

5 Perspectives on Urban Culture

The early urban sociologists, especially those associated with the Chicago School, were intent on probing the forms of social interaction found in cities. Borrowing the concept of sociation from Simmel they examined the informal social relations which existed in different parts of the city and which underpinned everyday life for various social groups and the processes of social organisation and disorganisation which they saw as typical of modern urban experience.

They bequeathed an interest in urban culture. But this legacy has proved a difficult one for later urban sociologists to utilise. Empirical studies suggested that urban cultures could rarely be distinguished from rural cultures. Conceptually, Manuel Castells (1977) dismissed the study of urban culture as ideological, as being incapable of rigorous theoretical definition. Other writers of this period denied that it was possible to discern a distinct urban culture (Smith, 1980; Saunders, 1981). Yet since the 1980s there has been a major revival in cultural studies of cities. There has been a striking number of studies examining the experience of urban living, in all its ramifications (e.g. Castells, 1983; Harvey, 1985b; Jukes, 1990; Sennett, 1996), and a distinct genre of urban biography has emerged (Davis, 1992; Ackroyd, 2000). The study of urban culture has returned to the agenda.

There are two contrasting approaches to the study of urban culture. The first attempts a generic definition, where writers discern common threads which apply to all cities. This project is usually concerned with delimiting an urban way of life. A second approach abandons the quest for a single form of urban culture and suggests that every city has its own specific culture, its own meaning. Here, the task of the writer is not to come up with

statements about an urban way of life that holds, in some form, for all cities, but to identify the processes which give different meanings to cities. This chapter considers the value of generic definitions of urban culture. The next considers how we might think in terms of specific urban cultures.

There were two alternative classic attempts to establish a generic definition of urban culture. The first of these was developed by Louis Wirth in 'Urbanism as a Way of Life' (1938), which sought to generalise from the studies of his colleagues in Chicago. We will argue that this was largely concerned to distinguish between cities and rural settlements, thereby defining urban culture spatially. The second, and prior, approach was that of Simmel, who defined the nature of modern urban culture temporally, in relation to older social forms. Whilst Wirth contrasts the city with the countryside, Simmel contrasts the modern urban dweller with rural and small-town residents of an earlier epoch.

We begin by discussing Wirth's arguments, indicating some of the problems with his account which subsequent discussion has sought to light. We then contrast Simmel's account of metropolitan culture, taking pains to show how it differs from Wirth's. Simmel's work has recently experienced a major revival, leading to new lines of research on urban culture which we review. Nonetheless, we conclude that generic definitions of urban culture are bound to fail because they cannot deal with the variety of urban meanings tied up with cities.

5.1 Louis Wirth and the 'urban way of life'

Louis Wirth's 'Urbanism as a Way of Life', published in 1938, was one of the most influential sociological articles ever written. In it he laid down a research agenda for examining how cities produced forms of social interaction different from those of rural settlements, and hence how urban and rural ways of life could be distinguished.

Wirth (and Redfield, who also helped to develop an interest in urban and rural cultures) wrote at a time when the pre-eminence of Chicago was threatened by other American departments championing a more scientific brand of sociology. The Chicago School itself in the 1930s also reformulated traditional themes

within a positivist framework, more congenial to the intellectual climate. Thus Wirth attempted to analyse urban culture by distinguishing three 'independent variables' – size, density and heterogeneity – which could be seen as causal factors behind urban cultural life. In order to tighten up the study of urban culture, it became more important to compare it with another, 'dependent', variable, in this case rural culture. In one important respect Wirth succeeded beyond measure, setting up an empirically testable hypothesis, which has sustained intense debate ever since.

Wirth's basic argument was that city life was characterised by isolation and social disorganisation, and that this was due to the fact that all cities were large, dense, and heterogeneous. In his own words:

Large numbers count for individual variability, the relative absence of intimate personal acquaintanceship, the segmentalization of human relations which are largely anonymous, superficial and transitory, and associated characteristics. Density involves diversification and specialization, the coincidence of close physical contact and distant social relations, glaring contrasts, a complex pattern of segregation, the predominance of formal social control, and accentuated friction, among other phenomena. Heterogeneity tends to break down rigid social structures and to produce mobility, instability, and insecurity, and the affiliation of the individuals with a variety of intersecting and tangential social groups with a high rate of membership turnover. The pecuniary nexus tends to displace personal relations, and institutions tend to cater to mass rather than individual requirements. The individual thus becomes effective only as he acts through organized groups. (Wirth, 1938, p. 1)

All three traits mentioned by Wirth were seen as being characteristic of urban rather than rural life: only cities had large numbers, and dense and heterogeneous social relations. Hence a distinct urban way of life could be distinguished. Wirth thus implied that there was some connection between type of settlement and psychic life, that certain sorts of personalities, psychological traits, and attitudes to life, were associated with being in the city. Strong social identities were eroded by urban life. In making this argument Wirth drew upon earlier sociological writers who had distinguished communities from more

fragmented social relations. Most famously, Toennies's distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (usually translated as community and association) has often been interpreted in the same way – that different kinds of place, rural as opposed to urban, determine different kinds of social relationship. *Gemeinschaft* is often thought of as being 'community', where relationships between people were intimate and personalised. In small, rural communities, people formed close, intense and overlapping ties which bound them together into a coherent cultural whole. In modern societies, based on *Gesellschaft*, social relations of association predominate, people interrelating impersonally and instrumentally. In this situation actors encounter more other people than in a *Gemeinschaftlich* society, but they deal with them for specific purposes only, forfeiting the density of contacts which characterise *Gemeinschaft* (for further elaboration, see Lee and Newby, 1982, ch. 3). From this reading of Toennies comes a whole genre of work that considers urban culture as the experience of anonymity, loneliness, isolation, and fleeting relationships. The implicit contrast is with the security and warmth of the rural community.

5.1.1 *The critics of Wirth*

In the 1950s and 1960s a series of debates about the transformation of the American personality, the decline of community, the entrenchment of mass, individualised, society, and the existence of an urban–rural continuum, drew on Wirth's belief that as urbanism spread, so primary social relationships would weaken and decline. They were hence predominantly concerned with the idea of disorganisation, with the decline of secure and pervasive social bonds in an urbanised society. This was a continuation of the way in which the Chicago School presented cities as, essentially, disorganised and disorderly. But the other emphasis of Chicago writers – on the informal social bonding in urban areas – was neglected. The maelstroms of invasion and succession, of weak traditional ties, of competition between groups, etc., were seen to cause particular urban problems, a view that probably continues to have some sway over policy-makers.

