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Relational Urbanity

Perspectives of a Global Urban Society beyond Universalism and Localism

Relationale Urbanität

Perspektiven einer globalen urbanen Gesellschaft jenseits von Universalismus und Lokalismus

ABSTRACT: Current debates in urban studies are questioning the theoretical and empirical adequacy of the term *city* for understanding urban dynamics, North and South. A related concern is the arbitrariness of delimitations of expanding, interwoven and hyper-connected agglomerations. Established regionalizations of urban areas or cities are thus fading away in more than one sense, demanding conceptual and methodological consequences. Building on these debates, the paper stresses the relevance of societal or socio-spatial dimensions of urbanity. The need to contextualize them across scales finds its expression in the term *global urban society*. Taking this idea further, we propose a research programme centred on a conceptual and empirical investigation of a *relational urbanity*.

Keywords: Urban theory, urbanity, global urban society, relationality, locality, everyday life.

KURZFASSUNG: Aktuelle Debatten der Stadtforschung stellen die empirische und theoretische Angemessenheit des Stadtbegriffs als Zugang zum Verständnis aktueller Stadtentwicklungen in Frage, im Norden wie im Süden. Auch die Abgrenzung von wachsenden und vielfach verflochtenen Agglomerationen erscheint immer arbiträrer. Urbane Regionalisierungen lösen sich somit in vielerlei Hinsicht auf, was die Frage nach konzeptionellen und methodologischen Konsequenzen aufwirft. Anknüpfend an diese Debatten verweist der Beitrag auf die zentrale Bedeutung gesellschaftlicher bzw. sozialräumlicher Dimensionen von Urbanität. Diese müssen gleichwohl skalenübergreifend kontextualisiert werden, was im Begriff einer *globalen urbanen Gesellschaft* zum Ausdruck kommt. Diese Perspektive mündet im Entwurf eines Forschungsprogramms, das einen konzeptionellen wie empirischen Zugang einer *relationalen Urbanität* entwickelt.

Schlagworte: Stadttheorie, Urbanität, globale urbane Gesellschaft, Relationalität, Lokalität, Alltagsleben.

1. Introduction

Throughout history, the fate of the world has been, and will be, decided in cities, as Fernand Braudel (1992) has argued. Cities have always been catalysts of social, political and economic change. Especially in our time, however, cities themselves have changed, and the accelerated process of urbanization has become a truly global (or planetary) phenomenon. This has contributed to a multiplicity of understandings of *the urban* – in short, the perspectives and theoretical concepts we have used to understand and explain cities and related phenomena have changed as well. A central focus of this paper, and a point of reference in the other articles in this special issue, is the social dimension of contemporary urban transformations across the globe in the light of these differing interpretations of cities. The scope of these articles will be shown at the end of this paper. In order to relate them to the broader debate on contemporary urban research, and in order to sketch out our own perspective on what we call a *global urban society*, the following sections attempt a critical engagement with some of the more prominent comments on cities and urbanization. While we welcome the conflicting and diverging positions in this debate, our aim is to interrogate their capacity to explain cities and the urban condition. We will do this through a lens that combines social theory (Bourdieu 1977; 1998) with the realm of everyday life in cities as experienced by their inhabitants (Lefebvre 2000).

To make sense of cities and of urbanization, local practices and daily routines of urban residents must be acknowledged. Focusing on the actions of ordinary people in “ordinary cities” (Robinson 2006) can help us unravel the ways in which these cities are reproduced on an ongoing basis (cf. Davis 2006; De Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1970/2003). Individual practices can be understood as a manoeuvring by subjects within different arrangements, which in turn are nothing less than the products of past activities. Cities then, are fields of activity that contribute to each city’s own reproduction as much as they are representations of political and economic frameworks. These wider frameworks or systems integrate cities beyond the intentions of individuals (cf. Scott/Storper 2015). In order to grasp the fundamental changes (such as demographic and economic transformation, social and spatial fragmentation) taking place in agglomerations of different sizes with different characteristics in the new millennium, the dynamics and contradictions arising in this structural sphere have to be understood as well. However, we can grasp the triggers and effects of these transformations only if we include individual and collective practices on the ground and relate both spheres to each other.

To examine the permanent creation and recreation of the city from below, we also need to pay attention to networks and social movements, especially in smaller communities and neighbourhoods. The socio-spatial ties on which the local production of the urban fabric depends are neither exclusively shaped by political decisions nor by the market, but also result from processes such as “autogestion” in line with Henri Lefebvre

(2009, 135).¹ In other words, through collective action people try to cope with the bigger waves caused by changing political and economic dynamics.² Collective self-organization is a way of making sense of, and responding to, these macro-scale dynamics through everyday practices. Face-to-face interactions and unplanned encounters contribute to the specific and localized quality of this realm (Korff/Rothfuß 2009; Rothfuß/Korff 2015).

“For many millions of people across the planet, the particularities of city life continue to be the context from which urbanization processes are experienced, understood, and potentially transformed” (Davidson/Iveson 2015, 646). Therefore, a focus on daily practices and their changes, as well as their constant adaptation to different, though overlapping, “localities” (Appadurai 1995), can provide an empirical entry point for the analysis of how cities are shaped. The struggles and alliances created by friction between the competing logics of different fields of activity and positions therein can thus be understood as being *relationally embedded* in global flows, which are filtered and transmitted through various scales.

