

**NANCY KLENIEWSKI,  
ALEXANDER R. THOMAS, AND  
GREGORY FULKERSON**

**SIXTH EDITION**

# **CITIES, CHANGE, AND CONFLICT**

**A Political Economy of Urban Life**



# Cities, Change, and Conflict

*Cities, Change, and Conflict* was one of the first texts to embrace the perspective of political economy as its main explanatory framework, and then complement it with the rich contributions of human ecology as well as perspectives derived from critical approaches to social theory. Although its primary focus is on North American cities, the book contains several chapters on cities in other parts of the world, including the Global North and Global South. It provides both historical and contemporary accounts of the impact of globalization on urban development and urban institutions.

This sixth edition features a new, groundbreaking chapter on the relationship between the physical environment and human settlements, including the urban-rural nexus. This edition also expands and updates coverage of recent trends such as the establishment and evolution of gay neighborhoods, the suburbanization of immigrant groups, the situation of the immigrant youth known as “Dreamers,” the reverse migration of Blacks from the North to the South, and the proliferation of exurban communities.

Beyond examining the dynamics that shape the form and functionality of cities, the text surveys the experience of urban life among different social groups, including a new perspective on intersectionality as it affects people’s experiences in cities. It illuminates the workings of the urban economy, local and federal governments, and the criminal justice system while addressing policy debates and decisions that affect almost every aspect of urbanization and urban life.

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PART I

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# Thinking About Cities



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# Examining Urban Issues

The city magnifies, spreads out, and advertises human nature in all its various manifestations. It is this that makes the city interesting, even fascinating. It is this, however, that makes it of all places the one in which to discover the secrets of human hearts, and to study human nature and society.

Robert Park: “The City as a Social Laboratory”

This book is about cities, one of the most widespread features of modern life. Cities are exciting, vital, and diverse—sometimes to the point of bewilderment. They contain the sights, sounds, and smells of humanity and the many products of human activity. People seek cities for jobs, to buy goods, to have experiences, and to be with other people. They are also places where the inequalities of wealth and poverty, the contradictions of growth and deterioration, the contrasts between social cooperation and competition are evident on a daily basis. Cities contain in magnified form many of the best—and worst—features of our society.

This chapter is an introduction to the kinds of questions and issues that will be raised later on; it is a sampler, preview, and synopsis of some major issues in urban sociology. In this chapter we will begin by exploring two issues:

- 1 How do we North Americans regard cities, and how do we define cities?
- 2 What does it mean to study cities from the perspective of political economy?

After discussing these two issues, we will analyze contemporary urban issues as previews of some of the important points we will explore in more depth later in the book.

## WHAT ARE CITIES?

Maybe it’s the rush as you exit the former Allston toll plaza in Boston and see the entire skyline in front of you, or the thrill of the Chicago skyline as you enter the “loop” from I-290, or Los Angeles as seen from I-10. Or it may be the sense of smallness you experience as you emerge from the Midtown Tunnel in Manhattan or walk toward City Hall on Market Street in Philadelphia. It could be the irritation of traffic as you travel the Washington Beltway or circle Atlanta on I-285. Cities exasperate and exhilarate. We all think we know what they are, but do we?

Cities are defined in many different ways, but the definitions that most people know are cultural definitions. A cultural definition is a social construction of what people in a given society think of as a “city,” and as such cities vary from place to place and from time to time. At the end of the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for instance, King Gilgamesh looks upon the walls of his home city of Uruk with great pride: for people in ancient Mesopotamia 3,000 years ago, the city wall was the symbol of urban greatness. In contrast, many nineteenth-century paintings of American cities highlight not the city wall—there were none—but the great smokestacks and plumes of soot reaching into the atmosphere. Although today most Americans would see such a scene as a symbol of environmental degradation, at the time it was perceived as a symbol of industrial and urban greatness.

The task of the sociologist interested in researching the city is to define it with enough precision to distinguish between individual cities and between cities and noncities. Although our cultural concepts are important in generating such definitions, we nevertheless find that there is no one satisfactory way to define the city. Consider, for instance, a metropolitan area of about a million people, such as Tucson, Arizona; Rochester, New York; or Salt Lake City, Utah. A visitor from one of the three largest metropolitan areas, New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago, respectively, might perceive each of these cities to be quite small and unsatisfying. In contrast, someone who grew up in a small agricultural town might find them to be large and exciting. In other words, the cultural definition of a city depends in part on where an individual was raised. This complicates the definition of a “city” for social science research. Nevertheless, there are ways of discussing cities in ways that account for the subjectivity inherent in such an exercise.

## The Urban–Rural Continuum

One way of accounting for the subjectivity inherent in defining cities is to place settlements on a continuum of developed versus undeveloped space called the **urban–rural continuum**. At the rural end of the continuum are spaces that have not been developed at all, such as open prairie, forest, and desert environments. Their opposite at the urban end of the continuum are spaces that are completely developed, as in such urbanized environments as the financial districts in San Francisco and Manhattan. These are spaces where nearly every inch has been planned and developed as part of the city, even in parks such as Grant Park in Chicago and Millennium Park in Atlanta. Between the most urban and most rural spaces are the vast majority of places where people live. Agricultural towns are rural, for instance, but normally have a small village that in its fundamental landscape is urban. Smaller cities and large towns typically extend their development over large areas but are also surrounded by agricultural landscapes.

Sociologists refer to the differing types of development found in urban and rural areas as “combined and uneven development” (O’Connor 1998). Derived from a Marxist perspective, this refers to the tendency of economic development to take place in certain areas, such as manufacturing in cities and agriculture in rural places. The level of wealth is typically affected by the pattern of development, and historically urban areas have had more concentrated wealth than rural areas. Within metropolitan areas, however, the pattern of wealth distribution can vary considerably (Lobao et al. 2007). In some metropolitan areas, for instance, downtown areas and suburbs attract considerable wealth—this is evident by a stroll through New York’s Upper East Side and a drive through its wealthy

suburbs in Westchester County. In other metropolitan areas, however, much of the wealth is found primarily in the ring of suburbs surrounding the city, such as in metropolitan Detroit.