The considered response, over fifty years, to Wirth's arguments and the debates they generated, has been to reject the idea of

there being 'an urban way of life', largely because of the persistence of segregated, collective life in even the largest cities. More specifically the objections are threefold:

1. it misspecified the determining character of space;
2. empirical inquiries found communities in the city and conflict and isolation in the countryside;
3. the diversity of group cultures challenged the idea that there was one dominant urban way of life.

Let us consider these points in turn.

(i) Spatial determinism

There can be no doubt that there are many lonely, isolated people living in cities. What is in doubt is whether they tend to predominate there, and even if they do, whether cities themselves can be held responsible. One of the most important post-war writers on this issue is the American, Herbert Gans. He claimed that:

Wirth conceived the urban population as consisting of heterogeneous individuals, torn from past social systems, unable to develop new ones, and therefore prey to social anarchy in the city ... [This] ignores the fact that this [inner city] population consists of relatively homogeneous groups, with social and cultural moorings that shield it fairly effectively from the suggested consequences of number, density and heterogeneity. This applies even more to the residents of the outer city, who constitute a majority of the total city population. (Gans, 1968b, p. 99)

Gans admitted that there were some sections of the population in cities who were rootless, transient and anonymous, but he doubted their typicality, and also whether this loneliness was produced by cities. Much has been written about the concentration of the homeless in inner urban areas, for instance (Dear and Wolch, 1987). This however, is not due to city life itself, nor because of the three variables of size, heterogeneity, and density discussed by Wirth, but because of the type of people, the type of policy, and the type of facilities which exist in any given area.

Nor is it self-evident that the marginalised, isolated and lonely live in the inner cities. In some areas marginalised groups can be

found living in other types of places, such as council estates situated on the outer rim of cities, or New Towns, well away from the centre of the urban milieu itself. Meegan (1990) has examined the way in which the most marginal groups of Liverpool's population are found in the outer council estates in Speke and Kirby. In a similar way, the movement of poor working-class residents away from the centre of Glasgow to the outer Clydeside council estates saw people move from an environment rich in cultural facilities and resources to a new environment with very few amenities (Savage, 1990). This was partly due to the fact that the Labour Council which commissioned the building of new council estates was dominated by a temperance lobby which did not want public-houses to be built on these outer estates. In other words, Wirth's stress on the effects of size, density and heterogeneity alone is misplaced; insofar as there is urban isolation it is linked to the types of social groups who typically – but not inevitably – live in central urban sites, the processes which cause them to concentrate there, and the types of urban policy which affect their resources and environment.

Gans also questioned whether the supposed isolation, individuation and autonomy of city life accurately described more than a small proportion of people. He pointed out that the inner cities also contained groups of people of common ethnic origin and cosmopolitan types, such as gentrifiers. Studies of the moral order of the slum have usually suggested that all the necessary properties of a predictable subcultural way of life (norms, values, ties, rituals, reciprocities, etc.) are present, though these are substantively different from those of a dominant culture. The city was not a place of incipient anarchy. Let us develop this point in more detail.

(ii) The urban-rural typology

A second source of discontent with the urban way of life model was the fact that sociological investigations threw up endless counter-examples to the supposedly anonymous and anomic pattern of urban life and to the integrated community of the countryside. Sociologists and anthropologists who carried out research on parts of large cities found neighbourliness, tradition, moral order and even strong ties of 'community' in inner-city areas like Bethnal Green in East London or Boston's West End.

'Urban villagers' – people living in cities, identifying with their particular neighbourhood and having close ties with their neighbours – abounded.

Young and Willmott (1962) conducted a survey of the Borough of Bethnal Green in inner London and a series of in-depth interviews there between 1953 and 1955. Bethnal Green was a poor, inner-city area which might have been expected to exhibit features of the urban way of life and the atrophying of family relations. On the contrary, Young and Willmott 'were surprised to discover that the wider family, far from having disappeared, was still very much alive in the middle of London' (Young and Willmott, 1962, p. 12). The frequency of kinship contact of people in Bethnal Green, with brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, and particularly with parents, was prodigious. As regards married people with a parent still alive, 'More than two out of every three people ... have their parents living within two or three miles' (ibid., p. 36). About 30 per cent of those married women lived in the same street as their parents. Moreover 55 per cent of married women with a mother alive had seen her within the last 24 hours. The centrality of the mother-daughter link and the extent of mutual aid was probably the most notable feature of all. However, the picture, generally, was of intense kinship contact which in turn fostered dense social networks throughout the community. Young and Willmott remarked that:

far from the family excluding ties to outsiders, it acts as an important means of promoting them. When a person has relatives in the borough, as most people do, each of these relatives is a go-between with other people in the district. His brother's friends are acquaintances, if not his friends; his grandmother's neighbours so well-known as almost to be his own. The kindred are ... a bridge between the individual and the community. (ibid., p. 104)

Thus was discovered a set of strong extended kin and neighbourhood ties in the very centre of the city, completely confounding any generalisation that social bonds had evaporated. Bethnal Green was like a village, where long residence and dense social networks had produced 'a sense of community, that is a feeling of solidarity between people who occupy the common

territory' (ibid., p. 113). When they compared a new London County Council housing estate built at Greenleigh, 20 miles east on a greenfield site, Young and Willmott found far more isolated and privatised ways of life.

Subsequent criticism has contested the sense of community said by Young and Willmott to exist in terms of the difference between public and private accounts of social life. Cornwell (1984) argued that East Enders' public accounts tend to give a rosy impression of the past, whereas private accounts, collected using oral life-history techniques, tell of jealousies, competition, conflict and violence as well. While realising the popular attractions of a garden and some control over the fabric of a house, effectively unattainable in Bethnal Green but a feature of Greenleigh, she nevertheless found people who had moved back into its very low-grade housing because they missed the companionship or preferred the social connections of the inner city.

Gans in another celebrated study also described as an urban village the West End of Boston – a mixed area, with many nationalities, but predominantly Italian; not quite a slum, though often thought of as such. It was ugly, noisy, had poor facilities, and bad housing, but nevertheless was convivial and socially highly organised, mostly through peer groups and through kin. Gans examined a whole range of local institutions of everyday life – family, associations, caretakers, political bosses, etc. – and argued that ethnic groups do very similar things in different countries, and that this is because of class location rather than specific ethnicity. Accordingly he isolated the features of what he called lower-class subculture, which included a central role for women who usually had working-class aspirations, while a significant proportion of the men were drifters and seekers of exciting action. Nevertheless, Gans showed, this inner-city area exhibited tight social bonds and strong institutional forms.

