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The Concentric Zone Model and Postmodern Urbanism

Urban sociologists have attempted to explain why cities grow and how their populations are arranged. Two main theories, the Concentric Zone Model and the Los Angeles School of Postmodern Urbanism, give different pictures of how cities appear and how they change. The Concentric Zone Model centers on early industrial cities, while the Los Angeles School explains modern cities shaped by technology, globalization, and diversity. While the Concentric Zone Model provides a basis for understanding early industrial cities, the Los Angeles School better captures the complexity, division, and global interconnection of modern cities.

The Concentric Zone Model was developed in the 1920s by Ernest Burgess of the Chicago School of Sociology. Burgess imagined the city as a set of rings that increase outward from the downtown area. Each ring represents a different social and economic group. Closest to the center is the central business district, then a zone where factories and lower-income housing are located, followed by working-class and middle-class areas, and finally the commuter zone made up of suburbs. “In the mid-1920s, one of Park’s students, Ernest W. Burgess, suggested that a city develops somewhat the way a tree does—growing outward in a series of concentric rings or zones over time” (Macionis and Parillo 155).

The Los Angeles School developed in the mid-1980s and explored how cities like Los Angeles show a new kind of form that is decentralized, uneven, and diverse. “It is no longer the center that organizes the hinterland but the hinterland that determines what remains of the center; the imperative toward decentralization (including suburbanization) has become the principal dynamic in contemporary cities, and the twenty-first century’s emerging world cities (including Los Angeles) are ground zero, pivotal loci in a globalizing political economy” (Dear & The New York Times, 3). Instead of having one downtown center, postmodern cities have smaller, scattered centers. These might include businesses, shopping areas, and suburban communities that operate as their own small cities.

“Rayner identified four basic “ecologies” that differed markedly from those advanced by the Chicago School: (1) *surfurbia* (the beach cities along the coast), (2) *the foothills* (the private enclaves of the privileged in such areas as Beverly Hills and Bel Air), (3) *the plains of Id* (the endless central flatlands), and (4) *autopia* (the freeways that exist as “a single comprehensible place” and “coherent state of mind”)” (Macionis and Parillo 167). He was very tough on the flatlands, describing them as areas with cheap homes broken up by highways.

The Concentric Zone Model is still useful for understanding how cities used to grow, but it doesn’t represent what cities are like today. The model made sense for cities like Chicago and even early Tulsa during the oil boom, where most jobs were downtown. This model doesn’t fit as well now since it assumes cities have one main center area and expand evenly, but modern cities are more widespread. “Proponents of

the Los Angeles School argue that previous urban theory is obsolete, and only if you understand Los Angeles will you understand current urban trends both in the United States and worldwide” (Macionis and Parillo 167). Suburbs and highways have made city life less organized around a single downtown area. The Los Angeles School better explains how cities work in the twenty-first century. They are extensive, diverse, and connected through highways and globally through technology.

Works Cited

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- Macionis, J. J., & Parrillo, V. N. (2017). *Cities and urban life* (7th ed.). Pearson.