URBAN POLITICAL ECONOMY AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: DESIGNING THE COURSE “SOCIOLOGY OF DUBUQUE”

MOHAMMAD A. CHAIICHIAN
University of Dubuque

This article is a report on the conception, design, and execution of a course which I taught for the first time in May 1987 at the University of Dubuque. By combining the principles of experiential education with class discussion and participation, I tried to create a course that deals with the political economy of Dubuque, Iowa within a historical frame of analysis. A detailed outline of the course is provided for those interested in the experiential aspects of teaching urban sociology. On the basis of course evaluations by contributors and students, the objectives, achievements, and shortcomings of this class are examined briefly.

Urban life in twentieth-century America always has been considered one of the most important aspects of socioeconomic and political relations, and the study of urban lifestyles and urbanization is still one of the main subjects of sociological inquiry. For the students of traditional urban sociology in the United States, “urban studies” is often synonymous with the Chicago school and its founder, Robert Park, who established the first Urban Studies Center in the United States in 1918. His ideas are presented in his classic article, “The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment” (1967), which was based on a “disciplined observation” of distinct constituent parts of the city as a “social organism.” Although Park’s systemic approach encouraged his disciples to develop detailed studies of all parts of the city, the short-comings of the Chicago school lay in his preoccupation with understanding the parts of the whole rather than the particular social relations which connected the parts, and in his ahistorical approach to the process of urban growth.

In the late 1960s, anomalies multiplied as the urban crisis created insurmountable questions about “increasing class and racial inequalities rather than social integration, urban decay rather than ecological competition and succession, protest organizations rather than anomic disorganization, and politics of domination rather than pluralism” (Walton 1981, p. 374). This period marked the beginning of a new urban social science with diverse origins in theory and practice, but as Walton (1976) argues, the works of writers such as Lojkine (1976), Pickvance (1976), Harloe (1977), Harvey (1973), Hill (1977), Gordon (1971), and Tabb and Sawers (1978) have enough in common to constitute a general theoretical paradigm which might be called the “radical political economy.”

In his analysis, Castells (1978, pp. 16–17) defines the political economy of urbanization in capitalist societies as the concentration and centralization of capital and “its constant battle against the tendency toward a lower rate of profit.” This process takes place in a spatially organized environment. On the basis of this idea Hill conceives of a capitalist city as

... a production site, a locale for the reproduction of the labor force, and a control center for these complex relationships. Thus the capitalist city functions as a spatial generative center through which growing quantities of surplus product are extracted (1977, p. 3).

This statement means that urbanization in capitalist societies is an inseparable part of the general conditions of production. Within the above theoretical framework I began to design and execute a new course in urban sociology.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE COURSE

DEINDUSTRIALIZATION IN THE MIDWEST

As a scholar of urban studies, I focus on the historical processes of urbanization and urban development in Third World countries in a comparative frame of analysis. The initial findings and the subsequent research, however, indicate that urbanization in the advanced capitalist societies and in Third World countries are inseparable parts and spatial manifestations of a single process, the historical development of the world capitalist economy. What
has been labeled "the deindustrialization of America" is related to the domestic situation, the stagnation of the national economy, high rates of unemployment, the loss of the competitive edge at the international level in the 1980s, and the occupational structure of American society, which varies from region to region. Bluestone and Harrison define this process and its effect on American cities as

... a widespread, systematic disinvestment in the nation's basic productive capacity. Controversial as it may be, the essential problem with the U.S. economy can be traced to the way capital—in the forms of financial resources and of real plant and equipment—has been diverted from productive investment in our basic national industries into unproductive speculation, mergers and acquisitions, and foreign investment. Left behind are shattered factories, displaced workers, and a newly emerging group of ghost towns (1982, p. 6; emphasis mine).

Although deindustrialization is a national process, some regions and localities are hit harder than others. For example, the older northeastern and midwestern cities seem to be affected more strongly by this process than cities in the southern and western states. Thus the old cities of the so-called "frost belt" are prime settings for studying the consequences of deindustrialization.

