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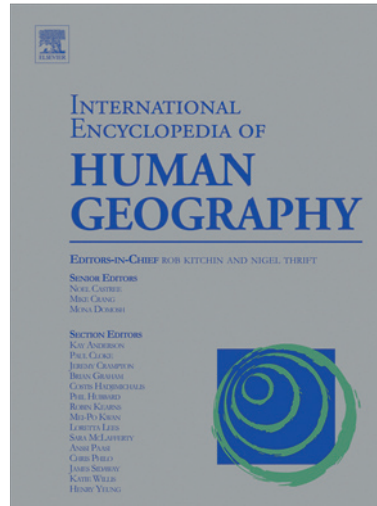
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## Urban Village

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### Glossary

**Cosmopolite** Middle-class, inner-city dweller attracted to live there by cultural vitality and diversity.

**Gentrification** Redevelopment of previously rundown, inner-urban areas brought about by in-migration of middle-class, owner-occupiers.

**Peasant-Workers** Individuals who combine urban industrial employment with agricultural production in the countryside where they live, a pattern produced by state socialist industrialization.

**Rural–Urban Continuum** The idea that community types can be located along a linear scale with rural and urban at the two extremes, based on the assumption that population scale and density determine social relationships.

### Introduction

An urban village is an oxymoron, if one associates villages with rurality and if rurality is regarded as the opposite of all things urban. There is a long tradition in social thought of highlighting the contrast between villages and towns and between rural life and urban life. In this tradition, rural life is stable, traditional, and centered on established family and community ties, in contrast to urban existence which is characterized by a shallower way of life lived at a faster pace, reflecting dynamic commercial and technological forces that make social relationships fleeting and impersonal. The notion of urban villages, created and inhabited by urban villagers, is compelling because it subverts this rural–urban dichotomy in which types of social relationships are associated with particular sorts of place. The notion of an urban village is thus immediately engaging and challenging because of its paradoxical character, linking modern city life with deep-seated patterns of supportive social relationships that are more readily identified with established rural arrangements. Urban villagers appear to have one foot in the city and the other in the countryside, or one foot in modernity and the other in a past world.

### History of the Concept

The concept of the urban village has its origins in the work of the sociologist Herbert Gans. His study was based on ethnographic fieldwork among Italian-Americans

in Boston, USA. It portrayed the people of the West End of that city (prior to its redevelopment) as cohesive, family-centered, and street-centered, but with relatively few points of connection to the world beyond their ethnic urban enclave. Their way of life prized experiences as part of the group and continued to bear many of the hallmarks of the intense but restrictive social relations which had characterized the communities in southern Italy and Sicily from which their ancestors (and a few of the older residents themselves) had migrated. Gans coined the term the peer-group society to describe this way of life in which the individual is dominated by the group. Group members are necessarily familiar to each other because of their shared social and physical environment. Gans' account emphasizes the importance of the poverty of this environment in which people come together because they all have to confront problems of low income and poor education, but urban villages have an ethnic as well as a class dimension as people seek to adapt their culture and traditions to the urban environment. In a related publication, Gans uses the term ethnic villagers rather than urban villagers, and it follows from this that urban villages may vary according to the originating culture of the migrants (as Gans suggested in his discussion of how Italian-Americans compared to Americans from Irish, Jewish, or Negro backgrounds). Gans' article is more analytical and wide ranging than his ethnography of Boston, and in it he characterizes inner-city villages in terms of the emphasis that they place on kinship and other primary groups. There are correspondingly few secondary group contacts, and formal organizations are weak, as are connections beyond the neighborhood. Gans also makes the point that there is nothing inevitable about an inner-city area becoming an urban village; it may just as easily approximate to an alternative ideal type, the urban jungle.

