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Review Essay

Urban Patterns

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George A. Theodorsen (editor): *Urban Patterns. Studies in Human Ecology*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park and London 1982. 470 pp.

Human ecology is the study of the spatial distribution of interrelated social variables. Its theoretical goal is to bring about an explanation of the observed distributions and an understanding of the processes producing them. The so-called classical position of human ecology, formulated at the University of Chicago during the twenties and thirties, emphasized competition as the central process in society and particularly competition for land. But because of the interdependencies and division of labor among humans, competition implies an automatic and unplanned degree of cooperation. The relations of interdependence resulting from competitive cooperation were called symbiotic relations. The organization of a population rested on these symbiotic relations and their origin in the struggle for existence. The basic processes shaping the organization and spatial distribution of a population were conceived as belonging to a sub-social level called the biotic level. This level was referred to as community. Society was used for the cultural level, which was thought of as a superstructure erected on the biotic level through the basic process of communication.

Not many sociologists today will find any meaning in the concepts of biotic and symbiotic relationships, and by community we mean quite another phenomenon than the classical students of human ecology.

It might seem a bit outdated for a new book to start with an in-depth look at the classical formulations of human ecological theory. Yet, I think there is a lesson to be learned from studying the classical position; this has largely escaped both its well-founded critic and its later reformulation in the neo-orthodox position. I will return to this. First, a bit more about the book.

The book comprises 56 articles or excerpts from books and articles. The first part reviews 'The Development of the Ecological Framework'. The next section of papers investigates the utility of 'Human Ecology as a Framework for the Study of the City'. Here ethnic and racial groups, neighborhoods, mental illness, commuting, and social area analyses are discussed. The final part of the book is devoted to the description of 'Urban Patterns in Different Cultural Settings'.

Twenty years ago Theodorson edited a book entitled *Studies in Human Ecology*. It became a standard text and reference in its field. The present book is a revised edition. It is improved and may well replace its predecessor as a standard text and reference.

Two thirds of the pages are new, and one fifth were written especially for the book. Six of the papers written for the book are follow-up studies of investigations reported in the first edition. The follow-up studies review the development in time periods ranging from 50 to 30 years and give a valuable perspective on the pattern of ecological change. For Norwegian social scientists K. E. Hoover's follow up on Christen T. Jonassen's study of Norwegian-Americans in Metropolitan New York will be of particular interest.

During the revision the focus of the book has shifted from human ecology in general to human ecology in urban society. This shift narrows its field and also focuses the essential questions of ecology in social science: What is the nature of the interrelations between environment, space, and society? How can one conceptualize the historical processes unfolding these interrelations?

One of the more interesting questions to ponder after studying this book is whether any progress has been made in answering such questions in the time since the first edition was published. If one stipulates that all relevant developments are included, the answer is clearly no. I am not quite satisfied that this has been done. But even including important papers on the border of traditional human ecology like Hannan and Freeman's (1977) paper on 'The Population Ecology of Organizations', the impression of a theoretical stand-still remains.

Just looking at the table of contents raises the suspicion. Of thirty-two new papers, five are dated to 1961 or before and might have been included in the previous edition. Twelve are written especially for this volume. Of the fifteen contributions dating from the period 1962–1981, eleven are empirical investigations, two discuss methodological problems and two theoretical problems. A closer reading of the two theory papers (Bailey and Mulcahy, pp. 165–172, and Hawley, pp. 111–114) supports the suspicion. Bailey and Mulcahy review the ecological complex as a frame of reference for ecological studies and show that it must be seen as complementary to the sociocultural frame of reference. Hawley's contribution is a comment on the interrelations of time, space and organization. Both clarify the importance of the ecological complex and the sociocultural frames of reference. But nothing new is added.

So why bother with a thorough revision at all? There are two reasons I can think of right away. While nothing much happened in ecological theory from 1962 to 1981, I think the papers written for this book and particularly their coming together in one book adds to ecological theory and, maybe even more to the point, lays the foundation for a new look at both theory and subject matter.