A MIDWESTERN CITY: DUBUQUE, IOWA

In the fall of 1986, when I began to teach at the University of Dubuque, I found this city of about 70,000 a charming and fascinating old midwestern community which was caught in the economic crisis, struggling to survive and to plan for its future growth and economic development. As the oldest city in Iowa, Dubuque has a tradition of more than 150 years of urban development, first as the center for fur trading and lead mining in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, then as a booming industrial town in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and finally as a stagnating industrial city within the corporate capitalist economy.

The major sign of Dubuque's involvement in the corporate economy is the John Deere plant, which manufactures farm equipment and in peak times provided about 60 percent of the industrial jobs in the city. The economic crisis of the 1980s hit the city hard in 1983, when the Deere Company laid off more than 4,000 workers (about 50 percent of its employees) and threw Dubuque into its worst economic crisis since the second world war. As an urban sociologist I found Dubuque an interesting setting, where one can see evidence of various periods of spatial development in different periods of commercial, industrial, and corporate capitalist economy. This discovery motivated me to develop a new course, which I entitled "Sociology of Dubuque: The City As a Living Community." I will explain briefly how I designed the course, which I offered for the first time in May 1987.

OBJECTIVES AND GOALS OF THE COURSE

The main objective of the course was to examine the political economy of urban development in a historical frame of analysis. I believe, however, that teaching should be based on a developmental learning model and that students should be self-motivated to acquire knowledge and skills. The very purpose of this course—understanding socioeconomic and political relations in an urban setting—provided me with an opportunity to achieve this objective by 1) minimizing the role of the teacher to that of a facilitator, 2) maximizing students' participation, critical thinking, and analysis, and 3) using the human resources in the community.

Another objective in designing the course was to enable students to learn about changing historical, economic, and political relations through field observation, interaction with the people in the community who are involved actively in urban affairs, and reexamination of one's beliefs, knowledge, and understanding of urban life. This goal, as I will discuss later, was appreciated particularly by the students who were long-time city residents, as it helped them to relate better to their city.

DESIGNING THE COURSE

The next step was to identify the main conceptual framework for the course and to adapt an appropriate methodology. With regard to the former, I followed the outline provided by Aiken and Castells (1977), who summarize the main features of urban political economy as follows:

... a widespread, systematic disinvestment in the nation's basic productive capacity. Controversial as it may be, the essential problem with the U.S. economy can be traced to the way capital—in the forms of financial resources and of real plant and equipment—has been diverted from productive investment in our basic national industries into unproductive speculation, mergers and acquisitions, and foreign investment. Left behind are shattered factories, displaced workers, and a newly emerging group of ghost towns (1982, p. 6; emphasis mine).
examine the large social, economic, and political context of cities; 2) using historical perspective to study urban problems and phenomena, meaning a strong emphasis on the process of social change over time in urban systems; and 3) exploring the critical role of the economic system in shaping the nature of urban systems. More specifically, a fundamental postulate which underlies these new approaches is that a given element of an urban system cannot properly be isolated as a separate object of study, meaning it cannot appropriately be removed from the economic, political, social, and historical context of which it is extremely a part (p. 7).

In regard to methodology, I developed a three-tiered sequence of urban analysis, which can be applied to the study of cities as a general format:

1) Macro analysis. Learning the basic skills of urban studies; historical understanding of urban development; a basic knowledge of urban political economy.
2) Micro analysis. Unit-by-unit analysis of data; field observation related to different aspects of the city's political economy, such as production, distribution, consumption, social stratification, ethnic relations, infrastructure, and culture.
3) Putting the pieces together. Trying to make sense of the present stage of the city's development; prospects for future growth.

