

Urbanism as a way of life

Trying to rediscover



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Table of Contents

Foreword (<i>Marek S. Szczepański, Grzegorz Gawron, Barbara Lewicka</i>)	7
<i>Piotr Skudrzyk</i>	
Like fruits of the Bible tree. Moral status of metropolises	11
<i>Barbara Lewicka</i>	
Behind the urbanism. Images of the city in modern marketing	25
<i>Małgorzata Suchacka</i>	
Creative class — around related concepts. An attempt at critical sociological analysis	39
<i>Krzysztof Bierwiazzonek</i>	
Spatial identity in the theoretical and empirical contexts	57
<i>Grzegorz Gawron</i>	
Living longer in urban environments — developing “age-friendly” cities and communities in selected models	75
<i>Paulina Rojek-Adamek</i>	
Urban space and sustainable development. Social challenges to contemporary design	93
<i>Karolina Wojtasik</i>	
Urbicide — when the city becomes a target	109
<i>Zbigniew Zagala</i>	
Residents of urban and rural areas. The same or different?	119
In Place of an End (<i>Marek S. Szczepański, Grzegorz Gawron, Barbara Lewicka</i>) .	135
Résumé	137

Foreword

It was July 1938 when Louis Wirth published his “Urbanism as a Way of Life” in the *American Journal of Sociology*. The paper was seen by many as the one defining the city as a social phenomenon. Looking beyond its physical structure, economic product or cultural institutions, the author discovers those “elements of urbanism which mark it as a distinctive mode of human group life” (Wirth 1938: 4).

Wirth argues that three key characteristics of cities — large population size, social heterogeneity, and population density — contribute to the development of a peculiarly “urban way of life” and a distinct “urban personality”. In his opinion, for centuries casual observers have noted deep personality differences between urban and rural people and between nature-based and machine-based styles of living. He attempts to explain those differences in terms of the functional responses of urban dwellers to the characteristic environmental conditions of modern urban society. According to Wirth, people living in cities are weakly integrated; they take part in impersonal relationships being rather concentrated on self-activities than involved in social engagements. Segmental roles, isolation and disorder result in the city dwellers’ susceptibility to persuasion or manipulation as their personalities are not coherent enough to fight external pressures. Moreover, people whose mentality was built in unfriendly city environment are likely to suffer breakdowns or commit suicides much more often than those living in rural areas. Although Wirth mentioned some positive aspects of living in the city like freedom or tolerance, his most meaningful ideas on the urban lifestyle were quite pessimistic with special attention paid to insecurity and loneliness experienced by city dwellers. As John Scott put it: “There was an anti-city bias in Wirth’s approach that reflected a widely found nostalgia in industrial societies for the life of the rural village”. (Scott 2003: 496)

According to some authors, Wirth's explanation of the sociology of urban life is nothing more but the attempt at social scientific verification of the obvious. For others, such things as an "urban personality" or an "urban way of life" simply do not exist at all. Anyway, although highly criticized, Wirth's essay — due to many reasons — has become highly influential and his new approach to the city — convincing. It is worth to mention here at least two of his prominent opponents: Anthony Giddens (1981) and Herbert J. Gans (1968). In Giddens' view, there is something like a distinctive urban lifestyle on the one hand, while, it cannot be described anymore, on the other. In modern capitalism this is not the place which could be acknowledged as responsible for shaping people's lifestyles. Instead, how much people earn and what they spend their money on do matter in a given context. In Gans' view, there is not only one urban way of life. Nonetheless, Wirth gave us detailed descriptions of city conditions and their impact on society, it is not true that people lead the same lifestyles. Among the lifestyles distinguished by Gans are the following: cosmopolites; unmarried and childless; ethnic villagers; the deprived and the trapped. Only the deprived and the trapped were recognized as suffering social anomie, contrary to Wirth's assumptions pointing to anomie as a natural characteristic of all city dwellers.

There is a long list of Wirth's opponents and enthusiasts what is not strange taking into account how vital problems concerning modern city and its dwellers his short essay comprises. The main objective of the authors of *Urbanism as a way of life. Trying to rediscover* was to prepare a collection of articles that will show the diversity of perspectives on "urban way of life" in contemporary cities.

The book is opened by "Like fruits of the Bible tree. Moral status of metropolises" in which Piotr Skudrzyk, based on studies of selected intellectuals, concentrates on discovering moral aspects of living in metropolis. To accomplish the task, he refers to Spengler's catastrophism and Castells's theory of network society. Finally, he undertakes an attempt at approaching the concept of the moral status of metropolis in the highest ethical categories.

In her article "Behind the urbanism. Images of the city in modern marketing" Barbara Lewicka tries to reconstruct the image of the city as a large overpopulated conurbation, full of alienation, depersonalized interactions in contrast to an attractive place, being synonymous with modern and interesting lifestyle. The article presents the examples of how associations with the term "urban" are used in marketing campaigns of various products.

