DSE 1: Urban Sociology

**2.3 Network Theory of Urban**

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Since the early 1990s and the publication of the Global City (1991) by Saskia Sassen and later Manuel Castell’s formalization of a concept called the space of flows (1996), research on global cities has become very popular in Urban Sociology. This body of work focuses on the diversity of networks that create interdependencies between urban spaces. The network theory of the city places networks at the heart of the urban process and considers the interaction between networks and cities as a process of co-development.

Unlike social networks urban and inter-urban networks do not simply link entities. Rather, they connect distinct networks, each one with its own organizational approach and dynamics. Urban sociology stresses that cities are not autonomous entities with specific bodies and functions, but serve as a support and expression of urban activity. In this sense, urban space bears a greater resemblance to an agglomeration composed of many distinct networks – economic, social, political, economic and infrastructural – which intersect at a given point, providing urban space with its own specificity. What differentiates one space from another is the particular set-up of each network. This in turn shapes the arrangement of various entities and functions within networks.

The concept of the network society has been most forcefully presented in the arguments of Manuel Castells. Castells tries to show how the linkages between the global and the local and between certain aspects of identity and function produce spatial transformation of the information society. Information society or network society, is according to Castells, a product of a number of historical transformations. These include first, the information revolution that started in 1970 and continued to expand all over the world; second, the process of globalization which include not only economic but also cultural globalization and third, the emergence of a new form of organization called networking which is a highly decentralized yet coordinated form of activity. The impact of these can be felt in the changes in the spatial dimension of societies which Castells studies.

Castells identified the large-scale development of urban agglomerations, especially in developing countries as the key spatial process of the early twenty-first century. These metropolitan areas are scattered throughout huge territorial expanses and are usually a mix of cities, countryside, center and periphery. Often called ‘metropolitan regions’ or ‘conurbations’, Castells finds them to be a very new process whose novelty lies in the ability to connect functionally a huge number of people and activities throughout a large expanse of space. These spaces are magnets of economic, cultural, political and urban growth which are absorbing more and more population from their hinterland. Thus, they become nodes in global networks of cities. In this they are aided by advanced telecommunications, the internet and fast computerized transportation systems which allow for spatial concentrations of activities.

Castells used the phrases ‘space of places’ and ‘space of flows’ to understand the spatial dynamics of the network city. ‘Space of places’ are used to refer to tangible places, such as localities where people’s experiences and activities actually take place. In the ‘space of flows’, separate locations are linked up electronically in an interactive network that connects people and activities in different geographical contexts. Thus, spaces of flows are not a-territorial – the consist of territories that are distant but are electronically connected. Their function and meaning come from their connections. The electronic networks link up the specific places, and it is this hybrid space that is the space of flows.

What is of importance is that, in our societies, cities are structured by the competing logics of the space of places and the space of flows. Cities do not disappear into the virtual networks. Rather they are transformed in the interface between electronic communication and physical interaction. Apart from the practice of urban governance, an evident impact of this is on the type of urban interaction we see today. The first part of this involves changes in the physical protocol of communication. This is achieved by introducing new forms of symbolic nodality that will identify places in the endless urban sprawl. Here architecture becomes very important, because it gives symbolic meaning to the city. The second level of urban interaction refers to social communication patterns. This involves creating situations where people can start being together without going through public institutions. Such modes of sociability can be found in airports, train stations, public squares etc. Castells calls this level of urban interaction the sociability of public spaces. Finally, the third level of urban interaction refers to the new combination of electronic communication and physical face-to-face communication as modes of sociability.

Thus, one finds that over the years there has been a thorough reconstruction of urban life which has spilt into the various domains of the economic, the political and the social. The challenge is to reconstruct society through the practice of living together, in the process of communicating with each other in the urban civilization.

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