I did not intend to conduct the unit-by-unit analysis according to the systemic and ahistorical approach of the Chicago school. Rather, I attempted to understand social relations historically within each unit (such as production, consumption, and superstructure) and in conjunction with other urban social units. After the initial planning was completed and the new course was approved through university channels, my most important task was to identify people and groups within the institutions, the business community, and neighborhood organizations and to make contacts with them for possible involvement in the course. Knowing the importance of a well-organized program and early planning, I made a list of potential participants and sent them letters of invitation in which I explained the objectives of the course, its implications and benefits for the community, and the high value of their contribution to this class. Because I was unable to predict how many persons would respond positively, I contacted more individuals than I could accommodate. The response to my invitation was phenomenal; immediately I began to receive calls from interested persons and organizations.

Two weeks after sending the invitation letters, I began to contact the resource individuals to learn about their interests and their willingness to participate in my class. We discussed the topic and set the date for their presentation within the above-mentioned methodological framework.

COURSE FORMAT AND REQUIREMENTS

The course format emphasized field trips, observation by participants, field surveys, and communication between the students and community leaders, which reduced teacher-student contacts in class. Because some of the field experiences required a particular level of historical and sociological analysis based on readings and class discussions, I tried to bring the class to this level through group discussions and critical analysis whenever possible. If the participant showed an interest in giving a formal presentation, I tried to take the students to his or her office or workplace. In this way the students became more familiar with various institutions and avoided much of the ineffectiveness and boredom usually endemic in conventional lecture sessions.

The course was offered during the May Interim, a three-week recess between the spring semester and the summer sessions. Classes met five days a week, three hours a day (five to six hours in the case of a field trip). My class contained 12 students, which I consider an ideal size for two reasons. First, a large group (18 to 20 or more) hinders meaningful group interaction and communication. Second, a group of 12 to 14 students is ideal for field trips because they can fit easily into a mid-sized van.

There was no textbook for this class, but with the help of a student assistant I prepared a package of readings which consisted of articles from books, journals, and local newspapers, as well as the census data on Dubuque. In addition, I included some basic articles on the theoretical aspects of urbanization, such as those by Gordon (1984) and Ashton (1984).

This class had three requirements: 1) daily journals reflecting students' critical understanding and evaluation of each day's events (lectures, presentations, field trips, and films/videos) in an organized manner; 2) weekly
take-home essay questions on the reading assignments; and 3) regular class attendance and active participation in daily activities. Answering the questions required a careful analytical reading of the material. I collected the daily journals once a week and returned them with my comments after careful reading.

THE COURSE AGENDA: A MORE DETAILED OUTLINE

As I stated earlier, the main objective of this course was to examine Dubuque's political economy. The class achieved this goal through a critical analysis of the economy (production, distribution, and consumption) and by observing various aspects of the urban superstructure, such as culture, politics, and ethnic relations. Economic analysis is a constant part of this course, but because of time constraints, I am selective in dealing with the superstructural elements. The unit-by-unit analysis is meant to investigate social relations in each unit and their relation to other units. The following discussion, based on the three-tiered model which I explained above, gives a more detailed description of the course contents.

MACRO ANALYSIS: AN INTRODUCTION

The objectives of this session are 1) to explain the expectations for the course and the rationale for the topic; 2) to provide an understanding of the function of cities as related to their size and scale at the national, regional, and local levels; and 3) to learn the basic principles of map reading. After the course objectives are explained, discussion focuses on a simplified analysis of economies of scale, how cities are connected to each other by transportation networks, and the market economy. I compare and contrast three maps of different scale (local, state, and national) to demonstrate the degree of significance of cities of different size at each level of analysis. This is the first step in the appreciation of urban networks and hierarchy.

MICRO ANALYSIS: INTRODUCTION

The second part of the sequence is designed to acquaint the students with the urban scene in Dubuque. I begin the session with a slide presentation of the city, which shows the city's relationship to its hinterland, its accessibility via highways and waterways, and its physical formation (illustrated with aerial photos). Next, to enable the students to conceptualize the city's layout, I involve them in an exercise based on Kevin Lynch's classic work, *The Image of a City* (1960). I ask the students to draw the city's map as they experience it and to identify the main nodes, pathways and roads, landmarks, and neighborhoods, as well as the conceptual boundaries between the city and its surroundings. This is a fascinating exercise because the comparison of maps drawn by students reveals the diversity in human perception of the built environment.

