



CITY: GROWTH, IDEOLOGIES, POWER AND VIOLENCE - SEMINAR

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Abstract

Our paper presents a theoretical framework, content and methodological format of a newly established seminar on modern history and theory of urbanism at the Faculty of Architecture, Brno University of Technology in the Czech Republic. The paper deals with our concrete experience as educators and creators of the conception and teaching methods of the seminar. First objective of the seminar titled *City: Growth, Ideologies, Power and Violence* was to acquaint students with the theory of our field. This implies relations between cities and technology, economy, politics and culture, various approaches to urban planning, ideologies, urban growth and problems of cities since the first Industrial Revolution until today. Reflecting the interdisciplinary discourse, we have welcomed lectures and discussions with professionals from external urban studies fields. Students themselves were asked to read, understand, graphically represent to others and in the end rewrite theoretical texts by experts of different backgrounds, all dealing with cities: sociology, economics, geography, philosophy, urban anthropology or cultural ethnography. The course content was divided into three blocks. The first one, called *Growth*, addressed analyzing the development of the city in terms of current theories. The second one, *Ideologies*, summarized important approaches to urban planning, understood as a response to stimuli coming from the period discussed in the first block. The third block, *Power and Violence*, outlined the city as a medium and space for exercise of power. Apart from our effort to deliver this specially tailored content to our students, we have also devised specific ways of teaching in order to improve students' ability to use critical theory as an essential part of their future work – our second main objective. In that respect, we have introduced a participative method involving students actively in the course of each lesson, in order to help them find their own beliefs and ways of thinking, rather than offering them ready-made interpretations and instant arguments. In a broader sense, we have tackled a question what role should we play as educators in such a complex field with so many elusive factors that architecture and urban planning stands for.

Keywords: seminar, teaching theory, critical thinking, ideology, city

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1. Introduction

Academic and professional sphere of architecture and urbanism are experiencing a pressure as never before, there are new factors acting on them. These forces include globalization, accelerating development of new technologies, extremely fast urbanization in developing countries of emerging economies, and new energy (de) regulatory policies. Our paper addresses an important question of today's architectural education: How can architecture schools train accountable professionals to successfully contribute to present situation? Within architectural education, we decided to focus on one topic only, which, we hope, will engage in meaningful debate. The issue covered is: How to teach urban planning theory under-ever changing conditions?

Although we³ are examining a broader question here, this paper is very much based on one concrete example: In autumn 2011, coming back from studying and working abroad, we were asked to conceive and teach a new seminar on a modern history and theory of urbanism at our alma mater – the Faculty of Architecture of Brno University of Technology in the Czech Republic. Since the very beginning we had quite a strong idea what to teach our students and how. Rather than putting the emphasis on purely 'architectural' analysis, we stressed out the importance of understanding links between the physical substance of cities and the technology, economics, politics and culture. The title of the course was *City: Growth, Ideologies, Power and Violence*. The course covered development of modern cities since the industrial revolution until today, based on precisely selected theoretical texts. Conceptually, we have been drawing from experience gained during our studies at the Institute of Art and Architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and at the Bauhaus Academy in Dessau. Therefore we would like to thank here our teachers, namely Gabu Heindl, Francoise Fromont, Regina Bittner, Peter Trummer, Chantal Mouffe, Markus Schaefer and Wouter Vanstiphout, who have been a great source of inspiration and knowledge for us.

The given task was specific in several ways. The realm of modern history and theory of urbanism is broad enough to accommodate wide range of topics on one hand, delimited by demand for innovation at the Brno Faculty of Architecture on the other. At the first place we have tried to understand who our audience will be. A) Although most of the students have a substantial knowledge on various topics concerning theory of urbanism, it is often fragmented gained via vicarious sources and potentially inaccurate, misinterpreted or covered with prejudices. B) The students had gained most of the knowledge passively and often have problems with interpreting it and applying it in practice. Therefore we introduced an underlying concept of thinking and talking about history and theory, rather than updating curriculum with the "latest stuff". We had decided to teach the

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course in a form of a participatory seminar instead of giving lectures in order to actively involve students into its structure. As for the content, we aimed to create a bundle of “must knows” - relatively wide in range but condensed in composition. The name of our seminar, *City: Growth, Ideologies, Power and Violence*, was also the basic structure of it, which was accordingly divided into three thematic blocks. Both, the specific format of the seminar and its content will be examined in this paper.

