

**Images of the American City**  
**English 365/Sociology 365**  
**Fall 2008**

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“The city...sets problems of meaning. The streets, the people, the buildings, and the changing scenes do not come already labeled. They require explanation and interpretation.”  
Anselm Strauss, *Images of the American City* (1976)

**Course description**

This course considers how literary representations and sociological studies of urban life variously respond to the astonishing growth of cities in the twentieth century, helping to shape newly emergent and highly contested cultural meanings of the city. “Mind takes form in the city,” wrote Lewis Mumford, “and in turn, urban forms condition mind.” In considering the interplay between mind and urban forms, we’ll explore the relationship between the individual and the urban environment, how life in cities is socially organized, patterns of immigration and tensions between ethnic groups, the creation of the slum and ghetto and efforts to gentrify them, how race and poverty are enacted in modern cities, and the rise of urban reportage, cognitive mapping and the legibility of the cityscape. We’ll also discuss how literary and sociological perspectives on the city meet and diverge.

The readings for this course will be varied: novels, drama, memoir, ethnography and other forms of social science and historical research. We'll also look at the urban photography of Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, Helen Levitt, and Bruce Davidson, among others.

**Books recommended for purchase**

- Anderson, Elijah. *Streetwise: Race, Class and Change in an Urban Community*. University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Deutsch, Sarah. *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940*. Oxford University Press, 2002.
- MacDonald, Michael Patrick. *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie*. Ballantine Books, 2000.
- Marshall, Paule. *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Feminist Press, CUNY, 2006.
- Petry, Ann. *The Street*. Mariner Books, 1998.
- Smith, Anna Deavere. *Twilight: Los Angeles*. Dramatist’s Play Service, 2003.

## Course requirements

The syllabus describes in outline form the topics and assignments for this course. The actual dates for discussion of any topic may vary slightly from those shown on the syllabus; class discussion and interest may extend some topics and shorten others.

- One observational field assignment (30% of course grade); due October 3
- One small group archival assignment on women in Boston (30% of course grade); due November 4
- A final paper (of approximately 20 pages) on a topic dealing with American cities in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (40% of course grade); prospectus and brief bibliography due November 25; paper due December 19

In addition to these graded assignments, you are expected to attend all classes, complete the assigned reading for each class, and participate regularly in class discussions. You will also be required to attend a public lecture by Professor Elijah Anderson on Monday, November 10. Please read the class conference on a regular basis. The conference contains both this syllabus and an electronic reserves folder containing many of the articles, essays and photographs we will use in the course.

## Course schedule

### I. Imagining Cities: An introduction to the course

September 2 No assigned reading

### II. The Birth of the American City

“I wish to have rural strength and religion for my children, and I wish city facility and polish. I find with chagrin that I cannot have both.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journal (1844)*

In the opening weeks of the course we will focus on the history of the American city from the colonial period to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. As background for our study of the 20<sup>th</sup> century city, we will discuss the profound ambivalence Americans have had with cities and the anti-urbanism that emerged from this. We will also discuss the typological tradition of country versus city characteristic of early social science theory.

September 5 Anselm Strauss, *Images of the American City*, Chapters 1 and 4 (pp. 5-17, 52-67)

Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual versus the City*, Chapters I and II (pp. 1-20)

September 9 Ferdinand Toennies, “Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft,” pp. 191-201 in *Theories of Society*, edited by Parsons et al.

Emile Durkheim, “On Mechanical and Organic Solidarity,” pp. 208-213 in *Theories of Society*

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Max Weber, "Types of Social Organization," pp. 218-229 in *Theories of Society*

## II. The Urban Experience

"The psychological bases of the metropolitan type of individuality consists in the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli."

Georg Simmel, *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903)

Are people who live in cities different from people who don't? If they are, what unique characteristics of city life shape the experiences of city dwellers? In addressing these questions, late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century writers and social scientists often presented deterministic (or fatalistic) narratives of the urban experience. The swift and ever-changing urban environment forces "modern man" to "react with his head instead of his heart" (observed Georg Simmel), and to develop a "blasé attitude" and a sense of "reserve" in responding to others. Some twenty years later sociologists at the University of Chicago would develop a less social-psychological (but equally deterministic) theory of urbanism that focused on the social ecology of cities. We'll look at how these two determinist perspectives are reflected in more contemporary social science research. Turning to literary treatments of determinism, we'll examine how individuals are molded or defeated by the urban environment in Ann Petry's *The Street*. We'll also look at how city experience has been portrayed in the urban photography of Paul Strand, Alfred Stieglitz, Helen Levitt, and Berenice Abbott, among others.

