

Urban Sociology in Trump's America and Beyond

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The Trump administration is only a few months old, but it may well do damage to America's cities. While urban sociology cannot protect them, it can perhaps help them a little, not only through its teaching but also with research projects.

This proposal describes a research area that could oppose the Trump administration's actions and also help cities. In addition, the essay makes some proposals for the long-term future of urban sociology which involves that research area.

Donald Trump is only one member of his administration, and no one can now predict who will be its chief White House decision maker in the foreseeable future; whether he, or Mike Pence or Stephen Bannon or Reince Priebus or someone else entirely.

However, all are Far Right politicians and their wing of the Republican party will survive beyond the end of Trump's presidency. Thus, they will influence federal decision making even if the Democrats regain control of the federal government.

By today's Far Right I mean a coalition headed by the economic ultra conservatives who want to turn the federal government into America, Inc.—a wholly owned subsidiary of the business community. The Far Right also includes the social, religious, and other ultra conservatives, many of whom want to deprive poor and dark skinned people of what is left of their safety net.

Up to now, the Trump administration has paid no attention to sociology. Instead it has mainly attacked journalists and some economists. Even so, judging by recent Congresses, some of its Far Right members are likely to again seek to defund federal agencies and federal fund recipients that gather and publish facts about various kinds of inequality that embarrass the Republican party or threaten Far Right ideology.

I doubt that either the Trump White House or the Far Right knows anything about urban sociology. Both Trump and Ben Carson, his HUD secretary, have acknowledged their dismay with the state of the inner city, although their ideology suggests that they are more likely to hurt than to help its poor residents, especially blacks and Latinos.

Whether their actual treatment of inner cities will make them aware of urban sociology remains to be seen. So far, Trump has identified with rural areas, since these were said to have played a major role in his victory.

In fact, the Trump victory is probably better explained by the long-term and pervasive hold of the G.O.P. on America's nonurban heart and hinterlands. That subject needs

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more study from political sociologists, especially rural ones, although it should also interest urban sociologists.

Whether urban sociologists should fight Trump is a matter for them, or for the field to decide. I doubt that it could make much of a difference or that we could win. Instead, the defense against Trump and the Far Right is a project for all of sociology—as well the social sciences—and both the American Sociological Association and the Consortium of Social Science Associations have already begun to carry it out.

FOR A MORE POLICY ORIENTED URBAN SOCIOLOGY

If urban sociology or individual urban sociologists want to be involved in the opposition to the Trump administration, they should undertake empirical studies of its programs and policies in cities but also in other communities. The studies should emphasize the effects of these programs and policies on their residents and on the institutions and other social structures in and with which they live.

These studies should not end when the Trump administration is gone. They should continue, and the field might even aim to become the one that pays the most sociological attention to the federal but also state and local programs and policies that impact cities and other communities.

To be most useful for both theoretical and policy-related purposes, the studies should include the creation and implementation processes of the programs and policies designated for effects research.

These processes and those who shape and carry them out deserve study to determine their intent and their aims, so that the effects of these on the effects of the programs and policies are understood.

In addition, the studies should include the political, economic, and other forces, agents and factors, within and beyond the community that influence the creation and implementation processes.

The inclusion of communities other than urban ones reflects my belief that urban sociology should someday transform itself into community sociology—a field that studies all types of communities, or what I prefer to call settlements.

That field should also carry out community studies that involve fieldwork and intensive interviewing so that the forces and agents, inside and outside, that impinge on the communities and their occupants are included in the research.

Community studies are broad and wide ranging enough that they shed light on all the impinging influences, overt and covert, that are in play when programs and policies are created and implemented.

Moreover, community studies also assure that primary attention is placed on the people and structures affected by the programs and policies under study. This research method does not ignore place; in fact, it can add to our understanding of how programs and policies help to create place, and how the creation processes affect those who occupy and use the created places.

Urban sociologists have done or participated in effects studies in the past, including most recently around experiments to help poor people move to better neighborhoods. These include studies of the Chicago Gautreaux court decision, the federal Hope VI policy, and the Move to Opportunity programs.

BEYOND TRUMP AND THE FAR RIGHT

As I suggested earlier, such effects research should not limit itself to the duration of Trump's and the Far Right's control of the federal and state governments.

Instead, it should continue with studies on selected policies and programs of subsequent governments, as well as profit-seeking and nonprofit organizations. Some could be place related, others could study those targeted at different populations in the community, as well as those meant to benefit all of them, or the community itself.

Thus, I am advocating an expansion of effects research already being done by urban sociologists to all policies and programs in urban and nonurban communities. However, we should also cooperate with sociologists from other fields who are already doing effects research.

Urban sociologists working with other effects researchers would benefit the field by adding their concepts, ideas, theories, and findings to ours.

Furthermore, urban sociologists would be encouraged to pay more attention to current economic, political, and other sociologically relevant events. They might even produce more public sociology. At the same time, urban sociology would become more useful to the well-being of the residents and the communities in which the research was taking place.

In addition, studying the effects of policies and programs would contribute to urban theorizing, by complementing the present paradigm of at least mainstream urban sociology with an additional conceptual perspective on community and its endless variations.

Today, that paradigm concentrates unduly, at least as I see it, on a set of administratively defined types which are also differentiated by size and population density. When urban sociologists study neighborhoods, cities, suburbs, towns, and rural areas (or villages), they are conceptualizing officially bounded areas (OBAs hereafter), and are not looking sufficiently at communities as sociologists.

Thus, residents and their social structures inside the city limits are city dwellers while those on the other side of those limits are suburbanites even if places and people are otherwise similar.

However, if they are studied sociologically as communities, each of the OBAs turns out to contain endless variations, depending less on them as places than on the people institutions and other social structures in them. What they do with, for, to, and against each other, and what is done to them by outsiders and outside forces can differ significantly even if communities are similar in other respects.

For example, the OBAs described as rural, sometimes defined as the countryside, consist of a large variety of communities. Industrial ones include those dominated by big auto factories and many other but smaller manufacturing places as well as active or inactive steel mills and mines like those which helped Trump win.

However, rural areas can also be purely residential, whether low-income areas or the estates and ranches of the very rich. Yet other rural areas are devoted to industrial agriculture and the remaining family farming areas.

Whether called cities, suburbs, towns, or villages, each of these will vary further by standard demographic variables, but also by more complex ones. Thus, a multiclass community is not the same as one occupied mainly by one class.

A blue or Democratic party dominated community differs from a red or Republican one, but a blue community in a blue state will differ in some respects from one in a red state.

A long-term multiracial community is very different, especially politically, from one which is just becoming multiracial and a jobless community which has lost its young people has to be distinguished from those experiencing economic decline.

Last, but not least, a greater emphasis on studying the endless variety of communities and people in them would enrich urban sociology considerably.