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Urban Sociology

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Lecture 3

Globalization, Technology and the Growth of Cities

Hello, everyone. I welcome back all of you to this course on Urban Sociology. Today, we will continue with the third lecture of the first module, which is globalization, technology and the growth of cities. As you all must be remembering, from the last class that we had discussed about the classical theories of urban sociology, which had, in a very fascinating way, spoken about transitions, growth of the cities, the process of urbanization, the connects between different kinds of societies, the relationship between community and the society, and how interaction patterns are influenced by the life of the city as a whole.

So, the topic that we are going to discuss today is actually a topic in context which is extremely common, and I would also say that it is extremely complex and multi-dimensional, something that is experienced by all of us to a certain extent, to a large and small extent, being members of the integrated urban community.

So, as I was telling you that for today's lecture, we will be discussing the concept of globalization, which is very complex, which is fascinating, which is multi-dimensional and which is a part of our everyday lives as members of the urban community. So, we would do this in a systematic and a thematic way.

After having an idea about the process and concept of globalization, we will move on to the factors that contributes to the growth of globalization in the cities. We will then briefly discuss about the three dominant schools of thought which teach us very critical lessons about the holistic process of globalization. And also, we will observe how each of these three schools perceive the process of globalization and its effect on our contemporary urban world.

Finally, we will discuss the concept of global cities by professor Saskia Sassen, where she tries to understand the impact of global economy on contemporary cities. And this very idea that Sassen provides us with has a very critical and significant bearing in the contemporary process of urbanization that we are experiencing as a community.

Now, before we try to understand the concept of globalization, I think it is beneficial that we go back a bit to the history to understand better about the present something that we call the contemporary. As we all know that in the present day and in the present age, the world is actually at our fingertips. But the world was always not like this. So, let us first briefly try to discuss the historical trajectory that has led us to the present stage of life and the growth and the process of urbanization.

One of the earliest societies that human beings inhabited, as we all know, was that of the society of the hunters and the gatherers. It was the simplest form of society where there was very little specialization and very less inequality. Men would generally hunt and women would gather resources like wild crops, cook and take care of the children. These communities were mostly nomadic in nature, they were wanderers as they had to move from place to place in search of food, and they do not have a permanent territory.

The next type of society which evolved from the societies of the hunters and gatherers was the pastoral society, which was characterized by domestication of animals for food, for a more productive, and we can say, a predictable food supply was present. These societies would remain longer in place than the society of the hunters and the gatherers.

The next type of society which evolved from the pastoral society was known as the agrarian society, where communities would grow their own crops, which resulted in the abandonment of the nomadic way of life which was previously the norm. After this, I would say that started to become much more complex, they became larger, they became denser, inequalities were starting to make their presence felt, they were getting pronounced as well.

And these very societies were based on the development of cities, mostly being associated with the rule of kings and emperors. With this, to a large extent, the use of writing, science and art started to flourish in the society. And this is why these kinds of societies often were known as civilizations. They came to be known as civilizations for the first time.

But all these kinds of societies disappeared after the advent of industrialization as a process, which was largely marked, as we all know, by the advent of machine production. Now, due to technological development, a large number of people were freed from the course of agricultural production due to the pace and growth of industrialization as a process in these advanced societies. A large majority of population started to work in these industries and factories.

And with this, started the growth of developed centers that came to be known as the cities and people started to move to these cities which were the hubs of the industrial process of production. With the growth of the cities and with people moving more and more to the cities, they started to interact with each other. Trade relationships started, people could produce more than what they needed. And this very process marked the transition to modernity.

Today, there is more technology, there is better transportation system, as we can see that we can sit at our own homes and still connect with anyone from anywhere from any part of the world. Time and distance does not matter anymore, and the borders of the countries have become much more porous owing to this very prominent pace of globalization and advancement of the process of industrialization and production.

In one sense, we can then say that globalization is also along with advancement, along with technological advancement, along with material advancement, globalization is also about shifting the form of contact as Manfred Steger has mentioned in one work. Thus, we start by analyzing what globalization can mean for all of us. It is definitely a buzzword.

But the question that comes to our mind is that is it only a passive phenomenon that we are experiencing in our everyday lives or is it a systemic process. Is it a system, is it a force, is it a new age, what exactly globalization is? And sociologists are still struggling to find out the exact meaning and dimension of the process and impact of globalization on the larger world.

And that is why we are bound to say that there is actually no consensus on the definition of this very complex concept. But we do know that we are all slowly becoming something that is known as the global citizens, who are commonly known to be part of one world. Anthony Giddens, who was a very, very renowned sociologist, who had provided us with some of the most foundational theories of sociology, on all areas of sociology, in his very significant book *The Consequences of Modernity*, defines globalization as the following, and I quote, "Globalization can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distinct localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.