Lefebvre’s (2009) argument pointing to the dialectical relation between social group and social conditions in a broader dimension resonates with other sociological concepts highlighting the interplay of structure and agency, such as Giddens’ theory of structuration and Bourdieu’s theory of practice. In the past few years, a number of studies have engaged especially with the latter, leading to claims that Bourdieu’s “lost urban sociology” needs to be rediscovered (Wacquant 2018, 97). Bringing Bourdieu’s arguments on urban settings and their (historically and geographically specific) societal contexts into a dialogue with the current debate on cities and urban transformations, we claim that specific modes of engagement within localized life-worlds in turn affect the shaping of a global urban society. Practice theory understood in this way, and Bourdieu’s contributions especially, identify practice not exclusively in the realm of social actors or subjects, nor as a ritualized expression of structural effects, but as a kind of catalytic relation *between* these two spheres with the potential to produce innovations within given settings (which nevertheless remain path-dependent to some extent). Examples of this relation can be found in the various housing policies, strategies and preferences; or in the variety of urban transport solutions, formal and informal, as well as – of course – in the organization and regulation of production and trade. Almost every aspect of contemporary urban life is affected by this interplay between relationally constituted urbanities. A relational reflection of localized social practice (in a broad sense) thus represents the conceptual background of our examination of current perspectives in urban theory (cf. Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992). This examination will also help to identify common ground which might serve as a starting point for conceptually framing empirical urban research, North and South.

- 1 “Each time a social group [...] refuses to accept passively its conditions of existence, of life, or of survival, each time such a group forces itself not only to understand but to master its own conditions of existence, autogenesis is occurring” (Lefebvre 2009, 135).
- 2 This includes movements addressing ‘ecological’ questions like ‘Fridays for Future’ – after all, their aim is to change the political agenda as well as systems of unsustainable production.

In the next section of this paper, we discuss debates in urban studies on conceptual perspectives by identifying the similarities and acknowledging the contradictions therein. We therefore reflect on the starting points (*By which cities are we informed?*), on the conceptual core (*What aspects of cities matter?*) and on the range of approaches in question (*What urban contexts are we speaking to?*). The aim will be to relate these perspectives to each other, and to highlight possible limitations. In section 3 we try to overcome the deadlock that has resulted from lack of agreement on the conceptual core, namely what cities are, or if they matter as such. For, while the call to reflect on the limitations of urban research may seem to complicate matters, it does in fact help to clarify the direction we hope to follow in order to make sense of what we describe as a global urban society. Section 4 then sketches out our conceptual path which is informed by a relational approach to the social sphere. We thus point out which steps will be necessary when pursuing this socially sensitive approach to the urban world. In short, we set out what conceptualizing relational urbanity could mean. Finally, the fifth section shows how the articles in this special issue relate to each other and how they respond to the perspectives presented in this paper.

2. Competing perspectives in urban research

Conventional categorizations, regionalizations and delimitations of cities and urban societies are increasingly being questioned, both empirically and theoretically. This section discusses the debate that is unfolding especially in Anglo-American urban studies, and shows that some of the fault lines in this debate can be attributed to epistemological differences and to different research agendas. Against this backdrop, commonalities in understandings of *the city* and *the urban* are identified, as well as parallels in the interpretation of ongoing trends towards a global urban society. We will focus our presentation of this debate on the implications for an empirical understanding of the urban sphere.

Contemporary urban research grapples with a number of questions and disagreements, which have been summed up by Scott and Storper (2015, 1) in the following way:

“There has been a growing debate in recent decades about the range and substance of urban theory. The debate has been marked by many different claims about the nature of cities, including declarations that the urban is an incoherent concept, that urban society is nothing less than modern society as a whole, that the urban scale can no longer be separated from the global scale, and that urban theory hitherto has been deeply vitiated by its almost exclusive concentration on the cities of the global North.”

This quote makes clear that the foundation of urban research is being questioned from different angles. The various positions mentioned here correspond to specific claims and counter-claims, which have often been scrutinized. The “different claims” listed by Scott and Storper (2015, 1) can indeed be linked to the work of specific authors. Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, for example, argue that the idea of the city is incoherent, and that urban society and modern society can no longer be distinguished (Brenner/

Schmid 2014). Jennifer Robinson claims that urban theory has been “deeply vitiated by its [...] concentration on [...] the global North” (cf. Robinson 2002; 2006). The argument that the urban scale “can no longer be separated from the global scale” can be found in the work of John Friedmann (1986), Saskia Sassen (1991) and Peter Taylor (2004), as well as that of Brenner and Schmid (2012).³

Three distinct strands of the debate can be identified. The first strand involves the relationship between cities, or urban nodes, as well as various methods for examining their relative positions and characteristics. Here, the scientific and political implications, especially of the world city approaches, have come under scrutiny, as have the essentializing categories used in the description of cities. The second strand is equally rooted in a substantialist critique, in this case not between different city-types or classes, but in respect of the city ‘as such.’ This fundamental criticism questions the conceptual relevance of the term city. The third strand can be understood as a response to this affront. Indeed, this counter-criticism attempts to rescue the city as an object, while clearing up some of the (mis-)understandings connected with the term city.

In short, the debate involves three distinct confrontational positions which, in line with our argument, can be brought into a fruitful discourse under the wider umbrella of a nascent global urban society. We argue that the question of how the ongoing worldwide transformation of socio-spatial arrangements can be conceptualized appropriately and examined empirically, constitutes the core of the debate. Breaking down the debate into the three strands, or phases of argumentation, enables us to identify the specific antagonisms at play.

2.1 Phase 1: North against South or ‘World Class’ versus ‘The Ordinary’

An important trigger of reflection on which understandings of cities matter in urban research was Jennifer Robinson’s (2002) argument that because of its limited focus on cities in the Global North, prevailing urban theory had become obsolete (cf. the above citation from Scott/Storper 2015). This critique, supported by Ananya Roy (2009) and many others, initially and primarily targeted approaches to research on World or Global Cities which were popular during the 1990s and 2000s. This field has remained prominent to this day, especially in the guise of the *Global and World Cities Research Network* (GaWC). Based on quantitative economic data, the GaWC traces the role of cities within the global economy, as well as the relative strength of connections between them (cf. Friedmann 1986). The GaWC’s assessment is mainly based on the sector of advanced producer services, and the location of its branches and head offices (cf. Sassen 1991). Through this lens, a new geography of world cities can be observed, namely one

3 Furthermore, the conceptual heritage of previous generations of debates can be recognized in Scott and Storper’s (2015) description, especially the Marxist and politico-economic approaches which have been formulated since the 1970s by prominent theorists such as Manuel Castells (1983), Henri Lefebvre (1991) and David Harvey (1973/2009), notwithstanding their differences.

in which distance and proximity are not defined metrically, but by relational positions within the network of the global urban system, the so-called world city network (WCN, cf. Taylor 2004). This analytical artefact subsequently evolved into a world-wide benchmark for urban policy: the world class mantra remains a decisive reference for urban governance and planning as well as for economy-based urban research (cf. Michel 2010; Rogerson 2004).

