BHARATI INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT (BIJMRD)

(Open Access Peer-Reviewed International Journal)

DOI Link : https://doi.org/10.70798/Bijmrd/03020012

Available Online: www.bijmrd.com|BIJMRD Volume: 3| Issue: 02| February 2025| e-ISSN: 2584-1890

From Classical to Contemporary Urbanization: An Overview

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Abstract:

Urbanization is a complex phenomenon that has evolved significantly over time, from classical theories that focused on physical aspects of cities to contemporary perspectives that highlight the role of actors and dynamics in shaping urban spaces. This paper aims to define the concept of urbanization and explore the transition from classical to contemporary urbanization theories. Results and conclusions are drawn by examining key literature and analysing methodologies under urban studies.Moreover, this paper provides a comprehensive overview of urbanization trends and theories.

Keywords: *Contemporary Urbanization, Capital Accumulation, Actor-Oriented, Dynamic Process.*

Introduction:

Urbanization refers to the process of structural development whereby places are made by several actors. It involves the growth and development of cities, including changes in population, infrastructure, economic activities and social structures. Urbanization has been a growing global trend, with more than half of the world's population now living in cities.

In classical urbanization theories, scholars like Robert Park, Ernest Burgess and Louis Wirth focused on the physical attributes of cities, such as population density, size and spatial organization. These theories emphasized the differences between urban and rural areas and highlighted the importance of urbanization for societal progress (Flanagan, 2010).The Chicago sociologists came to view spatial patterns in the city as the result of powerful social factors, such as competition and the struggle for survival among individuals and groups within the city. Thus, Robert Park and his associates viewed urban space as a container, a built environment that encloses the action. The Chicago School sociologists adopted a conceptual position that we know as human ecology—the study of the process of human group adjustment to the environment.Chicago School sociologists avoided the study of capitalism per se, preferring instead a biologically based way of conceptualizing urban life. For them urban analysis was a branch of human ecology. Their ideas brought them closest to the work of the philosopher Herbert Spencer, who also viewed society as dominated by biological rather than economic laws of development (Gottdiener& Hutchison, pp.56- 61). Ernest Burgess developed a theory of city growth and differentiation based on the social Darwinist or biologically derived principles common in the work of Park and McKenzie. According to Burgess, the city constantly grew because of population pressure (Gottdiener& Hutchison, p. 62). Further, Wirth wanted to know what it was

about the city itself that produced unique behaviors that might be called an "urban way of life." Wirth aimed for a general theory that ignored forces having origins outside the city. He studied the characteristics of people in the city and how life there might produce a distinct "urban" culture (Gottdiener& Hutchison, p. 56). However, contemporary urbanization theories have shifted towards more actor-oriented and dynamic perspectives, considering the diverse stakeholders and processes that influence urban development. New urban sociology include a shift to a global perspective on capitalism and the metropolis; the inclusion of factors such as class exploitation, racism, gender, and space in the analysis of metropolitan development; an attempt, when possible, to integrate economic, political, and cultural factors of analysis; special attention to the pull factors of real estate investment and government intervention; and the shift to a multicentered, regional approach to cities and suburbs (Gottdiener& Hutchison, p. 75).

Literature Review:

The transition from classical to contemporary urbanization theories reflects broader changes in urban studies. Classical theories, rooted in functionalist and positivist frameworks, saw cities as rational, ordered systems with predictable outcomes. They often overlooked the complexities of urban life, including social inequalities, power dynamics and cultural diversity. Park believed they are the products of ecological forces that work to distribute the city's populations and functions in an orderly fashion, with respect to one another (Flanagan, 2010, p. 82)

In contrast, contemporary urbanization theories emphasize the multifaceted nature of cities and urban processes. Actor-oriented perspectives highlight the agency of individuals, groups and institutions in shaping urban spaces through their actions and interactions. Dynamic perspective focus on the evolving and unpredictable nature of urbanization, recognizing the nonlinear relationships between social, economic, political and environmental factors. For instance in the work by Manuel Castells, it has been argued that, "space is the result of a history that must be conceived as the work of social agents or actors" (Castells, 1977, p.93). Further, Castells also stated that, "space is a material product, in relation with other material elements- among others, men, who themselves enter into a particular social relations, which give to space a form, a function, a social signification. It is not, therefore, a mere occasion for the deployment of the social structure, but a concrete expression of each historical ensemble in which society is specified. Urban space is structured, in a way that it is not organized randomly (Castells, 1977, p. 115). Foucault remarks, 'space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power'. A reassertion of the essentially political nature of space and spatial relations is, therefore, a key component of the spatial turn and the new geography, one that has been further supported and enhanced by the growth of postcolonial theory and analyses of the contemporary restructuring of global capitalism (Alexander, 2010, p. 28).

