Solutions to the Pathologies of Urban Processes: A Conference Summary*

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A second conference on Urban Pathologies was held in Kazimierz Dolny, October 12th through to the 16th. The focus of the conference was to be on solutions to urban pathologies. As conference organizer, my underlying contention in suggesting this conference theme was a fear that by following the plan of the first conference of 1983 of addressing the origins or epidemiology of pathologies and investigating the many forms of pathologies of urban systems, we would again become mired in the problems of specification of the models tested and the different forms pathologies take in different social systems.

Thus, I proposed for this second conference that the causes of pathologies be a secondary concern to question addressing solutions. The assumption was that by beginning our investigation at the other end, focusing on what works and what has been learned from failed initiatives, we may be better able to trace back and deduce why they failed in terms of the causes of pathologies. It was my intent by design that we work from the concrete, the sphere of action, to the sphere of ideas and theory. This I thought, by itself would help to clarify the debate. Furthermore, I thought that by looking at solutions we would be closer to our end goal of understanding what needs to be done to alleviate pathologies and what needs to be done to prevent them from developing in the future. Lastly, seeking solutions before discovering the causes of the problems or pathologies is consistent with the medical analogy. Most medical interventions begin with the treatment of symptoms without knowing the causes of the disease.

Another underlying premise of the conference was that not only do we need to understand what solutions to urban pathologies or problems are possible today, but more importantly, we need to understand what can be possible in the future. The process of solving pathologies or problems ultimately involves a process of changing systems to be more responsive to the needs of the people who participate in those systems. Grassroots movements in themselves create a possibility for a change in consciousness of those who participate and thus create the possibility of change in the system to make it more responsive to the needs of its citizens. We need to understand how we can further this process of empowerment of citizens to make the systems they participate in more responsive to their needs.

The conference was formatted into five panel sessions. The first panel session was entitled “How to Define the Problem?: The Epistemological and Political/Ideological Nature of the Problem Definition”. The charge to the first panel was to discuss the epistemological nature of the concept of “pathology” and to lead a discussion of the adequacy of the definitions proposed.

The panel began with a discussion of problems with the organismic analogy which underlies the concept of pathology. It was first suggested that we could dissociate this organismic component and still retain the idea of pathology as disorganization (Chojnicki). The problems of the organismic analogy were further elaborated in a comparison of order and conflict conceptualizations of pathology (Iadicola). The order conceptualization was attacked for its failure to recognize that the definition of pathology in any system is a product of political conflict, that is, it is a product of the power relations of the system. Furthermore, it was charged that when we talk about system-level pathologies from an order perspective we overlook the question from whose interests do we define what is pathological. In all social systems which are structurally divided it is essential to address this question (Iadicola).

Two complementary definitions of pathology were proposed which were rooted in a more conflict conceptual framework. One conceptualization focused on individual needs (physical and species) (Iadicola). In this conceptualization health is the condition where individuals have the ability to meet their physical and species needs by acting within the parameters of the social system. Conversely, pathology is the condition where the fulfillment of these needs is blocked, and thus human development is inhibited. The structural divisions (class and gender) within the social order are ultimately viewed as the root of pathological conditions from this version of a conflict conceptualization.

The second conflict conceptualization of pathology was referred to as the condition of unresponsiveness (Pepinsky). The term responsiveness was defined as the condition where “the content of action is jointly influenced by the experience and feelings of people more directly affected, rather than having decisions made unilaterally or made for (as opposed to with) others”. Responsiveness of the condition of health requires democratic, decentralized decision making. The condition of pathology is the condition of unresponsiveness. Both conceptualizations root the condition of pathology in hierarchical systems and the conflict which stems from them. The former conceptualization emphasizes the more structural nature of the conflict while the latter emphasizes the processual nature.

Another presentation argued that we must acknowledge that there are different perspectives on social problems, but at the same time move toward a common framework of analysis, which would include, above all else, agreement on the definition of key terms. If we can speak a common language about the basics, then we will be free to develop more sophisticated methodological tools and move from the study of clinical pathology to that of experimental pathology (Switalski).

Further discussion during this first panel focused on the historical framework of our evaluation. We must distinguish problems which are products of the stage of development of the forces of production from those which are manifestations of the relations of production (class) or reproduction (gender). From a more conflict orientation, the concept of pathology is not to be used in referring to problems which are a result of the former, but rather are problems which are fundamentally rooted in the latter. In this respect, the inherent contradictions of class systems are the root of pathologies (Iadicola). An order orientation would stress primarily the former condition as the root of pathology. Lastly, there was discussion of the importance of being aware of the scale of the problem (national, regional, urban, intra-ecological, and individual levels) and how these different stages articulate in the nature and definition of a given pathology. Here we must examine the mediating factors and structures (Dory).