Gans' work marked an important development on previous urban sociology because it sought to portray life in the urban village in a sympathetic way without sentimentalizing it. The particular target of his criticism was the attitude of planners and social workers who saw only social problems in inner-urban areas that they perceived to be slums (but which were not necessarily perceived to be slums by their inhabitants). Gans offered an explanation to these professionals of why opposition existed to their urban redevelopment schemes. In his view, they embodied an ill-informed, middle-class bias in favor of suburban lifestyles and values that the inhabitants of urban villages simply did not share. Gans' analysis is

strengthened by his frank admissions of how his fieldwork shook him out of his own preconceptions as an outsider. His methodology allowed him to learn about the people he studied by spending time with them as they went about their everyday lives. Gans moved on from Boston to research the new community of Levittown, New Jersey, which he also studied ethnographically. There, he discovered that life in suburbia did not conform to outsiders' conceptions of it any more than life in urban villages did, and on the basis of these findings he developed a critique of spatially deterministic explanations of people's ways of life. This argument challenged the previously influential idea associated with Louis Wirth that city dwellers' lives were made anonymous and impersonal by the size and density of urban populations. In doing so, he contributed to the demise of the rural–urban continuum and thereby helped pave the way for more nuanced, sociological accounts of both city and village life.

Gans was not alone in developing these arguments. The idea that migrants to cities continue to live according to the social norms that they (or their ancestors) brought with them from the countryside, can be found in studies at least as far back as William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's classic study of Polish peasants' migration from Europe to America. The related recognition of the centrality of ethnicity to urban ecology was a central plank of the Chicago School of sociology which flourished in the first-half of the twentieth century. By the time Gans was building on these ideas, other researchers were arriving at similar conclusions. Michael Young and Peter Willmott's analysis of family and kinship patterns in East London, in fact, predates Gans' Boston study and is mentioned at various points in the book. This is unsurprising, because it reported on fieldwork in another poor, inner-city area characterized by a history of settlement by successive ethnic minorities. Urbanization had long ago swallowed up what were in earlier centuries distinct villages, but Young and Willmott claimed that these village identities lived on in people's minds. In another parallel with Gans, Young and Willmott highlighted the continued importance of close-knit, family-based community relationships in large cities, noted how this confounded the expectations that such locations would be characterized by social disorganization and lack of community, and offered a critique of well-intentioned but sociologically ignorant schemes of urban redevelopment.

### **The Continued Relevance of the Concept**

Gans' work can be interpreted as a lament for a doomed and disappearing way of life contained in urban villages. In the specific case of Boston's West End, the community of Italian-Americans had literally disappeared by the

time of the publication of his research, as the book's photograph of the area following its demolition testifies. The book treated this outcome as the product not only of the politically driven physical redevelopment of the area's housing, but also as the indirect result of broader social and economic processes. Notable among these processes were the growing opportunities for social and geographical mobility offered by the development of an affluent society and service-sector employment, changes to the traditional order of gender relations, and the increasing intrusion into everyday life of the mass media. Gans' message is that the days of the community he studied were numbered well before the coming of the bulldozers. Yet Gans' work has continued to provide a point of reference for subsequent researchers because the idea of an urban village has continuing relevance. This is for two reasons, empirical and theoretical. The first is that subsequent studies have reconfirmed the importance of the rural cultures of origin of migrants to urban settlements, and this on an increasingly global scale. It has been noted, for example, that all but 5% of British-Pakistanis come from rural origins. Many studies reveal that urban villages can continue to be found in a wide variety of settings. The second reason for Gans' continuing relevance is that he identified a number of functions performed by urban villages, of which mutual insurance against the hardships of poverty was just one. The congregation in a particular area of people of a shared ethnic minority status can help offset some of the discriminatory processes to which they are typically subject, and in the process support a positive sense of individual as well as group identity. To this it can be added that urban villages also make it easier to maintain connections with wider kin who remain in the migrant group's country of origin.

A good example of a contemporary study that is very much in the tradition of Gans' classic study (but which surprisingly does not make this fact explicit, despite the echo in its title) is Peggy Levitt's research. Based on research among migrants to Boston from the village of Miraflores in the Dominican Republic and among people who remained in this village, Levitt's argument is that migrants' lives in Boston are recreated around much that is familiar from their home village. Contrary to common sense expectations that migrants will leave behind the social world from which they have come and pursue assimilation into their adopted homeland, Levitt reported little evidence of people having to give up their existing connections. Rather she found it to be the case that transnational migrants integrate to an extent into the countries that receive them without having to jettison contacts with the countries they have left. The flows of monetary and other remittances sent back to their home village by migrants are vital to this continuing link with their place of origin, but political and social as well as

economic factors are responsible for the recreation of familiar community relationships by the migrants. The cultural connections are so strong that it can appear that village life is transported more or less in its entirety by the migrants.