Such an interesting definition that is provided by Giddens. And I think that this very definition sums up a lot of features that we have been talking about. Today, we see that somewhere, in our own lives, as we can feel, that the boundaries between the local and the global have become fused, the local and the global have become much more connected.

If you think about the financial crisis of 2007, 2008 then we will find that not only was the United States of America affected. But also, many other countries and their respective

economies fell and there was a mass recession. Thus, from many of these events and different other kinds of, different other kinds, we can say that all the economies are connected via a web of relationships.

If a headquarter of a particular company based in India, closes down, it will directly affect the people and their jobs in other countries where they have set up their branches. Following from the works of Anthony Giddens, the rise of information and communication technology, we can say, is one of the most important factors leading to globalization.

He mentions in his book *Sociology*, that the explosion in global communications had been facilitated by a number of important advances in technology and the world's telecommunication infrastructure. In the post-second world war era, there had been a profound transformation in the scope and intensity of telecommunication flows.

Traditional telephonic communication, which depended on analog signals sent through wires and cables with the help of mechanical crossbar switching had been replaced by integrated systems in which vast amount of information were compressed and transferred digitally.

Cable technology became more efficient, at the same time less expensive. The development of fiber optic cables had dramatically expanded the number of outlets and channels that can be carried. Also, he puts a major emphasis on information flows during this age of globalization. If, as we had seen, the spread of information technology has expanded the possibility of contact among people around the globe, it has also facilitated the flow of information about people and events in distant places.

As we can see that every day the global media brings to us new images, different kinds of news, information and all of these into our individual homes, linking them directly and continuously to the outside world. And we can say, following the works of Giddens, that individuals are now more aware of their interconnectedness with others and more likely to identify with global issues and processes that was not the case in times of the past.

So, as you can see here, this does make us wonder what are the factors that have led this to happen. For that we need to see what are the processes at work, or more specifically, what were the contributing factors which led to globalization to better understand this present situation. Now, of course in this age of globalization, in the age of technology, in the age of internet, there is no doubt that rise of information technology and communication technology that we had been talking about had led to the rise of the process of globalization.

We now have smartphones, we have satellites, we have cable television, we can pass emails and much more. What these forms of technology do is that it compresses space and time. For example, right now I am recording in the studio at a time, and every student is watching this from their respective places. It is information and communication technology that largely makes this possible. In fact, why I say that information flow is extremely crucial towards advancing and facilitating the process of globalization is because this particular flow through ICT enables the global media to bring different kinds of resources to us.

There are, of course, more factors that we can discuss about, which characterizes the process of globalization. For example, economic factors, political factors. Economic factors, I think, are the most commonly used processes that academics had utilized while talking about the sociology of globalization because we all know that globalization is being driven forward by the integration of the world economy.

People are now seen to go cashless transferring funds with just a click of a button, there are transnational companies which produce goods in more than one country. In fact, these are the heart of the process of globalization. What about political factors? Political changes had also been a major driving force of globalization.

There has been growth of international and regional mechanisms of the government like the United Nations and the European Union. They bring together nation states into a common political forum. There are also international non-governmental organizations and different international governmental organizations who have the responsibility of overseeing a particular domain of activity that is transnational in scope. For example, many of you can relate this to the role of World Health Organization in the context of this entire COVID crisis in different parts of the world.

We will now move on to the globalization debate. In the beginning of this lecture, I mentioned that there are different schools of thought who have visualized the process of globalization and its impacts differently, and also, when it comes to globalization as a matter of fact, they see globalization as a contested concept, but their viewpoints differ from each other.

So, there are three schools of thought that were distinguished by David Held, and these three schools of thought and the community associated to them are commonly known as the Hyperglobalizers, the Skeptics and the Transformationalists. Now, the hyperglobalists privilege the economic logic and celebrate the emergence of a single global market.

They claim that the nation state is losing its power and will eventually wither away. For these scholars, the arrival of a borderless world is inevitable since the globe is turning into a

borderless discrete economic entity. They view that right now global markets are much more powerful than the state. In fact, to them, inter-governmental organizations possess more influence in the direction of economic and foreign policy than the individual states.

The second group that is the skeptical perspective follows that claims about globalization has been exaggerated. They believe that the governments, the national governments still continue to remain very, very powerful players in the sphere of economic activity. In fact, according to Paul Hirst, globalization is more a myth than a reality.

The skeptics also believe that there is nothing new or distinctive that can be called globalization. In fact, the world economy is not truly global but centered in the trias of Europe, Japan and North America, which are also known as the group of three or the G3. They also hold that the world is more regionalized than globalized. Contrary to the hyperglobalists, they believe that state sovereignty has been strengthened rather than weakened because of the process of globalization.