The concentration of development, both economic and residential, that characterizes cities is a central concept in defining cities. One economic characteristic of a city is that it exhibits **economies of scale**. This means that as the size of a place, just as the size of a company or other economic unit, increases, the cost per unit of providing services decreases. In cities, this often refers to certain types of municipal services. For instance, assuming that the cost of maintaining a mile of roadway is constant, the higher the number of taxpayers paying to maintain the road, the lower the cost is for each individual taxpayer. If mile A of a highway has 100 taxpayers and mile B has only 50, it would cost taxpayers of mile A half as much per year for maintenance as mile B taxpayers. Companies in cities also benefit from economies of scale, and this is evident in the fact that very large cities also tend to have very large supermarkets and very large malls. The scale of a city is also related to such issues as crime, cultural creativity, and entrepreneurialism with larger cities often (but not always) attracting more of each (Bettencourt et al. 2007).

Cities also exhibit **economies of agglomeration**. This refers to the benefits that accrue to companies located in cities where similar firms also exist. For instance, the American automobile industry has historically been concentrated in the region near Detroit, Michigan. Although the “big three” automakers—Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors—compete against one another, being concentrated near one another gives each firm access to a specialized workforce and suppliers competing for their business. Similar concentrations of industry are found in such metropolitan areas as San Francisco (computers) and Seattle (aerospace). We will examine this further in [Chapter 4](#).

Cities are not simply places of business and residence, however. Cities are also “nodes” in a global network of cities, each interconnected to the other through the various transactions that characterize human life, whether financial, cultural, or otherwise (Sassen 2001). In fact, cities have always been characterized by a “global” system. The earliest cities were participants in a “global” system that extended from southern Mesopotamia, in present day Iraq, to what is today southern Turkey (Algaze 1993). The system included a relatively well-developed urban economy centered on the cities of southern Mesopotamia, the largest of which was Uruk at nearly 50,000 residents, and a wider region with which people traded manufactured goods for raw materials. A similar system was found during the Middle Ages in Europe that set the stage not only for modern nation states but for the current global economy (Sassen 2008). In our current global system almost the entire planet is a participant, but the basic structure is similar. There are at the top of the hierarchy global cities, the “big three” being New York, London, and Tokyo (Sassen 2001). There are also cities of a national or regional importance, and further down the hierarchy cities of a more local importance. Smaller towns and agricultural villages are also part of the global system. This hierarchy of places with the global system exhibits a **rank-size order**. According to **Zipf’s Law**, the population of a town multiplied by its rank will be equal to the population of the largest city in a nation or territory (Auerbach 1913). For instance, the population of Los Angeles (population 3,898,747 in 2020), the nation’s second largest city, is about half of the population of the nation’s largest city, New York (population 8,804,190 in 2020). In many regions, however, particularly in developing nations, there is a very sharp drop off in population after the largest city, a condition called primacy, in which case the largest city is referred to as a primate city.

The rank-size order of a given region or country is in part the result of the function of a city in the wider political and economic system. Cities typically act as administrative centers for both government and private economic firms that are networked across a society. For example, New York City is the global city *par excellence*, and its suburbs are spread across multiple counties in four different states. New York is orders of magnitude larger than Philadelphia and Boston, cities of national importance that are also the “cultural capitals” of their own regions of Pennsylvania and New England, respectively. Within New York State there are several large metropolitan areas that administer their own particular regions, such as Albany (New York’s capital) and Buffalo. There are also a number of smaller metropolitan areas that have their own spheres of influence, plus a number of small towns and agricultural villages, that function to bring goods and services from the global economy to the local level and send goods and services produced at the local level into the wider global economy.

Cities typically provide **central place functions** to the people who live in the surrounding area (Christaller 1966 [1933]). A small agricultural village, for instance, may have a gas station, a hardware store, a supermarket, a bank, a post office, and perhaps a few retail shops. According to central place theory, certain places provide services that are important to the overall functioning of a system, and those places that provide these “higher order” services tend to have more population and a larger market. If we consider that an agricultural village may provide a limited number of functions to its residents, then those residents must travel to other places for higher order services, and this relationship is found in places across the urban–rural continuum. For instance, a small metropolitan area might provide most of the shopping that an individual will want, but some items might only be available in a very large metropolitan area. Consider that Target is found in nearly every major metropolitan area in America, but American Girl is not.

Since 2008 a majority of the world’s population has lived in cities, a stark contrast to the past when most people lived in rural areas (Wimberly et al. 2007). In modern societies like the United States, up to 80 percent of the population lives in cities and their suburbs.

**TABLE 1.1** The Ten Largest Cities and Combined Statistical Areas in the United States, 2020

City	Population	CSA	Population
1. New York	8,804,190	1. New York	23,582,649
2. Los Angeles	3,849,747	2. Los Angeles	18,644,680
3. Chicago	2,746,388	3. Washington-Baltimore	9,973,383
4. Houston	2,304,580	4. Chicago	9,986,960
5. Phoenix	1,608,139	5. San Jose-San Francisco	9,714,023
6. Philadelphia	1,603,797	6. Boston-Worcester	8,466,186
7. San Antonio	1,434,625	7. Dallas-Fort Worth	8,121,108
8. San Diego	1,386,932	8. Houston	7,312,270
9. Dallas	1,288,457	9. Philadelphia	7,379,700
10. San Jose	1,013,240	10. Atlanta-Athens	6,930,423

Source: US Census Bureau 2022

People in cities and their suburbs typically exhibit **urbanism**: the social psychological effects of living in proximity to a large number of other people (Wirth 1938). Residents of urban areas have social interactions that, from the perspective of residents of rural areas, tend to be impersonal, utilitarian, and transitory. As such a high proportion of modern societies live in cities and suburbs, the dominant cultures of such societies typically exhibit **urbanormativity**: the general view of urban life as normal and real. Urban in this context does not refer specifically to the culture of cities *per se*, but rather that the lifestyles and cultural attitudes of people who live in such societies express a belief in the dominance, and even superiority, of urban institutions (Thomas et al. 2011).

