
UNIT 6 PERSPECTIVES IN URBAN SOCIOLOGY- NETWORK*

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Explain the concept of network in urban sociology;
- Examine the emergence of Information Technology & communication (ICT); and
- Discuss the ‘global city’ and its networks.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit on “Political Economy” you learnt how the state politics and economic institutions and processes affect society. In this, unit on Network we have explained about these and other linkages in the context of ICT’s.

The idea of a society enmeshed in networks or to say, a ‘network society’ is closely associated with the social implications of globalisation phenomenon as well as the electronic and modern technologies that form the newer ways of communicating in society. Manuel Castells in his significant work defined network society and theorised about it. According to him, a network society is “a society whose social structure is made up of networks powered by micro-electronics-based information and communications technologies” (Castells 3:2004).

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It is interesting to note that these new social structures did not come out of vacuum but have been a result of certain existing processes of the last 20th century. These new social structures emerged due to:

- i) The restructuring of industrial economies as they paved way for accommodation of new market approaches. This mainly led to the opening of market development paradigms along with the gradual weakening of nation-state idea. Stress on deepening of social inclusion and exclusion within and beyond the countries could thus be witnessed.
- ii) Movements oriented towards freedom & cultural changes of the last 1960s & early 1970s like civil rights movement or the movement towards environmental safety or feminist movements also led to building up of better networks. The movements have always been very important in history. These create conditions that stress on a 'human-capabilities paradigm' thereby focussing on human capability & their rights. The emphasis on freedom movement led to more open systems of communication & modern network structures conducive to human growth.
- iii) There had been a gradual revolution in the domains of information & communication technologies that definitely created an impact for network society to grow further. According to Castells, "the culture of freedom was decisive in inducing network technologies which, in turn, were the essential infrastructure for business to operate its restructuring in terms of globalisation" (2004: 22).

6.2 CONCEPTS OF NETWORK IN URBAN SOCIOLOGY

It was around the 21st century that a change was being witnessed. This was a change marked by the emergence of the era of the commons. There was multi-dimensional transformations occurring in each facet of living those were difficult to comprehend. The need of the discipline of Sociology was felt more than ever. This truly had to be the study of society. It was not to bound itself as just a normative kind of instruction giving. In short, a consensus on a new kind of sociology was felt. This sociology was based on observation, theory building and communication. There was a whirlwind of social changes that society was facing, different social processes which were emerging at a great speed. The need of the sociologist was to understand and elaborate due to this change using the creativity embedded into the values and technologies of Information Age. Some concepts that stood out in terms of a network perspective of urban sociology have been discussed below.

6.2.1 Power & Empowerment

Social & communication networks that are marked by ample exclusion & inclusion in any social structure go through the presence and integral role of 'power' that determines social change. Power in simple words can be understood as the capacity to impose one's will onto others. Control over communication and influence over it is the major form of power in network

societies. This is also true as the connectivity and access to networks become the pillars for groups in order to impose their ethics, rules and set forth their goals in the society. These are then the mediums for exercising power. It is interesting to note that network society is beyond the spatial constraints. One of the most crucial effects of globalisation in the network society is the creation of social, political and cultural relationships that are not bound by the location of the individual. It is power that is exercised beyond these locations.

In societies of the traditional type, social relations, customs and the entire culture gets formed differently in different spaces. Individuals then act according to the established rules of that space for instance, families, villages, cities, towns etc. However, this changes in the urban network space. The regional spaces lack their control here. People are now free to communicate and build relationships through the global net, mass media, computers and so on. They might not share any common history or face-to face interaction might be lacking, yet a relationship is built. Also the earlier existing traditions and social relationships are affected with the growing network society and the values associated with it. According to Castells, empowerment becomes stronger due to the role of social media and networking including things like Facebook as there always exist several social movements connected through the internet. The active social media then becomes a channel of globalisation to lead to higher cultural diversity, creativity and newer arenas of freedom. Thus, one of the most essential roles is that of Information Technology exercised across any existing borders.

6.2.2 Meaning of Information Technology

Castells pointed out that social networks have always existed in any society or civilisation. However, the vast usage and existence of Information Technologies (ICTs) distinguishes the network society from earlier existing social networks. The ICTs are ways of establishing networks across vast regions and thus, different kinds of social relationships are created.

The change in pre-existing social structures is also dependant on how we interpret, understand and put into effect the new ways of communication.