The final exercise in this section is map reading. I take the students for a tour of the city and ask them to identify the route, the land uses, and the types of activity along the route on their maps while we are driving through the city. This activity helps the students to develop their skills in conceptualizing the city on paper.

MICRO ANALYSIS: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

I believe that an understanding of the existing urban structure is inadequate if it is not grounded in a critical understanding of historical developments. Using Gordon's (1984) classification of American cities (commercial, industrial, and corporate), the students examine different stages of Dubuque's growth on site. For this activity I invited a local historian, who gave the class a comprehensive tour of the city and discussed different stages of urban development.

MICRO ANALYSIS: ECONOMY

This is the most important part of the course, requiring careful scrutiny of economic relations and analysis of the data. In this part the students have the opportunity to observe the creation and circulation of surplus product in the form of commodity and money capital. This section consists of three elements: production, distribution, and consumption.

*Production.* The main objectives of this part are 1) to understand the nature of industrial production within a corporate economy by examining the processes of design, execution and production, labor-management conflict, and robotization; 2) to explore the role of the unions in influencing the labor
process and in organizing labor; and 3) to undertake an historical analysis of data related to the changing nature of the economy from industrial to corporate capitalism, to the state of working class and the ups and downs in union membership, and to the extent of Dubuque's incorporation into regional, national, and international economies.

In addition to assigning class exercises in industrial data analysis, I arranged a tour of the most important industrial plant in Dubuque (both in production capacity and in number of workers employed), a division of the John Deere Corporation which manufactures farm equipment and employs about 40 percent of the city's labor force. With the cooperation of Deere's public relations office, the students took a comprehensive tour of the plant and were enabled to make sense of the complexity of the production process. After the tour, the students participated in a discussion session with the plant representative, in which they had a chance to evaluate labor/management relations in Dubuque.

No study of industrial relations would be complete without the most important factor in production relations—the working class. My initial invitation received a positive and very supportive response from local unions, and the one-day workshop sponsored by organized labor was one of the highlights of this course. The workshop, a product of two months of planning and coordination, was a combination of films, presentations, and intensive discussions, which dealt with the state of the working class at both the local and the national levels.

Distribution. One of the basic premises of the urban political economy is the importance of an efficient market and transportation system for distribution of commodities, which will hasten the realization of profit. One objective of this section is to foster an appreciation of the differences between the old marketplace of competitive capitalism and the new forms of market dictated by the needs of a corporate capitalist economy. For teaching purposes I identified the former with the businesses along Main Street and the latter with regional shopping centers or malls.

In meeting with the director of the "Main Street" project in Dubuque, who supervises revitalization and small business development, students had the opportunity to examine the plight of downtown businesses, caused by the flight of corporate businesses and their relocation in regional malls. Then the students made a trip to Dubuque's only shopping mall and examined the extent to which corporate business dominates the mall's economy.

Distribution of commodities requires a network for transporting the products from the factory to the marketplace. On the basis of Marx's analysis, the urban political economy considers commodity transportation as a part of the process of production. In order to understand the dynamics of transport networks, the class considered the Mississippi River and the local railroad system.

Consumption. One of the main assumptions of urban political economy is the distinction between items of collective and individual consumption; the former includes roads, parks, public facilities, and schools, and the latter consists of automobiles, single-family houses, and other commodities for individual use. This section focuses on the pattern of housing as an item of individual consumption and as the spatial manifestation of social stratification and inequality.

With the help of a local real estate agency, the students were given a tour of neighborhoods with different property values. Then we discussed the dynamics of the housing market with the real estate agents, and worked on a project to identify the class basis of different neighborhoods according to income, number of cars, and household size.

