attachment to the former place, and the new one. Persons’ activities in places affect the meanings attached to those places. As Milligan writes, “Over time, this process creates an interactional past for the site, a history tied to the experiences that have occurred within it (‘memories’). Second, at the same time, specific features of the site shape, constrain, and influence the activities that are perceived as able to happen within it, its interactional potential (‘expectations’)” (1998: 8).
Milligan documents and analyzes this disruption after the Coffee House was relocated and rebuilt and how the employees who moved with the place dealt with the symbolic and physical discontinuity between the two sites (1998; 2003). When place attachment is disrupted, the individuals involved lose both a link to a past experienced as meaningful and a link to a future imagined as potentially meaningful (Milligan, 1998: 9). By altering the physical make-up of the place, the employees’ routines were disrupted and they were consequently forced to develop new ways of interacting with the place and each other.

Milligan’s discussion of both the old and new Coffee Houses’ physical traits (their layout, atmosphere, and positioning in relation to nearby sites) points us toward important factors that influence social behavior and the practice of culture. The physical structure of a place, however, does not determine action, but it can influence behavior. Conversely, actors can appropriate or change, to varying degrees, the physical layout of a place to suit their individual and collective needs. Such adaptations are easily observed in public places, like open parks, where people add to the setting by bringing their own blankets and chairs, or in coffee shops where seats and tables are often moved and rearranged to accommodate patrons’ sociability or “public solitude” (Lofland, 1998: 88).

CONCLUSION

Cities are great stages for observing the relationship between culture and place. Cities offer a variety of both cultures and places, some old and some new, and some that work better than others. The three dominant schools of thought in urban sociology do not provide us with the best window to make these distinctions. The urban culturalist perspective can account for both the distinctions people make between places and the ways that places can serve as overarching symbols for the city in question. The cultural “texture” of a city is dependent upon the actions of people and the customs, codes, and ceremonies handed down to them. Because communication between individuals and groups, over time and across regions, is inevitably imperfect, culture is never a matter of pure consensus. And in the end, that does not seem to matter much. What matters are the shared meanings that can create connections between individuals, groups, and something larger and more lasting than both (i.e., the city).

The places where we work, play, and sleep at night are culturally important. Common and historic places, including local diners, coffee shops, birthplaces of famous people, commemorative landmarks, emblematic streets and neighborhoods, sports facilities, and other recreation spots, provide locals, newcomers, and visitors with a “sense of place” (Suttles, 1984; Oldenburg, 1989; Low, 1992; Hummon, 1992; Lofland, 1998; Bird, 2002). The fact that people care about the loss of particular places (e.g., Milligan, 1998; 2003; Borer, 2006) shows at least one way that people make the city, or any area for that matter, less “strange,” less anonymous, and less chaotic. How these attachments are fostered and what places are deemed as irreplaceable and immutable, and for what reasons and purposes, are crucial for maintaining and reconstructing cultures inside and outside of cities. And they are crucial as subjects of inquiry for students of urbanism, civic life, and culture in general.

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Notes

1 Works from outside the subfield of urban sociology and the discipline of sociology proper have influenced urban culturalist studies. Some of these works come from anthropologists (e.g., Low, 1992), social historians (e.g., Breen, 1989), communications scholars (e.g., Simpson, 2000), and others (e.g., Norkunas, 2002). To paraphrase C. Wright Mills, the sociological imagination is not the birthright of any one discipline. An interest in the roles that places play in the everyday life of individuals and groups is the common denominator between these studies.

2 I am not using the term “school” in any formal sense that would imply that the so-called school’s “members” self-consciously define themselves as such. Nor have I used “school” in the somewhat superficial sense whereby a school is based primarily on members’ physical proximity to a location or each other (e.g., Halle, 2003). The way that I am using “school” is consistent with Samuel Gilmore’s definition of a “School of Thought,” which is different than a “School of Activity” (1988). The first is defined by a group of people who do not necessarily work together, but whose work employs similar concepts, questions, and styles of inquiry. The latter is based on propinquity and not necessarily a common theoretical or methodological apparatus. Using Gilmore’s distinctive categories, urban culturalists constitute a “School of Thought” in its present state.

3 I am indebted to Lyn Lofland for directing me toward some of the studies that became the foundation of the urban culturalist perspective. While my intentions were different than hers, Lofland wrote a complementary chapter for the Handbook of Symbolic Interaction that outlined a host of “fellow travelers” (i.e., urban and community sociologists who apply symbolic interactionist theories and methods). And while I’m sympathetic to her argument, I contend that symbolic interactionists can be more effective and influential when positioned beneath the urban culturalist umbrella next to more structurally oriented sociologists. This way, symbolic interactionists can avoid being continually ignored by urban sociology’s dominant schools of thought (see Lofland, 2003).

4 Of course, proponents of each approach may tweak the models they adhere to and cross-affiliations between and disagreements within these three schools are likely and evident.

5 Despite their differences and disputes over orthodox Marxian categories, the respective works of Castells, Lefebvre, and Harvey wed culture to market mentalities, modes of production, or political consciousness.

6 Traditionally, stemming from Plato’s ontology, a simulacrum is a copy of a copy. As the theory goes, a copy is inferior to the ideal form that it is a copy of, and the simulacrum is further still from the original and is therefore inferior to the first copy. Postmodernists view today’s world as consisting only of simulacra with increasing distance from anything “real” or authentic.

7 This is a powerful lesson handed down to us from W. I. Thomas and Dorothy Swain Thomas. Their well-known dictum, labeled the “Thomas Theorem” by Robert Merton (see 1995), states: “if [persons] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”

8 Ann Swidler’s “culture as a tool-kit” (2001) is a useful concept for understanding culture as something that works and is lived “through us.”

9 Due to space constraints, I have eliminated a discussion of urban culturalist methods. There are two research strategies, however, that urban culturalists have recently defined and employed that are particularly instructive and worth mentioning. First, as a means for studying places and “making character concrete,” Krista Paulsen offers four distinct research strategies: (1) using local accounts to analyze what and how people talk about places; (2) creating variables for measuring character; (3) using “strategically matched pairs” to compare places

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within and between cities; and (4) examining local responses to outside forces that range from natural disasters to redevelopment campaigns (2004). Second, Margarethe Kusenbach’s “go-along” technique (2003) provides a useful method for empirically investigating how the meanings of places become a part of persons’ cultural repertoires and aid in the construction of symbolic cultural and moral boundaries. Mixing participant observation and interviewing, the researcher accompanies “informants into their familiar environments and track outings they would go on anyway as closely as possible, for instance with respect to the particular day, the time of day, and the routes of the regular trip” (Kusenbach, 2003: 464). The “go-along” can shed light on social actors’ environmental perceptions, everyday routines, the presence and substance of personal landmarks, place-based social networks, and social patterns and practices in public settings.

10 For a recent appropriation of Long’s “ecology of games” model as a means for mapping and viewing the structure of community affairs, see Cornwell, Curry, and Schwirian (2003).

11 Also see Firey’s full-length study Land Use in Central Boston (1947), which Suttles perceptively claims is “one of the most cited and least imitated books in sociology” (1984: 283).

References


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