Module 1: From rural to urban
Lecture 4: Max Weber and Charles H. Cooley on the rise of the city

The Lecture Contains:

- Charles Cooley: Origin of the city from the point of view of transportation
- Max Weber: What was Important for the Rise of the City
- Similarities between Occidental and Oriental Cities
- References
Charles Cooley: Origin of the city from the point of view of transportation

The theories of origin of cities range from technological, social to its physical attributes such as location. Some of the theories of urbanization link it to warfare. The example that is given is Mesopotamia. This might not be true of cities in other regions, but the decline of cities has been related to warfare.

Charles Cooley argues how the theory of urban location is an extremely complicated matter, and not wholly a matter of transportation nor of economic relations. In early and war-like times military considerations were of great importance in the original placing of cities. It should be noted, that the first towns in militant communities were forts and they were a means of holding conquered territory. Defense was the most important characteristic of the planning of these fort towns. Sacred geography and religious significance are also causes of emergence of towns.

Cooley observed that in the western United States, in regions where there is almost no diversity of surface, a considerable town often grows up at the county seat simply because of the slight advantage due to the location there of the public buildings and offices. He also notes that the site of cities is sometimes fixed by no better reason than the chance and possibly unwise selection of the first colonists.
These are examples of causes quite apart from the **economic considerations** and Cooley has shown that **among these forces transportation** is the most important, if we look at the question from the point of view of location. Thus, Cooley related the primary reasons for location of cities form the point of view of **transportation**. He begins with the observation that:

“Population and wealth tend to collect wherever there is a break in transportation”

Cooley explains that by a break is meant an interruption of the movement at least sufficient to cause a transfer of goods and their temporary storage. If only **physical interruption of the movement** takes place, it is called a **mechanical break**. But if on account of the close relation between transportation and exchange already pointed out, the physical interruption causes a change in the **ownership of the transported goods**, it leads to a **commercial break**.
**Mechanical Break**—It is quite obvious that a break of the first sort is of much less importance than one of the second. Even a mechanical break may, however, bring together a good many persons and lead to the development of considerable structures. At these locations there must be loading, unloading and intermediate carriage of some sort. Buildings are required for storage and persons to care for them and for the goods they contain. Some sort of provision must be there for the instruments of transportation—ships, camels, railroad cars, or whatever they may be. All these facilities were required during the process of loading and unloading. Provision also had to be made for the persons that accompanied them. Around this group of specialized personnel a corresponding agricultural, artisanal and shop-keeping population had to be present.

According to Cooley a **commercial break** arises almost always at or near the physical interruption and thereby increases its importance. Where a break of this sort exists on an important line of transportation—though it might be in the midst of a desert—a commercial city develops. The reason is not difficult to imagine. At a commercial break there necessarily arise, beside the machinery of transfer and storage, the highly organized **personnel** and appliance of economic exchange. Over a period of time there arises a class of merchants and money-changers, who require buildings with more elaborate facilities for carrying on with their business. Their splendid lifestyle draws together a relatively large and heterogeneous subsidiary population. The nucleus thus formed, it tends to become the seat of political power, and of the central institutions of different social organization. Very often the commercial capital usually becomes the political capital and is commonly the seat of the chief temples and of the culture and art.
When do these breaks occur?

According to Cooley, physical interruptions in transportation are the most important of these causes. For example, the junction of land transportation with water transportation, or of one kind of water transportation with another, or of one kind of land transportation with another. The location of the greater number of commercial towns the world over, and from the earliest times to present day, has been fixed at the point of juncture between land and water movements. Before the railroads came in, the chief seat of inland towns has been along navigable rivers at the points where these are most accessible from the land.