Typical portrayals of this kind, by definition, show only a small selection of cities, emphasizing their asymmetrical relationship. Furthermore, because WCN research relies on a specific set of economic indicators, the choice of cities to be analysed is limited to examples for which the relevant data is available (cf. Robinson 2002). From this perspective, most Latin American and African cities are categorized as economically irrelevant and are thus largely neglected in this strand of research.

For Robinson (2010), however, world city research is just an illustration of the broader problem that urban theories are almost exclusively derived from case studies of the Global North, while cities in the Global South are at best considered (by the North) as exotic or marginal parts of the greater urban reality (cf. Heineberg 2011; Simon 1995). Robinson is equally bothered by the idea of “urban research in the context of development” or any kind of *a priori* regionalized urban research (such as ‘in Africa’, ‘in Latin America’, etc.). Robinson’s (2006; 2010) critique is thus also aimed at the prevailing division of labour in urban research (as in what is researched), namely the fact that urban and development studies often hold on to the implicit and explicit separation between the urban North (focus on theory) and the urban South (focus on development). The consequence of this division could lead to an epistemic blockade, i. e. to a dualistic framing of urban development which overlooks, for instance, “modernity” in the South (cf. Patel 2014, 50 f.) or “informality” in the North (cf. Parnell/Robinson 2012, 600). McFarlane (2010, 728) makes a similar statement by arguing that comparative urban research is “shipwrecked on the reef of developmentalism”, because cities are discursively fixed as “developed”, “developing” or “under-developed” (cf. Rothfuß/Gerhard 2014, 70).⁴

The conceptual space created by Robinson (2006; 2010)⁵ and others also calls for the inclusion of new context-specific empirical data (cf. Michel 2009). Instead of relying

- 4 At this point one could perhaps counter the post-colonial critique of World-City research by pointing out that it ignores how innovative and critically positioned World-City research was originally. With regard to methodology, for example, the hierarchy is created ex-post: the approach is based on a concept which, in principle, treats all cities equally, understanding them as ordinary cities. There is no *a priori* determination resulting, for instance, from different cultural, regional or (post-)colonial attributes. Even if the Western core primary cities represent a clear research emphasis, and the initially transformative message is no longer present in the respective publications, the World-City approach is founded upon a world-wide indicator-based case selection. However, the fact that global comparability within WCN research is obtained exclusively through economic data, thus limiting the reflection of differing urban societal contexts, remains conceptually problematic.
- 5 As Robinson points out, problems arise regarding the wider implications for urban research stemming from the WCN and Global City approaches: the term “World City” can be interpreted as a travelling model which is then used as a global city planning prototype, bringing with it all the accompanying problematic consequences, for example the focus of urban policy on unattainable growth targets (cf. Künkel 2015; Zdiara 2013).

exclusively on prefabricated data sets with a standardized range of mainly economic and demographic variables, the local societal characteristics should be reflected more broadly, moving from case studies to comparative urban research.⁶

In this vein, Sheppard et al. (2013) argue in favour of “provincializing global urbanism” as a means of incorporating the expertise and perspectives of urban majorities. Besides the analytical innovation, suggestions like these might have a transformative relevance. Sheppard et al. (2013, 897) seek to enact alternative urban futures by “worlding” “subaltern urbanism”, and to confront the hegemonic ideology of “global urbanism” with the subversive and resistant everyday tactics of the subordinated people (cf. Roy/Ong 2011).

The first phase of the debate is therefore shaped by a critique of economically-oriented approaches which epistemologically privilege the Global North. The proposed alternative is to take into account those ‘other cities’ which have been sidelined. This latter perspective is closer to the positions of the cultural and social sciences than those of economics: it describes cities as spaces of social interaction and societal imagination (cf. Hoerning 2018). An additional difference is that, while Robinson (2006) understands cities as specific forms of social space, WCN research defines them as almost monadic elements within a global (economic) system. In this latter perspective, the internal characteristics of cities would be little more than an outcome of their relative positions to one another.

2.2 Phase 2: The City vs. Urbanization

“The city is everywhere and in everything. If the urbanized world now is a chain of metropolitan areas connected by places/corridors of communication (airports and airways, stations and railways, parking lots and motorways, teleports and information highways), then what is not the urban?” (Amin/Thrift 2002, 1)

Despite the recurring critique of the 1990s and 2000s regarding the limitations of the term “city”, which is reflected in the quote above, and despite the equally present awareness of empirical changes in the urban condition, WCN and Ordinary-City concepts continue to retain the city (or a web of cities) as their central object of research; this is one of the similarities between the two approaches. This pragmatic continuity is questioned, and in fact rejected in clear terms by Brenner and Schmid (2014), applying the same argument Amin and Thrift (2002) made roughly a decade earlier. These authors deny any usefulness of the term city, thus marking the second phase of the debate. By

6 It is interesting to note that the case-based approach to cities initially promoted by Robinson is shared by her counterparts, the proponents of “northern-biased urban research”. In contrast to the deductive structure of World/Global-City approaches, however, Robinson calls for the application of inductive methods (cf. Robinson 2010). This is an epistemological difference which requires further attention. Another open question lies in determining which cities should be used as a starting point for research, and how wide the selection of case studies must be to provide fruitful results.

deconstructing the Urban Age Thesis (cf. UN Habitat 2006), which claims that because today the majority of people live in cities (and not in rural areas) a new threshold of human development has been crossed,⁷ Brenner and Schmid (2014) demonstrate how arbitrary the statistical evidence of this is, and how inconclusive the related claims of a threshold, or of specific effects of a merely quantitative observation, are (Gleeson 2012; Merrifield 2014).