Throughout the first day of the conference there was frequent discussion of the problem of defining “pathology”. It was suggested by some that the concept of pathology be abandoned entirely, and the term “problem” or “phenomenon” be substituted (Komerowski). However, it was recognized that the substitution of terms would not provide a way to avoid the theoretical choice. The order and conflict conceptualizations of systems and their problems provide very different paths to understanding and reaching solutions to problems of cities. The
The case studies did have the virtue of allowing the discussion to follow specific issues. Even within the disparate studies presented here certain commonalities emerged. In some cases the situation described is clearly pathological in the sense that it threatens the survival of people within the urban system. Traffic pollution and traffic accidents, crime, and the accumulation of wastes are all life-threatening.

The second panel session was entitled, "Case Studies of Pathologies". The five presentations included within this panel session covered a wide variety of topics including the subterranean economy in Mexico (Palacios), crime in Poland (Bartnicki), traffic problems in Italy (Spinelli), and the impact of urban development on surrounding rural areas in Poland (Szczepanski and Wodz) and Senegal (White). The charge to this panel was first to address the geographic/spatial dimension of the definition of the pathology, specifying and differentiating pathologies unique to urban systems from societal level pathologies which are present in the urban setting. A second charge was to discuss the political nature of identifying pathologies.

Regarding the first point, the ecological problems resulting from the development of large urban areas in Africa, specifically the case of Dakar, Senegal, has resulted in significant pathologies that are specifically urban. On the other hand, the inability of the planning process to stay even with, much less ahead, of the pace of development is more of a societal pathology which manifests itself within, and exacerbates the uniquely urban pathology (White). The problem of crime in Warsaw was viewed as in part a product of the creation of new concentrated high-rise estates in the periphery of the city. However, stereotypes of areas in terms of crime patterns and fear of crime reveal a pattern of results which is somewhat at odds with the actual incidence of crime, indicating that subjective definitions of the situation also play a role in the development of pathology independent of the objective reality (Bartnicki). The discussion on traffic problems in Pisa, Italy describe a pattern of pathology which is a product of the spatial organization of cities. The problem manifests itself in terms of increased levels of pollution (noise, air, and aesthetic) and increase in mortality rates resulting from traffic accidents. As in Senegal, the planning process seems unable to cope with the pathology (Spinelli). The presentations on poverty and the subterranean economy in urban systems in Latin America (Palacios) and the problem of rapid development of tourist communities in Poland (Szczepanski and Wodz) are examples of pathologies of the larger social system manifesting themselves within the urban environment.

Discussion also focused on the political nature of the problem definition. It was noted that what could be defined as pathological from one segment of the population could be defined as normative or healthy by another. Problems of pollution, unemployment and even traffic congestion may be seen by those who most benefit by the system as necessary inconveniences to obtain the positive features of economic development. Others may define them as a threat to their livelihood and thus as pathologies which must be eradicated. The political nature of problem definition again highlighted the strength of the conflict model in analyzing pathologies (ludicola).

Problems with the discussion within this session resulted primarily from conflicting conceptualization of the term pathology. Again as in the first conference, there was a failure to develop a uniform definition which could be utilized in evaluating problems. The ambiguity of the concept revealed itself most apparently in the discussion of the subterranean economy in Latin America. On the one hand, this could be seen as a pathological response to unemployment and marginalization. On the other hand, it could be seen as a positive response to a problem, a response that might one day mature and provide a partial solution to the problem.

Given that complex interagency relations are the norm in modern societies, the ability and will to coordinate is an important aspect of institutional success. Among planning agencies there exists a general failure to understand the significance of levels. It is remarkably difficult to get this established and yet the object of conflict varies by level. Some have argued that the social interest actually varies by level. Certainly, it is perceived to be different at different levels (Diamond).

The idea of decentralization of control and democratic inputs from below were highlighted as important features of successful planning and institutional initiatives in Norway (Saether). The involvement of all groups and interests which were to be affected by the initiative was found to be crucial to the success of the initiative. Furthermore, the scale of organization was also discussed as important in determining the success of planning and institutional initiatives. The smaller the scale of organization and planning, the greater potential of success for the initiative.

An evening session was held in order to present and discuss two films on urban "pathologies" and grassroots initiatives to address them. The first film, Polonowno, was greeted with a great deal of interest from the Polish participants. The film detailed the efforts of a community to fend off their imminent destruc-