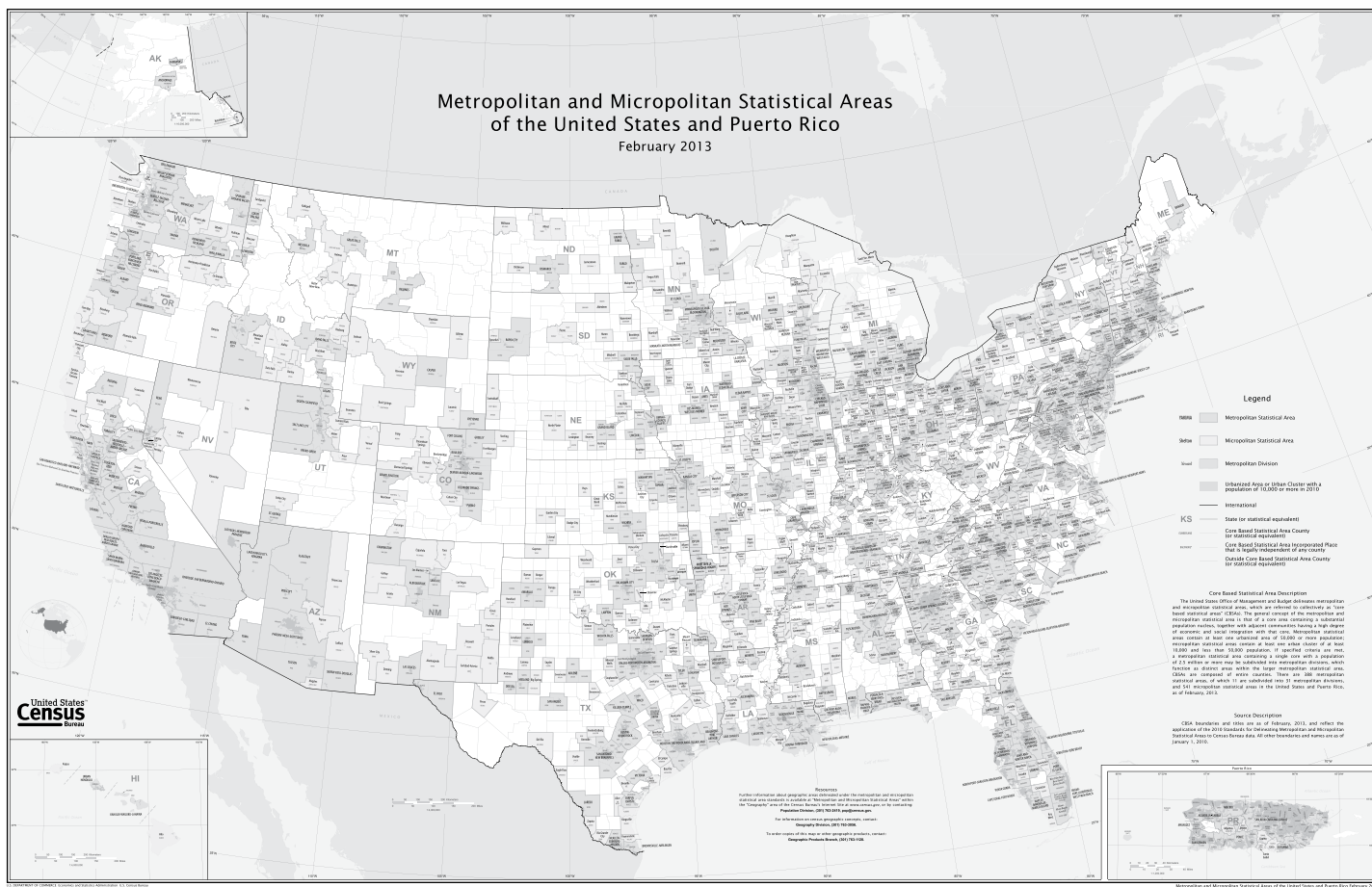
## Defining Cities

Defining the city is a difficult task, not only because of cultural definitions and the continuum of types of urban places, but because the sociological definition is by its nature imprecise (Thomas 2012). Corporate boundaries typically do not encompass the entire developed area of a city, for instance, and so most cities have surrounding urbanized regions referred to as suburbs. As such, using the legal definition of a city will typically leave out a large geographic area and, in many cases, the majority of a region's residents. Similarly, choosing a population "cut off" above which a place is a "city" and below which it is not is not particularly useful either: is a place with 50,000 residents any more of a city than a place with 49,999? Nevertheless, in order to study cities it is also necessary to somehow measure their characteristics: population, land area, economy, etc.

In the United States, it is typically the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) that defines how to measure cities and metropolitan areas (US Census Bureau 2020). Normally, when possible, the OMB uses the legal definitions of places: cities, towns, boroughs, counties, parishes, and states. In terms of whether a place is considered urban, however, the OMB historically used a population cutoff of 2,500 residents in a densely settled area but in 2022 increased the threshold to 5,000 (US Office of Management and Budget, 2022). Sometimes the urban place aligns with the legal boundaries, but often it does not. Regardless of legal boundaries, such settlements are called **urbanized areas**.