Brenner and Schmid's (2014) critique of the Urban Age Thesis leads to the almost scathing conclusion that not only the city, but also the urban, are insufficient as concepts (see summary in Scott/Storper 2015); therefore, at least in their current form, they are of no further analytical value. Brenner and Schmid (2014) characterize the term city as unclear and misleading. Furthermore, they claim that, in empirical and conceptual terms, urban demarcations have become obsolete. The city, then, should be dropped as a serious object of research, and the focus should rather be on the all-encompassing processes of urbanization. How exactly this should be translated empirically, if the distinction between city and non-city is relinquished, is an open question – and indeed, this is one of the reasons why we propose a different avenue of investigation.

Assuming that the urban is the local, it is clear that this local/urban scale cannot be understood without the global (a conclusion very similar to the assumptions of the WCN, but also resonating in Robinson's (2002) critique). Thus, despite Brenner and Schmid's (2014) completely different point of departure, we again find that urban research can only be conducted properly with a global perspective.

Emphasizing this point, Brenner and Schmid (2012) use the label "Planetary Urbanization" for their new understanding of the urban. This concept acknowledges the world-wide socio-spatial transformations of the past thirty years, and follows Lefebvre's more than four-decades-old concept of "urban revolution" (Lefebvre 1970/2003) with the rise of urbanization on a planetary scale. While Lefebvre stresses the possibility of a societal transformation leading to a different (and better) future, namely that of an "urban society" (cf. Huchzermeyer 2014; 2017), for Brenner and Schmid (2012; 2014), "Planetary Urbanization" signifies that the urban is a product of exchange relations and metabolisms which span or encompass the entire globe. In short, their focus is on manifest changes on a planetary scale which need not have an emancipatory value per se (cf. Merrifield 2013). Further research, however, would then only be possible with an awareness of this supra-local/-regional/-national contextualization. The authors have thus brought the important question of the meaning of the city (and its preconditions) back into the urban research agenda.

Illustrative of this contextualization is, for example, the agricultural surplus required to sustain urban societies, and other multi-scalar metabolisms and infrastructures they rely on. These are the 'material flows' referred to by authors such as Oswald and Baccini (2004). Similar interdependencies and networks are found in other realms, whether in

7 Brenner and Schmid's position resonates with the long-lasting critique of "the city" in terms of the unsustainable binary division between "city" and "countryside" (cf. Angelo 2017; Dirksmeier 2016; Rickards et al. 2016).

the social (such as migrant workers, commuters), the economic (global investment flows, trade), or the cultural (the growing reach of social media, or hegemonic Western-based TV concepts strongly connected to self-representations of the middle class). Between all these varying forms of connections and interdependencies, for Brenner and Schmid (2012) the central focus remains on the globalization of economic trade relations.

With their definition of urbanization as a politically and economically directed process, Brenner and Schmid (2012) shift the focus away from the controversial question of the specific quality of the urban. Without denying the immense relevance of their contribution by reviving one of the fundamental debates of urban studies, which might, in the words of Rickards et al. (2016, 1531) “clear the ground for new theoretical and epistemological entry-points to help the discipline grapple with the challenges posed by 21st century urbanization”, two questions remain. If planetary urbanization is the expression of all-encompassing political-economic metabolisms, in which way, then, are different socialities (including intersectional power relations beyond the production process) to be conceptualized? And, equally important, how can these spatially and socio-economically situated configurations be understood in relation to specific spatio-temporal fixes (Jessop et al. 2008)? We argue that, in order to retain the possibility of identifying specifics and similarities of these fixes, and especially their resonance with specific social configurations which have been described as urban in one way or another, we should not neglect the analytical insights of urban sociology as much as the concept of planetary urbanization seems to suggest. And after all, if Brenner and Schmid (2014) stick to “urbanization” as a processual term, then it should at least become clear why this process is still bound to rendering something urban, instead, for instance, of what is planetarily interlinked. Therefore, as pointed out above, their perspective can be considered as being susceptible to the very same definitional problem that these authors were so adamant about drawing the reader’s attention to.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that, even without cities as somehow delimitable objects, Brenner and Schmid (2014) promote a perspective which chiefly attributes an economic-material dimension to urbanization. This is inherently similar to the approaches of Friedmann (1986), Sassen (1991) and Taylor (2014), and the same applies to their theoretical-deductive methodology.

We agree with Brenner’s (2013, 94) statement that

“the notion of the urban cannot be reduced to a category of practice; it [practice] remains a critical conceptual tool in any attempt to theorize the ongoing creative destruction of political-economic space under early twenty-first-century capitalism.”

The flipside of this statement is, however, equally valid – without social practice at various scales, urban reproduction of the conditions of accumulation would not exist.

The challenge, then, is to find working definitions, i. e. ways to discuss the urban without *a priori* ‘provincializations’ (see above), while not losing the ability to recognize the signification of differences within and between cities. These differences could be as important to inhabitants as any attempt to specify the conceptual vagueness of urbanization – and of cities.