In recent years some studies of globalising cities (e.g. Eade *et al.*, 1997) have emphasised the rising significance of long-distance communication and have argued that small-scale communities have been eclipsed (Giddens, 1990; Beck, 1992). It is possible to exaggerate the extent of global change: international migration flows, for instance, have not risen significantly despite impressions to the contrary (Papastergiadis, 2000). However, Castells (1996) has noted that even mobile populations have to be fixed in

particular places, and he has shown that globalising forces can in fact lead to an increase in communities that are based on turf loyalty. Recent research in parts of the Greater Manchester area indicate that there are still some neighbourhoods marked by dense social ties, and close contact between members of the extended family (Savage *et al.*, 2002). In one area of inter-war housing, two-thirds of households had at least one parent or child within a ten-minute drive.

Furthermore, while such studies showed that parts of cities exhibited characteristics of 'community', inquiries in rural areas challenged romantic views of social life in the countryside. Studies initially indicated that although in villages people knew their neighbours and met many of them regularly, life there was neither harmonious nor necessarily highly integrated. Lewis's re-study of the Mexican village that had been Redfield's model for his influential ideal type of 'the folk society' was often cited because it showed high levels of real and latent conflict (Redfield, 1947; Lewis, 1951). The post-war British community studies similarly showed conflict and resentment emanating from inequalities of class, status and participation (Frankenberg, 1957; Littlejohn, 1963; Williams, 1963). Subsequent studies, like Newby (1977) on East Anglian farmworkers, relied not at all on models of rural life or community. Observed deferential behaviour by farm labourers was shown to be situationally specific action, their concerns and practices being in most part similar to those of other working-class occupations. Moreover, by the 1970s, the proportion of the population of rural areas employed in agriculture had diminished to such an extent that villages were inhabited by urban 'off-comers' who bought second homes for holidays or commuted daily to the city. This caused appreciable social divisions, pushing the poorly paid rural labourers into enclaves, within or beyond the village, which Newby termed 'encapsulated communities', that separated them geographically and socially, partly for purely financial reasons. Recent concern in Britain about the state of rural communities emphasises the degree of isolation which is current in rural areas, with the relatively high suicide rate of farmers being attributed to their lack of contact. Insofar as 'rural institutions' are preserved, it is often the in-migrants who play key roles in rural social life.

Of course, Britain is a very highly urbanised society. In states with much greater land mass, and/or where agricultural production remains a significant source of employment, rural settlements may be less fragmented. Thus Dempsey's (1990) study of Smalltown, Australia, a township and hinterland containing fewer than 4,000 people, 250 kilometres from Melbourne and 110 kilometres from 'the nearest town of any size' (Dempsey, 1990, p. 23), showed a strong sense of belonging, an attachment to the place and a high degree of social cohesion. Class inequalities existed between farmers, state professionals often employed in state welfare agencies, local working-class households and some marginalised people. There are considerable and visible differences of power between men and women. Yet high levels of social interaction, a strongly held view that life in Smalltown is clearly superior to that in a city, and the exigencies of getting along in a small and isolated place, produces a way of life that does have strong elements of *Gemeinschaft*. However, the conditions for the existence of such settlements are such that they face constant pressure from external forces that have, over time, reduced their number.

Despite its widespread use, the concept of 'community' has often proved to be troublesome because of its vagueness. Hillery (1955), for example, in a much-quoted observation, distinguished ninety-five different senses of the term used in sociological literature. More usefully, Bell and Newby (1976) distinguished between three analytically different connotations of the concept:

1. It is used as a purely topographical expression, to describe finite, bounded areas, such as a village, a tract of land within a city, a housing estate, or whatever.
2. It has a sociological expression, characterised by the degree of interconnection of local people and their social institutions, implying some level of mutual social involvement or integration, a phenomenon conceptualised by Stacey (1969) as a local social system.
3. Community describes a particular kind of human association, a type of social relationship, which has no logical connection with places or local social systems. This kind of relationship Bell and Newby usefully prefer to call communion, indicating warmth of feelings, personal ties and belongingness. However,

this is not necessarily secured by geographical proximity: modern city-dwellers may obtain this sense of communion through churches, clubs, social movements, gangs, and the like. They entail face-to-face interaction, but may be obtained through more or less formally organised meetings.

In sum, there is only a contingent link between area, local social system and the hallowed sense of communion. No doubt there are geographical areas with relatively complete local social systems that generate a sense of communion. There are also places where people hate their co-residents. It is a mistake to imagine that settlement type produces specific qualities of social relationship.

Research into communities became bogged down in a series of intractable problems of a conceptual and methodological character. These problems finally undermined the use of the term 'community', as it was recognised that its use was ideological – that is to say, that it reflects widespread cultural assumptions and biases, rather than reality. The idea of community itself is much revered, regret being widely expressed about the loss of the intimate, face-to-face relationships of small rural villages. A myth of an idyllic rural way of life has had pronounced effects on British society at least for 200 years. The myth has been dissected many times in informative ways (see Williams, 1973; Newby, 1979) and has been shown to have important consequences for the declining profitability of British industry (Wiener, 1981). The attraction of the countryside in the British imagination has been a conception of the special kind of social relationships thought to be present in the rural village. This has very often missed the oppressive and restrictive character of life in small, preindustrial communities. Ethnographic studies of rural areas have begun to pick out conflictual rather than cooperative social relations (see Gasson *et al.*, 1988, for a survey). In the urban planning literature, nostalgia for an imagined lost community has obscured the way in which architects of new urban settlements have conceived of the restoration of community life as a strategy for control of subordinate social groups (see Bell and Newby, 1976).

By the 1970s the community studies were denounced as scientifically flawed, though they were appreciated as interesting

ethnographic accounts. They were, and still are, fascinating and absorbing reading, describing the minutiae of everyday life, mostly of the working class, as seen voyeuristically by social scientists. Their failings were that they were non-cumulative, since it was difficult to compare them systematically, as they were written by different people in varying ways. They made no contribution to theory, often preferring to stick close to their empirical investigation. Also they gave unsatisfactory explanations because they were concerned only with processes internal to the community. In the late 1970s these problems led Wellman and Leighton (1979) and others to champion the value of network methods as ways of empirically measuring people's social ties. The basic idea of Wellman's network analysis was to avoid assuming that a particular space was characterised by particular kinds of social ties. Rather, by measuring the contacts between people in diverse locations, it was empirically possible to adjudicate whether some places were richer in ties than others. Community thus becomes an empirical question. As network approaches have been utilised over the past two decades, they have demonstrated the difficulty of revealing any clear spatial patterns to communities. Researchers have shown that even nineteenth-century urban communities were not as bounded and cohesive as might have been once thought (Scherzer, 1992). The most significant differences in the organisation of social networks are not based on urban residence so much as class, with working-class areas being characterised by closer, stronger ties, and middle-class areas by weaker ones (see also Adams and Allan, 1998). The result of this long line of inquiry was therefore to dismiss the idea that the countryside was full of communities, whilst cities were not. It proved, however, remarkably difficult to research communities in such a way that Wirth's expectations could be rigorously tested. Since strong social ties, based upon subcultural affiliation, existed in the city, the evidence for the urban-rural contrast was found unconvincing.