Break exists wherever the technical apparatus of vehicle and forces needs to be changed. In water transportation it is found at that point in the courses of rivers where sea-going vessels must be exchanged for lighter and shallower craft. This seems to be the chief factor in determining the location of many commercial towns. They are situated upon the estuaries of navigable rivers, or upon the rivers themselves at a place not too far up to be accessible to large ships. The break is between two varieties of water transportation rather than between land and water, an exchange between boats built to slide over shallows and those built to cut the waves. Many great rivers have produced cities of this sort such as Alexandria and Cairo on the Nile, the Babylon on Euphrates, Hamburg on the Elbe, London on the Thames, New Orleans on the Mississippi, New York on the Hudson. Cooley points out that cities famous for their commerce but not situated on the estuary or lower course of a navigable river are comparatively few. He also noted that the lake ports are among the American cities were experiencing most rapid growth. The examples are Chicago, Buffalo, Detroit, Cleveland. New York’s importance lies in its location at the juncture of both land and water terminals.

Therefore, at the mouth or key points of rivers, meeting points of hills and plains, and other such areas that commercial city formation appear.

We can add the example of Kolkata on the river Hoogly.

**Note: A good material for discussion could be Jim Corbett’s eaasy title "Life at Mokameh Ghat"."
Max Weber: What was Important for the Rise of the City

Unlike Marx who emphasized the dominance of economic considerations, Weber explored the way cultural and political factors affected individual behaviour and social history along with economic activity. He undertook survey of various cities throughout the world unlike previous theorists who focused primarily on the European cities.

Weber argued that cities are products of surplus. Weber's urban community is based on trade or commercial relations. In rural areas, people are more or less self-sufficient, growing their own food, providing their own clothing, and so on. Trade and commerce are of limited importance there. It is not so in the cities. Economic self-sufficiency is nearly impossible; people are economically interdependent.
It was not until the **late Middle Ages in Europe** that towns acquired political independence from the state. Weber considered this autonomy to be necessary for the establishment of an urban community. For Weber, the key to city life was the creation of an independent urban government that was elected by the citizens of the city itself. Classical Athens and early Rome were two examples. **Citizenship** was a new form of **legitimate authority**.

It is also an **economy-regulating association**. In other words, policy and political authority moved to the centre.
Weber believed that in the late Middle Ages, Europe developed the ideal urban community. "For Weber, urban community consisted of three elements: a fusion of the fortress and the marketplace where trade and commercial relations predominated, a legal court of its own that had the authority to settle local disputes, and partial political autonomy that allowed residents to elect authorities who could administer daily affairs."

According to Weber, in order to be a full urban community, the city had to possess its own laws and its own judicial administration. Whereas Asian cities had only the market and the fortress, the occidental cities also had a separate urban law and a separate legal status for its citizens. Urban law specified that the property is alienable and that individuals are free.

It should be pointed out that the condition that a city has its own body of laws is more important than the content of the law. It also maintains military autonomy. They have a garrison and if it is extensive enough like in the case of Sparta, they will not need a wall.¹

¹Gottdiener and Hutchison, 2006 p. 33.
Like Durkheim, Weber believed that cities could be a positive and \textit{liberating force} in human life but he did not see much hope for twentieth century cities.

He considered \textbf{only} the \textit{fortified, self-sufficient cities} of the \textit{medieval period} as deserving the title of \textit{full urban community}. Here all the citizens thought they were unequal in wealth and power, were equal before the law. That is, although there was gradation, there was political equality.

So the characteristics—market, fortress, autonomous law and the associations highlight the city as an \textit{economic, politico-administrative} as well as a \textit{social category}.

With the rise of the \textit{nation-states}, cities lost their pre-eminence and autonomy.

It should be remembered that \textit{civis} (meaning \textit{townsman}) is the root of the word \textit{civitas} from which the word \textit{citizenship} has been derived.
Similarities between occidental and oriental cities according to Weber:

- Max Weber saw many similarities between European and South Asian cities in the pre-modern times.
- Fortresses, markets and thriving commercial endeavours were common to both.
- Both had city deities (*puradevata*) and cults.
- At the same time, Weber pointed out that the caste system prevented the rise of uniform legal equality and therefore of the full urban community in the Indian context.
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References


Further Reading