Book Reviews

The Idea of Neighborhood

The Social Construction of Communities. GERALD D. SUTTLES. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1972. x, 278 pp., illus. $9.50. Studies of Urban Society.

To understand the problem a sociologist has in handling the concept of neighborhood, the reader must retrieve the cognitive maps of childhood. If you grew up in a large city, you knew best those living on your own block. Awareness of the city radiated outward, with the density of information diminishing rapidly with the distance from home. Beyond a few blocks on either side, street names grew vague and faces unfamiliar. The area of comfortable familiarity constituted the experience of neighborhood. (For those raised in Brooklyn or the Bronx, psychological boundaries were set at 5 ± 2 streets from one's home stoop.)

Yet we know that cities do not consist of an indefinitely large number of neighborhoods each centering on one of millions of inhabitants only a slight spatial remove from his fellows. Rather there is a small number of social labels applied to definable geographic areas. Because population characteristics of a city are continuously variable, with no clear demarcation between one side of the street and the other, society imposes categorical labels on specific geographic realms. Neighborhood categories are not simply found in nature, but are consensually imposed definitions. This is the first sense in which communities are socially constructed according to Suttles's analysis.

A neighborhood label, once affixed, has real consequences, Suttles points out. For outsiders it reduces decision-making to more manageable terms. Instead of dealing with the variegated reality of numerous city streets, the resident can form a set of attitudes about a limited number of social categories and act accordingly. Thus a mother will instruct her child to stay out of Harlem, or judge that a boy who lives in Riverdale is probably acceptable for her daughter. Newcomers may be attracted or repelled by areas defined with a high or a low prestige label. For those who live within it, the neighborhood defines areas relatively free of intruders, identifies where potential friends are to be found or where they are to be cultivated, minimizes the prospects of status insult, and simplifies innumerable daily decisions dealing with spatial activities. Thus the mental map of neighborhoods is not superfluous cognitive baggage, but performs important psychological and social functions.

But what sets the boundaries on neighborhoods: ethnic homogeneity, physical barriers, economic characteristics? All of these play a part, but in the final analysis it is a creative social construction. Most often the neighborhood boundary is an arbitrary street or intersection, rather than a physical barrier. Thus, in New York City, Harlem "begins" on the north side of 96th Street. The demographic approach, which equates neighborhoods with particular concentrations of ethnic or racial types, is less interesting for Suttles than the question "How are varying proportions of racial, ethnic, and income groups selectively highlighted in the reputation of local communities?"

If the neighborhood exists first as a creative social construction, it nonetheless possesses a number of important properties. First, it becomes a component of an individual's identity, "a stable judgmental reference against which people are assessed. . . ." (That is why when you ask a person what city he comes from he will tell you without blush, but when you ask about his neighborhood the question may be considered too personal for casual conversation; for the neighborhood is a status-differentiating component.) A neighborhood may derive its reputation from several sources: first, from the master identity of the area of which it is a part (Yorkville is part of the fashionable East Side); second, through comparison and contrast with adjacent communities; and third, from historic claims, a game, Suttles point out, in which all communities can win, since the new community offers the image of an area unshackled by tradition, and the older community takes pride in its association with the past. The best time to capture the "meaning" of a neighborhood, it occurs to this reviewer, is on moving day, when two sets of pertinent associations are revealed: those generated by people moving in, and those disclosed by people moving out.

Readers will also recognize that neighborhoods deemed "desirable" need not always have the best physical features. Consider the upper East Side in New York City. Unless an apartment overlooks Central Park, it is an area devoid of breathing space, consisting of stone towers built on acres of unrelieved pavement. Park Avenue is a fuming canyon of hydrocarbons. It is a wonder not only that people will pay exorbitant Park Avenue rents and maintenance charges but that they are willing to live there at all. Note that Harlem, which in popular imagery possesses only rat-infested slums, actually contains a considerable amount of attractive housing. But none of this figures in the public image of these two areas. The images are social constructions linked to but not wholly identifiable with the facts.

We define urban communities, therefore, because the concept simplifies the complicated and inchoate qualities of the city, dividing it into differentiable segments and thereby rendering it cognitively manageable.

What then of the idea of a community as first and foremost a group of people bound together by common sentiments, a primordial solidarity? In Suttles's eyes, the view is poorly realized in fact and represents an overromanticized view of social life. Communities do lead to social control, they do "segregate people to avoid danger, insult, and status claims"; but whatever sentiments are engendered by neighborhoods are strictly tied to functional realities and can in no sense be treated as gratuitous expressive solidarity. Moreover, the notion of a closely interdependent, self-contained community, having its prototype in the rural village, was never an appropriate model for

urban living. Of greater pertinence to an analysis of urban life are the *multiple* levels of community organization in which the resident participates.