Further, Henry Lefebvre in his work 'production of space, argued that, "so far as the concept of production is concerned, it does not become fully concrete or take on a true content until replies have been given to the questions that it makes possible: 'Who produces?', 'What?', 'How?', 'Why and for whom?' Outside the context of these questions and their answers, the concept of production remains purely abstract" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 69). Moreover, Gottdiener& Hutchison (p. 81), in their work, highlighted on Lefebvre's idea on social space, that the way capital investors or businesspeople and the state think about space is according to its abstract qualities of dimension—size, width, area, location—and profit. This he called "abstract space." In addition, however, individuals use the space of their environment as a place to live. Lefebvre called this interactively used space of everyday life "social space." For him the uses proposed by government and business for abstract space, such as in the planning of a large city or suburban development of new houses, may conflict with the existing social space, the way residents currently use space.

Gottdiener and Hutchison also presented in their work on, "the sociospatial perspective stresses the human dimension along with structural arrangements. It wants to know who the actors are and how they behave, not just the facts or figures about aggregate levels of growth and change. Activities involve people acting as part of social classes and class factions, or of gender, racial, and ethnic interests. How people come together to struggle over the patterns of development is an important question for the" (p.90). Norman Long's work 'Development Sociology', stresses on new approach in understanding social change. He stated that, "although less well articulated in the literature on development until relatively late in the twentieth century, there has always been a kind of counterpoint to structural analysis in development sociology. This is what I have called the 'actor-oriented approach'. Nourishing (either explicitly or implicitly) this interest in social actors is the conviction that, although it may be true that important structural changes result from the impact of outside forces (due to encroachment by the market, state or international bodies), it is theoretically unsatisfactory to base one's analysis on the concept of external determination. All forms of external intervention necessarily enter the existing lifeworlds of the individuals and social groups affected, and in this way they are mediated and transformed by these same actors and structures (Long, 2001, p.13)

Methodology:

To understand the transition from classical to contemporary urbanization theories, a comprehensive literature review of key studies in the field of urban sociology has been conducted. Such as the classical theories of Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, Louis Wirth and contemporary theories of David Harvey and Manuel Castells. The methodology involved identifying relevant sources, analysing their main arguments and findings to trace the dynamics of urbanization at contemporary.

Findings:

The extensive review of literature led in knowing the significant shift in the idea of urban transformation. Like in the classical theories by Robert Park, Ernest Burgess and Louis Wirth explained the physical growth of cities and hence defined expansion of cities or places are transformed naturally and self-adjustment among its residents. The classical theories have failed to address the later complexities in urban transformation. Such as in case of transformation of places it differs across time and space and region. So, the transformation that takes place may not be self-adjustment. The later urban theories that emerge in 1960s and 1970s shows that urban transformation is largely the result from structural processes which in a way is related to capital accumulation. Moreover, the recent work of actor oriented approach by Norman Long, highlights on the point that the structuralist approach by David Harvey and Manuel Castells heavily influenced by Marxist ideas, have failed to address the contemporary urban transformation or social change. The structuralist approach have included only the macro part (structures, government and developers) in their study and have not mentioned anywhere in their work about the people who perceived that change. Actor-oriented and dynamic approaches provided new insights into the diverse actors, power relations and complexities involved in urban development processes.

Discussion:

The transition from classical to contemporary urbanization theories leads to a more inclusive, participatory and sustainable approaches to urban development where it has important implications for urban planning, policy-making, and practice. It refers that in the process of transformation, such sustainable approaches, bridges the gap between individual actors at the base and government/developers at the top. The participation of individuals in the process of change is equally important as, this allows the individuals to connect better and understand the infrastructural development, which in a way helps the developers and government to make better policy during the structuring and restructuring of places. Further,understanding the complexities

of urbanization can also help address social inequalities, environmental challenges and governance issues in cities.

Conclusion:

This paper has provided an overview of the transition from classical to contemporary urbanization theories which shows that in recent times the term 'urban' is more than 'population shift', 'self-adjustment' and structuralist analysis of social change. Rather, it includes a more inclusive and participatory approach of social change. Moreover, the theories led by Chicago school may not be applicable to the other cities/region across the globe. The structuralist approach though have addressed that urban transformation is not natural and it actually involves a process behind the transformation, but perception towards infrastructural change by the urban dwellers or residents of a place remain largely hidden. So,By highlighting the shift towards actor-oriented and dynamic perspectives, the paper underscores the importance of recognizing the diverse stakeholders, power dynamics and complexities that shape urban spaces.

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Citation: **Brahma. P.,** (2025) "From Classical to Contemporary Urbanization: An Overview", *Bharati International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Development (BIJMRD)*, Vol-3, Issue-02, February-2025.