11.329 Social Theory and the City

Session 12:

Part 1: Regional Cities

Summary:

During the first half of class, discussion focused on a draft work-in-progress written and presented by Stephen Ramos. His work examined his experiences working in Madrid, Spain on the "Proyecto Cities" initiative launched by the University of Pennsylvania in 1997, and it extracted questions about regionalism and regional planning that formed the basis of the presentation and discussion. The class explored historical models of regional planning, from the "Garden-City" model to the Randstadt, polycentric model.

Theoretical issues underpinning the content:

- Hierarchic versus Polycentric
    o Which is better?
- Charles Tilly, *Coersion, Capital and European States, AD 990-1992*.
    o Polycentrism = capitalism
    o Hierarchical = coercion
- Virtues of Hierarchy:
    o Coordination
    o Identity
    o Diversity
    o Density
- Sociological Problem with Polycentrism
    o Illusory:
        ▪ Unequal division of labor
        ▪ Unequal division of capital
    o What kind of hierarchy is best?

Example Cities:
- Tokyo – Hierarchical or polycentric?
- London – Hierarchical
- Randstatt – Polycentric
- Basque Region, Spain – Polycentric
- Los Angeles – Hierarchical (unplanned polycentrism?)

Part 2: The Limit of Place

Summary:

During the second half of class, discussion focused on a draft work-in-progress written and presented by Nomita Sawhney. Her work explored the different perceptual levels through which cities are experienced beginning with memory and amnesia, moving through desire as the impetus for creation, and ending with an understanding of the city as a being or organism. The paper grappled with the question of how to balance the need for memory with the desire to create new forms, to fill the gap between what exists and what is perceived to be missing. It also addressed the erasure of ancient systems of city building in the East, specifically India, which related the city abstractly to the human body. The class focused primarily on the question of how to capture memory in the form of the city and how that memory is perceived.

Theoretical issues underpinning the content:

- Memory
    o Why is it important?
    o Relation between memory and presence
    o How is it conveyed
        ▪ Theory of ruins
            • When something is in a destroyed state, we are more attentive to it than when it is whole
    o What makes something memorable?
- Amnesia and Creation
    o Creation as an act of amnesia
        ▪ Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art*
            • Moments of unknowing give the freedom to create
    o Creating as a release of tacit knowledge
- Amnesia versus Erasure
    o Erasure is a positive act to deny there was anything there before
        ▪ To build, one must destroy
        ▪ No room for juxtaposition
        ▪ Jacques Derrida