

Images of the American City
English 365/Sociology 365
Fall 2009

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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 from the early twentieth century to the present, helping to shape newly emergent and highly contested cultural meanings of the city. For the first time in history, we now live in a predominately urban world. To understand our world and plan our future, we would do well to study to complexity and challenges of modern urban life. This class asks how American cities have changed over time and how Americans have variously understood their cities. “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, the experience of women in cities, 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, Berenice Abbott, and Bruce Davidson, among others.

Books recommended for purchase

Cantwell, Mary. *Manhattan Memoir*. Penguin, 2000.

Deutsch, Sarah. *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

Jones, LeAlan and Lloyd Newman with David Isay. *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago*. Scribner, 1997.

MacDonald, Michael Patrick. *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie*. Ballantine Books, 2000.

Mengestu, Dinaw. *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*. Riverhead Trade, 2008.
Petry, Ann. *The Street*. Mariner Books, 1998.
Smith, Anna Deavere. *Twilight: Los Angeles*. Dramatist's Play Service, 2003.
Venkatesh, Sudhir. *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto*. Harvard University Press, 2002.

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 9
- **One small group archival assignment on women in Boston** (30% of course grade); class presentations on November 10
- **A final paper (of approximately 20 pages) on a topic dealing with American cities in the 20th Century** (40% of course grade); prospectus and brief bibliography due November 13; brief presentation in class (either December 8 or 11); paper due December 21

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. **On Saturday, October 3 at 10:30, we will meet at Back Bay station for a walking tour of Boston led by mytown student guides (www.mytowninc.org.) Following the tour we'll have lunch in the city.**

Please check 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 8 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-19th century. As background for our study of the 20th and 21st

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 11 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 15 Ferdinand Toennies, "Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft," pp. 191-201 in *Theories of Society*, edited by Parsons et al.

David Hummon, *Commonplaces*, Chapters 3 and 4 (pp. 47-94)

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 19th and early 20th 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, Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, and Bruce Davidson, among others.

September 18 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

Marc G. Berman, John Jonides, and Stephen Kaplan, "The Cognitive Benefits of Interacting with Nature," *Psychological Science* (2008, vol 19, no 12), 1207-1212

September 22 Ann Petry, *The Street*, to p. 162

September 25 *The Street*, pp. 163-326

September 29 *The Street*, pp. 327-end

October 2 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>)

Katherine Beckett and Steve Herbert, "Dealing with Disorder: Social Control in the Post-Industrial City," *Theoretical Criminology* (2008, vol 12, no 1), pp. 5-30

October 3 mytowninc Boston tour (begins at 10:30 at Back Bay station, followed by lunch)

October 6 Urban images: tall buildings/city streets

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

October 9 Urban images: the subway. Walker Evans and Bruce Davidson.

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 20th 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 13 Charles Hirshman, “Immigration and the American Century,”
Demography 42(4), 2005, 595-620
<http://0-www.jstor.org.luna.wellesley.edu/stable/4147331>
- Daniel Kelves, *In the Name of Eugenics*, Chapters 5 and 7 (pp. 70-84 and 96-112)
- October 16 Urban images: immigrants. Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Augustus Sherman, and Arnold Genthe.
- Keith Gandall, from *Virtues of the Vicious: Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, and the Spectacle of the Slum*
- October 20 Roger Waldinger and Jennifer Lee, “New Immigrants in Urban American,” pp. 30-79 in *Strangers at the Gates*, edited by Waldinger
<http://0site.ebrary.com.luna.wellesley.edu/lib/wellesley/Doc?id=10062287>)
- Nancy Foner, *In a New Land: A Comparative View of Immigration*, Chapters 1 (pp. 11-42)
- Additional reading may be assigned
- October 23 Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles*

IV. Women and the City

“In a city neither designed for nor controlled by women, women had to reimagine or reconceive the city before they could create female-controlled public and semipublic spaces.”

Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City* (2000)

This section of the course will focus on the experience of women in cities from the late nineteenth century through the 1950s. What opportunities and freedoms did urban life offer women? What roles were available to women in the public sphere? To what degree were working women able to achieve financial independence? Was the city a more sexually dangerous place for women? Our readings will provide context for these and other questions about how women experienced and changed the modern American city. We'll read Sarah Deutsch's study of the impact women had on Boston's development from 1879 to 1940, considering the rise of the college-educated "New Woman," the alliances and divisions between working-class and middle-class women, and the role of women's settlement houses (one of which, in Boston, was run by Wellesley professors). Elaine Abelson presents an interesting narrative linking the rise of the department store to middle-class female criminality in the Victorian period, and Nan Enstad's research invites us to examine more closely at the role of working-class women both as urban industrial workers and as consumers. Finally, Mary Cantwell's memoir, moving us to 1950s New York, provides an intimate look at the world of women's fashion magazines and urban parenting.

October 27 Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City*, pp. 3-135

October 30 Elaine Abelson, selections from *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store*

Nan Enstad, "Ladies of Labor: Fashion, Fiction and Working Women's Culture" in *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*

November 3 No class (Tanner Conference)

November 6 Mary Cantwell, "Manhattan, When I Was Young," from *Manhattan Memoir*

November 10 Presentations on archival assignment

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 Dinaw Mengestu’s novel *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* will bring together issues of race, immigration, and the gentrification of urban neighborhoods.

November 13 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

Sudhir Venkatesh, *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto*, pp. 1-109 and 281-287

Final paper prospectus and brief bibliography due

November 17 Sudhir Venkatesh, *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto*, pp. 110-277

November 20 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (excerpt)
LeAlan Jones, Lloyd Newman and David Isay, *Our America*, pp. 17-83 and 159-200

November 24 Dinaw Mengestu, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*

November 27 No class (Thanksgiving recess)

December 1 Dinaw Mengestu, *The Beautiful Things*

December 4 Michael MacDonald, *All Souls*

December 8 Brief reports on final paper projects

December 11 Brief reports on final paper projects

December 21 Final papers due at 4:30