The second reason is linked to this. While a fair amount of research has been done in human ecology (the amount of data processed and presented is nothing less than staggering), the dissatisfaction with the theoretical orientation seemed to be growing during the seventies. We witnessed the flourishing of a 'new urban sociology' founded on Marxian concepts (Lebas 1982), while new students of human ecology or social ecology seemed to be fewer each year. Those who graduated without joining the 'new urban sociology' seemed more and more to be groping

towards the classical formulations for inspiration (Hunter 1974; Hamm 1979; Sly and Tayman 1980).

So what did the neo-orthodox reformulation of human ecological theory leave out? What new did the 'new urban sociology' discover?

This brings me back to the lesson of classical human ecology the neo-orthodox formulation seems to have left out. It is clearly spelled out by Hollingshead in his '*A Re-examination of Ecological Theory*' (pp. 82–87) if for communication we read cooperation.

The lesson concerns the nature of competition and cooperation and their position in ecological theory.

Hawley, the most influential writer in the neo-orthodox ecology, concludes that 'competition is not the pivotal conception of ecology: in fact, it is possible to describe the subject without even an allusion to competition' (p. 107). That, however, is not quite what he proceeded to do (Hawley 1950).

Competition is still central, but focus is mainly on structural forms called symbiotic and commensalistic and their relations to competition. His main theme is thus the organization of a population in relation to its environment. Cooperation or communication are scarcely discussed at all.

Hollingshead, on the other hand, assumed that 'there are two basic processes that underlie organized human life: competition and communication' (p. 83) and concluded that 'Cultural values and usages are the tools which *regulate the competitive process*' (p. 84: my emphasis). Both the classical formulation of human ecology and its critique identified competition as a process. This gives the wrong associations. Competition is more like a logical principle, a kind of grammar which sociological theories must conform to if they are to be statements about human societies. Competition is the general structure of processes where circumstances force actors with at least partly conflicting interests to interact. The formal properties of this grammar are explored in game theory (Luce and Raiffa 1957).

But competition is not the only grammatical principle for sociological theories. Cooperation may be another. Cooperation may be defined as the general structure of processes where circumstances force actors sharing at least partly the same experiences (experiences taken in a very broad meaning) to communicate. One way to interpret the quarrel between the sociocultural and orthodox formulation of ecological theory is to see it as a debate over whether cooperation or competition is the most important grammatical principle for the kind of processes they are studying. Now we may conclude, not that they are complementary principles, but rather that social processes are governed by both principles simultaneously.

The important point is that in making competition a general logical property of the processes we study, the focus of interest is shifted from competition as such to the way culture and institutional forms help a population to overcome the various destructive consequences of competition as well as utilize its benevolent aspects.

Likewise, assuming cooperation to be a general logical property of the processes studied, shifts the focus from cooperation as such to the way social structure and limited resources shape the communication process and through that impairs or promotes the various forms of cooperation.

I think this is the lesson contained in the classical formulation of human ecology as spelled out by Hollingshead. Nobody, as far as I know, has taken his insights

seriously. Hannan and Freeman, I suspect, have partly rediscovered the role of competition for themselves. And the 'new urban sociology' has to some extent proceeded on the research program implied by it by focusing on the 'competition of capitals' which leads straight to the most pure and significant competitive processes in our societies. But even these processes have more to them than competition.

If by studying the debate about the classical formulation we come away with this lesson I think the value of the rest of the book will increase tremendously. The summary papers in particular may provide new leads of investigation. For instance: many have read Sjöberg's study of the pre-industrial city as implying an evolutionary theory of city structure where industrialization by and by would lead to the Burgess zone type of city for the distribution of people according to status. London, however, concludes (p. 431) that 'the extreme ecological variability of Western European cities presents us with a serious exception to the hypothesis'.

The problem is to model the process distributing people according to status. This process is shaped both by the competitive logic and by the cooperative logic. First question: How will technological development affect this process? New transportation has increased the supply of land for private use and increased the number of actors interested in public land (roads). The factors shaped by the cooperative logic seem mostly unaffected.

Thus the industrialization process will surely affect the availability of different types of land, but the desirability of the different types of land will vary as much according to the sentiments and spatially referred symbols historically vested in the land as according to its utility in economic processes. Only cities without history could conform to the Burgess zone hypothesis of social status distribution.

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