

Julia Lossau

# SPACE AND THE CITY: REFLECTING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SPATIAL CATEGORIES IN URBAN STUDIES

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades “space” has become a central concept in both the social sciences and the humanities. In line with a much-quoted remark by Michel Foucault, alleging that the “present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space” (Foucault 1986: 23), many disciplines – from sociology and political science to cultural and literary studies – have witnessed a revitalization of spatial categories: notions like “space”, “place”, “topography” or “topology” have been taken up again in disciplines that have previously been characterized by a certain “oblivion of space” (Werlen 2000).

Despite the fact that questions of space have been discussed for quite some time now, the contours of what is actually under debate have remained surprisingly blurred. This may on the one hand be due to the large number of disciplines involved which, despite all rhetoric of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, have pursued their own interests in and with spatial categories. On the other hand, “space” has remained a word with almost magic power, capable of “conjuring up exactly what is supposed to be said” (Nassehi 1998: 152, transl. JL).

Against such a background, the purpose of the present paper is twofold. First, it aims at reconstructing the performative power of “space” in urban studies, discussing in particular the significance of spatial categories in the conceptual background of German-speaking urban sociology. Secondly, it records the reactions which the so-called spatial turn has effected in the interdisciplinary field of urban studies. Again, a special focus is on the field of German-speaking urban sociology, highlighting an approach preoccupied with the “intrinsic logic of cities” (Löw 2012).

## DELIMITING THE SUBJECT

The question of the significance of “space” in urban studies is as well rehearsed as it is answered inconsistently. The field of urban sociology, for instance, is said to be “confronted with the problematic of space when it comes to the question of whether and how to define its subject matter – the city” (Steets 2008: 391, transl. JL). The starting point of the related discussions is the question of whether the study subject, i.e. the city, is constituted mainly by its spatial dimension or whether it is not rather an object to be grounded sociologically. In other words: are cities more or less large, more or less clearly defined, more or less fragmented entities which are, after all, geographically locatable on the surface of the earth? Or are cities rather defined by their social qualities, i.e. by their particular urban ways of life that have, in the course of urbanization, apparently become ubiquitous at least in the countries of the Global North (for the more radical idea of a “planetary urbanization” see Brenner/Schmid 2015) and have turned the European city into what has been called a “laboratory of modernity”?

In the majority of contributions to the field elements of both ideas can be traced. As early as in Georg Simmel’s classical essay on “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (Simmel 1984), the spatial (or geographical) and the sociological imagination of the city go hand in hand with each other in a very specific way. In Simmel’s sociological reflections on the nature of the urban dweller, the metropolis merely figures as the spatial backdrop, i.e. Simmel’s main interest is not in the multiple ways in which urban space is constituted. He rather presupposes the city as a given entity, separated from the countryside. This focus on the social that leaves the spatial unchallenged allows him to represent the city as a setting or laboratory of modern life, which is characterized by “the blasé attitude”, by reserve

and indifference. The city is for Simmel, as he writes in an essay on the “sociology of space” (1903: 35; transl. JL), “not a spatial fact with sociological effects, but a sociological fact that forms in space”.

A similar blending of the spatial and the sociological imagination of the city can be found in a later approach that was adopted, in the German-speaking context, by urban sociologists Hartmut Häußermann and Walter Siebel (Häußermann/Siebel 1978). In a counter-movement to the *Gemeindesoziologie* (municipal sociology) as “an older sociology of the city” (ibid.: 484) and in contrast to the seeming duality in Simmel’s classical essay, they postulate that the contrast between city and countryside had dissolved “into a more-or-less of the same” (ibid.: 486; transl. JL). As a consequence, Häußermann and Siebel dismiss the idea of the city as a spatially delimited sociological entity. As their focus is on the polarizing dynamics economic process, they are rather interested in the role the city plays in the context of capitalist socialization: “In short”, they write, “the question is not: what does urban life mean compared to rural life, but rather: what does urban development mean for the development of class relations” (ibid.: 469, transl. JL)?

This question is central to an urban sociology preoccupied with questions of political economy that, borrowing from the works of Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey, has influenced the mainstream of (non-applied or merely descriptive) urban sociology for several decades (see Steets 2008; Löw 2008). The basic assumption of the so-called “New Urban Sociology” (Häußermann/Kemper 2005), according to which any attempt to delimit the city as a subject has become suspicious after the end of the urban-rural dichotomy, is put in a nutshell in Peter Saunder’s standard work on “Social Theory and the Urban Question”

(Saunders 1981) (see Steets 2008). In 1992, German sociologist Thomas Krämer-Badoni finally argues “that any attempt to define of the city in sociological terms (...) must fail because in that the city can be defined neither physically nor socially and cannot be distinguished from society as a whole” (Krämer-Badoni 1992: 2, transl. JL). The concomitant rejection of a geographical notion of the city, however, does not imply a rejection of spatial categories as such. An analysis of the performance of “space” in the works of New Urban Sociology (e.g. Häußermann/Siebel 1987) reveals that the idea of the city as spatial entity is nonetheless of great significance. The same is true for spatial entities on a smaller scale, namely urban districts, areas or neighborhoods.