2.3 Phase 3: Understanding All Cities?

Scott and Storper (2015) claim to be able to solve the problem of the lack of a fundamental and operational understanding of cities and therefore of the urban. Their striking thesis that all cities can be analysed and understood through the same lens rests on their argument that only two dynamics define urbanization: economic upscaling and the related organization of space. In this way, Scott and Storper (2015) revive the status of the city as the central object of research. This is not merely a response to the critique of the 'Planetary-Urbanization' approach, but also an attempt to retain scientific sovereignty by taking ownership of a global perspective and thus disarming potential future allegations of parochialism. By explicitly embracing "all cities", they demonstrate their awareness of the critiques of Robinson (2002; 2006) and other post-colonial oriented authors like Roy and Ong (2011) regarding hierarchical ethnocentrism in mainstream urban research.

Scott and Storper's (2015) concept of the city rests on a combination of economic, and socio-political arguments.⁸ Based on a historically informed, functionally and soci- etally qualified tour through the past two millennia, the authors conclude:

"the most basic *raison d'être* for cities [...] resides in their role as centers of economic production and exchange within wider systems of regional, national and international trade. Cities are always much more than this [...]; however, it is only by means of an analysis that begins with the complex spatial dynamics of economic activity that we can arrive at an account of the agglomeration dynamics common to all cities" (Scott/Storper 2015, 6).

By emphasizing the role of production and trade as central and necessary characteristics of a city, and by building upon their historical synthesis, Scott and Storper (2015) position themselves close to the mainstream of urban research. The primacy attributed to the spatial-economic dimension parallels the argumentation of David Harvey (e.g. 1985). Despite their emphasis on economic factors, however, these are combined with an array of further sociological characteristics, which are presented roughly along the lines of the Chicago School of urban sociology of the 1920s and 30s (cf. Glasze/Haferburg 2013, 479 ff.).

Scott and Storper (2015, 7) write: "the city is to the space economy as a mountain is to the wider topography in which it is contained". With this metaphor they reject Brenner's and Schmid's (2014) argument of the city's conceptual irrelevance due to a lack of consensus regarding its limits. Their counter-thesis that the "the concept would still remain useful to distinguish varying intensities of related properties from the wider context" (ibid.), however, does not disarm the conceptual critique, since it relies on a historical account that simply reiterates old categories without addressing the new theoretical and empirical challenges. Their historical account is based on a body of knowledge which privileges written artefacts with a bias towards the representation of economic produc-

8 Their understanding of cities rests on an identification of their 'central functions' as well as on tracing the social contexts in which they were embedded throughout history.

tion and exchange. While there is an explicit engagement with social relations, these are represented in pre-constructivist terms (see above, “Chicago School”), and while they indeed address all cities, they hardly respond to one of the core postcolonial requirements, namely to reflect on the articulation of historically specific power relations. Thus, the range of Scott and Storper’s (2015) approach is limited; while it provides very convincing insights into the characteristics of cities as persistent structures within wider systems of industry and trade, in relation to the selective and disintegrating contemporary urban dynamics the concept seems to have some loose ends.

2.4 Common ground and new directions: Three points of reference for contemporary urban research

What conclusions can be drawn from this debate in respect of possible research agendas for contemporary global urban phenomena? To begin with, it can be noted that regarding the central problems and empirical pathways, there is more common ground between the positions than is often recognized. All these authors share a global perspective and rather unambiguously reject *a priori* categorizations of cities. Neither *Southern urbanism* nor research focusing specifically on the cities of the Global North is on their agenda. To a certain extent, the concepts tend to emphasize the central role played by economic factors in urbanization and city development, or at least implicitly postulate such an explanatory correlation. Even Robinson (2006) describes the city as a localization of technologically charged modernity. A further implicit similarity can be seen in the fact that the urban is understood as a specific social phenomenon which is defined by factors such as density, diversity, a high-degree of social interaction, as well as a certain alienation from ‘traditional’ socio-cultural norms, and perhaps also the production of new norms (cf. Wirth 1938). Questions regarding the nature of these norms and patterns of interaction and interconnectedness, whether or not they reveal trans-regional similarities, and whatever their potential social implications might be, would have to be explored more explicitly in (possibly comparative) case studies (Robinson 2002).

Still, there remain stark contrasts between the positions. For example, there is no consensus over whether the ‘isolated’ city can be a legitimate object of research; in the light of multivariate connections between cities, multifunctional city regions, suburbanization and peri-urbanization, this question remains open. Furthermore, it is unclear whether idiographic or inductive approaches can serve as useful first steps towards a comprehensive ex post interpretation of urban patterns, or if it makes sense to search for ex post classifications of the city or the urban at all. By means of an interim conclusion, it can be stated that despite all the differences in the conceptual discussion, three common assumptions can be identified:

1. Contemporary urban configurations must be contextualized in a potentially global perspective, as complex, heterogenous nodes in a context of other nodes on various scales, which can be related and compared to each other.

2. There is a common socio-economic thread running through the debates which may be illustrated by the idea that the economy (including its indicators) must be interpreted as an expression of specific socio-spatial arrangements and vice versa.
3. Urbanity manifests itself as a situated concentration of interactions, whether economic/material or social. The local navigation of supra-regional flows must thus be taken into account.

A proven theoretical perspective to understand these navigations can be found in the realm of practice theory, which seeks to explain the relationality between human action, on the one hand, and different scalar entities (from local to global), on the other hand. This relational approach seeks to resolve the antinomy between structuralist theories and “methodological individualism”, which attempts to explain all social phenomena in terms of individual actions (Bourdieu 1977).

We now turn to the question what this could mean for the conceptual backdrop of a contemporary urban research agenda.

3. Multiple urbanisms in an emerging ‘global urban society’⁹ – towards a conceptually framed urban research agenda

Current arguments in urban studies indicate the need to rethink urban theory for the various reasons described above. One of the problems is that dominant urban theories are mainly based on research in Western cities, implying a bias towards these (McFarlane 2010; Robinson 2006). Metropolises like New York or Paris are still thought of as generic points of reference for analysing phenomena such as urban economies, land markets, or gentrification. In contrast, “mega-cities” in the Global South are most often approached and conceptualized through the lens of “developmentalism” or, more recently, Southern urbanism (Parnell/Robinson 2012; Patel 2014; Schindler 2017; also see the article by Sandra Kurfürst and Ulrike Gerhard in this special issue).