(iii) *The proliferation of subcultures*

Wirth's view that there was an urban culture always sat somewhat uncomfortably with the Chicago School's recognition of the existence of varied practical cultures in the Western city. If the practices of the Gold Coast and those of the slum were so very

different, as charted by Zorbaugh (1929), then in what sense was it possible to maintain that there was some generalised 'urban' culture? The objection was that responses to the opportunities of urban life largely depend upon the social group to which someone belongs – defined in terms of lifecycle stage, generation, class and ethnic group (see Gans, 1968b). The implication of this position is that the 'urban' ceases to be a first-order cause of particular social practices, and is replaced by central sociological variables (demographic and socio-economic) as the way to explain differential experience within the city.

We have emphasised that the Chicago School depended on urban ethnographies for their arguments. The sheer variety of subcultures to be found in any city makes it impossible to identify some dominant type of urban social relations. There are certainly strong forces making for competition, individuation and personal difference; but there are counter-tendencies in shared interests, sociability, friendship and kinship, membership of organisations, etc. that induce cooperation and communality. What studies of urban villagers, of Bethnal Green, of ethnic groups, etc., have constantly shown, is that heterogeneity is in part an illusion, behind which integrated, homogeneous groups are involved in high levels of interaction. This also weighed heavily against Wirth's theoretical synthesis.

Recent ethnographic studies have been framed in rather a different way from that of Wirth. It is striking that despite theoretical interest in issues of globalisation, there is no evidence that urban ethnography is on the wane, though its tools and perspectives are undergoing change. (For an overview of the history of such studies, see Hannerz, 1980; and for the tradition of community studies, see Bell and Newby, 1974; Allan and Crow, 1993). In the US, the 1990s saw a remarkable wave of urban ethnographies of black communities, ranging from Duneier's *Slim's Table* (1994), an account of how under-privileged black male customers of a local café in Chicago sustain their pride in difficult circumstances, to Loic Wacquant's (e.g. 1999a) studies of ghettos in Chicago (and comparisons in France). There is a similar number of innovative ethnographic studies of suburban cultures (Baumgartner, 1988; Dempsey's (1990) studies of suburban Australia). In the UK, Crow (2002) talks about the 'rejuvenation' of ethnographic community studies after a period of relative quiet

in the 1970s. Admittedly, urban ethnographies have changed their focus: no longer is there marked interest in localised subcultures, but rather the concern is to use a local lens to explore processes of wider theoretical and social relevance. In the UK, this has led to local ethnographies of musicians (Finnegan, 1989), cultures of crime and fear of crime (Hobbs, 1987; MacKay *et al.*, 1997) and virtual communities (Wakeford, 2002).

These studies recast the purpose of local ethnographies. Rather than centring on local areas as self-contained communities, they explore the interface between global social processes and their instantiation in specific social and physical spaces. In some ways this is a different rendering of urban ethnography from that used by the Chicago School since it imparts no particular causal role for urban processes as such. Rather, such studies lead away from issues of urban personality or urban culture towards the identification of a variety of different modes and patterns of everyday life. These new ethnographic studies do not, then, rely on Wirth's framework, nor do they rely on a conception of the distinctiveness of urban space. However, it may be premature to write off Wirth's contribution. Some, mainly American, writers have recast Wirth's framework in somewhat different terms.

The most significant writer here is Claud Fischer, and especially his studies of southern California (1982). Fischer explored the social networks of urban and rural residents, and develops an argument that offers an interesting revision of Wirth's. Fischer argues that urban living allows the proliferation of subcultures, and identities, since people can choose a variety of bases on which to identify. Urbanism allows such subcultures to proliferate since a critical mass for the formation of a distinct culture is often only possible in a city of a certain size. Thus only when the number of potential members of a given group rises above a threshold can they form a collectivity. Furthermore, once it is known that a subculture exists in a certain city, selective migration takes place as people choose to move to that area in order to join. Subsequently, conflict or interaction with other social groups may reinforce a sense of shared identity.

Fischer discusses the emergence of homosexual subcultures in urban areas in precisely these terms. In some urban areas, such as San Francisco, selective migration of gay men to the city over a long period led first to them becoming a large group able to sustain

their own social and cultural life. Other gay men, often moving from more repressive rural areas and small towns, were encouraged to migrate, reinforcing the gay subculture. Frequent conflicts with homophobic public authorities have served to strengthen the subculture. Subsequent writers, notably Bellah *et al.* (1985), have developed the idea of 'lifestyle enclaves' to refer to the creation of communities of interest, where those sharing a similar 'enthusiasm' develop shared communities which are not based directly on Wirth's triad of size, density and heterogeneity. Nonetheless, Fischer's emphasis on the need for a size threshold, and the significance of communication through various kinds of transport and media to allow like-minded people to come together, still suggests that urban areas continue to be advantaged because their population size allows more like-minded people to live in close proximity. In his more recent re-evaluations of his perspective, Fischer (1995) insists on the sociological significance of the rural-urban divide. He is sceptical of claims that new forms of virtual communication make actual spatial proximity irrelevant for subcultures (as argued, for instance, by Wellman, 2001), and instead insists that urban dwellers in advanced capitalist societies tend to be more 'unconventional' than rural residents. He thus paves the way for a partial reappraisal and reinstatement of Wirth's arguments.

5.1.2 Reappraisal of Wirth

This three-pronged critique of Wirth's notion of an urban way of life made a considerable contribution towards better understanding the city. Many defects of Wirth's synthesis were identified and laid aside: for example, notions of the urban personality, the urban-rural distinction, the uniformity of the urban temperament, the idea that cities *per se* had effects, and the belief that communal and community networks had atrophied. Nonetheless, recent re-evaluations have shown that whilst Wirth's arguments cannot be sustained in their entirety, they contain important insights into the nature of life in modern cities. In three important areas it can be argued that the critics have overstated their case.