Creative class is the subject area of analyses of many contemporary researchers. In her paper "Creative class — around related concepts. An attempt at critical sociological analysis" Małgorzata Suchacka proposes sociological theoretical considerations and critical reflections on the concept of creative class on the basis of several main themes connected with the process of its formation and determinants of its functioning. The aim of the study was to make an attempt

at critical reflection on the concept of creative class with the use of the notions of human and social capital. An attempt was also made to assess usefulness of over a hundred years old concept of leisure class by T. Veblen in the analysis of the notion of creative class. Considerations were focussed on identification of similarities and differences of these two theoretical approaches.

The next study “Spatial identity in the theoretical and empirical contexts” by Krzysztof Bierwiaczonek raises the issue of functioning and importance of the spatial identity. According to Peter Weichhart, one could distinguish three levels of it: individual, social and institutional one. Based on the data presented in the article, it is possible to find out the existence of the community of spatial experience which influences formation of the urban identity both in its individual and social dimension.

In his paper “Living longer in urban environments — developing “age-friendly” cities and communities in selected models” Grzegorz Gawron presents the main assumptions and models comprising the idea of “age-friendly” cities (AFC). The idea (and the article) should be treated as a significant input into discussion on how our cities will look like taking into account needs of contemporary societies among which growing demand for creating concepts securing the future of contemporary societies connected closely with the local (urban) perspective seems the vital one.

The next study “Urban space and sustainable development. Social challenges to contemporary design” by Paulina Rojek-Adamek concentrates on the problem of sustainable development in the perspective of creating urban spaces. Referring to the concept of “sustainable design”, the author presents a wide spectrum of the roles fulfilled by specialists influencing the urban environment, i.e. urban planners, architects, designers. Based on the selected activities of the Design Council (UK), she shows how to ensure sustainable growth and prosperity of residents in long-term development perspective.

In her paper “Urbicide — when the city becomes a target” Karolina Wojtasik explores changes in the urban space resulting from armed conflicts — wars, terrorism or “urbicide”. As a consequence of changes in the attitudes to military operations, technology development, globalization and the emergence of the “asymetric threats”, armed conflicts moved from the battlefield to the urban space. The cities are fought for. They are taken over being divided into areas of influence of one side of the conflict or another.

The volume is closed by the article “Residents of urban and rural areas. The same or different?” by Zbigniew Zagala. Based on statistics and nationwide sociological research, the author undertakes an attempt at defining the similarities and differences between the residents of cities and villages. How they are perceived by different respondents? Are there or not differences in social perceptions? What is similar and what is different? Those and other questions were tried to be answered.

As the editors of this volume, we hope that it will be an interesting collection of various perspectives on urban life in modern cities. We also do hope, it will encourage reflection on multidimensionality of this social phenomenon.

Marek S. Szczepański
Grzegorz Gawron
Barbara Lewicka

In Place of an End

Cities, since first of them were to be established centuries ago, have always been spaces full of social actions, mass activities and collective behaviors. It is because they had an unusual power to attract people. They were and still are influential, inspiring and they arouse interest. For many reasons cities are important for common dwellers, but also for artists and thinkers. In 20th century Louis Wirth described urbanized areas in terms of high population density, social diversity and large size of population — features which seem to be obvious and natural. In his famous essay we may read:

“The degree to which the contemporary world may be said to be ‘urban’ is not fully or accurately measured by the proportion of the total population living in cities. The influences which cities exert upon the social life of man are greater than the ratio of the urban population would indicate, for the city is not only in ever larger degrees the dwelling-place and workshop of modern man, but it is the initiating and controlling center of economic, political, and cultural life that has drawn the most remote parts of the world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, peoples, and activities into a cosmos”. (Wirth 1938: 2)

In this book we have tried to consider whether Wirth’s ideas are still valid today. We have tried to find out if — when transformed — his ideas could be useful to analyze modern urban areas. The papers presented here touch different aspects of city life, but what they have in common is their fundamental source of inspiration which is Louis Wirth’s “Urbanism as a way of life”. Trying to rediscover was an intellectual challenge for the contributors. Nevertheless, we are deeply aware that our explanations do not exhaust the topic. Maybe (also) because there is no social explanation which could exhaust any social topic at all...

Marek S. Szczepański
Barbara Lewicka
Grzegorz Gawron

Phénomène urbain comme mode de vie Tenter de le redécouvrir

Résumé

En juillet 1938, dans le *Journal Américain de Sociologie* (*American Journal of Sociology*), est paru l'article de Louis Wirth « Le phénomène urbain comme mode de vie » (« Urbanism as a Way of Life ») qui d'après l'opinion de beaucoup de lecteurs constituait une contribution importante au développement de la sociologie urbaine. Or, Wirth y a présenté une nouvelle optique de percevoir l'urbanisation et surtout les centres municipaux comme les produits les plus importants de ce processus. En contemplant la vie en ville, il a distingué ses trois caractéristiques : la grande taille de la population, l'hétérogénéité sociale et la densité démographique qu'il a considérées comme les déterminants principaux du développement individuel du « mode de vie urbain » et de la « personnalité municipale ». D'après lui, on peut apercevoir depuis des siècles une différence entre le mode de vie urbain et le mode de vie rural, et par conséquent entre les traits de personnalité de leurs habitants. Wirth a essayé d'expliquer ces différences tout en faisant sa propre caractéristique de la société urbaine contemporaine.