September 12 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," pp. 409-424 in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, edited by Wolff

Stanley Milgram, "The Experience of Living in Cities: A Psychological Analysis," *Science*, 167 (March 13, 1970), 1461-1468  
(<http://0-www.jstor.org.luna.wellesley.edu/stable/pdfplus/1728966.pdf>)

Bibb Latane and John M. Darley, "Bystander Apathy," pp. 62-91 in *Urbanman*, edited by Helmer and Eddington

Claude Fischer, "On Urban Alienations and Anomie: Powerlessness and Social Isolation," *American Sociological Review*, 38 (June 1973): 311-326  
(<http://0-www.jstor.org.luna.wellesley.edu/stable/pdfplus/2094355.pdf>)

September 16 Robert Park, "The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment," pp. 1-46 in *The City*, edited by Park, Burgess and McKinzie

Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," pp. 60-83 in *Louis Wirth on Cities and Social Life*, edited by Reiss

George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson, "Broken Windows,"  
*Atlantic Monthly*, March 1982  
(<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/198203/broken-windows>)

September 19 Ann Petry, *The Street*, to p. 162

September 23 *The Street*, pp. 163-326

September 26 *The Street*, pp. 327-end

September 30 Kevin Lynch, "The Image of the Environment," pp. 1-13 in *The Image of the City*

October 3 Urban images: tall buildings

Mona Domosh, "The Symbolism of the Skyscraper: Case Studies of New York's First Tall Buildings," *Journal of Urban History* 14.3 (May 1988), 321-345

Mary N. Woods, "Women on top: gender and photographing New York City skyscrapers," *The Journal of Architecture* 11(5), 2006, 577- 584

**Observational field assignment project due**

### III. The City and the American Dream

"Over the great bridge, with the sunlight through the girders making a constant flicker upon the moving cars, with the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish out of non-olfactory money. The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world."

F.Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

In this section of the course, we'll focus on the city as the representation of social mobility, opportunity, and the chance for a new life. We'll talk about national and international migration to cities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, immigration laws and their relation to the eugenics movement, the contrast between the aspirations for creating a new and better life in cities and the frustration of confronting obstacles to class mobility. We'll consider whether present day cities represent same or different "land of opportunity" for recent immigrants. We'll read (and view the film adaptation of) Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles*, a one-woman play about the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

October 7 Readings to be assigned

October 10 Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles*

October 14 No class (Fall Break)

October 17 Roger Waldinger and Jennifer Lee, "New Immigrants in Urban American," pp. 30-79 in *Strangers at the Gates*, edited by Waldinger (<http://0-site.ebrary.com.luna.wellesley.edu/lib/wellesley/Doc?id=10062287>)

#### IV. The City as Workplace

This section of the course will examine industrialization, the birth of factories, labor unions, changes in labor force participation, alienation from work, and poverty. We'll look at Lewis Hine's photographs of the workers who built the Empire State Building and of children laboring in American factories. We'll also give attention to the subway photography of Walker Evans and Bruce Davidson. After considering the city as the site of work in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, we'll discuss some contemporary sociological writing on cities and work.

October 21 Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City*, pp. 3-135

October 24 *Women and the City*, pp. 136-290  
Guest speaker: Sarah Deutsch, Duke University

October 28 No class (Tanner Conference)

October 31 Urban images: transportation

#### V. The City as Home

How have the growth of modern cities and the emergence of new multi-residence forms of housing altered American conceptions of the home? How do we understand the relationship between urban spaces and urban subjectivities? Our topics here will include urban neighborhoods, neighborhood change, "ethnic enclaves," the growing distance between home and work, the boundary between public and private space, feminine and masculine space, urban development, and gentrification. A reading of Paule Marshall's novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* will bring together issues of urban domesticity, ethnic neighborhoods, and the emergence of slums in concert with the mid-century establishment of housing projects. In this section of the course, we'll be reading Elijah Anderson's ethnography *Streetwise*. Professor Anderson will lead one of our seminars and will present a public lecture on his current work on "cosmopolitan canopies" in November.

November 4 William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*, pp. 288-309

Herbert Gans, *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans*, pp. 396-417

Elliot Liebow, *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men*, pp. 151-166

**Archival assignment due**

November 7 Urban images: immigrants and tenements  
Keith Gandall, from *Virtues of the Vicious: Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, and the Spectacle of the Slum*

**November 10 “Cosmopolitan Canopies,” public lecture by Elijah Anderson**

November 11 Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise: Race, Class and Change in an Urban Community*  
Guest speaker: Elijah Anderson, Yale University

November 14 No additional assigned reading

November 18 Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, to p. 103

November 21 *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, pp. 104-215

November 25 *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, pp. 216-end  
**Final paper prospectus and brief bibliography due**

November 28 No class (Thanksgiving recess)

December 2 Michael MacDonald, *All Souls*

## **VI. The Placeless City**

“The cities of the world are concentric, isomorphic, synchronic. Only one exists and you are always in the same one. It's the effect of their permanent revolution, their intense circulation, their instantaneous magnetism.”

Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories* (1990)

In the final segment of the course, we will turn to post-modern work on the city, exploring in particular how new forms of communication and electronic interaction change the way we understand urban space. We'll take a look at recent theory about decentered “urban zones” and consider literary and artistic conceptions of the city of the future.

December 5 Readings to be assigned

December 9 Readings to be assigned

## **December 19 Final papers due at 4:30**