Urban areas are used by the US Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to define **core-based statistical areas**, which are divided into **metropolitan areas** and **micropolitan areas** (US Office of Management and Budget 2020). Core-based statistical areas are defined not only by urban areas but by the level of integration measured by commuting patterns found in a region, and except in New England are grouped by counties. (In New England they are grouped by townships, and a separate county-level definition called a New England County Metropolitan Area is also used.) If a core-based statistical area has at least 50,000 residents in an urban area, it is called a metropolitan area (MA). In a metropolitan area, a county that contains an urbanized area is referred to as the "central" county. There can be more than one central county in a metropolitan area. A nearby county in which 25 percent of workers commute into a central county, even if the county does not contain an urban area, is classified as an "outlying" county in the metropolitan area. The same definitions are used to define a micropolitan county, except that a micropolitan area has an urban cluster of at least 10,000 residents but no more than 50,000 residents. Micropolitan areas are by definition "nonmetropolitan areas," and are sometimes grouped with other nonmetropolitan counties that do not have urban clusters. [Figure 1.1](#) shows the distribution of core-based statistical areas in the United States.





**FIGURE 1.1** Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas of the United States  
Source: US Census Bureau (2013).

**BOX 1.1 How Big Is New York City?****FIGURE 1.2** Manhattan Skyline

Source: iStock Photo 19164770

New York, New York, is the largest city in the United States, but exactly how big it really is depends on how you define “New York.” The city of New York was home to 8,804,190 residents in 2020, a population larger than Virginia and 37 other states. New York is also part of the New York-Jersey City-White Plains metropolitan division, what previous scholars called a primary metropolitan statistical area, with a population of 11,878,178, greater than that of Ohio and 42 other states. Although Long Island is immediately east of New York, it is considered part of its own metropolitan division, and so the over 2.9 million residents are not included in the above figure. However, Long Island, as well large areas of New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania are included in the New York Combined Statistical Area, what used to be called a consolidated metropolitan statistical area, which stretches from the southern tip of New Jersey to Saugerties, New York, and was home to 23,582,649 people in 2020.

In particularly large metropolitan areas, those with at least 2.5 million residents, there are further definitions. In such places as Boston, New York, and San Francisco the suburban region surrounding the city has grown so large as to exhibit a degree of independence from the central city, and in those cases portions of the region may be grouped into **metropolitan divisions** that are integrated with one another as measured by commuting patterns.

For instance, the New York-Newark-Jersey City Metropolitan Area is divided into four metropolitan divisions: New York-Jersey City-White Plains, Newark, Nassau-Suffolk, and Dutchess County-Putnam County. Each division has communities that are strongly tied to one another economically yet are also integrated into the larger metropolitan area. Prior to 2003 these were called primary metropolitan statistical areas (PMSA).

Another type of core based statistical area, and the largest in geographic terms, is the **combined statistical area (CSA)**. A CSA represents the entire region that is integrated with the central city and is composed of all the metropolitan and micropolitan areas in the region. For example, the New York-Newark-Bridgeport CSA includes the New York MA (and all of its metropolitan divisions) and the Kingston MA in New York, plus the Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton MA and East Stroudsburg MA in Pennsylvania, the Bridgeport-Stamford-Norwalk MA and Torrington micropolitan areas in Connecticut, and the Trenton, New Jersey MA. It stretches from touristy Beach Haven, New Jersey, 200 miles north to the village of Saugerties, New York, and 216 miles from Allentown, Pennsylvania to eastern Long Island (US Office of Management and Budget 2013). Prior to 2003 these were called consolidated metropolitan statistical areas (CMSAs).

A final type of urban agglomeration does not have an “official” definition but is nonetheless of increasing importance worldwide. It is a string of large metropolitan areas referred to collectively as a “megalopolis” (Gottman 1964). The term was originally coined to refer to the region in the northeastern United States that extends from Washington, DC, through Philadelphia and New York to Boston, Massachusetts, but it can be applied to highly urbanized regions of the world as well, such as the Los Angeles-San Diego-Tijuana corridor in California and Mexico that contains over 20 million residents, or the western end of Lake Ontario, a region known as the Golden Horseshoe stretching from Toronto, Canada, to Buffalo, New York, that contains over 11 million residents. Other megalopoli include the Taiheiyō Belt in Japan that includes the country’s two largest cities, Tokyo and Osaka; the Rhine-Ruhr region of Germany, that includes Cologne and Düsseldorf; and the Sao Paulo-Rio de Janeiro corridor in Brazil.

## **CITIES, CHANGE, AND CONFLICT: THREE APPLICATIONS**

This book is titled *Cities, Change, and Conflict* because the political economy approach stresses how societies change and how conflict between and among social groups plays a role in that change. Sometimes the changes and conflicts are right out in the open—for example, a debate in the city council over property taxes, a public hearing on a proposed highway, a sit-in challenging a landlord, or a strike against an employer. Other examples of change and conflict are more subtle, gradual, or even hidden—the members of one ethnic group in a neighborhood are being replaced by those of another group; one community’s schools deteriorate while a neighboring community gets a new school; a developer buys an apartment house, evicts the tenants, and demolishes the building. Although more subtle, these changes and conflicts are also real.

We will look briefly at three contemporary issues that illustrate several of the key concepts we will return to in later chapters. These examples, although describing a specific set of events, represent social processes that are spread throughout the urban areas of our society.

## The Forbidden City Within Los Angeles

Every city has a characteristic **built environment**, consisting of buildings, roads, bridges, and other structures. One of the key issues in urban sociology is how the built environment relates to the ways in which people use the city. The human–environment interaction is reciprocal: people build cities to fulfill certain purposes, and once the cities are built, they influence how people live in them. As Winston Churchill said, “We shape our buildings, and afterwards, our buildings shape us” (quoted in Michelson 1970, 168).

