



Introduction

This chapter introduces the sociological study of cities, describing how the emphases of urban sociologists have historically changed as cities grew in size and complexity, as the relations of cities to the geographical areas surrounding them expanded and grew stronger, and as their links to urban areas outside of their own nations became stronger. This introduction examines how cities are defined, both sociologically and officially, and also how the larger areas of which they are a part – metropolitan areas and global city-regions – are defined.

In conjunction with enormous increases in world trade, beginning in the last decades of the twentieth century and continuing to the present, the global connections among city-regions grew in significance, and these city-regions became central points in the world economy. This chapter examines that increase and notes its implications for governing these expanded city-regions for which connections to their counterparts in other nations are often stronger than relations to city-regions within their own nations.

Differentiating cities

When the study of cities initially became a specialized subfield in sociology, early in the twentieth century, the focus of urban sociology was on how city life differed from life in the countryside. During the first part of the twentieth century, many settlements grew rapidly, and the emerging urban form was generating profound changes in social institutions. As analyzed by the major sociological theorists of the time, these institutional changes were altering the ways people interacted with each other and producing distinctive personalities within the residents of cities.

To ferret out the distinguishing features of cities, urban analysts have typically utilized comparative analyses, although the comparative referent has changed over time. Early in

the twentieth century, it seemed logical to analysts living in partially urbanized societies to contrast urban and rural areas. The latter referred to farming communities and small towns not meaningfully connected to any city. The research made it possible eventually to situate various places along a rural-urban continuum. For example, larger cities were at the top of the continuum, very small farming communities at the bottom, and towns of varying sizes were located in between. Then residents of these places were analyzed with respect to their kinship attachments, tolerance of people who were different from themselves, and so on.¹ Describing the differences in patterns of interaction and forms of social organization that distinguished types of places from each other along this continuum was one of early urban sociology's primary objectives.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the areas surrounding cities became more built up and more urban (less rural) in character. The ties between these suburban areas and the cities they surrounded also multiplied. Urban sociology correspondingly turned to questions about the differences between cities and their suburbs (which, combined, define metropolitan areas). Social interaction in cities, and the social organization of cities, remained core topics, but when contrasts were drawn, social life in cities was as likely to be examined in relation to life in the suburbs as to rural areas.

During the latter decades of the twentieth century, many metropolitan areas (i.e., cities and the suburbs that envelop them) continued to expand, engulfing and integrating more and more formerly separate communities. For example, once developers built tract housing in a former farming community outside of a city, the area would be transformed into a suburb. Areas outside of the former farming community would then be strongly exposed to the same suburbanization pressures. This process of expansion often led to the overlap of the peripheries of nearby (and once separate) urban areas, creating unified areas that were so large it seemed best to describe them as city-regions. Sometimes this entailed the increasing integration of two major metropolitan areas, such as Baltimore, Maryland, and Washington, DC. In other instances, one major urban center greatly expanded by engulfing numerous smaller cities. Examples of the latter include Shanghai, China, and Sao Paulo, Brazil. The resulting city-regions are important not only as territorial units but as economic, political, and cultural nodes housing transnational corporations, international associations, and so on whose activities cut across national boundaries. This has led to their characterization as global city-regions.² A great deal of research and analyses in contemporary urban sociology (and related social science disciplines) is directed at understanding the distinctive features of these global city-regions.

From this brief historical overview, it is apparent that urban sociology has never stopped studying cities. What has changed is that the larger areas of which cities were an integral part became more important to study as a function of changes that were occurring within and among urban areas. A main focus of this book, as implied by its title, will be on global cities and global city-regions: their development, the features by

which they are distinguished from other types of places, how the lives of people within them are organized, and the way they are linked to each other. These global cities are, in some ways, unique; that is, some of their qualities make them unlike any cities that previously existed. At the same time, they also share some features with other types of cities that flourished in very different historical periods.

The first part of this chapter offers definitions of some key terms and discusses the issues that are conventionally considered in reaching these definitions. Specifically, we begin by examining the sociological and official-legal definitions of cities, then turn to definitions of larger entities of which cities are a (major) part: metropolitan areas and global city-regions. These global city-regions grew in conjunction with enormous increases in world trade and commerce, and the second part of this chapter reviews the magnitude of these increases before turning to an analysis of how the leading global cities (and regions) can be identified.