Our departing assumptions for the overall conception were based more on personal estimates than anything else – later on, they proved to be right, measured by high attendance and interest of students. The seminar was created as a compulsory optional subject for 5th-year students, but opened to everyone. Finally, it was attended by around 40 students of both, Bachelor and Master program, from 1st to 6th year. The accent on theory as fundamental basis for practical work – theory perceived as an inseparable part of the dialectics of theoretical and practical work of an architect, rather than to be there just for corroborating a “good culture of architectural profession” – is not groundbreaking, especially thinking of other disciplines falling into category of urban studies. It was particularly our personal involvement and experience confronted with the environment of the technical university that were crucial in delivering the selected content and developing specific teaching methodology of the seminar.

Our paper presents the very concrete case of our personal experience with teaching concrete students in a particular time at the concrete location. It is not meant to be an overall manual on “how to teach”. However we believe that our experience can serve as a good reference to anyone who is concerned with urbanism and teaching in general.

2. Analysis

2.1 Content of the Seminar: the Bundle

The name of our seminar, *City: Growth, Ideologies, Power and Violence*, stands for the content itself, giving it a framework of three thematic blocks. In the first block, *Growth*, we have dealt with the historical facts and their interpretation of development of modern cities since the industrial revolution until today, based on precisely selected texts. As a backbone of this block we adopted a point of view represented by Czech sociologist Jiří Musil, in which the beginning of urbanization coincides with industrialization (2002). Not being purely technocrats or culturalists ourselves, still, we found the news in technology and changing demography relevant for defining different historical eras in order to frame the topics of the first block. We talked about industrial revolution, fordism, postfordims, globalization or shrinking cities.

The second block named *Ideologies* was closely interrelated with the first block, in terms of both, the time span and the context. Here we have summarized the

most important approaches to urban planning, understood and interpreted as particular modes of thinking with their own history and context. The word “ideology” itself does not represent pejorative connotations such as closeness, unilateralism, propaganda and other irrational features in a form of political theory or utopian architecture. For us, it stands for a coherent system of ideas, attitudes, values and evidence as an intellectual framework enabling modus operandi of practical work. Our goal was to introduce to students to historical and contemporary approaches to urban planning as openly as possible, still, based on categorization by two French historians and theoreticians of architecture in different times - Françoise Choay (born 1925) and Françoise Fromonot (born 1958). Furthermore, we focused on contemporary consumerist tendencies in society and their consequences for the city.

The third block, *Power and Violence*, outlined the city as a medium and space for exercising a power. We understood power as an ability to enforce own will against abilities and will of others, making it often a source of conflicts. Conflicts have always been an obvious aspect of forming and shaping cities and modern societies, where the coercion is monopolized by the national state, multinational corporations, politics, economics, but also by culture. We addressed violence in/against the cities, not only in the form of war or terrorism - urbicide, but also violence and conflicts of power, related to the various crises and further with concepts of an unobtrusive control in the city.

2.1.1 Growth: The Industrial Revolution

Our lessons have begun with the so-called industrial urbanization of the late 19th century. Jiří Musil, the Czech sociologist, dealing mainly with housing and urban sociology, considered the beginnings of urbanization being this period of time, especially due to the growth of urban population and spread of the urban way of life (2002). We addressed the rapid expansion of cities in the period of coal and steel and examined the concentration effects of steam as drivers of these elementary processes. Our foreign guest Michael Reuss, a German environmentalist and urban historian, spoke on changes in living conditions and infrastructure in the time of industrial revolution.

