

Cities and Urban Life



What relevance, if any, does the work of the Chicago School have for understanding the contemporary urban condition?

This is a relatively straightforward question which is looking for you to examine how applicable to the present are theories and ideas from the past. Successful essays must include at least: (a) a reliable account of Chicago School ideas and research, (b) a good grasp of the features and problems of contemporary urban life, and (c) sufficient linkage between the two to facilitate a proper assessment. As with all historical comparisons, an essay that is able to operate thematically and move easily between past and present will tend to be more sophisticated and score higher marks than 'shopping list' models based on description.

The Chicago School comprises two main components that are useful for urban sociology. The first of these is 'urban ecology', which is dealt with on pages 209-13. The key analogy here is with nature; a city is another organism responding and adapting to favourable or less favourable environments. Within the city, particular 'species' of urban dweller gravitate towards areas best suited to them. Urban ecology also has a vision of the urban form divided into concentric rings, each of which may be split into segments. From time to time there are migrations into particular segments, causing the existing population or community to leave for another neighbourhood, or to a more distant suburb.

The second component of the Chicago legacy is the idea of 'urbanism as a way of life'. In short, what it feels like to be in and experience urban life. Here the emphasis is on fleeting interactions that are functional rather than intrinsically satisfying. Ironically, Louis Wirth noted that the pace of living and the need to ameliorate social competition could result in the sort of neighbourhoods described in urban ecology. The key here though is the distinctive *cultural* nature of the modern city as a way of bringing people together.

The next stage is how to link this type of Chicago School theorizing to the contemporary character of urban living? A good idea is to pinpoint both the key aspects of Chicago thinking and their contemporary counterparts. For example, the ongoing process of inter- and intra-city migration means that today's urban centres are equally likely to experience waves of invasion and succession, and the chapter contains a helpful section on gentrification and 'urban recycling' (pp. 226-30). These are contemporary illustrations of today's urban ecology; planners, politicians and community leaders have often given the process a push by pursuing particular objectives and by providing incentives for individuals and businesses to inhabit certain areas. The second component of Chicago thought is the cultural nature of cities. Here it is possible to draw on the material on micro-scale interactions from Chapter 7 or even consider the way in which urban displays and landscapes might be considered as forms of hyperreality, explored by Jean Baudrillard in Chapter 17 on Media.

Finally, the Chicago School saw social research as a means to the greater end of social reform for the common good, for instance, in the commitment to using their results to expose and ameliorate poverty. In this sense Mike Davis's powerful portrayal of the way that life is made as 'unliveable' as possible for the poorest and most marginalized residents of Los Angeles (Global Society Box 6.3) echoes some of the Chicago concerns too.