A sociological view of cities

In defining cities, contemporary sociologists (and other social scientists) frequently start with the views of the German sociologist Max Weber. He was one of the most prominent figures during what is now termed the *classical period* of sociological theory (in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). During that period, a group of theorists laid the framework for what was to become the modern discipline of sociology. All of their theories, including Weber's, continue to be very influential in most of the specialized subfields in the discipline. Of most relevance to us here is Weber's examination of the way the salient features of cities transcended different historical periods and different cultural regions, enabling one to present a general description, not tied to time or place. His comparative analysis of cities was first published, shortly after his death, in 1921.³

The most universally applicable variables in defining cities, according to Weber, were their large populations, with homes built closely to each other in settlements so extensive that inhabitants could not know very much about each other. His point of comparison was a rural community that was small in size and had to be sparsely settled because most people farmed the land. With large and dense settlements, there obviously would not be sufficient land for everyone to continue to farm, so city populations would have to contain an extensive range of specialized (nonfarming) occupations and trades. Where large, Western, turn-of-the-twentieth-century cities were concerned, he added that these then contemporary cities were dominated by trade and commerce more than cities in the past had been, and this fundamentally altered daily life.

Modern specialization in occupations, according to Weber, was highly correlated with the development of relatively fixed markets, involving regular rather than occasional exchanges of goods and services, and a money economy. Permanent markets and

money changed everything, he wrote. To illustrate, in a community without markets or a money economy, people might color gourds and exchange them with their in-laws during certain ceremonies. The ritual and symbolism were the most important parts of these exchanges. Thus, people would not think of exchanging gourds with people other than their in-laws, and nothing like a profit motive could enter their thinking because no one could say exactly how much any gourd was worth, and no one beside their in-laws would give them more in return for a particular gourd. The primary significance of the pre-market exchange was to maintain family relations and reaffirm each person's place in this network.

With markets and money, however, all kinds of goods and services can be purchased. Everything is for sale, and the exact value of every item can be fixed in monetary terms. As a result, people who live in cities become accustomed to calculating the precise value of things, and this encourages them to become rational in all of their thinking: weighing what all kinds of things – cars, movies, vacations, and so forth – are worth and how best to go about attaining them. The type of **rationality** most strongly connected to historical Western urbanism, according to Weber, was indicated when there was a clear relationship between people's objectives and the course of conduct they were following. In other words, people are behaving rationally when they select the means (to an end) according to the likelihood it will lead to the desired end.

Furthermore, because almost everything is for sale to anyone who has the money (or a MasterCard), city dwellers also tend to be characterized by **impersonal orientations**. Buyers and sellers in most markets – unlike in-laws in the gourd exchange example – can be substituted for each other. In other words, under normal circumstances, where people come from, and their age, race, or the like, does not matter to buyers and sellers in modern urban exchanges, and people's place in a kinship network becomes less salient.⁴

Louis Wirth introduced many of the then contemporary sociologists to Weber's definition of cities. The German-born Wirth immigrated to the United States in the 1920s and became an important part of the group of pioneering urban sociologists collectively referred to as the Chicago School. (They will be discussed at length in Chapters 2 and 3.) One of Wirth's most significant contributions was his presentation, in 1938, of a systematic definition of cities and the urban way of life attendant to them. Among efforts preceding his own, he believed that Weber's formulation had been the most important. Wirth acknowledged a strong intellectual debt to him and then proceeded to elaborate on the variables Weber had identified. Specifically, Wirth also began by stressing the distinctive demographic features of cities, namely, the large size and high density of their populations. He also emphasized their extensive heterogeneity, primarily entailing specialization in occupations but also including racial, ethnic, and other types of diversity.