How does the built environment relate to other features of urban life? An issue we will explore in [Part III](#) of this book is the way in which different social groups are spatially divided in cities. People of different ethnicities, races, income levels, and even gender differ in where and how they live in the city. How does this social differentiation relate to the built environment? Let us begin with a proposition that we will explore later:

A city’s built environment is a reflection of its social structure.

This proposition means that we can see the existence and interaction patterns of different social groups reflected in the physical structure of the city. For example, are the social groups very different from each other or not so different? Do they mix freely or are they separated? Are the spaces that different groups use similar or are they dramatically different from each other? For each city, we may find somewhat different answers to these questions, depending on the city’s history and its current social structure.

To begin our exploration of the relationship between the built environment and the social structure, we can consider Mike Davis’s analysis of the new downtown of Los Angeles in his book, *City of Quartz* (1990). Davis indicates that the architecture and design of the new downtown both reflect the separation of social groups in Los Angeles and help to enforce their separation from each other.

Davis calls the new downtown “The Forbidden City,” a reference to Beijing’s Forbidden City, the walled compound within which the emperors of China lived for hundreds of years until they were overthrown by a series of revolutions and wars in the twentieth century. Because it was thought to be important for royalty to be separated from ordinary people, the Forbidden City contained all of the necessities of life for the emperor’s extended family as well as for the many nobles, retainers, and servants attached to the court. The Forbidden City thus encompassed several city blocks in size, and contained dozens of dwellings, ceremonial halls, schools, kitchens, stables, and gardens, all surrounded by a formidable wall that separated the court from its subjects.

Los Angeles’s new downtown, built since the early 1980s, consists of a series of linked megastructures, or large, multipurpose buildings, including office towers, hotels, shopping centers, and entertainment facilities, all connected by a system of multilevel highways, access ramps, elevated pedestrian walkways, and parking garages. Although not literally walled in, Los Angeles’s new downtown is difficult to enter, particularly on foot, and consists almost entirely of privately owned spaces, such as shops, hotels, and health clubs, that are monitored through the control of access. Once people gain entrance, Davis says, their experience is a “seamless” transition from work to shopping to play, allowing them to move from one activity to another without leaving the complex and without ever having to see a Latino teenager or a homeless person on the streets outside. This new downtown was built to accommodate white-collar office workers and to attract tourists, convention-goers, and suburban shoppers; and, not surprisingly, those are the groups normally found in the district.

By way of contrast, Davis describes the old downtown of Los Angeles, which is just six blocks from the new downtown. Here, sidewalks teem with pedestrians, buses deposit shoppers on every corner, and the doors of business establishments open directly onto the street. Here also is where Latinos, African Americans, and poor people shop, eat, and play, in distinct contrast to the decidedly white and affluent clientele of the new downtown.

Davis relates that the city of Los Angeles planned and carried out the downtown's separation of the rich from the poor, of white Anglos from Latinos and African Americans, through its Redevelopment Agency. The architectural features of multilevel ramps, skyways, and blank concrete walls separating the new downtown from the rest of the city and making it a Forbidden City are designed to exclude the less affluent. The philosophy behind such reconstruction of urban space, Davis argues, is that middle-class whites gain a sense of security from being separated from people who are poor or are members of racial and ethnic minority groups. Thus, replacing openly public spaces with controlled-access semipublic spaces leads to a feeling of spatial security for white middle-class residents. [Figure 1.3](#) shows another example, this time from Dallas.

Lest we think that the separation of social groups is inevitable, Davis reminds us (2006 [1990], 231) that in the past century, planners such as Frederick Law Olmstead emphasized providing public amenities—parks, playgrounds, and plazas owned and operated by local governments—that would bring different social groups together. Olmstead thought public mixing of the classes would democratize cities and prevent the extreme social class polarization that was occurring in Europe. In recent years, however, city planners have more commonly adopted the fortress approach seen in Los Angeles. Detroit's Renaissance



**FIGURE 1.3** Downtown Dallas

This park has few benches, discouraging use by homeless or unemployed people. Critics of contemporary city planning claim that many cities are creating spaces for the wealthy that exclude low-income people.

Source: Photo: Alex Thomas.

Center was the first example of this approach to gain national prominence, followed by numerous other downtown redevelopment projects that, rather than welcoming the public inside, have presented the architectural message that the public is not invited (Whyte 1988). If our built environment does indeed reflect our social structure, what we are seeing in the new downtowns is literally a “concrete” statement about the increasing separation of rich and poor in contemporary cities.

## Criminalizing Homelessness

What rights do people have to use public space? Who has the power to define what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate public behavior? From a political economy point of view, those with the most power usually get to dominate the policy-making process. Yet, political decisions about urban issues result in different policies from one community to another. Let us use the case of homeless people to examine the following proposition:

Local laws and public policies can differ from one place to another based on the political and economic climate of different communities.

As we will see in [Chapter 11](#), homelessness has been on the rise in the United States since 1980. In response, many cities have established positive programs such as increasing affordable housing, assisting homeless people with medical and psychological issues, and providing free or low-cost food. Other cities have tried to drive homeless people away, or to make them less visible. Unfortunately, one increasingly common tactic cities use to deal with homelessness is to pass ordinances that punish or harass homeless individuals, in effect making it illegal to be homeless.

The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty tracks how cities and towns criminalize **homelessness**. The Center’s 2019 report, *Housing Not Handcuffs: Ending the Criminalization of Homelessness in U. S. Cities*, provides grim evidence of how elected officials sometimes choose to fight the homeless people themselves rather than the causes of homelessness. The Center’s survey of 187 cities shows that officials may take one of these four different types of approaches toward criminalizing homelessness:

- Enacting legislation that limits the use of public space for living activities such as sleeping or sitting.
- Inequitably enforcing existing restrictions on begging.
- Conducting police “sweeps” to remove homeless people from specific areas.
- Targeting homeless people for selective enforcement of generally applicable laws such as loitering.