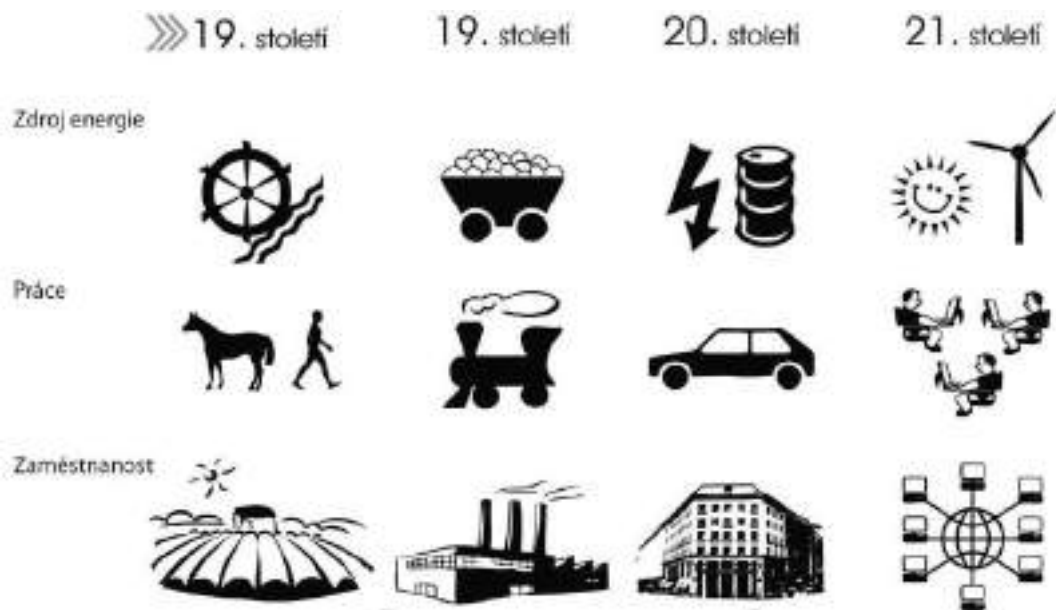


Figure 1. Classification of urbanization periods according to a participating student Zdenka Sedláková, based on the text by sociologist Musil (2002: 7 - 53). Source: Archive of the authors.

2.1.2 Growth: Fordism

Rationalization of production in the form of a moving assembly line introduced by Henry Ford caused the establishment of a new economic order of mass production (Garreau 1991). One of its consequences was for instance a general motorization (Jacobs 1962), acting as one of the main factors in the development of suburbia. In addition to Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times* (1936), we also watched the original documentary about the famous social project of that time – the Frankfurt kitchen by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky (1928).

2.1.3 Growth: Postfordism

The rise of the middle class coincided with the advent of economy of flexible accumulation (Harvey 1994) and culture of mass consumption of goods, cities, and lifestyle. Western countries entered the post-industrial period, which we discussed with a landscape architect Daniel Matejka. Revitalization of post-industrial landscape recorded also a Josef Pleskot's documentary film *Lower Area of Vítkovice* (2011) about a Czech industrial and postindustrial city of Ostrava and its contemporary issues on redevelopment and revitalization.

2.1.4 Growth: Globalization and Megacities

Aspects of today's globalized world and its problems with growth (Burdett, Sudjic 2007), continued de-industrialization, migration, economic (dis) equilibrium

(Sassen 2002), the ubiquitous anonymous individuality of mass consumption (Figure 2) and attempts to escape this consumer culture (Palahniuk 1996).



Figure 2. “Like everyone else, I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct. If I saw something like clever coffee table in the shape of a yin and yang, I had to have it. I would flip through catalogs and wonder, what kind of dining set defines me as a person? ...I had it all. Even the glass dishes with tiny bubbles and imperfections, proof they were crafted by the honest, simple, hard-working indigenous peoples of wherever.” A clip from David Fincher’s film *Fight Club* (1999), based on the novel of the same name by an American postmodern writer Chuck Palahniuk (1996).

2.1.5 Growth: Shrinking Cities

Shrinking Cities - a term coined by the German architect Philipp Oswalt (2005) at the beginning of the new millennium - has been a problem for many cities around the world, and society reacts to it differently. For example, by the German video game *Demolition Company* (2010) as the opposite for the US video game *SimCity* (1989).

2.1.6 Ideologies: Categorization by Françoise Choay

Choay, born 1925, divides the ideological approaches to architecture and urbanism to 1) the naturalistic one - represented by F. L. Wright (and his plan for a city for a new community, 2000) for instance, 2) the progressive one - such as modernism [represented by](#) LeCorbusier and 3) the culturalist one, with suggestions of ideal garden cities (Howard 2011). We discussed the background of creation of individual ideas, their possible realizations and welcomed the lecture by the philosopher, director, scriptwriter and educator Jan Motal on dissolving the myth of modernity in the city.