### “THE INTRINSIC LOGIC OF CITIES”

A surprising turn in the debate on “space” in urban studies took place only recently with an approach that has become popular under the heading of the “intrinsic logic of cities” (Berking/Löw 2005; 2008; Löw 2008; Löw 2012). This approach is based on the observation that urban studies – and urban sociology in particular – are characterized by a peculiar blind spot in that the city, i.e. the individual city as such, is usually not considered as a distinct object of knowledge: “Why is there no cognitive interest in the city as a specific object”, asks Martina Löw (2008: 16; transl. JL) in her book “Soziologie der Städte”? “Why is so little attention paid to the phenomenon that some cities, despite comparable structural starting conditions, come to terms with the challenges of the social change easier and more successfully than other cities? Why is nobody (in academia, JL) systematizing the knowledge that planners have – and apply for quite some time – of the different ways in which cities operate? Why do scientists hardly try to start and formulate hypotheses about the

structural composition of these different ways of operating and about how the elements that make up the different ways of operating can be grasped conceptually” (ibid., trans. JL)?

These questions are answered by the scholars of the “intrinsic logic” approach with reference to the supposed orthodoxy of New Urban Sociology which is said to have departed from the city as a category of analysis and to have directed its interest instead to the social conditions in cities and on the functional logic of cities in the context of capitalist development. In a corrective counter-movement to the collateral “subsumption of the city under society” (ibid.: 32), a theory of the city is established which is meant to underline the significance of the (specific) city and to pay particular attention to both the idiosyncrasy of cities and the differences between them: “In the planning sciences, in historical studies, in local political research, but particularly in everyday non-scientific discourse there is wide knowledge of the differences between Cologne, Munich, Berlin, Hamburg and Frankfurt am Main or of the distinction between Cologne, Dusseldorf, Duisburg and Dortmund; also the cities of Bensheim and Heppenheim are compared, only sociology has not found a theoretical place for the consideration of these differences” (ibid. : 38-39, transl. JL).

A related effort to take seriously the individual nature of cities and thus to put the city as such in the center of the research agenda has been developed in urban anthropology (Lindner 2003; 2005). In an attempt to conceptually understand the specific nature of different cities, Pierre Bourdieu’s habitus concept is applied to the city: “To speak of a habitus of a city (...) is to argue that cities, due to ‘biographical’ solidification, are closer to certain lines of development while other lines are more distant; in the idea of ‘path dependence’ this argument

is, praxeologically abridged, already included” (Lindner, 2005: 64, transl. JL). In an empirical analysis of the “biographical” characteristics of cities, semantic differentials served as matrices of potential properties from which typical profiles of given cities were to be derived (Lindner 2003). Representing well-established methodological tools, semantic differentials usually consist of lists of selected adjectives – such as “mundane, vulgar, arrogant, dynamic, aloof, alternative, cosmopolitan, industrial, open, conservative, cultured and hard-working” (Lindner, 2003: 49, transl. JL). The lists were submitted to ninety students of social anthropology which participated in the study. What came out is “that the appearance of a given city is not composed of discrete properties but is based on a particular, distinct combination of properties which becomes apparent in comparison with others” (Lindner, 2003: 49, transl. JL). In detail, the following characteristics have been identified: “The city of Essen is (...) industrial and hard-working, but definitely not classy, Frankfurt is dynamic and hard-working, but by no means conservative, Stuttgart is conservative and hard-working, but definitely not alternative” (ibid., transl. JL).

Although these results may be instructive at first sight, it is obvious that “property surveys” of cities do not disclose the characteristics or styles of the cities themselves, but rather the images and ideas that the participants have of these cities. Similar to the “intrinsic logic” approach of urban sociology, urban anthropology interested in the habitus of cities predominantly delivers image or stereotype research. Although research about spatial images and stereotypes (Hamburg as the “cool beauty”, Berlin as “poor but sexy”, Frankfurt as “Mainhattan” etc.) generates interesting results (see, e.g., the study of Eisenhüttenstadt in Weichhart/Weiske/Werlen 2006), the “intrinsic logic” approach runs into

the risk of confusing stereotypes with reality by presenting images of the cities as properties of the cities themselves. This is not to deny that the images “ordinary people” have of individual cities may be unambiguous. What is interesting from a researcher’s perspective, however, is to explore how such unambiguity is produced within society. Which are the political, cultural or social strategies of identification and essentialization by which widespread images or stereotypes come into being in the first place? What can be researched, subsequently, are the social impacts and effects that are connected with these images in order to show why, to repeat Martina Löw’s question, “some cities, despite comparable structural starting conditions, come to terms with the challenges of the social change easier and more successfully than other cities” (Löw, 2008: 16, transl. JL)?

### CONCLUSION

According to Martina Löw and Helmuth Berking, the “intrinsic logic of cities” approach developed “against the background of the assumptions of space theory” (Löw 2008, transl. JL) and in the context of “modern concepts of space” (Berking/Löw 2005, transl. JL). This emphasis on space leads back to the starting point of this paper. “Space”, it has been argued at the beginning, is a magic word that conjures up exactly what is supposed to be said. During the paper’s excursion into the history of urban sociology, it became obvious that urban studies have been endowed with certain spatial ideas from their institutional beginning. Against such a background, the assertion that “space” had been underprivileged prior to the spatial turn is not convincing. It can be argued instead that the claim of a new significance of “space” is based on a cognitive shift. Indeed, the debate of the significance of “space” can be regarded primarily as the *debate* of the new significance of “space” (Lossau 2012).

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