First, older ethnographic and community studies demonstrating the persistence of social bonds tended to look for coherence and interconnections. This is partly because it is easier to carry out research in communal settings than on specific private house-

holds. Persuasiveness in traditional anthropological work has typically come from giving a coherent and understandable picture of some network of social interaction. The analysis of such interaction systems need not exclude conflict; the best anthropology has a lot to say about dispute, negotiation and conflict, as was apparent in community studies. However, such research has focused on particular groups of people in contexts where there are high levels of interaction and some recognisable moral order. The method itself tends to enhance the impression of coherence. This has been appreciated by modern anthropology and current best-practice guards against such misrepresentation. The recent emphasis in anthropology to recognise the reflexivity of the researcher, and the need to guard against intellectual closure (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), has led to different kinds of research. Certainly, many of the key empirical studies in the debate from the 1950s to the 1970s upon which the critique was based probably overemphasised the coherence of social groups. The fact that urban communities were discovered in cities may partly reflect the methods used by researchers.

Second, recent ethnographic studies continue to demonstrate that local context matters. The contextual aspects of human interaction, the sense in which configurations of co-presence are an important part of the construction of distinctive group subcultures, got lost in the most thoroughly aspatial theoretical critiques of Wirth (e.g. Saunders, 1985). Although settlement type does not directly generate particular types of social relations, the frequency, density and context of personal contact does have effects on sociation. In Bethnal Green and in Smalltown, widespread face-to-face interaction was one precondition of communal practice and a sense of belonging. Repeated interaction encourages more intense interpersonal sentiments, whether of belonging or antagonism. Often the specific features of the local environment – its layout, the memories it invokes, the public spaces that it contains – frame a distinctive context that supports particular forms of interaction. Distances, boundaries and configurations between sites for association restrict some and enable other types of joint and collective behaviour. That spatial arrangements do not determine the quality of social interaction does not mean that they should be ignored altogether, a point that recent research on space and place has increasingly appreciated.

Third, the critique tended to reinforce the sense that sociation should be explored as an antinomy: *Gemeinschaft* or *Gesellschaft*; rural or urban; cooperative or competitive; communal or anonymous. In fact, these characteristics usually exist together; more of some and less of others in particular groups or situations, for sure, but the texture of life in late capitalism is a mixture. Both competition and cooperation are required in a society with a division of labour and private ownership, an insight from Durkheim of which Wirth was fully aware. These antinomies are not alternatives; almost everyone has both in their social repertoires for use in different circumstances. Nor are they spatially determined. Rather, they are supported or undermined by particular types of social interaction situation and material contexts. These last are more appropriate objects of study.

Urban sociology after 1945 tended to generalise unacceptably from Wirth's model of an urban way of life without necessarily doing the kind of research that would corroborate or refute its key tenets (see Fischer, 1975). In addition, statistical approaches to segregation failed to depict sociation satisfactorily. Demographic and material characteristics as identified through census-type variables are insufficient to understand everyday life. Groups in similar socio-economic circumstances may have quite distinct lifestyles. Ley (1983) quotes a comparative study of two affluent social areas in Vancouver. Both were among the richest 10 per cent of neighbourhoods by socio-economic status, but exhibited enormous differences in terms of settledness, background, respectability, leisure activities and friendship patterns. Residential distribution generates different social milieux. Case studies, those with a historical component as well as ethnographies, which often take a territorial area as a convenient unit for studying social relationships in context, are essential to understanding the diversity of urban living.

5.2 Simmel and metropolitan culture

Wirth failed to sustain the idea of a generic urban culture differentiated from rural culture. But an alternative approach is possible, thinking in terms not of its spatial differentiation from a rural way of life, but of its temporal distinctiveness from older,

traditional cultures. This is the line of argument which Simmel developed.

Thirty-five years before Wirth published 'Urbanism as a Way of Life', Georg Simmel had produced another classic essay on urban culture, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (see Simmel, 1964). It is common to see these two essays as part of the same tradition, with Wirth elaborating and systematising some of Simmel's ideas (e.g. Smith, 1980; Saunders, 1986). However, Wirth misunderstood Simmel's essay in important respects, for his project was rather different. Simmel was primarily concerned to establish that urban culture was the culture of modernity.

In 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' Simmel rehearsed many of the themes which crop up in Wirth's later essay: the metropolis as the site for the lonely, isolated individual, shorn of strong social bonds: 'the relationships and affairs of the typical metropolitan usually are so varied and complex that without the strictest punctuality the whole structure would break down into an inextricable chaos' (Simmel, 1950, p. 412). More specifically, Simmel argued that there are four distinctive, but interrelated, cultural forms which are characteristically found in urban settings. These are:

1. 'intellectuality', where the urban dweller 'reacts with his [sic] head instead of his heart' (Simmel, 1950, p. 410).
2. urban dwellers are 'calculative' (*ibid.*, p. 412) – instrumentally weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of each action.
3. people are blasé.
4. urban dwellers retreat behind a protective screen of reserve, rarely showing emotion or expressing themselves directly to others.

These traits all seem consistent with Wirth's account. There, however, similarity stops. Unlike Wirth, Simmel did not claim that cities *per se* caused these cultural forms. Although Simmel has frequently been interpreted as positing a causal link between cities and cultural life, so that the mere fact of population density itself produces the effects he discusses, this claim is dubious. The belief that Simmel was showing how size of settlement affected cultural life – a view similar to that of Wirth – is often justified by evoking Simmel's interest in the sociology of numbers, and the way in which the formal properties of quantities affect patterns of

social interaction (Mellor, 1977, p. 184; Saunders, 1986, p. 89). Yet although Simmel did write extensively about this issue in his earlier work, by the time he wrote 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' he had abandoned his rather formalistic treatment and rarely mentioned the significance of size alone, and was careful to qualify any statements relating to it: hence his observation that 'it is not only the immediate size of the area and the number of persons which ... has made the metropolis the locale of freedom' (Simmel, 1950, pp. 418–19). Rather, Simmel's concern had become the correlation between quantitative and qualitative relationships. In this context, he emphasised the sociological significance of money whose 'quality consists exclusively in its quantity' (Simmel, 1978, p. 259). Numbers only became sociologically significant because they were premised on a money economy, and it was this which Simmel regarded as most important.