2.1.7 Ideologies: Categorization by Françoise Fromonot

One generation younger Fromonot, born 1958, applies a slightly different classification to existing ideas, though again with the division into three groups: supermodernism (Koolhaas 1995), metamodernism (Spirn 2000) and postmodernism, represented by Jencks and Krier.

2.1.8 Ideologies: The City as a Product

Our guest in this session was a sociologist Slavomíra Ferenčuhová, who questioned „in what sense are the cities for sale“, when, how and why has developed the city branding and place marketing, how to create an attractive identity and image of the place/city, and whom are the cities as products primarily intended to serve. According to Jayne (2006), the cities are not only places of consumption, but also objects of consumption, and so we got to Disneyland (see Fig. 3) and Disneyworld (Zukin 1993) and urban activities of the Nike company (von Borries 2004).



Figure 3. Disneyland symbolizes the domination of space through the tools of architecture under the auspices of multinational corporate patronage. The world of joy and happiness became the visual landscape of consumerism representing a shift to a society of consumption. Source: STEROW © Stephen Rowley 2011.

2.1.9 Power and Violence: Crisis, War, strategy, terrorism and control in the city

Cultural anthropologist Petr Gibas, gave us a lecture on the Prague metro, the fear of (Cold) war and how it was reflected in the socialist city, both on the material plane as well as ideological and imaginary one. We also discussed issues of geopolitics, security and control in public space (Norman 2009) and the extent, to

which a war strategy (Weizman 2007) can influence the perception and the use of urban environment and architecture.

2.2 Format of the Seminar: the Method

“Imagine it, you’re sitting in your living room, which you know so well; this is the room where the family watches television together after the evening meal. ...And, suddenly, that wall disappears with a deafening roar, the room fills with dust and debris, and through the wall pours one soldier after the other...” (Weizman 2007).

Eyal Weizman’s text was one of many read by students of the seminar. The text deals with strategy developed by Israeli military in a course of Operational Theory Research Institute (OTRI), where several thousands of soldiers were moving not through corridors of streets but through tunnels broken through walls and ceilings of houses of dense urban fabric when attacking the city Nablus in 2002. “We interpreted the alley as a place forbidden to walk through, and the door as a place forbidden to pass through, and the window as a place forbidden to look through [...]. This is because the enemy interprets space in a traditional, classical manner, and I do not want to obey this interpretation and fall into his traps,” said Kochavi in one of the interviews (Weizman 2007). Co-director of OTRI Shimon Naveh claimed their theoretical background as being based on the texts of architects such as Christopher Alexander, John Foerster or Gregory Bateson or anti-imperialist texts of Situationists or philosophers Deleuze and Guattari.

Although the aim of Israel military are in contrasts to often humanistic attitudes of architects, the pragmatic way of implementing critical theory illustrates its mastering as an intellectual tool. In the similar way, besides imparting the necessary knowledge of the theory, our main goal was to teach students how to use the theory for their own advantage. However we didn’t aim to train students in a bare logical argumentation with the acquired theoretical ammo – a kind of academic sophism. Our goal was to relativize and in certain way undermine their way of understanding and to train them in a *strong-sense* critical thinking (Paul 1995). Similarly Shimon Naveh said: “We employ critical theory primarily in order to critique the military institution itself – its fixed and heavy conceptual foundations” (Weizman 2007).

This aim was particularly reflected in the format of seminar and the way we have worked with students. A typical lesson consisted of two up to three students’ presentations, one guest lecture, and several short screenings, always accompanied by discussion. The core of each lesson was built up on students’ presentations. Each presentation was based on assigned theoretical text and it was understood as a little personal research project. In that sense, before students presented it to others, they had to have discussed it with us - in terms of accuracy of facts, relevancy of chosen material, language, correct sourcing and also means of graphic representation. Therefore, the considerable part of our teaching took place outside the seminar room – in the form of personal consultations, during

which we have intensively discussed with each student how to approach the topic, how to argue correctly about his/her findings and how to present it in appropriate way. At the classroom then, after each presentation we have critically analysed every student's work and eventually pointed out shortcomings or inaccuracies in his/her argumentation. We have also addressed various complementary or opposing points of view on the presented topic inducing students to actively participate in discourse. So at the end, it was students too, who have helped to create the content of the seminar, accompanied by our selection of screened clips from popular and/or documentary movies, series, videogames or computer games, comic books, characterizing the period, opinion or idea being discussed. The whole framework was complemented by guest lectures.