Associated with this demographic profile that emphasized size, density, and heterogeneity in defining cities were a number of residents' attitudes, with **impersonal**



Early sociologists defined cities by their large size and density, and noted that crowded city dwellers had to psychologically distance themselves from others.

orientations foremost among them.⁵ Here Wirth emphasized the difference between the intimate, responsive relations characteristic of non-urban places and the more neutral and formal relations he felt were typical of cities. In addition to the impersonal effects of modern markets and money economies, as previously described by Weber, Wirth viewed city dwellers as avoiding personal contacts because they were psychologically detached from each other. The large and dense settlement of cities, Wirth wrote, was associated with excessive stimulation. People were bombarded with horns and lights and were surrounded by too many potential others with whom they could interact. To adapt, people psychologically removed themselves. To acclimate to city life thus meant becoming aloof and detached. If people interacted at all with most other people, it was only in a superficial and impersonal manner. Therefore, their physical selves may have been walking down the street in close proximity to each other, but their thoughts and feelings were elsewhere. Perhaps that is why, in some notorious instances, the residents of cities have appeared to ignore strangers in apparent need of assistance and continued about their private business, or may have pretended they did not hear when others were crying for help.

In sum, the features by which **cities are sociologically defined**, following Weber and Wirth, include:

1. large population size;
2. dense settlements;

3. occupational specialization and permanent markets; and
4. impersonal and rational orientations.

Sociologists and other social scientists generally agree in stressing the preceding features in their definitions of cities. However, while the definitions of Weber, Wirth, and their followers have greatly influenced the way many people think about cities, in their own right they have no official (i.e., government) standing.

Official definitions

What constitutes a city according to the government entity responsible for that determination varies by nation, and sometimes by states and regions within nations. In almost every nation there is a government or quasi-government agency – such as a census bureau or national statistics bureau – that is responsible for stipulating what officially constitutes a city in that nation. The figures of that agency are almost always used by demographers in compiling world publications.

In some instances, agencies take note of urban lifestyle characteristics, such as impersonality or rationality; however, population size is almost always emphasized, often to the exclusion of any other consideration. Hence, across the world, a city is most often defined as an incorporated place containing some minimum population size. Although sociological definitions are usually more elaborate, a strong, or even exclusive, reliance on population size as the criterion can be justified by the fact that it is objective and more easily measured and, in addition, it is typical to find high correlations between population size and all of the other indicators that distinguish cities (i.e., density, rationality). Thus, if one had to choose a single variable to measure cities, that one variable would be its population size.

Precisely how large the population of a place must be for it to be considered a city varies among nations. In Mexico, for example, the minimum population is 100,000 people, whereas in New Zealand it is 50,000. Population minimums between 50,000 and 100,000 persons are typical, but as a result of these variations one must be cautious in comparing urbanization in different nations, or even cities within the same nation that are in different jurisdictional areas.

Historical urbanization

Following either sociological or governmental definitions, cities are not recent phenomena. As early as 500 BCE, for example, Luoyang, then the capital of China, was a large and densely populated city (with more than 1 million persons) and had many occupational specialties and a large merchant class that made it a very well-to-do city.

Over the next 2,500 years, in all parts of the world, there were other large settlements that would fit most contemporary definitions of cities, although a very small percentage of the world's population lived in a place that could qualify for designation as a city.

Those people who did live in cities, in the Middle Ages and before, usually lived in what has been termed a **primate city**. This designation is indicated when, within any nation, there is a single major urban center where the population is at least twice as large as any other city in that nation, and that one urban center also dominates the nation's political, economic, and cultural life. In the middle of the seventeenth century, London fit all the criteria of a primate city, and it provides an interesting example of an early city because so many of its features resembled a contemporary city as defined by Weber and Wirth. It was an enclosed city with more than half a million people within its walls, and another couple of hundred thousand outside those walls. It was congested, built around commerce, with specialized craftsmen and merchants, and very diverse with large Dutch, French, and German settlements. Our first case study examines London circa 1650 in greater detail.

CASE STUDY: An Early Primate City – London circa 1650

Like many European cities, London was a former Roman army encampment. The Romans originally selected it for this purpose because the Thames River afforded easy transportation of troops and supplies, and the site was easily defended because enemies could be seen approaching given that the Thames lied to the south, there was a marshy meadow to the north, and plains to the east and west. To further enhance its security, the Romans enclosed the city within a semicircular wall.