Several cities have passed legislation that, although ostensibly prohibiting “unsafe” activity, actually target the street dwellers who make up the most visible segment of the homeless (see [Figure 1.4](#)). Philadelphia, for example, passed a Sidewalk Behavior Ordinance that prohibits lying on public sidewalks; only a last-minute lobbying effort by homelessness advocates prevented the bill from carrying a jail sentence for violation. In Tucson, the city council not only passed a law against sitting or lying on the sidewalks, but also attempted to lease the sidewalks to adjacent businesses, thus making the sidewalks private property and allowing the businesses to control access to them. Milwaukee has an “anti-scavenging” law that prohibits people from looking through trash cans and dumpsters. New Orleans has an “unauthorized public habitation” law. Memphis prohibits people from owning



**FIGURE 1.4** Is Homelessness a Crime?

Some cities have criminalized public homelessness as a way of hiding the problem.

Source: iStock/Available Light.

shopping carts. San Diego passed a law against storing property in public. Who else but homeless people would need to sit or lie down, store their possessions, or scavenge for food and clothing in public?

Restrictions on begging, usually termed “aggressive panhandling,” are also numerous. New York City, Miami, and Milwaukee reportedly enforce these laws routinely.

Another common practice is the “sweep,” in which police raid an area known to harbor homeless people, arrest them or chase them away, and confiscate or destroy their property in the process. Sweeps are often used to “clean up” particular districts, either to encourage economic development or prior to a high-profile political or sporting event expected to attract large numbers of visitors.

Some laws on the books are rarely enforced but can be selectively enforced against homeless people. This gives elected officials and law enforcement agencies a tool to control where homeless people go and what they do. Such laws include prohibitions against sleeping on the subway, urinating in public, loitering, jaywalking, public intoxication, littering, and camping within the city. In some cities, officials have declared “zero tolerance” policies for homelessness under the theory that any public disorder contributes to crime. Thus, they react very strongly against minor offenses.

According to a study of 187 cities by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, municipal laws that criminalize actions among homeless people have been on the increase. The report notes that between 2006 and 2019, bans on camping in public rose by 92 percent, loitering by 103 percent, begging by 103 percent and legislation making it a crime to live in a vehicle rose by a whopping 213 percent. A new trend cited in the report is adopting laws that make it a crime for an individual or private organization to share food in public (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2019). Several municipalities and one state were highlighted in the Center’s “Hall of Shame,” as shown in [Box 1.2](#).

## BOX 1.2 Homelessness “Hall of Shame”

In 2019 the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty singled out five cities and one state for their particularly aggressive, inefficient, and inhumane treatment of homeless people. These are the entrants in the Center’s “Hall of Shame.”

**Ocala, Florida:** In Ocala, Florida, homeless people are strictly policed in accordance with Ocala’s draconian anti-homeless ordinances. It is illegal to rest in the open on public property, which has been heavily enforced by the city. The city’s “Operation Street Sweeper” and aggressive policing have even led to a federal lawsuit on behalf of three unsheltered residents. These three plaintiffs have collectively spent 210 days in jail and been assessed over \$9,000 in fines, fees, and costs due to enforcement of the trespass and unlawful lodging ordinance alone.

**Sacramento, California:** The City of Sacramento consistently engages in practices that seek to isolate and disperse homeless people, even in the absence of adequate housing alternatives or available shelters. The City has seized and destroyed encampment residents’ personal property and caused some of the residents personal injury; it has even filed its own lawsuit seeking to declare certain homeless individuals as public nuisances and to have them banned from public space.

**Wilmington, Delaware:** Wilmington has engaged in practices with the intention of keeping its homeless residents away from certain parts of town by seeking a “no contact” order with the entire city as a condition of bail. In Wilmington, the police have requested that judges issue “no contact” orders prohibiting direct or indirect contact with the entire City of Wilmington, the “alleged victim.” Vulnerable residents are thus forced to choose between agreeing to unreasonable conditions of release or remaining in jail until their case is resolved.

**Kansas City, Missouri:** Health department officials in Kansas City poured bleach on chili, soup, and sandwiches being offered to homeless residents by the organization Free Hot Soup. Then-mayor Sly James posted on Twitter in support of the actions conducted by the health department officials.

**Redding, California:** Redding Mayor Julie Winter requested a state of emergency over homelessness and calling for the ability to, “hold [homeless] individuals accountable” by, “[requiring] mental health treatment for the severely mentally ill, up to and including conservatorship until such time as the individual has demonstrated the ability to care for themselves including managing their finances.” Mayor Winter also wishes to build a shelter where she can force people experiencing homelessness to stay for up to 90 days.

**The State of Texas:** Austin amended its camping ordinance in June 2019, and Texas Governor Greg Abbott rebuked Austin for the positive law changes and threatened to intervene if the city did not return to the more draconian version of the ban. Governor Abbott warned that “all state-imposed solutions” were on the table, and then ordered Texas Department of Transportation staff to sweep homeless encampments from underneath highways in the Austin area. The sweeps have continued on a weekly basis since the Governor first ordered them to begin on November 4, 2019.

Source: National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2019.



Contrary to these ineffective, counterproductive, and inhumane policies, the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (2019) reports that several cities have adopted policies that can offer long-term help, both for assisting individual homeless people and for addressing the long-term causes of the homelessness problem. In its report, the Center cites the approach of “Housing First and Permanent Supportive Housing” as the most effective policy direction. This means that homeless individuals need to be placed in their own apartments—not shelters—to give them the security they need to ensure their health and safety. They need to be offered supportive services such as healthcare, job counseling, and treatment for substance abuse without mandatory participation. According to the Center’s studies, programs of permanent supportive housing in all the cities that have adopted them have resulted in lower costs and a higher likelihood that the clients will remain housed.