In such a scheme, a tutor operates as a discussion moderator rather than guru broadcaster. By already mentioned intensive tutoring and consultations of students' presentations/texts, we aimed to help students to deliver meaningful results in order to maintain the coherence of the whole seminar. This was possible with a great enthusiasm and engagement of students. Even if there were always some improvements possible, the problems and the following analysis carried the same importance within the lesson as the presentations themselves. To enable this participatory and informal scheme to work, we had to adjust the set up of the physical environment of the seminar room as well. At the first place we have rejected representative but proscenium-like aula and insisted on a rather smaller space. Getting one of such, we have organized its tables and chairs into a neutral O-shape, which made an informal face-to-face discussion possible.

Time restricted slide presentation of a text is already itself its reinterpretation requiring a deep understanding of the context and research on the topic. Furthermore it mobilizes conceptual and syntactical skills of a student. Based on this experience, in the second stage, students elaborated on their studied topics further by writing their own texts. We asked them to apply the newly gained knowledge on a personal experience, project or observed phenomenon of their choice. The output of the seminar is a book of students' critical texts.

An important part of the scheme was a reflection of the interdisciplinary discourse in the form of lectures and interviews with external experts dealing with the city - from the fields of sociology, economics, geography, philosophy, cultural anthropology and urban ethnography. Besides complementary information on the topic, they have brought to discussion their own characteristic language - typical for methods and patterns of thoughts in their specific field. We have perceived this fragmentation - a consequence of the collage of the chosen texts, guest lectures and movies, which built up the content of the seminar, as an advantage - as an inseparable part of the concept, allowing students to relativize their own thinking. But, it was not enough for us to introduce students to the current expertise and to provide them this interdisciplinary context involving external professionals. Our main goal was to teach students to use the knowledge they have gained, to think critically, argue passionately, and independently express

their opinion, and by that we tried to reinforce their capacity of asserting themselves in order to be able to influence the field itself.



Figure 4. Spatial layout of the seminar room during a discussion with urban historian and environmentalist Michael Reuss. Photo: Jan Kristek.

2.3 Results

The seminar was attended in average by forty students (which was four times more than the number of students originally officially inscribed) from 2nd to the 6th grade, both Bachelor and Master programs. The general interest of students was immense; some show broader interest in seriously deepening their knowledge in theory in the future. The methodology itself proved to be working well in terms of format and content as well. In the weekly two-hour lessons we managed to discuss the fundamental topics as the basis for our eventual future work with students to build upon. The format, dense and demanding, still appreciated by students has had a considerable outcome: valuable presentations and 3 to 12 pages long texts written by students, which we perceive as a challenging success and motivation for further work for them as well as for us. All submitted texts are now being published in a seminar proceedings book carrying the same title, *City: Growth, Ideologies, Power and Violence*. Within lessons, we contrived to encourage everyone, external guests, internal teachers and our students to interact within each other.

The conception of our seminar became a part of the Operational program “Education for Competitiveness” for the period 2007-2013, directed by The Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and founded by the European Social Fund (ESF). We have also presented the content and methodology of the seminar at the PhD conference at the Technical University in Brno in January 2012, receiving a very warm reception and feedback by both, students’ body and the faculty, inspiring us for further work. We also obtained an invitation to attend and present our teaching experience at the International scientific conference “Veda vo výstavbe / Science under Construction” in Bratislava, Slovakia in September 2012.

Since we were offered to continue teaching this kind of seminar in the future, looking back, we would like to implement some improvements. This time, we have let students working on their own writings first in the second half of the semester. Today we think that a continuous work on the texts since the very beginning could bring even better results. Considering the individual consultations before presentation or final submitting with each student, the shift to collective discussion comes here into question, allowing other students to listen or interact already during a concept polishing process.