Levitt claims that the lives of the people she studied are replicated by many migrants to the USA from villages across Latin America and the Caribbean, and she suggests that there is no sign of any decline in the phenomenon of migration leading to the creation of urban villages in migrants' destination countries in the global North. Other studies support this argument. Fred Halliday's study of Yemeni migrants to Britain charts how they created urban villages in the industrial cities in which they settled, and reports the surprising finding that in these new community settings, the degree of their segregation from mainstream British tended to increase rather than decrease. Their urban communities were so self-contained that they had the character of remote villages. A similar narrative is developed by Pnina Werbner in her account of Pakistani migrants to Britain, based on her research in Manchester. Arguing that migrants take their cultures with them when they travel to take up work opportunities in new settings, she recounts how cultural traditions were drawn upon as this immigrant population grew in the second-half of the twentieth century and relocated south of the city center to an ethnic residential enclave. This enclave had a sufficient degree of concentration of Pakistanis that it might be called a ghetto, although (like Gans) she is keen to point out that ghettos are not necessarily slums. What developed there was a network of relatives and friends whose maintenance of shared cultural practices provided support and security in an environment that could be hostile. These arrangements helped immigrants and their families survive disadvantage and resist discrimination and racism.

An important aspect of contemporary studies is that they highlight the continuing mobility of migrants. Permanent return migration of immigrant groups is regarded as sufficiently rare for some writers to treat it as a myth, but although aspirations to return are not always realized, such language nevertheless overstates the case. Historical statistics indicate that as many as one-third of certain waves of immigrants to the USA later returned to their countries of origin, and these include Italian migrants among whom would have been some of Gans' urban villagers and their ancestors. This is unsurprising given that the majority of these migrants did not regard their journeys as involving permanent relocation. Keeping open the possibility of return migration is an important aspect of the lives of migrants. Levitt reports that transnational villagers in Boston are reluctant to consider their move to be permanent, and most state an intention to return. The creation of urban villages by migrants thus

serves the function of helping to keep this option alive far more than a strategy of assimilation would. Moreover, as global travel has become increasingly affordable, it has facilitated short-term visits that allow social networks to be sustained through face-to-face encounters. A similar argument can be made that developments in communications technology enable migrants to combine elements from geographically distant cultures and thus feel at home in more than one location. People who are part of global population flows thus have something of a cosmopolitan character, and can continue to regard themselves as having a place in two cultures rather than having to choose between them.

### Wider Significance

It is instructive that Gans' identification of five types of inner-city residents put ethnic villagers into a separate category from cosmopolites. He identified the latter as people who are attracted to the city by its cultural life, and included among them groups such as students, creative artists, and professionals. In Boston's West End, Italian-Americans made up 42% of the resident population, and other ethnic groups a further 32%, but located alongside them were limited numbers of bohemians and middle-class individuals whose cultural affiliations made them stand out. Gans distinguished these residents from the urban villagers who were the main focus of his Boston study because in his view, the latter's inward-looking character and their relative lack of resources led them to have few connections with cosmopolites, beyond those links with professionals whose formal roles necessarily brought them into contact with the urban villagers. This portrayal has been revisited by more recent researchers who have sought to follow up Gans' suggestion that the distinctiveness of ethnic enclaves in inner-city areas has a particular appeal for young adults seeking to escape from the mainstream of the dominant culture embodied in suburbia. As Graham Fennell has argued, these locations provide opportunities for students and young, single people to escape from mainstream culture and participate in alternative and unconventional lifestyles. Tim Butler and Garry Robson echo this view in their suggestion that movement to the inner city is prompted by the association of suburbia with boredom, together with a rather nostalgic view of what inner-city neighborhoods used to be like.