By the early 1600s London was already a commercially dominated city, crowded because it was squeezed into a Roman settlement pattern established more than 1,000 years earlier. That settlement pattern continued to constrain the city's growth. Houses, shops, and warehouses lined narrow streets that bustled with activity. Pack animals carrying goods shared the very crowded streets and alleyways with pedestrians and horse-drawn carriages.

To attract customers, merchants found it efficient to display goods of the same type in

close proximity to each other. London's seventeenth-century street markets came to be known by their products, which in turn yielded street names such as Grocers' Court, Poultry, and Fish Street – many of which can still be found.⁶ This type of commercial concentration would, of course, later become commonplace in large cities.

The Thames in the seventeenth century was lined with thousands of small boats carrying passengers and large ships carrying cargo. Its tides, along with piers from London Bridge that spanned the river, made travel difficult, leading ships to unload onto barges near the Customs House just east of the bridge. The river was so crowded that ships sometimes had to wait weeks to unload their cargos: tobacco from America, sugar from the West Indies, wine from France, pepper from India, and so forth.⁷

The original London Bridge, a timber and stone span constructed in the late Middle Ages, was in service until the nineteenth century. It was lined with houses, stores, and souvenir shops, and the

bridge and the Thames, in conjunction, made London the center through which all of England was connected to world markets. A market orientation, with the rationality and impersonality it entails, spread outward across the city from this commercial center.

Seventeenth-century London also resembled contemporary cities with respect to the development of enclaves outside of the city's commercial center. For example, a large group of wealthy Dutch merchants and their families settled in North London, just within the walls, and a sizeable French settlement formed just beyond the wall to the east. When the city's population grew as a result of the increasing industry and trade, these peripheral areas were settled by people who were pushed out of the crowded city center.⁸ Probably more than any other city at the time, London was moving toward taking on all of the appearances of a contemporary city.

However, it was only because of a great deal of in-migration that London's population grew during the early decades of the seventeenth century. For many years the city had an elevated mortality rate because of unsanitary living conditions and high rates of infectious disease. Without the new migrants, its birthrate alone would not have been sufficient to maintain the city's population. But real calamity struck in 1665 when plague and smallpox killed about 20 percent of the city's population, and in the following year a great fire destroyed about 60 percent of the city. London's movement toward becoming the precursor to contemporary cities was halted by the twin catastrophes. Structures in the city were slowly rebuilt, but it was 100 years until the population lost to plague and smallpox was fully replaced.

World urbanization proceeded slowly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As late as 1900, for example, only about 13 percent of the world's population lived in a city, even if places with as few as 5,000 residents were considered to be cities. However, world urbanization – the percentage of people who lived in a city – increased so rapidly during the past half century or so, that by 2007 more than 50 percent of the world population could be characterized as urban.⁹

Viewing the world's gross rate of urbanization, however, overlooks an important difference between nations based on their degree of economic development. To be specific, the United Nation (UN) identifies two groups of nations differing according to the size of their economies, technological infrastructure, general standard of living, and related variables. Those that score high on all of the preceding criteria are termed *more developed countries* (MDCs), and most of them are located in Europe or North America. Nations scoring low on these criteria are termed *less developed countries* (LDCs), and most of them are located in Africa or Latin America. (Asia is mixed with respect to MDCs and LDCs.)

The UN distinction is relevant to us because in the MDCs there is a higher overall rate of urbanization, and the places in which urbanites live are less likely to be primate cities in MDCs than in LDCs. In fact, more than half of all city-dwellers in MDCs live in cities where the population is less than half a million persons.¹⁰ There are still

some primate cities in MDCs – London, for example – although the primate pattern is substantially more prevalent in LDCs.

Another major change in the form of urban life entails the relatively recent growth of populations and activities in the areas immediately surrounding cities – that is, suburbs. Our attention now turns to these expanded urban areas and the ways they have been defined and conceptualized.