Another challenge is the tendency to frame cities primarily from an economic perspective based on trade and production. Very often this perspective is linked to normative interpretations of cities of the future as hubs of innovation and creativity, and related to planning and governance imperatives focusing on the respective sectors, and on marketing and visibility. The practices of city dwellers across the globe and their contributions to the reproduction of the ‘urban’ are often overlooked.

In the light of this critique, we argue firstly that there is a need to relate the urban to a global dimension; secondly, that our understanding of cities should be based on a

9 The concept of a global urban society is not meant to provide a theory of the city. Rather, it places past and current transformations towards a society based on urban rationalities in a global perspective. Urban society, then, is in the process of being globalized without becoming a world society. The term “global urban society” thus captures an emerging phenomenon which is constituted by intra- and interurban processes of socialization (*Vergesellschaftung*).

societal perspective, which reconciles the dominant economic focus with an awareness of social practice; and thirdly, that this practice needs to be acknowledged in its local articulation.

What does this mean for urban theory? As a starting point, the range of the concepts at play has to be assessed. Likewise, there is the question of how a global perspective can be integrated without reducing the empirical base to standardized international datasets. One also has to be cautious of postulating generalizations based on limited case studies, for, even if urban pathways are addressed in a differentiated way, these are often based on a few selected and over-represented cities – in the Global South, this might be Mumbai ('the Indian' city) and Rio de Janeiro ('the Brazilian' city).¹⁰

Comparative urbanism has been suggested as a way out of these traps, avoiding the regional compartmentalization of urban research, as well as the shortcomings of the objectivistic metric approach (cf. Kantor/Savitch 2005; Ward 2010; McFarlane 2010; McFarlane/Robinson 2012). Robinson (2006, 1), for example, suggests urban research should draw inspiration from the complexity and diversity of urban experiences, as well as from related scholarship across a wide range of "ordinary cities", rather than privileging experiences and studies of "Western" cities. In another approach, Simone (2014, 34) introduces the term "near-South" as "an instrument of translation among distinctions that do not really exist but still have purchase on our ways of knowing about the urban world". Building on these considerations, our concept of a global urban society strives to overcome the North-South divide without perceiving comparative urbanism as the only route, nor following the assumptions of planetary urbanization or adhering to the idea of the city as a concept and entity.

The second argument, namely to address cities from a societal perspective, brings us back to Henri Lefebvre's "urban revolution" (1970/2003). He argues that this revolution could mark the rise of an urban society which might be understood as a utopian though but "possible world" (cf. Purcell 2014, 151; Huchzermeyer 2017). Like any other revolution, it would imply structural changes within society and new rationalities, classes and movements. If we follow Brenner and Schmid (2012), this revolution has indeed produced a "planetary urbanization". But if this is really all-encompassing, then why should we privilege economic or material relations in order to trace its effects? Thus, while most of the paradigms in the current debate on urban theory put economic relations before social relations, we propose – based on the reflections on contemporary social theory outlined above – to systematically include other dimensions of urbanity, such as social dynamics and transformations, in order to develop a sufficiently balanced analytical stance to approach urban questions.

In line with Lefebvre's (1970/2003) dictum of an "urban revolution", Pierre Bourdieu was intrigued by the transformative power of urbanization as a process of societal

10 For example, while mentioning about 80 cities, North and South, Routledge's 'Handbook on Cities of the Global South' addresses only about 24 southern cities more than twice, and with almost no exception, these are the biggest two or three cities of the respective countries (about a dozen cities of the BRICS countries plus a dozen other capital or primate cities).

change (Bourdieu/Sayad 1964; Wacquant 2018). However, whereas Lefebvre discovered the importance of the city as a condition of capitalist production in its own right, simultaneously linked to its contestation thereof in urban life, and no longer primarily on the shop floor, Bourdieu's view of 'the urban', and therefore also of urbanization, was based on its contrast to the rural. In a recent article, Loic Wacquant claims that this is where we find the real "lost urban sociology of Bourdieu" (Wacquant 2018, 97; cf. Bridge 2011, 77 f.). At the time of Bourdieu's early writings in the 1950s and 1960s, the process of urbanization had triggered enormous societal changes in Algeria and France alike. By way of example, Bourdieu mentions unsynchronized temporalities and fragmented socio-spatial environments (cf. Wacquant 2018). New relations of power had been translated into new ways of living, highlighted by the city and 'quasi-urban' formations such as (refugee) camps. This transformation of the modes of production, as well as of socio-spatial arrangements, continues until to this day. It generates the archipelagos of contemporary urban life-worlds, exemplified by favelas, townships and informal settlements, as well as suburbia and the fortified enclaves of the gated ghetto.

Urbanization, then, is not exclusively linked to industrial modernization, but can only be understood fully if we consider its societal spin-offs. The city is a permanent vanishing point of present-day utopias, linked to the constant uprooting of places to live and effectively displacing even the remotest rural areas 'at a distance'. In our reading of Bourdieu, it is the societal dimension of the urban that can shed light on the blind spots pointed out above in our reflection on the debate on the 'substance' of urban theory. In his later work, Bourdieu (1991) elaborated on the link between social injustice and its spatial articulation. Localized field effects shape neighbourhoods, thus constituting the performative power of a habitat (Haferburg 2007; 2017) – an analogy to Bourdieu's central concept of habitus. Our third conceptual point is thus that we need to develop a 'global sense of place' – following Doreen Massey's argument (1994) that, in spite of the proclaimed annihilation of space through time, place as a product of social relations continues to matter.

