



The Symbolism And Imagery of Urban Life

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Abstract

To develop a completely objective, value-free view of urban communities and urban life is probably impossible, for people's attitudes to them are strongly subjective. The modern city is an object of hatred for many people, but it is also a love object to many others. Still others may have more ambivalent, love-hate sentiments toward the city. The modern city may be perceived or valued in extremely wide variety of ways, including the following: a place of novelty and excitement, of fashion and style, of ideas and artifacts, a center of sumptuous consumption, of diversity and delight. As a den of iniquity- a place where vice and crime abound, and political corruption rides high.

As a fountainhead of service- a place where health and wealth, the arts and sciences, the educational and welfare services reach their highest levels. As a center of loneliness—a place where man is depersonalized, anonymous, alone, rootless, afraid, uniquely separated from his fellow men.

While the balance of public opinion tends to swing toward negative views of urban living, such views are not universally shared and a significant minority people are prourban.

KEYWORDS: Symbolism; Communities; Urban Life; Metropolitan; Anonymous; Sentiments.



Gist and Fava (1994) suggest that it is important to describe what is known of the sentiments and symbols attached to cities, if only to avoid possible attitudinal biases that may color research on urban life. Moreover, such imagery can have real consequences on policy decisions concerning the urban community. For example if the city is seen as so evil, decayed, or anachronistic that it is beyond salvation, then it may be neglected or abandoned as an object of further investment or planned social intervention. On the other hand, if it is seen as totally satisfactory in its present form, then the perception very well might be that no further social

Intervention, other than perhaps the free play of “natural” market forces is necessary. According to this perspective, the city can easily deal with its own contingencies without help from external agencies. Perceptions between these two extremes, which are the most reasonable from this point of view, are more likely to be that urban communities are worth preserving, but that in many cases they need massive intervention and social guidance if they are to remain workable and livable.

Many popular images of the city and attitudes toward urban life have been commonly expressed in the mass media, public opinion surveys, popular music, literature, and films. The

Purpose here is briefly to summarize some of the main dimensions of these popular sentiments.

Popular Music

The folklorist Botkin (1994) has found that American cities possess a folklore that has grown up around landmarks, streets, neighborhoods, expressed in the form of folk, jazz, or popular music. Much of it also expresses a positive attachment for urban sights and sounds, or a longing for a city or place left behind by a geographically mobile wanderer. The music of the late jazz composer and conductor Duke Ellington, for example, includes many compositions expressing positive affection for his adopted hometown of Harlem, as illustrated by such titles as “Drop Me Off in Harlem,” “Harlem Upbeat,” “Echoes of Harlem,” or “Harlem Airshaft” (Ellington, 1973).



The other side of the coin is expressed in the city blues, such as the St. Louis, Kansas City, Beale Street, or Memphis blues, which cry out of being down and out, lonely, or abandoned by a loved one in the "cold, impersonal" city. Popular songs such as "I left My Heart in San Francisco," "Give My Regards to Broadway," "I'll Take Manhattan," "Moon Over Miami," "I Love Paris," or "Chicago My Kind of Town," all express a sentimental desire to return to an urban scene associated with pleasant memories of one sort or another. Charosh (2008) more specifically refers to these types of songs as "home songs." It has also been suggested that much of the country and western music that has become popular, particularly in the cities of the south, southwest, and the industrial north, attracts an audience of "urban hillbillies" for whom the themes of much contemporary country western music probably remind them of the problems they faced in their urban migration (Wilgur,2001).

One thing that is interesting about popular, folk, or jazz music with an urban theme is that it invariably focuses on the city or on specific subareas of the city. But so far none of it deals with the larger types of metropolitan complexes . Evidently the larger metropolitan unit is too large, too new, too abstract, or too amorphous to have yet taken its place as an object of sentimental identification.

The City in Popular Literature

The novel and contemporary feature films are two important sources of urban symbolism. In them the city may simply be a setting in which the plot unfolds , or it may be an important part of the story line itself. Early in the nineteenth century a body of literature already existed that depicted the American city as a backdrop for heartless commercialism, poverty, crime and evil, loneliness, and personal defeat. The works of Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe, for example, portray the city as a source of nightmares and other frightening personal experiences. Around the turn of the century, the burgeoning industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest were viewed with distaste by popular authors such as Sinclair, Norris, and Dreiser. Prominent social critics such as Addams and Strong wrote of the city in nonfictional terms with equal distance.



In the 1930s and 1940s, Marquand's novels involving upper-class Bostonians or transplants from rigidly stratified small towns to the more open social class structure of big cities provided a satirical view of the class structure of New England towns, large and small, while Levin's "The Old Bunch" and Farrell's "Studs Lonigan" vividly portrayed peer group relations among the adolescents and young adults of Chicago's well-defined hyphenated American ethnic sub-communities. Fitzgerald portrayed the naivete of Midwesterners transplanted into the more cynical and worldly urban East and much of O'Hara's work often contrasted Manhattan with his semi-fictional hometown of Gibbstown, Pennsylvania, from which financially able natives would occasionally escape to carry on nefarious activities in the anonymous big city.