Some communities that have adopted Housing First and Permanent Supportive Housing policies have made enormous gains in combating homelessness. Four communities have effectively ended chronic homelessness: Bergen County, NJ, Rockford, IL, Lancaster, PA, and a cluster of communities in Southwest Minnesota. In addition, 78 communities and three states have effectively ended homelessness among veterans, including New Orleans and the state of Virginia. Impressive gains have also been achieved in places as disparate as Marin County, CA; Charlotte, NC; Los Angeles, and Seattle (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2019).

What must be done to address the problem of homelessness? If policies are not put in place to prevent homelessness, we will continue to see a steady increase in the number of homeless families and individuals. As we will see in [Chapter 11](#), a broad range of policies is needed, including affordable housing, improved mental health treatment, accessible and effective substance abuse programs, decent jobs, and livable wages. Through the political process, some local areas are addressing comprehensive policies, including assistance for people who are already homeless, and help for people at risk of becoming homeless. Communities have the choice of turning the homeless into criminals or attempting to address homelessness as a community problem.

## **Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice**

Does every citizen have equal access to a safe and healthy living space? Are the dangers and difficulties of urban life spread evenly throughout cities and metropolitan areas? Or are some groups more likely than others to be exposed to problems and hazards? By examining the case of the environment, we can explore the following proposition:

The ability of a community to control its fate is related to its political and economic power.

During the 1980s, many people of color, including Black Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, began to recognize and rally against environmental threats to their neighborhoods. Until that time, the environmental movement was overwhelmingly made up of white, middle-class activists. As we will see in [Chapter 9](#), the fact that lower-income people of color are especially subject to environmental hazards prompted new discussions of environmental issues in communities of racial minorities.

One of the earliest incidents to expose this pattern of the concentration of hazards in minority communities occurred in 1982, when officials decided to locate a toxic PCB landfill in a predominantly Black area of North Carolina. Residents organized to

stop its construction. The following year, the federal government's General Accounting Office reported that three of the four major hazardous landfills in the South were located in predominantly Black communities. Shortly afterward, a national study found that the proportion of racial minorities in communities with hazardous waste facilities was double that of communities without such facilities. The authors concluded that they were observing a nationwide pattern of environmental racism (Bryant and Mohai 1992). Subsequent research has largely confirmed the earlier reports (Bullard and Waters 2005).

In general, environmental racism is used to refer to environmental policies or practices that disadvantage individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color. These may include increased exposure to environmental hazards, segregation of people of color in dirty jobs, or a lack of prompt mitigation of environmental disasters. Environmental racism is reflected in public policies and industry practices that systematically provide benefits for whites while shifting costs to people of color (Taylor 2000).

Environmental racism is not confined to decisions about locating hazardous waste facilities. Several other environmental threats face communities of color far more frequently than they do white communities. Lead poisoning, caused by eating or inhaling lead paint particles, eating vegetables grown in lead-polluted soil, and drinking water from lead plumbing, is rampant in the older sections of cities. Lead poisoning is the number one health problem for children nationwide, affecting millions of inner-city children, a high proportion of them Black or Latino (Dolbeare and Ryan 1997). Cancer rates among residents of communities near polluting industries, such as petrochemical plants, are also far higher than the average. A string of Black towns along the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to New Orleans is called "Cancer Alley" because of the high rates of cancer among the residents (Bullard 1993).

Once activists and scholars began studying nationwide patterns of race and environmental hazards, they noticed a definite relationship between the two. Then they asked whether the high levels of exposure to environmental hazards in minority communities were due simply to poverty, or if there was a distinct relationship with race. Researchers have statistically disentangled the effects of income and race on environmental hazards (Bryant and Mohai 1992; Krieg 1998; Pastor, Sadd, and Hipp 2001). They found that both factors contribute to the high incidence of hazards in minority communities. Low incomes and low property values in poor communities make it cheap for industries or government agencies to acquire land for environmentally questionable purposes. But members of racial and ethnic minority groups, independent of their incomes, have a limited number of residential choices compared to whites. This makes it more difficult for them to flee contaminated neighborhoods. Furthermore, whites dominate the political leadership of most communities, allowing them to take the stand of "not in my backyard." Thus elected officials often end up siting hazardous land uses among politically less powerful minority residents. After studying all of the available evidence, Bryant and Mohai (1992) concluded that race has more of an effect than income on influencing the level of environmental hazards in a given neighborhood.

Throughout the nation, the environmental justice movement combines the approaches of both the environmental movement and the civil rights movement. Grassroots groups have sprung up to address such issues as waste facility siting, lead contamination, pesticides, water pollution, air quality, nuclear products, and workplace health. Community groups often use confrontational direct-action tactics similar to those used by civil rights groups in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition, however, the movement includes professional

and workplace groups such as labor unions, churches, and business–environmental forums that help activists make connections between their local struggles and related state or national issues (Taylor 1993).

One of the obstacles the movement has encountered is that members of low-income minority groups sometimes think their only choices are between a hazardous job or no job. They may seek work in workplaces (such as uranium mines or pesticide factories) that are shunned by whites because of the health risks. They may be convinced by authorities that a landfill or industrial plant is safe and will bring jobs to the community, only to learn after it is built that it poses threats to their families (Bailey, Faupel, and Gundlach 1993). The overwhelming need for employment and investment in low-income communities of color can make environmental concerns seem less important in comparison. The many environmental justice groups that have been formed, however, have had a number of significant successes in addressing both high-profile environmental problems such as industrial pollution, and less obvious but still pervasive problems such as asthma and lead poisoning.

## CONCLUSION

Cities are contradictory places, reflecting the many currents and contradictions of contemporary society. Which of the following statements about cities is true?