Hence Simmel did not, in this paper, seek to establish any clear causal links between cities *per se* and these cultural traits, and he was certainly not interested in contrasting the city-dweller with the rural-dweller. What is striking, on a careful reading of Simmel's paper, is that his point of contrast was generally not between cities and rural areas, but between contemporary cities and towns in earlier historical periods. Indeed, the usual contrast is with the 'small town', especially in antiquity (e.g. Simmel, 1950, p. 417). Simmel rarely compared the city-dweller with the rural-dweller directly, and on the few occasions that he did, it is unclear whether he was referring to the rural-dweller in earlier historical periods or the contemporary era. Generally Simmel was not arguing for a distinction between urban and rural cultures, because he believed emphatically that in the modern world the metropolis's influence spreads throughout the whole society, including its rural hinterland:

the horizon of the city expands in a manner comparable to the way in which wealth develops ... As soon as a certain limit has been passed, the sphere of the intellectual predominance of the city over its hinterland grow(s) as in geometrical progression ... For it is the decisive nature of the metropolis that its inner life overflows by waves into a far-flung national or international area. (Simmel, 1950, p. 419)

Simmel also did not explain the specified cultural traits in terms of the causal effects of cities *per se*, but it is the role of the city as centre of the 'money economy' that he developed at greatest length, and it is consistent with the overall tenor of his mature social theory (see Frisby, 1985, especially pp. 77ff). Since the money economy is most highly developed in cities, so too are the cultural traits. The decisive evidence for this argument is that Simmel himself thought the *Philosophy of Money* (see Simmel, 1978) his most important work, noting at the end of 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' that 'argument and elaboration of its major cultural-historical ideas are contained in my *Philosophy of Money*' (Simmel, 1950, p. 424). His book analysed many of the same cultural traits discussed in the shorter essay, and he was happy to explain them in terms of the dominance of the money economy. He thus spent two pages discussing the blasé attitude without mentioning cities once (Simmel, 1978, pp. 256–7). He argued that money is by its very nature instrumental, a pure means to something else. Hence the dominance of the money economy in modern societies explains the associated calculative attitudes. From time to time in *The Philosophy of Money* Simmel referred to cities, but merely to illustrate the effects of the money economy. A typical observation is that 'our whole life also becomes affected by its remoteness from nature, a situation that is reinforced by the money economy and the urban life that is dependent upon it' (Simmel, 1978, p. 478).

In short, Simmel's arguments cannot be used to justify the idea that an urban way of life stands in contrast to a rural way of life. Simmel's main stress, like that of Toennies, was a historical one, in which modern societies, based on the dominance of the money economy, exhibited very different cultural traits from traditional societies. Cities were interesting because they exhibited these new emergent features most clearly, not because cities themselves possessed some generic causal power.

Simmel's contribution to the analysis of urban culture was thus rather different from that suggested by many of his interpreters. As his most perceptive advocate, David Frisby, has hinted, the importance of Simmel's work lies in his arguments that the nature of modernity makes it virtually impossible to pinpoint any coherent way of life at all. Frisby has argued that Simmel should best be understood as a sociologist attempting to develop an

account of 'modernity' – 'the modes of experiencing what is "new" in "modern" society' (Frisby, 1985, p. 1). In this context Simmel's constant refrain is the fragmentation and diversity of modern life. As Simmel stated:

the essence of modernity as such is psychologism, the experience and interpretation of the world in terms of the reactions of our inner life and indeed as an inner world, the dissolution of fixed contents in the fluid element of the soul, from which all that is substantive is filtered and whose forms are merely forms of motion. (quoted in Frisby, 1985, p. 46)

For Simmel, modern life saw a rupture of inner, spiritual life and feelings from outward behaviour – in Simmel's terms 'the separation of the subjective from objective life'. In order to protect ourselves from the potential instability and chaos, given the diversity of stimuli which bombards the senses in the course of everyday life, we are all forced to retreat into an inner, intellectual, world which acts as a filter on our experience. This account is not without problems, for he appears to have used an empiricist theory of experience, in which the outside world is able to affect our senses of their own accord (see Smith, 1980). Even if we adopt a weaker version of Simmel's thesis, that we need to control our perceptions intellectually in order to maintain identity and personality, it is clear that the implication of Simmel's argument is still to deny that we can specify a distinct way of life at all. The very concept of 'way of life' suggests a fusion between thought and practice, social position and individual action, which he regards as absent in the modern world. If we recognise that our activities are context-specific (i.e. we behave in different ways in different settings) and that each person may interpret or intellectualise the same actions in a different way, then it becomes very difficult to accept a notion of 'a way of life' – implying as it does a certain coherence to people's activities, and a fusion of culture and practice.

Simmel's real significance is that he problematised the very idea of urban culture, if by this is meant a single and unified urban way of life, based upon axes such as urban alienation or loneliness. Ironically, one of the most powerful critiques of Wirth can be found in Simmel's own, earlier account, which offers a more sophisticated notion of contemporary culture. There are four major differences between Simmel and Wirth:

1. Wirth made what had been a largely historical claim, about traditional communities turning into modern societies, into a spatial one about the difference between cities and villages.
2. Relatedly, he made the study of urban culture part of a comparative project with rural cultures, in an unprecedented way.
3. He claimed that the three defining characteristics of the city were causal forces behind urban cultures, whereas Simmel made no such claim.
4. He used a concept of culture as a 'way of life', which diverged from Simmel's more aesthetic and fragmentary definition.

In all these ways Wirth's innovations proved unhelpful.

5.3 The culture of modernity

Recently, urban culture has again become a focus for study, mainly by writers from outside the terrain of urban sociology. Many are associated with literature and literary criticism, some with the visual arts. In this section we show how Simmel's account of urban culture as the culture of modernity has been used to explore aspects of urban culture. Simmel's work is indeed the best starting-point for the analysis of contemporary urban cultures, and recent writers have interestingly applied his account. We develop this argument by considering the merits of recent writing which draws upon Simmelian themes in four main areas, namely: the visual, modernist aesthetics, sexual identity and the nature of street life.

5.3.1 *The visual*

Several authors have developed Simmel's arguments that the 'eye', or the visual, gains particular prominence in modern urban culture. Simmel saw the urban as characterised by the dominance of the visual sense over all others. Clark (1985) echoes this stress on the dominance of the visual when arguing that the rise of French Impressionist painting in the mid nineteenth century was associated with the development of the modern urban form. The painting of Impressionists such as Manet, Monet, Degas and Seurat did not 'fix' images to known social referents. Instead they marked the proliferation of visual signs and symbols which the

new urban spaces had brought forth (see also Hannoosh, 1984; Reff, 1984). In contrast, earlier painting – for instance, British eighteenth-century landscape painting – was organised through literary forms. For Pugh, ‘the discourse of the “landscape” and the “rural” was first negotiated through verbal modes of representation ... the verbal interpellates the visual’ (Pugh, 1990, p. 3).