The research by Butler and Robson into how middle-class in-migration has transformed certain areas of inner-London shows that the cosmopolitan ethos which prizes contact with other cultures is, in practice, at odds with the frequently stated desire of these gentrifiers to live among people like themselves. A matching sense of social distinction and separateness informed Gans' respondent

who referred to our kind. Butler and Robson's use of the term enclave to describe the middle-class settlements that they studied is an appropriate indication of the exclusivity of the actual patterns of social interaction that these people create. As they note, although living in the context of otherness is said to be highly valued, in practice, middle-class, inner-city dwellers have very limited interactions with different social groups in their everyday lives. They also note the irony that as gentrification proceeds, the poorer urban villagers (whose cultural distinctiveness constitutes part of the attraction) may find themselves displaced as they are priced out of the local housing market. There is a remarkable parallel here between the unintended impact of these middle-class, in-migrants' pursuit of an imagined community (what Butler and Robson call Brixton of the mind, or Hackney in the mind) and Ray Pahl's analysis of how the movement of city dwellers to the countryside eroded the very type of community they sought to join.

A particular threat to the existence of the sort of urban villages described by Gans is posed by in-migration and gentrification associated with the emergence of so-called new, artistic quarters. It has even been suggested by David Bell and Mark Jayne that the distinctive quarters of cities that have been created to service the consumption patterns of the service class, constitute the most notable contemporary expression of the urban village. However, urban villages can be found all over the world and no one characterization adequately captures their diversity. Rather, what is needed is an approach to the analysis of urban villages that is sensitive to their various political, economic, social, spatial, and cultural contexts. The cultural appeal of rural life has very deep historical roots, and so the prospect of a village-like existence in an urban setting has understandable attraction to those for whom the city represents an unnatural, alienating, and dangerous entity, even in highly urbanized societies. In other parts of the world, the concept of an urban village retains a more literal applicability. In Latin America, for example, Bryan Roberts has argued that complex patterns of rural-urban migration continue to mean that it is difficult to draw a hard and fast distinction between rural and urban phenomena, making it appropriate to continue to refer to cities of peasants. Urban-rural relations are arguably even more difficult to unravel in contemporary China where millennia of peasant traditions are being overturned by patterns of industrialization and urbanization that are historically unprecedented in their pace and form. And in the countries of the former Soviet Bloc, things are different again because the legacy of under-urbanization which characterized the communist period has been the location of the equivalent of urban villages, populated by peasant-workers, in the countryside.

Gans' concept of the urban village is thus of far more enduring interest than the specific community of

Italian-Americans in 1950s Boston from which it originated, but which has long since disappeared. New research continues to add to the picture of life in urban areas settled at some point in the past by migrants from rural backgrounds. For example, the historical work of Christine Harzig and her colleagues has deepened understanding of the specific contribution of women to the communities into which they were transplanted. Gender also figures prominently in Talja Blokland's analysis of contemporary ways of life in the inner-city district of Hillesliu in Rotterdam, where women from diverse backgrounds both within and beyond the Netherlands are more prominent in the neighborhood than are men. What is striking about contemporary work in the field of urban studies is not only how many authors continue to make explicit references to Gans' work, but also the extent to which their research findings confirm the veracity of his analysis of the underlying structure and operation of urban social relations despite the substantial transformations which cities have undergone in the meantime. The demonstration by Mike Savage and his colleagues that the forces of globalization are as likely to reinforce people's local attachments as they are to undermine them, follows in the tradition of Gans analysing empirical evidence to identify and then resolve an apparent paradox. It is not at all surprising that sales of *Urban Villagers* placed it among the top 20 bestsellers by American sociologists in the second-half of the twentieth century.

See also: Community; Cosmopolitanism; Ethnography; Gentrification; Migration; Transnationalism; Urbanization.

## Further Reading

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## Relevant Websites

<http://www.holbeckurbanvillage.co.uk/about>; <http://www.bilstonurbanvillage.co.uk/>  
UK Urban Village.