- If, at all, communication comes across as a ‘one way’ passage where knowledge and information is being passed on to the recipients who absorb this unquestioningly and passively; no curiosity is raised; then the communities lead to becoming ‘disempowered’ communities based on only external knowledge. This leads to a passive growth without rationality.
- If communication is understood and taken as a process where information is being processed continuously; recipients are understanding this and questioning this and thus shaping up their worldview; then the local communities become a group of ‘empowered’ people. There are new ideas in accordance with existing cultures. Innovative forms of communication and sharing of knowledge becomes empowering.

The usage of ICTs lead to the difference between communities becoming empowered or passive recipients for development. In fact, it has been critiqued by those who discuss the flip side of globalisation. According to these critics such inflow of knowledge or information leads to a uniform and standardised community formation due to the technological capabilities. The one at the centre of the power decides what constitutes as information and knowledge and thus the cultures get organised accordingly. However, there also exist the proponents according to whom this exchange of electronic communication is a two-way process. as the information that is being passed on is not taken in uncritically. There is always a room open for interpretations, differences, innovative applications and newer ideas. Thus the dominant knowledge is not considered as an end in itself. This is in fact the central tension occurring in most network societies wherein some groups try to impose their ideas and thoughts on the others while others continuously try and resist this kind of a domination. There is an interesting tussle about the effects of the increasing information technology and its usage in societies.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Network Society is directly linked to:
 - a) Social Control
 - b) Information Technology
 - c) Informal Groups
- 2) Sociology of Urban Network has been worked upon hugely by:
 - a) Simmel
 - b) R. Park
 - c) Castells
- 3) The spread of information through ICTs may lead to:
 - a) power to groups
 - b) breakdown in groups
 - c) both power & empowerment

6.3 THE NETWORK SOCIETY

With several changes occurring simultaneously, it was realised that a new economy was being built up in this new emerging society. Along with this new economy, there were many more changes in other aspects of society also. The renewal and newer facets of sociology were thus required in order to keep it relevant and useful. A new technological paradigm was being built. This emerged from the new information technologies including genetic engineering. Claude Fischer (1992) regarded technology as a part of material culture. This was a socially embedded process and not simply some external factor that affected society. This material transformation of the society is quite important and crucial for the entire social structures and processes remain dependant on this. Thus, social interaction is affected along with the electronically based information networks.

Much earlier, there occurred the industrial revolution that could not be separated from industrial society and changes within; similarly, there is this new information technology revolution that has become a powerful & effective tool for multi-dimensional social change within the social fabric of society. Information technology may directly not be a causal factor of social change; but it definitely is a mean of leading to processes that create new forms of production and management, newer forms of communication and globalisation in economy and culture. The emerging new society can be seen to be comprising of networks.

Electronic networks become the pillar for all global financial markets processing financial transactions. The internet becomes the buzzword hailing from computer networks. The entire process of electronic hypertext, global connections, communication networks in studios, newsrooms, information systems, mobile transitions units begins to mark the existence of society. Thus the global economy is not a restricted one. It is an amalgamation of various financial transactions in different market sites with a varied labour pool. There is continue information exchange that marks the business organisation. Thus these organisations become network enterprises. The functioning of these enterprises is then dependant on the institutional decision-making that is automatically attached to the information networks and communication. The internet links the most active and dynamic movements not only across the city but beyond national boundaries too.

6.3.1 Globalisation and Network

Globalisation becomes the second dimension of social change along with Information Technology. This comprises of technological, organisational and institutional. This trend is historically new as the earlier existing internationalisation could not really enjoy the benefits of information and communication technologies as also seen by David Held et alter (1999). The electronic hypertext that is also the common frame of reference for symbolic processing from all sources and all messages becomes the third dimension enclosed in the cultural manifestation. The internet is the medium then that links people with one another as well as the shared multimedia hypertext and has grown by leaps and bounds with globalisation. This hypertext is integral to the formation of new culture as this is a culture based on virtual reality. The virtuality becomes the backbone of a symbolic environment and part of the experience being created and shared by communicating individuals.

The last major characteristic of this new global networks is the decline of the idea of sovereign nation-state. This is not to question the institutional existence of nation-state but with the transformation of power apparatuses, change is bound to happen. Rearrangements take place in national governments, international networks, organisations and so on. The entire political representation thus gets re-presented and re-fined.