MICRO ANALYSIS: SUPERSTRUCTURAL ELEMENTS

This section deals with other aspects of urban life, which (according to the assumptions of the political economy approach) belong to the superstructure, such as cultural activities, political relations, religion, and the mass media. In brief, although the superstructural elements are not involved directly with the economy, they indirectly affect and are affected by economic relations.

For this segment I had to choose the topics and elements according to availability of resources and time limitations. The following selected areas were discussed in this class.

Culture. It seems that more and more cities are facing changing economic realities, deindustrialization, and the increasing importance of service industries in creating jobs in the 1980s. Dubuque is no exception; the authorities are seeking alternative solutions for the
city's stagnating economy. One option is the tourist industry and related activities, such as festivals and fairs. By coincidence, one of the festivals (the DubuqueFest) is held annually in May; I tried to take advantage of this opportunity by incorporating it into my course. One day was devoted to the festival; students met with the festival organizers and were made familiar with the technical aspects of planning and executing the festival. Then, under the guidance of festival organizers, the students visited to the city's art gallery, examined architectural aspects of historic buildings, and made a report about the festival based on their observations.

Ethnic relations. The main objective of this section is to understand the socioeconomic aspects of ethnic relations in the city. Dubuque's ethnic makeup is unique. Historically, the city was divided by clear boundaries into Irish and German neighborhoods; other ethnic groups were hardly present or visible. This tradition survives into the twentieth century; even in the 1980s, Dubuque remains predominantly white. Other ethnic groups constitute less than one percent of the city's population: .05 percent are Hispanic and .03 percent are black. This unusual social setting provides an excellent opportunity for the students to examine the degree of discrimination and prejudice against minorities and outsiders. After studying the history of racial and ethnic relations in Dubuque, the students met with the head of the Human Rights Commission and engaged in a constructive discussion of racial/ethnic relations.

Urban political structure. This section focuses on a historical understanding of the political structure of the city government. The class makes a detailed study of the changes in the political machines and discusses various types of election: partisan/nonpartisan, at-large, and the ward system. The class also makes a collective analysis of the "movers and shakers" in Dubuque by examining the profiles of local politicians.

Dubuque's municipal government is based on a "weak mayor" structure; the city's affairs virtually are conducted by the city manager. To address this aspect of political structure I scheduled a meeting with the assistant city manager, in which the students discussed problems related to their understanding of the machine's operation. This meeting was of particular interest for local students because it gave them a chance to meet with the authorities and to voice their concerns in an informal atmosphere.

MICRO ANALYSIS: THE CITY AND ITS HINTERLAND

The main objective of this section is to understand the dynamics of urban-rural interdependence and how the rural hinterland contributes to the economy of the city. Dubuque is a sizable city, but unlike many American cities, which are part of an urban corridor (such as the Boston-Washington megalopolis on the East Coast) or which are linked to a larger metropolitan area, Dubuque has clearly defined boundaries. This characteristic makes Dubuque a good case study of the extent to which the city serves as an urban center for its rural hinterland.

I arranged two sessions: a visit to a family-owned and operated farm, and a field observation and analysis of the farmers who operate the city's farmers' market. An understanding of the rural-urban connection is particularly significant at a time when Iowa farmers (and others in the Midwest) are facing hard economic times. The students were able to observe two factors: 1) the extent of rural poverty and the plight of the small independent farmers; and 2) the importance of Dubuque for its hinterland. Farmers come to Dubuque from communities as far as 40 miles away, even from Wisconsin and Illinois, to sell their produce in the farmers' market.

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

The last session of class was devoted to a critical evaluation and review of what was learned and accomplished; what should be done to improve the quality of the course; and possible strategies for Dubuque's future growth. The class then was divided into four groups; I asked each group to analyze the state of the economy, the political structure, and the credibility of current economic development plans, and to make recommendations for improving the course. The class concluded with a comparison and contrast of each group's analysis and recommendations.