En revenant après plusieurs années aux réflexions de Louis Wirth, nous fournissons aux lecteurs un recueil d'articles qui entreprennent au sens large du terme la thématique du développement urbain.

La publication débute par un texte de Piotr Skudrzyk où l'auteur analyse l'ambiance morale envers la métropole présente dans les travaux des intellectuels choisis. Il se réfère entre autres au catastrophisme de Spengler et à la théorie de la société en réseaux de Castells. Avant de conclure, il essaye d'examiner le statut moral d'une métropole tout en prenant en considération les plus hautes catégories éthiques.

Barbara Lewicka essaye de reconstruire l'image de la ville en mettant en opposition la vision d'une grande agglomération comme un espace de surpeuplement, d'aliénation, d'interactions dépersonnalisées et un espace attrayant, étant le synonyme d'un style de vie moderne et intéressant. Dans l'article, on a présenté des exemples concernant l'application des associations avec les termes « urbain » et « urbanité » utilisés dans les campagnes publicitaires de différents produits.

L'article suivant, rédigé par Małgorzata Suchacka, constitue une tentative qu'entreprend l'auteure pour réfléchir critiqueusement sur la notion de classe créative tout en employant les notions de capital humain et social. Elle a essayé aussi d'évaluer l'utilité de la conception de classe oisive de Thorstein Veblen dans l'analyse de la notion de classe créative. Les réflexions ont eu pour objectif de montrer les ressemblances et les différences de ces deux approches théoriques. Dans la conclusion, on a eu recours aux résultats partiels des recherches menées dans la voïvodie de Silésie sur les transformations vers une région de connaissance.

L'étude suivante, élaborée par Krzysztof Bierwiazzonek, aborde la question liée au fonctionnement et à la signification de l'identité spatiale. Conformément à la conception de Peter Weichhart, on distingue trois niveaux de l'identité spatiale : individuel, social et institutionnel. La conclusion clé tirée des données y présentées concerne l'existence d'une communauté unie par des expériences spatiales. Cette communauté influence ensuite la création de l'identité urbaine aussi bien au niveau individuel que social.

L'article de Grzegorz Gawron constitue une présentation des principes essentiels et des conceptions de modèle de l'idée *Age-Friendly Cities* (AFC) comme une des réponses au besoin de plus en plus visible de former des conceptions protégeant l'avenir des sociétés contemporaines tout en mettant en relief une perspective locale (urbaine).

Paulina Rojek-Adamek aborde la question du développement durable dans la perspective de créer des espaces urbains. En se référant à la conception durable (*sustainable design*), on a présenté le rôle des spécialistes qui influencent sensiblement la création du milieu urbain, c'est-à-dire des urbanistes, architectes et concepteurs-projeteurs. La référence aux exemples choisis de l'activité Design Council (UK) permettra de montrer les démarches à l'aide desquelles on peut viser à assurer une croissance continue et la prospérité des habitants dans la perspective d'un développement à long terme.

Cependant, Karolina Wojtasik aborde la question des changements qui se produisent dans l'espace urbain à la suite des conflits armés : guerres, terrorisme ou soi-disant pratiques de l'urbicide.

À la suite du changement de la manière de conduire des opérations militaires, de développer les technologies, de réaliser le procédé de mondialisation et de l'apparition des menaces asymétriques, les conflits armés se sont déplacés du champ de bataille vers l'espace urbain. On lutte pour les villes, on les saisit, on les transforme en sphères d'influence ; quand il faut, on s'empare d'un bâtiment après l'autre (p.ex. la deuxième bataille de Falloujah).

Le texte de Zbigniew Zagala, fermant le présent volume, constitue une tentative d'examiner les différences et les ressemblances des habitants de la ville et de la campagne qui sont incluses dans les données statistiques et dans les résultats des recherches sociologiques comprenant toute la Pologne. Comment les habitants de la ville et ceux de la campagne sont-ils perçus, y a-t-il des différences entre eux dans les imaginations sociales, quels sont les champs de ressemblances et de différences éventuelles — ce sont quelques questions auxquelles on a essayé de répondre.

En tant que rédacteurs du présent volume, nous espérons que ce livre se révélera comme une collection intéressante de différentes perspectives de percevoir et d'examiner la vie urbaine dans les villes modernes et incitera à la réflexion sur l'aspect multidimensionnel de ce phénomène.

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