By asking questions about the starting points of our reflections ('*By which cities are we informed?*') and the range of the specific research we are involved in ('*What urban contexts are we talking about?*'), we hope to place the insights gained in a relation to their societal context, and to highlight possible limitations of the claims thus made. These insights do not necessarily rely on national boundaries or on classical containerized representations of societies: in an urban world, we should relate urban processes across the globe to each other, working out how they operate in different localities and across different scales and territories. We suggest framing these processes in the following way:

1. The concept of a (nascent) *global urban society* is focused on an interconnected societal space. Its theme is the transformation towards a society in which urban rationalities become dominant. Urban society is globalized without becoming a single world society. Urban, then, is what extends contingency and is regulated by communication as follows: urban contingency is the co-existence of different multidimensional orders and structures, as well as the ability of inhabitants to navigate these. Urban communication thus entails a capacity to embrace ambiguity. Sennett (2000) depicts this as public life and the ability to live with differences.

2. As an epistemic consequence, the perspective of a *global urban society* transcends the North-South divide in urban research. By focusing on society in an urban world, this approach moves beyond (post-)colonial dichotomies. Everyday urban life is understood as a global phenomenon. Research questions to be addressed here would then have to focus on the connections that link urban practice across regions and scales, or, more specifically, on the relations that constitute the societal realm. Furthermore – in line with the idea of overlapping orders, archipelagos and habitats sketched out above – socio-spatial practices should be distinguished by reflecting on their different relation to societal positions, and to spatio-temporal structures.
3. The limitation of research to specific cities or to *a priori* regionalized urban contexts (such as the ‘European city’, the ‘Oriental city’, or ‘Northern vs. Southern cities’) fails to understand both commonalities and differences across and between various urban formations. This conceptual problem of the range of urban theory (closely linked to the lack of a common understanding in respect of what constitutes a city), however, is only one side of the void. Empirically, the representation of the dynamics of global change would not be complete without acknowledging the process of urbanization. The current urban transformation is indeed all-encompassing, an observation that resonates in the policies of the UN (for instance in the SDGs), in the HABITAT III publications, or in the documents of scientific advisory boards (for example, the prestigious WBGU Report (2016) dedicated to the theme “Humanity on the move: The transformative power of cities”). A vast number of related research projects have described the urban production of linkages and similarities as a driving force behind the accelerated economic, residential, consumptive, infrastructural and other dynamics. Along with this, and in a complementary way, processes of innovation and differentiation are steadily creating new and distinct modes of urban life. As a consequence, and in the light of both a theoretical assessment and empirical observations, we are advocating a perspective that is linked to the term *global urban society*.

Acknowledging the multifaceted composition of the urban, while avoiding fragmentation into *a priori* categories, leads us to suggest approaching the urban as a socio-spatial relation. We will now turn to the question of how this can be done, how the conceptual idea of an emerging global urban society can be translated into a methodologically grounded research approach to understand urbanity in a relational way, or, in short, how to establish relational urbanity as a preliminary research programme.

4. Beyond the global-local dichotomy: ‘Relational urbanity’ as a research perspective

The crisis of modernity, and modern (social) theory in particular, has produced a wide range of new approaches not only to issues in the social sciences. One of these innovations in social theory is the development of a relational perspective in thinking and

theorizing about social and societal conditions (Donati 2015). Although not really a new thought (see Berger and Luckmann's social constructivist manifesto of 1966), the specific argument of relationality can be considered as a new way of conceptualizing social relations in urban theory. Its basic rejection of concepts that consider social facts ('*faits sociaux*' in Durkheim's words), groups and places as entities with singular qualities can be considered as its common epistemic ground. This thinking should be superseded by conceptualizing the relation to other social facts that brings them into being. Relational theory tries to move beyond classical dualisms such as objectivism/subjectivism, nature/culture, mind/body, social structures/agency and the rural / the urban (Donati 2015). Emirbayer (1997, 287) has argued that "relational theorists reject the notion that one can posit discrete, pre-given units such as the individual or society as ultimate starting points of sociological analysis." This thinking has amounted to a

"quiet revolution in social science, turning from units to context, from attributes to connections, from causes to events, and, one might add, from substances to networks, from essences to relations" (Abbott 1995, 93).

To understand social practice in a relational way, one should take

"the basic units of social analysis to be neither individual entities (agent, actor, person, firm) nor structural wholes (society, order, social structure) but the relational processes of interaction between and among identities" (Tilly 2002, 14).

Urban society, then, is neither a social space "containing" relations, nor an arena where relations play out; it is rather the very tissue of relations (Donati 2015). Society is relation, or, as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 232) put it, "the real is the relational".

Thus, *relational space* refers to the reciprocal adaptation and conditioning of physical space and human practice. Urban space results from relationships and activities, while in turn also shaping these relationships and activities. As a consequence, it is impossible to separate physical background and social activity – they should instead be seen as different aspects of a social and material whole (cf. Massey 2005, 279 ff.).

Relational urbanity starts where people are involved in a phenomenon that belongs as much to the urban form and fabric as to the social relations that constitute the urban subject(s). Conceptually, urbanity is a kind of spatiality, understood as a relationship between space, place and people based on intersubjective experiences of living together. Because of the interconnectedness of its constituting elements, this relationship may unfold in various dimensions and scales. However, in line with Massey's (1994) observation on the "sense of place", and against the background of the insights offered by practice theory (cf. Bourdieu 1998, Reckwitz 2003), the crucial epistemological realm for researching the urban is constituted by situations where urbanity is produced and shaped. Methodologically, this translates into focusing on "localities" (cf. Korff 2003; Appadurai 1995, 204), which are linked to daily routines as much as to changing practices.