In addition to the above, there is a serious crises of existing patriarchy with women's insurgency and the surfacing up of gay and lesbian movements that challenge the anti-attitude and practices towards heterosexuality. This is a way ahead for setting up of different kinds of families with more egalitarian

values of life. The crisis is about the pace, speed and human cost that patriarchy shall lead to choose. With multiple sexualities, socialisation and personal networking; this may change. These are the lifestyle changes that accompany other domains of social change.

The progress in the domain of science and scientific knowledge has also been noteworthy. This knowledge is being used for a healthy progression of science. This is evident from the ecological influence seen lately that has affected our ways of living. It shall be important to note what Castells said that “We are just at the beginning of a most extraordinary cultural transformation that is reversing the course of thought that has prevailed among the world's dominant groups since the Enlightenment” (2000: 694). Thus we see the emergence and flourishing of a new society that came as a consequence of the interaction of three essential components that took place around the same time. This included the major revolutions in the field of information technology, the restructuring of capitalism and the emergence of social movements in the 1960s within the US and Western Europe as well. Amidst the diversity, there is a new social structure based on networks leading to a network society.

6.3.2 Sociology and Urban Network

Social structures are redefined on the basis of networks being an organising principle. The social structures here comprise of human relationships with production/ consumption or any power dynamics or experience being vocal in a meaningful interaction within the fabric of culture. It is within the new social structure that is surfacing up that sociology must take the opportunity to voice out the conceptual and methodological issues.

Sociology has been involved with the study of networks. Works like that of Wellman (1999), Fischer (1992), Granovetter (1985) are some of the popular ones. The territorial constraint ceases as soon as there is diffusion of communication technologies that form interactive social practices. However this end of distance can't be considered to be the only way of assuming the end of spatial dimension of society. The meaningful physical space is a major source of experience building for many people. Also, the interactive communication being a distant one cannot eliminate the physical space entirely. It just helps in emergence of a new form/ type/ kind of space. This space is constituted of electronic networks and information flow. In addition to these, it is also made up of territories as the physical space also needs network connection for them to function.

This flow of space is made of different pieces of places that remain connected through telecommunication, facilities like transportation & information technologies. Lately, there has been much deliberation about ‘the global city’. It is important to note that this global city is not just a vast metropolitan centre that acquires a high rank in the geographical scenario world-wide. Such cities existed earlier too and were called the ‘world city’. Thus, the global city in fact is not a territorial city. It exists in different cities of the entire world, small, large and even larger spaces. These global cities are made up of global economies that are located in different cities and linked to one

another. The management of global communication takes place through these. For instance, some parts of Manhattan could be regarded as a global city due to its network of global management. In short, global cities become a network of non-territorial regions that are united by networks beyond any locality. This is a way of examining the inter territorial networks and their connection and relationship with the existing local surroundings. Thus a relation between the local and global is built in this manner. We may observe that it is the interaction of discontinuous networks with local spaces that form the basis of new structures.

Check Your Progress 2

Mark the following as True or False

- 1) Network is a new phenomenon emerging in the contemporary society only
- 2) Information Technology has not created much impact in our daily living
- 3) The networks emerging do not restrict groups and individuals territorially or so

6.4 LET US SUM UP

Networks have existed in social organisation since a very early time. Like every other phenomenon, networks too had many advantages as well as drawbacks. The world has been becoming more volatile than ever. Thus the qualities of flexibility and adaptability have definitely been working in favour of networks in order to manage the social order. However, when the critical size increases, then networks face a problem of management. They are a means for personal interaction leading to a reciprocal support system. Though sometimes they lack the capability of mobilising resources & performing some particular task. For instance, in conduct of war; large centralised forces performed way better than networks. However, this limitation of networks was overcome with the emergence and gradual growth of information and communication technologies in the form of Internet. With the coming of electronic system of communication, the potential of decentralising and performing the task in a better way increased. Thus flexibility came in along with good performance. In fact, gradual weakening and erosion of centralised hierarchical organisations was seen as networks grew stronger.

Social evolution in Information Age can be explained by the active networks that characterise all multi-dimensional social structures. The scale of a city along with its diversity is organised around the networks that become a reason of strength for these diversified complex cities. According to Mitchell a network is “a specific set of linkages among a defined set of persons, with the additional property that the characteristics of these linkages as a whole may be used to interpret the social behaviour of the persons involved” (1969: 2). Thus, by explaining and interpreting spatial structures in accordance to networks, a new field of study emerges within the gamut of urban sociology.

6.5 REFERENCES

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6.6 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) b
- 2) c
- 3) c

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) False
- 2) False
- 3) True