COURSE EVALUATIONS

COURSE EVALUATION BY STUDENTS

On the last day of this class I asked the
students to evaluate the course in writing. The comments indicated an overall appreciation and approval of the course, but the students expressed their dissatisfaction with the quality and the rationale for some of the field trips. Their reaction stems from the fact that I tried to avoid imposing any rules or guidelines for presentations. Dissatisfaction with this lack of guidance also was reflected in the contributors’ comments. In future classes I will provide the participants with guidelines for contributions.

Students also complained about the intensity of field trips and the fact that they were not able to take breaks. In the future I will devote at least one day per week to class discussion and evaluation of that week’s activities.

Aside from the technical problems which are inherent in any first-time attempt, the students’ evaluation of the course content was positive, as reflected in one student’s comments about the course as

... the opportunity to get out and actually see the things talked about, and to interact with people involved in the areas discussed, gaining knowledge of the city and (through Dubuque) other cities in the United States. I felt the background and history were very important to understanding later developments.

Regarding the importance of the field trips and experiential learning, another student stated:

The field trips for the most part were very beneficial. Seeing things first hand and meeting with the people that help to make Dubuque tick was the essence of the course. I could not have grasped my understanding of Dubuque without the personal contacts beyond the classroom.

COURSE EVALUATION BY CONTRIBUTORS

Later in the summer I sent a questionnaire to everyone who had contributed to this course, either by representing their respective institutions or as experts in various areas related to urban life in Dubuque. When asked how they evaluated the course, they said unanimously that they approved of the class and praised the “well-balanced structure” of the course. As one individual commented:

I feel my participation in the course benefitted me as a participant in as much as it gave me on-site knowledge of what is conveyed to the student and how she/he absorbs the particular items that are discussed.

In general, many respondents evaluated the course on the basis of its potential as a means of communication within the community. When asked about the instructor’s role and the extent of his involvement in the course, 43 percent preferred the instructor as a “mediator,” 45 percent as “another student,” and the rest as an “authority.” When asked whether they would be interested in future courses, 86 percent responded positively; the rest were not sure about their future commitments in the community. This response indicates the importance of this kind of course for concerned citizens and shows their degree of willingness to share their expertise and knowledge with the students. As one participant commented:

I want you to know how much I appreciate you including our organization in your “Sociology of Dubuque” class. My only regret is that I was not able to take the class myself. After visiting with your students and other participants, I see what a dynamic class you have created. I would love to be a part of your class again. In fact, we already have lots of new ideas for next semester.

All the course evaluations by students and contributors indicated the great value attached to experiential learning.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this report I have tried to discuss systematically the conception, design, and teaching of “Sociology of Dubuque.” Proceeding from the theoretical assumptions of urban political economy and adopting a three-tiered methodological model, the students addressed the historical development of Dubuque’s political economy. The course is designed for the study of small to medium-sized cities; a study of metropolitan areas and big cities will require another format but will incorporate a similar methodology. In that case it might be necessary to teach the course in sequences: that is, to devote one semester to the study of production, distribution, and consumption and another to superstructural elements and other aspects.

This class proved that people learn most about society from direct interaction with other people; it reinforced my conviction about the great value of experiential education. The most important aspect of an
experiential course is that all participants (students, contributors, and the teacher) are learners.

Another positive aspect of this course was that it served as a platform for various organizations, institutions, and individuals to improve their communication with the rest of the city. Despite all the shortcomings in the design and execution of this course, I hope that the reader will benefit from the discussion of the objectives, the theoretical and methodological considerations, and the final outcomes in designing other courses in urban sociology based on the principles of experiential education.

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Mohammad A. Chaichian is Assistant Professor and Chairperson of the Department of Sociology at the University of Dubuque. Research interests include urban political economy and third world urbanization. Address correspondence to Mohammad A. Chaichian, Department of Sociology, University of Dubuque, Dubuque, IA 52001.