

Part 4 ☉ Space, Time, Polity, Social Structure and Community

Cities are not symbols in a vacuum. As we saw in Chapter 9, their symbolism is usually tied to a larger spatial reach. They have a cultural as well as an economic hinterland. They are usually part of broader polities. They are tied to other cities. The nature of those ties affects a city's social structure and also the subcommunities in which a person's selfhood is embedded.

In short, selfhood is more often than not achieved in cities, and, to be fully understood, cities have to be seen in geographic and economic context. It was when I was a Research Associate at the University of California at Berkeley's Center for the Study of Law and Society, run by sociologists, that I absorbed the structural-functional theory in vogue among social scientists in the 1960s.¹ That theory talked in terms of "systems" while Berkeley students, catching fire from the national Civil Rights Movement and spurred on by opposition to the Vietnam War, began in 1964 to rally against "The System," i.e., the military-industrial complex, the government in power, and the social structure as it then existed.

What did theorists mean by "system"? Systems thinking begins with understanding, an initial direct intuitive grasp of the gestalt; explanation comes after. According to F. E. Emery's presentation of the essentials of systems thinking: "In a system, the members are, from the holistic viewpoint, not significantly connected with each other except with reference to the whole,"² not through their immanent qualities (e.g., identity, diversity, similarity), but by their distribution or arrangement within the system. They need to have certain attributes in order to fill the positions required for the system. The differences between this approach and the customary historical paradigm of things and events in linear sequence is that time is not the assumed frame but rather an integral and complex part of the system. Space is not merely the plane on which objects are dispersed; it participates in the formation of the system. A systemic whole is four-dimensional.

Trying to understand the nature of systems, I was particularly interested in the problem of space-time changes and their effects on polities. This led me to intensive reading in geographic theory where I found that geographers talked in terms of city-systems, in which economics played a major role.

Social science methodologies usually rested on Newtonian assumptions and had not yet fully incorporated space and time in a post-Einsteinian way. The need to do so was particularly acute for regional economics.³ Historians usually assumed that time was linear and space was planar without explaining the pluralistic qualities of space and time and how these entered into the structure of history itself. My long-range aim was to develop a historiography that would be post-Einsteinian, to which phenomenology was quite relevant and also theories of symbol and of aesthetics.