The smallest of these units is the "face block." For children it is the prescribed social world carved out by parents. It is here that face-to-face relations are most likely, and the resulting institutional form is the block association. Next, in Suttles's typology, is the "defended neighborhood," which is the smallest segment of the city recognized by both residents and outsiders as having some corporate identity, and possessing many of the facilities needed to carry out the daily routine of life. The defended neighborhood frequently lacks official recognition, and its boundaries, because they have no legal status, are often precarious. Street gangs arise which protect it from unwanted incursions by outsiders.

The urban resident also participates in the "community of limited liability," a larger realm possessing an institutionally secure name and boundaries. The concept, originally developed by Morris Janowitz, emphasizes the "intentional, voluntary, and especially the partial and differential involvement of residents in their local communities." Frequently an external agent, such as a community newspaper, is the most important guardian of a community's sense of boundaries, purposes, and integrity. A single individual may be defined as living in several such communities. The multiple claims on the person may limit and even paralyze active involvement in any of them.

Even larger segments of the city, such as an entire East Side area, may also take shape in response to environmental pressures, creating an "expanded community of limited liability." Thus an individual may find himself picketing to keep a highway not just out of his neighborhood, but out of the entire South Side.

Thus what Suttles teaches us is that the concept of neighborhood is not adequate to handle the multiple levels of urban organization in which the individual participates. Varied levels of community organization are created as responses to the larger social environment. Neighborhoods cannot be seen as a society in microcosm. They never were, and never can be. The urban community is a form of social differentiation within a total society.

Does Suttles's analysis have a bearing on the contemporary issue of "community control"? It suggests, first, that the fully self-contained community within the city is a fiction. The urban community can be a differentiated but never a fully autonomous unit within the larger urban context. Second, Suttles points out that the idea of a centralized government is not incompatible with a well-served local community. "One of the sources of community weakness in most American cities is that many mayors are responsible to local communities but have little direct recourse to the federal levels at which major power and resources are located." In Sweden, in contrast, the mayors of certain local communities are appointed by the central government but this strengthens rather than weakens the resources available to the community.

It is a central theme of Suttles's analysis that "total societies are not made up from a series of communities, but communities are areas which come into being through their recognition by the wider society." Suttles overstates the case. Sometimes cities do develop through the coalescing of smaller communities, which continue to maintain their identity. London is a good example. To some extent it depends on the phase of a city's development under discussion. In later stages of development, when a city's origins are no longer relevant to its functioning, the social-constructive approach may well constitute the dominant mode of defining neighborhoods. More important, is the point really worth a great deal of theoretical fuss?

The book has other faults: it is repetitious and disjointed, with a number of essays only tangentially related to the main theme. Yet these flaws are unimportant alongside the book's considerable achievements. First, it helps break away from the limiting view of Park, Burgess, and others that "a city consists of a mosaic of little worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate." The urban community is a form of social differentiation within a total society. Second, Suttles teaches us that the concept of neighborhood is not adequate to handle the multiple levels of urban organization in which the individual participates. Participation ranges from the face block to larger segments of the city. Third, Suttles shows that there is no necessary discontinuity between how we experience neighborhoods, communities, cities, and so on and the sociological concepts needed to describe them. Neighborhoods are not primarily segments of real estate but collective representations existing in the minds of inhabitants, and attaining reality through social consensus. This is a stimulating viewpoint of great heuristic value. Fourth, he demonstrates that the phenomenon of mental maps, developed by Kevin Lynch and others, is not a disembodied esthetic or cognitive phenomenon but is part of the ongoing life of individuals, with practical meaning and significance. Fifth, Suttles translates the concept of territoriality, so foolishly caricatured in the work of Ardrey, Morris, and others, into its proper human context. He recognizes the importance of territoriality in human life, without equating it with its animal expression. Finally, his book is a work of considerable originality and insight; the author is a keen observer, bringing the same order of sensitivity to urban analysis that Erving Goffman has applied to the study of small-scale social interaction. And in both cases, we emerge with a sense of clarified perception.

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Behavioral Science of Science

Politics in Science. MARLAN BLISSETT. Little, Brown, Boston, 1972. xvi, 230 pp., illus. Paper, $4.25. Basic Studies in Politics.

Why do scientists believe this or that? Because reason, say the scientists, working on the available evidence, requires this or that belief. Because the scientific community, say the sociologists of science, working on its members, requires this or that belief. The two responses can be reconciled, but only, it often seems, at the expense of making each largely irrelevant to the other. The scientists may concede that their community is not absolutely rational, which is simply another way of saying that present knowledge is imperfect—so back to the preoccupation with reason working on evidence to improve knowledge. Sociologists of science may concede that the product generated by a scientific community is truth, but their preoccupation is with the process of generation rather than the thing generated, which shrinks to the significance that mudpies have for child psychologists, a clue to the thing sought rather than the thing itself.