In the 1950s, Bellow's semiautobiographical "The adventures of Augie March" evoked a vivid sense of Chicago as the environmental setting in which a young man comes of age. Ritche's "The Adventures of Duddy Kravits" used the city of Montreal in much the same way in his similarly titled novel. The city as Armageddon has been another theme of some novels, with West's "The Day of the Locust" a case in point. In this work, Los Angeles is the setting in which a set of unrelated circumstances eventually comes together in such a way as to produce senseless mass violence and self-destruction among hordes of people crowded in the streets at the premier of a breakdown in the ecological order upon which the survival of the city depends. Similar themes are repeated in countless popular science fiction works.

The City In Films

Many of these novels also have been re-created as motion pictures. The motion picture medium has been most effective in borrowing materials from short stories, novels, and the theater for plot materials, but it has created original material of its own as well. While not always attuned to the artistic intent of the authors of these sources, the film medium does have the added advantages of sight and sound. Films provide a more realistic and intense sense of the cityscapes and scenes in which the plot action takes place. Such settings are often created in a film studio, but more and more films are produced on location in the appropriate city or cities. One common film cliché is to begin by zooming in on the skyline of the film's city setting to create a more authentic sense of place of the story's locale. The skyscrapers of New York, the



hills, bridges, and bays of San Francisco, and the streets of Los Angeles have probably been used most often for this effect in American films. But what is important is the idea that popular movies, whatever the sources of their plots, are a rich and diversified source of urban imagery. For many filmgoers, films shot on location in such cities as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, Miami, Honolulu, Seattle, or Denver are their only direct contact with such places and may be one of the most important influences on their impressions of these places. Television tends to use these same locales for their urban-based serials or specials and thus may have a similar positive or negative impact on the viewer.

Public Opinion

The most common method of measuring the attitudes of the general public has been through national sample surveys, commonly referred to as public opinion polls. In recent years, several such polls have begun to survey American's attitudes to living in cities. For example, some of these polls have asked people to indicate the size or type of community in which ideally they would prefer to live. Two polls conducted in the early 1970s seem to suggest that a large majority of people would prefer to live in the country or small towns and suburbs than in large cities. One Gallup survey (1973) found only 13 percent of the respondents preferring city living to suburbs, small towns, or farms, while the U.S. Commission on Population Growth (1973) found only 14 percent choosing large cities over smaller cities, towns, or the countryside. These results point to a rather strong anti-urban bias, even though a substantial majority continues to reside in urban areas. While most people indicated were generally satisfied with the quality of life in the communities in which they lived, in another Gallup poll (1974), the residents of metropolitan communities of a million or more population were slightly less satisfied than the residents of places under 2,500 population: 83 percent of the residents in the smaller areas expressed satisfaction, compared to 71 percent in the larger areas. That many big city residents would prefer to live in smaller communities but do not choose to do so would seem to suggest that attitude surveys are not a reliable predictor of actual behavior. A more reasonable explanation, however, is that many people are reluctant urban dwellers who feel they have no



real choice because of occupational ties to the metropolitan labor force or other economic circumstances that prevent their moving to less urbanized areas.

Some surveys have pinpointed dissatisfaction with particular aspects of urban living rather than total disillusionment. For example, Fischer(2006) reports the results of several studies suggesting that distrust of other people tends to increase with community size. The same survey also showed that anxiety about crime increases with city size. Only 14 percent of rural respondents felt that it was unsafe to walk outside at night, while 57 percent of the respondents who resided in the center cities of large metropolitan areas felt that it was unsafe. Likewise, big city residents are more than twice as likely as rural residents to think it important to lock their doors when they leave home (Marans and Rodgers,2005).

Conclusion

While the balance of public opinion tends to swing toward negative views of urban living, such views are not universally shared and a significant minority of people are pro urban. Some studies (Mazie and Rawlings,2012) suggest that those who are highly educated, employed in professional and white collar occupations, young or elderly, childless couples, or interested in the cultural activities of the city tend to have positive attitudes toward city living and are more likely already to be living in urban environments. These are the cosmopolites. To the extent that current demographic trends point to an increase in the portion of the total population expected to have such social characteristics, it seems reasonable to speculate that an increase in cosmopolitan life styles among the population will eventually lead to more positive attitudes toward urban living among a wider portion of people than is now the case. Certainly some real or perceived improvements in the conditions of urban living that are now deemed unsatisfactory—such as decrease in the crime rate—would probably serve to enhance this prospect.



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