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Wirth vs Harvey on Urbanism

In the theory made by Louis Wirth, urbanism is defined by a few social characteristics of a particular space. The three characteristics that make up an urban space are size of population, density, and heterogeneity. These terms are specifically describing a space as urban when there is a high number of inhabitants that makes for less people knowing each other. Density is talking about the number of inhabitants in relation to the actual geographic location. Two spaces can have the same amount of inhabitants, but the smaller space has a higher density, which makes for more urban social relations as mentioned. And the third term is referencing the phenomena of diverse kinds of people, especially racially and socioeconomically, but also diversity in groups these people are in such as workers, lawyers, and students.

This differs from what Harvey theorizes about what makes a place urban. In the account given by him, he believes that urbanization in its truest form is seen in a capitalist society. In this sense the capitalist goals are the motivation for the infrastructure and circulation of goods. One of the best ways this is seen is when urban spaces must destroy old standing infrastructure to rebuild new ones for the purpose of making the space a good conduit of capital. An example of this is a highway being remade to direct itself to the downtown of a city that was recently invested into. The goal of capitalism directs the infrastructure in the “urban”. It is also what makes Wirth and Harvey’s theories so different. Whilst the theory proposed by Wirth can be transposed in some sense to different eras of history and in different social settings, Harvey’s cannot. It is centered on the capitalist society because in his eyes, to move it into another social context is to lose the essence of why urban spaces are curated (profit).

If I were to choose which theory was better, I would choose Wirth’s. This is because I believe that urbanism is best seen across history in Wirth’s view. For example, when seeing ancient civilizations, one may see different social settings where capital is generated but filtered through different religious centers. Such as Egypt where there were cities of production but the goods of labor were sold in a capital city. Or the central cities in Mayan civilizations where religious activities were performed. What is seen here is capitalism in an older form where going to less important places to get product was not possible, rather going to the main city was. Wirth believed in capital being formed and circulated from the same city, however Wirth’s may account for more capitalist societies while also having some distinguishing characteristics that Harveys theory does not leave.