John Urry (1990a), in examining the construction of the tourist ‘gaze’, also stressed the visual. The construction of particular vistas, the development of viewing points, and so forth, can be seen as a major element used to draw people to particular sites. In a similar way post-modern architecture of the 1970s and 1980s is designed to elaborate and enhance the visual imagery used in architecture (Harvey, 1989; Connor, 1989); grand ornamentation contrasts with the functional plain style favoured by modernists.

Recent cultural theorists (Jay, 1993, 1996) have explored Simmel’s emphasis on the interrelation between modernity and the visual. Modernist thinkers have situated their accounts of the modern through either endorsing, or denigrating, the role of the visual. The most critical analysis of the development of the visual sense in modern urban cultures comes from feminist writers who relate it to the voyeuristic male gaze (e.g. Pollock, 1988). It is only men who are able to cast their wandering eye freely around the urban landscape, and furthermore, it is often female bodies which are the target of such gazes. The ambivalences of the visual can, then, be seen as one of the contradictory features of modernity itself.

5.3.2 *Modernist aesthetics*

A second recent issue in the analysis of the city and modernity idea has been the connecting of Modernism – as a cultural movement affecting literature, the visual arts, and music in the first part of this century – with the urban experience. Modernism seems, in many ways, to be an artistic elaboration of many of the themes which Simmel developed in ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’. The most celebrated modernist works – for instance Proust’s *In Remembrance of Things Past*, T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and James Joyce’s *Ulysses* – all developed a form of ‘high aesthetic self-consciousness and non-representationalism in which art turns from realism and humanistic representation towards style,

technique, and spatial form in pursuit of a deeper penetration of life’ (Bradbury and McFarlane, 1976, p. 25). This is linked to the ‘intellectualisation’ of life in response to psychic overload emphasised by Simmel (Sharpe and Wallock, 1984).

Bradbury observed, ‘Modernist art has had special relations with the modern city, and in its role both as cultural museum and novel environment’ (Bradbury, 1976, p. 97). In part this simply reflects the growth of a Bohemian artistic culture in the metropolises of Paris, London, Vienna and New York as young avant-garde artists moved into the big cities. At another level, however, it reflected the way in which modernism was a reflection upon the urban experience as such. These new immigrants to the city saw it as strange and wonderful, in contrast to their often rural or small-town upbringing, and hence it became the source of artistic inspiration (Williams, 1989, p. 45). Urban sights and sounds became the topic of modernist work:

in the early part of this century, for painters like Chagall, Stella, Mann and Severini, being modern meant coming to terms artistically, with the juxtaposition of urban sights and sounds, the compression of history and modern technology on a single street. (Sharpe and Wallock, 1984, p. 11)

According to Berman (1983), cities such as St Petersburg offered remarkable scope for modernist work since the contrast between old and new, tradition and modernity, could be most directly observed in street life. The Nevsky Prospect, for instance, a modern consumer street in a city still dominated by a feudal social order, was a frequent source of inspiration for the Russian modernists.

Associating the modernist sensibility with urban experience has however led to disagreement over one vital matter. It remains unclear whether the links apply to modernist art, narrowly defined, in a small number of ‘great’ metropolitan cities in a small time-span between, say, 1890 and 1930, or whether there is a more general association between urbanism and particular forms of cultural production. Berman (1983) argued that the experience of ‘modernity’ is a generic feature of all social life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and continues to see the urban experience as the wellspring of creative art. Perry Anderson (1984), however, claims that Berman’s arguments do not apply

after the 1920s, since modernist art was effectively a commentary on the slow transition from an aristocratic landed order to an advanced industrial capitalist order, and so, with the triumph of capitalism after 1930, modernism lost its distinctiveness. In his recent work Frisby (2001) has further developed Simmel's arguments to emphasise the urban specificity of particular kinds of modern urban cultures, in his exploration of the diverse modernisms of Vienna, Berlin, and Paris. This account recognises that modernism itself is diverse because the manner of its development varies in specific historical contexts (see further, Kahn, 2000). Here, we see how Simmel's emphasis on the temporal nature of modernity can lead to a further elaboration of urban difference.

Feminists have also been critical of claims about the universality of the experience of modernity. Pollock (1988) and Wolff (1987) argue that writers such as Simmel, Benjamin and Berman do not recognise that the experience of modernity as they define it is primarily a male one. Indeed, the same process whereby men moved into the public sphere, enjoying the excitement and insecurity which that involved, depended on a parallel process by which women were confined to the domestic, private sphere. Yet, as Pollock (1988) shows, there were female modernist painters, using experimental techniques similar to those practised by men. However, unlike men, their chosen subjects were frequently domestic and familial. If female artists are given proper recognition, then artistic modernism cannot simply be seen as a commentary on urban change.

Thus, while there is clear evidence for a specific association between particular cities and particular cultural movements, it is altogether more difficult to claim a generic association between cities and cultural life. Particular types of modernist culture may have had close ties to Vienna, New York and Paris, but not to Rome, Birmingham or Copenhagen. Some forms of modernist art, often that by women, were denigrated even in 'modernist' cities.

5.3.3 *Sexual identity*

The third development concerns the relationship between sexuality and modern urban cultures. Simmel, as we have seen, saw the intellectualisation of life as a typical feature of modern urban

culture. The process of developing a sexual identity, interrogating intellectually the nature of this identity, and forming specific sub-cultures based upon it, exemplify his view. Recent research, some of it drawing on Fischer's work discussed above, has pointed to the way in which the urban milieu has a prominent role as a site in which subversive and non-conforming forms of sexuality may take root. One example of this is the siting of gay and lesbian cultures in large urban areas, such as San Francisco and New York (Fischer, 1982, ch. 18; Castells, 1983). Feminist writers (e.g. Benstock, 1986), have also noted the greater potential for women to find alternative, less patriarchal ways of living in urban contexts. This is also an aspect of gentrification (see Chapter 4).

Wilson (1991) argues that urban living threatens patriarchal, familial ways of life characteristic of smaller towns and rural areas. She sees the disorder and potential subversion inherent in the culture of modernity as threatening to men, but as enhancing options for women. 'The city offers women freedom. After all, the city normalises the carnivalesque aspects of life' (Wilson, 1991, p. 7). Their power challenged, men find ways of clamping down on the licence and 'freedom' of urban living – through such devices as planning. As a result, urban culture is a complex interplay between male and female principles: 'urban life is actually based on this perpetual struggle between rigid, routinised order, and pleasurable anarchy, the male-female dichotomy' (Wilson, 1991, pp. 7–8).