- Cities are growing.
- Cities are shrinking.
- Cities are similar to each other.
- Cities are different from each other.
- Cities are orderly.
- Cities are in upheaval.
- Cities are exciting and vibrant places.
- Cities are the dumping grounds for many societal problems.
- Cities are overly influenced by wealthy and powerful groups.
- Ordinary people can affect what happens in cities.

As we will see in subsequent chapters, all of these statements are true—for some cities at some point in time. The point of studying cities is to discover the circumstances under which each of these generalizations is true.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 Think of a mall or shopping center with which you are familiar. What space is public? What space is private? Now think of a city shopping street. How do the use of space and the demarcation of public and private differ from that of the mall? Who is allowed to use spaces in the two settings, and how is the use of the space controlled?
- 2 Examine a week's worth of listings of prime-time television shows in the local newspaper. How many shows take place in cities? How many portray a mostly positive view,

a mostly negative view, or a balanced view of cities? Do you think television shows influence viewers' attitudes toward cities? Why or why not? What else influences beliefs and attitudes about cities?

- 3** In your community, what public policies or programs exist regarding housing and homelessness? What happens to hazardous waste generated by residents and industry? Are the patterns similar to or different from those described in this chapter? How?
- 4** What type of community do you live in: city, suburb, or rural town? Do people commute to your town or to another town? How does your community relate to other communities in the area?

# Theoretical Perspectives on the City

One day I walked with one of these middle-class gentlemen into Manchester. I spoke to him about the disgraceful unhealthy slums and drew his attention to the disgusting condition of that part of the town in which the factory workers lived. I declared that I had never seen so badly built a town in my life. He listened patiently and at the corner of the street at which we parted company, he remarked: "And yet there is a great deal of money made here. Good morning, Sir!"

Friedrich Engels: *The Condition of the Working Class in England*

Whenever researchers set out to study anything, from atomic structure to international investment patterns, they begin with a set of questions. These questions orient them to the object of their study. It should not be surprising that, given the number of different researchers, each one might ask different questions about the phenomenon under scrutiny. Although they may be studying the same problem, they will probably investigate or at least emphasize different aspects of it.

Sociological studies can be grouped together on the basis of the main questions or assumptions that guide different research projects. These broader sets of assumptions, methodologies, and key questions are often related to the investigator's theoretical approach to the subject. In urban studies, researchers with similar overall theories about how urban society works will usually be interested in asking similar questions. This chapter will explore how urban sociologists use theory in their research, focusing on four questions:

- 1 Why do sociologists use theories to shape their research?
- 2 What theories do urban sociologists use and where do their theories come from?
- 3 What are the different assumptions and approaches that accompany different theories?
- 4 How do theories affect the research topics that urban sociologists select to study?

## THEORIES AND PARADIGMS

Let us say that four sociologists set out to study housing problems in urban areas of the United States. They might take a number of different approaches, and the questions they ask at the outset will determine the direction of each researcher's study. One researcher

might look for spatial patterns in the location of adequate and inadequate housing, mapping the areas with different housing conditions. A second might investigate the relationship between the incomes of residents and the quality of the housing in which they live, analyzing how residents as consumers spend their resources. A third might describe the mechanisms by which property is bought, sold, and financed, asking about the role of banks, realtors, and other individuals who make their living from buying and selling property. A fourth researcher might investigate the local, state, and federal government's policies regarding the supply and adequacy of housing.

How do investigators decide on the objects and methods of their studies? Aside from the obvious limitations of time, place, and costs of the research, social scientists choose their research questions based on fundamental assumptions about the operation of the social world. These assumptions are tentative answers to a set of overarching questions about the nature of society. For example, are societies and social institutions orderly systems composed of interdependent parts? Researchers who answer "yes" to this question tend to emphasize the ways in which the urban social system is integrated or the way that the parts fit together to make the whole city work smoothly. They tend to see changes in cities as evolutionary, being driven by predictable factors such as population growth. Researchers answering "no" to the question may see societies as composed of competing groups, each struggling to gain advantages over the others. They tend to look for the ways in which urban patterns reflect the power of some groups over other groups within the community and to see changes in urban patterns as the product of groups' struggles to gain and keep resources.

Researchers are also guided in their subject areas by different **paradigms**. A paradigm is a set of related concepts, research questions, and theories that a group of researchers find most useful for understanding the world (Pickvance 1984). Researchers using different paradigms will probably ask different questions, examine different data, and interpret their findings in different ways. In urban studies the dominant paradigm for the first half of the twentieth century was **Human Ecology** (Flanagan 1993). Human Ecology shares many assumptions with theories of social organization and structural functionalism, stressing the orderly interaction of interdependent parts of social systems—in this case, of cities. Since the 1970s, a second paradigm, called **Political Economy**, has emerged with a stress on the use of power, domination, and resources in the shaping of cities. The paradigm helped focus researchers on several different questions and concerns within the field (Walton 1993). More recently, **critical approaches** have supplemented these approaches.

So how do researchers adopt a theoretical orientation and choose a paradigm to guide their work? One influence is the nature of the social world surrounding the researchers: what problems, issues, and phenomena do they observe? Another is the academic milieu in which they work: how can their research build on the foundations laid by other investigators? Still another source contributing to the formation of a theoretical approach is the researchers' personal value systems: what do they think is good or bad about current social arrangements?

Every theorist and researcher who has asked questions about urban society has had to confront these questions. In this chapter we will examine these differing but overlapping approaches to urban studies—Human Ecology, Political Economy, and critical approaches—to understand why the proponents have asked the questions they have, and what contributions their research has made to understanding cities. In each case we will first examine the theoretical antecedents or ancestors of the theory, then look at the theory when it was first developed, and finally examine its contributions and problems.