3. Conclusions

The only thing constant is change itself, (Heraclitus in Mansley Robinson 1968: 91), and as well as rapid the world changes, changes the approach to teaching.

The pilot of the seminar on modern development and theories of urbanism titled City: Growth, Ideologies, Power and Violence took place in the winter term of academic year 2011/2012. The seminar was created as a compulsory optional subject for 5th-year students, but opened to everyone. This option chose students of both, Bachelor and Master program, from 1st to 6th year. We have dealt with the development of modern cities since the industrial revolution until today, based on precisely selected theoretical texts. The whole course was divided into three blocks. The first one, called GROWTH, addressed analyzing the development of the city in terms of current theories. The second, proceeding block called IDEOLOGIES, summarized important approaches to urban planning, understood as a response to growing complaints from the period discussed in the first block. The third block, POWER AND VIOLENCE, outlined the city as a medium and space for exercise of power.

After having the clear content structure, we have focused on our main goal and how to reach it. The main goal was to acquaint students with the basic historical and theoretical concepts, and, especially, to teach them to apply the knowledge they have gained in practice, to discuss ideas properly and master the principles of presenting complex topics. To some extent, it seems like the lack of discussion in the urban planning seminars at the FA BUT came from its format. If we really wanted to

introduce turbulence into education, we needed to structure it differently, to explore new formats. We have come up with a participatory method, when moderated and tutored students presentations built up the lessons of the seminar. Students have carried a part of responsibility in imparting ideas contained in theoretical text assigned to them. Each student has had to read, understand, assess and then process it in a clear graphic presentation to introduce the main idea to others. Then we have discussed the given issue sitting in a non-hierarchical face-to-face setup circle. The final output of each student's semestral work was an own critical text, which applied the acquired theoretical knowledge on a personal experience, phenomenon or project of his or her choice. We have insisted that students always explore relations to other issues, historical, geographical situation and relate it all in time and place. They had to rethink their way of presenting things and asked themselves: which theory are we talking about, at which time, on which place, mobilized in which direction?

As from students' side, it was demanding in terms of deep studying, understanding, and presenting the assigned topics. From the teachers side, the scheme was time demanding and challenging in terms of intensive individual consultations and personal involvement in students work, in order to uncover their potentialities, rather than letting them cover done deals. Together, we have prepared the lessons in close relation to the last and the coming one. Further on, the role of us as teachers in the classroom was rather a role of discussion moderators and when necessary correctors than the role of speakers. We have found this scheme, not commonly used for teaching theory, successful in accomplishing our goals mentioned above.

In number of lessons we have welcomed external lecturers dealing with the city - from the fields of sociology, economics, geography, philosophy, cultural anthropology and urban ethnography. The texts from our reading list were accompanied by screening of clips from popular and/or documentary movies, series, videogames or computer games, comic books, characterizing the period, opinion or idea being discussed. One could easily admit that this is not architecture education; this is not urban planning education. We have shown students that to think "what if yes?" is possible, to relativize stereotypical opinions is healthy, and to look around to perceive everything is necessary.

Within this dynamic process of going beyond the definition of "urban planning seminar", we hope we have reached new attitudes to teaching.

"Our unique mission is to move beyond the highest level of professional training to open a creative space within which the discipline can rethink itself, a space of speculation, experimentation, and analysis that allows the field to detour away from its default settings in order to find new settings, new forms of professional, scholarly, technical, and ethical practice."⁴

⁴ Mark Wigley in his GSAPP Dean's Statement

4. Acknowledgements

At the first place we would like to thank our students, who significantly contributed to the final picture of our seminar.

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Next to Gabu Heindl, who nurtured our interest in theory and whose way of teaching we took as a reference, our thanks go to Francoise Fromonot's theory lectures, Wouter Vanstiphout's lectures on "violence and the city", Peter Trummer, Chantal Mouffe and Markus Schaefer, all from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, and Regina Bittner's lectures at the Bauhaus Dessau in 2010/2011.

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References to all publication cited in the text should be presented in a list following the abstract body text. These should also be typed in Times New Roman 12-point, single line spacing, with a blank line between each reference cited.

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