Wilson's view, however, is romantic. One might object that the heightened significance of fashion and appearance in urban environments increases the pressures for rigid sexual identities to develop. Similarly it is not self-evident that unconventional forms of sexuality can only find a haven in the city: there is a long tradition of retreating to rural environments where the public gaze is thought less intense – for instance, in Utopian communities (Taylor, 1980). Furthermore, despite Wilson's claims concerning the possible development of subversive forms of sexuality in cities, they are also the sites for sexual activities that reinforce and sustain patriarchal sexuality – most notably, prostitution. Interestingly in this regard, Simmel attributed the concentration of prostitution to the dominance of the money economy typical of modernity (Simmel, 1978, pp. 376ff). As with the case of artistic modernism, it seems unwise to generalise: some cities such

as New York and San Francisco may be homes for gay subcultures, but other metropolises may not. Single women may be able to create their own alternative culture in some inner cities, London for example, but not in all.

5.3.4 *The nature of street life*

A final development of Simmel is by Marshall Berman who examined the way in which encounters on the street are linked to the culture of modernity. Working within a largely unacknowledged Marxist elaboration of Simmel's framework, Berman explored the double-edged nature of modern life by arguing that people's freedom to develop and change goes hand in hand with the insecurity caused by the resulting lack of certainty. Hence:

to be modern, is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction ... to be a modernist is ... to grasp and confront the world that modernisation makes, and strive to make it our own. (Berman, 1984, p. 115)

Berman sees the street as a microcosm for modern life and the battle for public space as at the heart of the modernist quest: 'I've come to see the street and the demonstration as primary symbols of modern life' (Berman, 1984, p. 123). He connects the role of the street to wider concerns by arguing that street encounters are unpredictable and unknowable. We are never sure whom we will meet, or with what consequences. At one level this gives us unparalleled potential – to meet the love of our life, a potential employer, an old friend – but at another level it is deeply worrying – we may be robbed, attacked, or slighted. This general insecurity reinforces the role of the visual in urban cultures – as we scan passers-by in order to assess their risk or value to us. This in turn leads us to highlight the visual imagery we wish to emphasise to others, hence the significance of fashion and style. These kinds of issues are reasons why thinkers such as de Certeau (1984) regard walking in cities as having the potential to develop a different kind of knowledge from that based on academic detachment. This call to celebrate knowledge emerging from urban milieux has been made by others, such as the geographer Derek Gregory (1994).

Such contributions deepen Simmel's analysis of how the 'psychic overload' of modern urban life is related to the culture of modernity. However, it is by no means clear that tensions which Berman sees as characteristic of the street are unique to it. Given the relative instability of family, household and personal relationships in contemporary societies it might very well be argued that household life is composed of the very same blend of promise and danger as the street. Feminists might argue that the street fails to possess any excitement at all given its status as male territory, where women are under constant threat. His view might also be said to adopt a male perspective by locating both promise and danger in encounters with strangers. Women might object that they are more usually endangered by men known to them, often fathers or lovers, since the majority of sexual violence takes place within the family. Equally there seems no reason why one cannot see promise or excitement in relations with people one knows very well. Furthermore, to take only one well-known aspect of street life – its potential dangers – recent studies in criminology, echoing the Chicago School, have shown that there are highly localised differences in the incidence of crime within large cities. Not all streets are the same. Berman recognises this implicitly, since he plays particular attention to some types, such as the central-urban shopping street. It is better to recognise the specificity of street cultures, rather than to generalise about the street *per se*. Finally, we spend only a relatively small part of our time – even if we live in cities – walking around them. In short, the stress on the 'sociology of the street', cannot bear the theoretical weight placed on it by Berman or Jukes (1990).

5.4 Conclusion

Urban sociology has learned much from its various attempts to depict the key attributes of a culture of the city. An elaborate understanding of sociation – neighbouring, kinship, friendship and association – has emerged from the concern with the quality of life and social relationships in cities. We can also appreciate the proliferation of subcultures in contemporary society, the contexts of their development and the structured social divisions transposed through them. Moreover, the attention devoted to urban

culture recently has expanded further the interdisciplinary contributions to urban studies as the techniques of literary criticism and art history have been brought to bear.

Nevertheless, attempts to develop an understanding of the generic meaning of living in cities have had only limited success. Relatively little can be said in general terms about the meaning of urban life in the contemporary world. It seems that a good deal of what has been valuable in explorations of urban culture could more appropriately be grasped as illumination of the experience of modernity. The culture of modernity, which in Simmel's time found its clearest expression in urban life, is now virtually universal throughout developed countries. The problems, dilemmas and potentials of modernity are of the utmost importance, but they cannot be consigned to the category of urban culture. Cultural differences emerge between and within cities. Different cities and different quarters support alternative, and sometimes competing, patterns of cultural existence. Insofar as sociologists continue to note the existence of urban and rural differences, their arguments are cautious and contingent to particular kinds of societies. To some extent it is unique combinations of attributes that make places recognisably different the one from the other. It may be better, then, to explore how cities take on their own specific meanings and how these are communicated and interpreted, rather than to refer to urban culture as a whole. This does not imply that we should be content with merely describing the particular cultures of individual cities. Rather, a more analytic approach recommends itself, considering how urban experience can be analysed in more particular and specific ways. This is the subject of the next chapter.

6 Urban Culture and the Regeneration of Urban Meaning

In this chapter our focus is on understanding how urban cultures are constructed, maintained and re-constructed. Over the past two decades, and especially in the 1990s, there has been a dramatic growth of interest in the generation of urban meaning, and an astonishing growth of urban cultural analysis. The aim of this chapter is to explore different ways of interpreting urban cultures, and to examine how urban cultures have undergone reinvigoration even at a time when globalising processes have exercised a powerful effect. The main theme of the chapter is to consider how to reflect sociologically on the built environment in order to understand how urban meanings are constructed in complex interplay with it.

In section 6.1 we begin with the influential work of Henri Lefebvre, in which the social construction of space is related to the commodifying forces of capitalism. This leads on, in section 6.2, to the work of the Marxist cultural critic, Walter Benjamin. We briefly outline some of his ideas and explain their relevance to the study of urban culture. He addressed urban meaning as an interface between personal memories and experiences and the historical construction of dominant meanings and values. The city, for Benjamin, was a site where cultural contradictions could best be revealed and dominant cultures criticised. Finally, section 6.3 explores how globalisation can go hand in hand with the regeneration of urban cultural meaning.

6.1 Urban meaning

It is a striking contemporary paradox that urban specificity seems to be prized at the very same time that globalising processes mean