Trying to reach a bit of a middle ground, the transformationalists perceive globalization as a significant trend, but one that coexists with other developments. They believe that it is too simple to say that the power of the state is eroded or reinforced. They hold that the contemporary patterns of the state will re-articulate themselves by modifying their institutions and policies.

They make no claims about the future trajectory of globalization, but they do point out that in the emerging new global patterns, some states and societies are increasingly becoming more enmeshed within the global order, and the others are becoming increasingly marginalized. Now, summing up the observations from all these three discrete schools of thought, which spent a lot of time deliberating on the process and impact of globalization, I think that we should remember that all of them make very interesting and important points about globalization, without realizing that to grasp this concept, they must first realize and understand that be it economic, be it political, be it social, all these aspects constitute globalization, and that it cannot be reduced to a single domain. After all, this concept, as I told in the beginning, is extremely complex and multi-dimensional in nature.

Now, we have discussed many of the dimensions of globalization, and I think that it is time that we should talk about at least one very contemporary and influential theory of globalization that Saskia Sassen has provided us with. She has also coined the term known as global city. Saskia Sassen points out that information technology and globalization are changing the relationship among cities. She believes that in order to understand our cities, we have to first look at our economies. Saskia Sassen, in particular, is very interested to know what goes on in today's corporate buildings, and this is a question that she asks in many of her significant and important works.

She believes that large corporate firms, in order to go global, need central places in the city, which have an infrastructure for specialized services. And most of these are almost impossible to produce in-house. For example, if the headquarters of a particular firm is located in London and they want to sell a product in Germany, then they might design the product in London itself, but then they contact, contract with firms in a developing country like Malaysia to produce the products they have designed, and then they learn about the culture and attitudes of the German population to finally sell it there.

Which means that this firm would now require lawyers familiar with British law, accountants familiar with Malaysian accounting practices, and of course advertising executives sensitive to the cultural preferences of the German consumers. Now, having said that, this is a very interesting example, they would rarely have the internal capacity to provide all these services.

And thus, they turn to networks of specialized firms located in the global cities to provide these definite and specific services that they need. In a sense, we see two processes in motion from the above example then. One being of centralization, and the other being of dispersal. This is very interesting.

Centralization, I would say because economic power is concentrated in cities like London and Tokyo, but also, we talk about dispersal because Mexico and Bangkok or in this case Malaysia, are also operating as focal points in the global economy. In fact, decisions made in the headquarters might directly affect the jobs, the wages and the economy of the dispersed cities in the globe.

Thus, what is at work is the reconfiguration of the physical arrangement of activities within this particular metropolitan space. This new economic logic has thus led to the generation of high-level jobs with specialized skills like law and accounting, but also the generation of an influx of low-level jobs like janitors who work and clean many of these buildings.

As can be understood, due to such a development, wealth is being concentrated in the hands of a few because firms now cannot produce all these in-house. They need access points in different cities. For example, for firms, urban space has become strategic because let us say buying urban land in London helps the firm to actually gain access in Europe.

Many countries are thus buying foreign land and these buildings are not for use. In fact, as Sassen points out, these buildings are empty. The common belief is that if you set up a giant building, it is supposed to house many people. But these lands are being bought by foreign

firms and these buildings are being set up at the cost of many modest neighborhoods, ultimately causing the process of de-urbanization.

She raises a question here, who then owns our cities? She believes that mostly in these neighborhoods, the powerless are able to leave the imprint, be it cultural, be it economic, be it social. From these modest neighborhoods, ethnic food, music, therapies and the little piece of history that they carry with them, can spread to a vaster urban zone. But right now, due to this economy, diversity is being expelled from the cities.

Sassen worries that this possibility of making a history or a culture is today threatened by the surge in large-scale corporate redevelopment of cities. Thus, according to her, this global city that she talks about, is not a bounded unit but a complex location in a grid of cross boundary processes.

To conclude, let us briefly summarize what we discussed in today's class. Globalization is a multi-dimensional concept with social, political, economic and cultural dimensions. There are three dominant schools of thought when it comes to globalization. The hyperglobalizers, the skeptics and the transformationalists. We learnt about the theory of Saskia Sassen, who shows how acquiring and buying urban land has become a significant trend since urban space has become strategic in the age of globalization. Sassen also writes about how modest neighborhoods in the cities are being threatened by large-scale corporate redevelopment of cities.

This is the list of references that would be provided to all of you. Thank you, all, and we will meet again in the next class, which will be on urban infrastructure and governance.