Metropolitan areas

By the middle of the century, the hinterland surrounding most cities had grown substantially in residential population and the importance of the retail and commercial activities they contained. Many suburbs were no longer just bedroom communities, although a few of them – such as areas outside of the wall in seventeenth-century London – had always been more than that. To illustrate, many of the largest corporations moved to the suburbs of major cities rather than in the city or its central business district, and many firms that provides technical and staff support to these corporations followed. The corporate headquarters of McDonald's and Allstate, for example, anchor commercial complexes in northern suburbs of Chicago. To study urban life in a meaningful way, it became increasingly necessary to refer to a more inclusive area that encompassed both a city and its suburbs. In many nations this new territorial unit was referred to as a metropolitan area, or standard metropolitan area, or in the contemporary United States, a metropolitan statistical area (MSA).

Because cities are politically incorporated areas, their boundaries are usually unambiguous so it is almost always possible to state with precision the geographical area a city encompasses. Metropolitan areas, by contrast, are not typically incorporated. The cities, towns, and surrounding areas are functionally interdependent, and they may formally cooperate in limited ways, as with regional transportation authorities or metropolitan police departments. However, the parts of a metropolitan area, unlike the parts of a city (i.e., neighborhoods), are not usually under the jurisdiction of a single government. Thus, in most instances despite being meaningful sociologically and economically, metropolitan areas are not usually legal entities. Changes in the boundaries of metropolitan areas also occur more frequently than in cities. They are more fluid, often expanding and engulfing formerly separate rural hinterlands or small towns.

As metropolitan areas became socially and economically more significant, it became increasingly important to nations to develop formal definitions. The same government agencies that define cities in any nation usually define metropolitan areas as well. Historically, these definitions were sometimes imprecise, such as referring to the built-up area around a city. They soon became more precise, however. In contemporary nations the definitions of **metropolitan areas** identify a functionally integrated area

of which a city (usually defined by a minimum population size) is one important part. The most commonly used indicator for combining a city and its hinterlands into a metropolitan area involves commuting patterns between outlying municipalities and a city. The specific cutoffs are highly variable, however. In Japan, for example, a metropolitan area is defined as a city and all the surrounding municipalities in which at least 1.5 percent of the total population aged fifteen years and older commute to school or work in the city. In France, a municipality that abuts a city is included in the metropolitan (or urban) area when at least 40 percent of its residents commute to work in the city or into other municipalities that already have 40 percent of their residents commuting to the city.

Global city-regions

During the last half century, a number of metropolitan areas have continued to expand, engulfing smaller cities, towns, and rural areas that were once beyond their boundaries. Through a series of freeways, for example, Los Angeles tied a number of smaller cities – themselves growing – into an extensive urban agglomeration. On a smaller scale, in the United Kingdom, cooperative ventures involving Birmingham and seven other smaller cities led to the formation of an integrated West Midlands area, with Birmingham as its core. In other instances, two formerly separate metropolitan areas expanded until the areas surrounding each of the central cities overlapped: Washington, DC, and Baltimore provide an example as do Copenhagen, Denmark, and Malmo, Sweden, described in the following case study. To convey the large size of these agglomerations, regardless of how they formed, they are often described as **city-regions**.

Table 1.1 presents a listing of the ten largest urban agglomerations as of 2011. Given the variations in how nations designate cities, metropolitan areas, and city-regions – as we have noted – variations are to be expected among lists prepared using different criteria; however, they tend to include most of the same places, even if their ordering changes.¹¹

Notable from Table 1.1 is the fact that seven of the ten largest agglomerations are in Asia, and if the listing is extended, the predominance of this region continues, led by city-regions in China. To be specific, of the thirty-two most populous of such areas in the world, seven are in China. That nation, in absolute terms, now has the largest urban population (nearly 600 million people) as a result of very rapid urban growth that began in the mid-twentieth century and then accelerated around the turn of the twenty-first century. To illustrate, in 1953, only about 12 percent of China's population was urban. Fifty years later, in 2003, it was slightly more than 40 percent. The previously established Chinese cities grew as a result of in-migration, and industrialization in previously rural areas led to the rapid growth of new cities.¹² And all across Asia, and the rest of the world, city-regions were growing in size while connecting more strongly to the world economy.