When trying to make sense of urban arrangements – which in some instances may be addressed in cities – the urban neighbourhood level is pivotal, where the socio-spatial organization allows for face-to-face interactions and everyday life takes place. In these

“lived spaces” (Lefebvre 1991, 39), situated processes (especially within person-based social relationships common in loose networks) are stabilized through mutual interests articulated over a period of time. Neighbourhood, as well as joint working and collective activities, are means by which tolerance, even “civil inattention” (Goffman 1972, 126) and diversity are facilitated. Enhanced coordination and cooperation allows for differentiation and specialization within city and society. Multiple social relations and interdependencies between inhabitants developing out of work, trade, neighbourhood, kinship or friendship become stabilized through organizational structures, space and time. What defines a locality are the (local) organizations that have the capacity to define and maintain spatial boundaries (Berner/Korff 1995; Korff 2003). To some extent, social interaction is always spatially bound and never covers all scalar dimensions and spatial ranges. As specific outcomes of interaction, spatial linkages are constantly created and re-created, and different places are favoured, less favoured or avoided.

However, locality is not a homogeneous object; multiple forms and dimensions are possible (Duncan/Savage 1989). Locality, then, is not an autonomous unit, but sits at the intersection of diverse cultural, social, economic and political interventions: it is a relational space that is continuously constructed and reconstructed over time (Brickell/Datta 2011; Anderson et al. 2012).

From this perspective, *relational localities* appear as a human condition. North-South divisions in urban theory would therefore be rendered obsolete. But to what degree do localities have to be conceptualized as being relational? This makes empirical investigations crucial, in order to show how social relations shape the urban sphere and which kind and dimensions of relations are ‘at stake’ in a Bourdieusian sense. To frame this heuristic research programme, we have identified at least four important dimensions which are interwoven while their articulation differs:

(1) In a scalar perspective: How do localities relate to regional, national or “global ethnoscapes” (Appadurai 1991, 191 ff.)? (2) Regarding regional expansion: How are localities connected in rural-urban interrelations? (3) In their ‘situatedness’: How are localities embedded through self-organized practices (*autogestion*)? (4) In urban form and practice: In which way are socio-material relations articulated within the built environment, and vice versa?

In short, these four dimensions acknowledge representations of scale, space/territory, place and form (materialities, networks or flows), which can be understood as a synthesis of contemporary geographical thought.¹¹

11 Of course, these dimensions and their theoretical heritage would need to be unpacked and specified according to the particular research interest. Our list, however, roughly corresponds to the four TPSN (territory, scale, place, network) dimensions suggested in Jessop et al. (2008).

5. Concluding remarks and contextualization of the articles

Based on a critique of the ongoing debate on the categorization of cities, on an appropriate understanding of the urban, and on the relevance of these terms as conceptual avenues to research for investigating contemporary societal transformations linked to the changes and expansions of human settlements, this paper has developed three methodological proposals: firstly the need to relate the urban to a global dimension; secondly, that an understanding of cities should be based on an interpretation of social practice as a relational concept, and thirdly, that this practice has to be acknowledged in its local articulation, which is nothing other than a situated expression of the intersected scales and dimensions of urbanity. The common horizon of these theoretical and empirical points of reference is represented by the relational aspects of societal (as well as spatial) articulations of urbanity as a social product. The four heuristic dimensions for approaching this horizon are the relational aspects of scale, space/territory, place and form, and their respective representations. The following contributions to this special issue stress the significance of such renewed perspectives on the urban world, and they respond to this challenge by elaborating different elements along these reflections.

Aside from the introductory article to this special issue by Christoph Haferburg and Eberhard Rothfuß, further conceptual reflections are presented by Ulrike Gerhard in her article on “Mega City, Slumdog City, Global City – Relicts of urban research beyond the global urban society?”. In this paper, Gerhard takes the recent debate on “planetary” or “cosmopolitan” urbanism/urbanization as a starting point for confronting the more “classic” concepts of “mega” and “global” cities, in order to examine whether these are becoming increasingly obsolete. How can the critique be channelled into improving research on cities? The article tries to answer these questions by structuring the debate into three arguments in respect of the significance of a Southern perspective on urban studies, the difficulties of provincializing urban theory, and the implications for developing a new epistemology of the urban. Finally the article offers an insight into the need and complexity of *doing comparative urban research*. This proposition can be understood as a research agenda capable of tackling conceptual challenges of research on global urban issues.

In the third paper, “The Role of Conflict and the Production of the Urban, or: The Urban, the Rural, and the Political”, Johanna Hoerning sheds light on urban theory, encompassing classic accounts, just as much as on the current debates on planetary urbanization and postcolonial urban theory. She argues critically that, in order to advance urban theory, certain aspects of these different accounts need to be integrated: a perspective on social change, a thorough analysis of the urban as an analytical category that relates to the city and to processes of urbanization, and the careful observation of historical and social differentiations. The core thesis is that the political potentiality of urban and rural spaces differs. This is very much related to the fact that power relations between opponents within urban and rural contexts may vary greatly and thereby alter conflict dynamics. This is illustrated by the Brazilian case of urban and rural struggles over land, territory and property.

The final article on “Multiple Urbanisms – a Lefebvrian Perspective on Public Space” by Sandra Kurfürst questions concepts taken for granted in urban studies, such as “public space”, and argues that they need to be rethought. Based on Henri Lefebvre’s notion that every society produces its own space, the paper zooms in on the practices, meanings and representations of public space in Hanoi, Vietnam. It also shows how urbanites continuously transform former spaces of officialdom into public spaces through their everyday practices. On this basis the paper identifies the dimensions of state, sacredness and privacy as being essential to the de-/coding of public spaces in Hanoi. Kurfürst contributes to a questioning of long-established concepts of public space and the public sphere developed with reference to Northern cities, and highlights the tension between universalism and particularism in urban studies.

Together, all four contributions provide closely related ways to link theoretical and empirical urban research to a global perspective. By transcending established *regionalizations* in more than one sense, they sketch out conceptual and methodological steps for integrating societal and socio-spatial dimensions of urbanity. In this way, they provide further points of reference for understanding an emerging global urban society.

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