# Urbanity through Time, Space and Place

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**ABSTRACT**

The idea of urbanity is contested. This contribution considers two opposing strands of sociological theories on urbanity, namely structural and cultural, shedding a light on their relation to time, place and space. We will show that, in a world where cities remain identifiable as concentrated big settlements in space, only conceptual time shifts allow for the structuralist notion of a spaceless urbanity. On the other hand, cultural concepts tend to oversee overarching socio-cultural features that are shared by cities over time and space. The time-geographical idea of a future space of opportunities/future prism will be related to existing sociological theories on urbanity so as to determine its potential as a means to connect these two strands of urban theory.

**KEYWORDS**

Urbanity, Urban sociology, City space, Urban cultures, Time Geography

**RÉSUMÉ**

L'idée d'urbanité est contestée parmi et entre les sujets. Cette contribution examine deux volets opposés des théories sociologiques d'urbanité, à savoir les théories structurelles et culturelles, mettant en lumière leur relation avec le temps, lieu et espace. Nous soulignerons que, dans un monde où les villes restent identifiables comme de grandes colonies concentrées dans l'espace, seuls les décalages temporels permettent la notion d'une urbanité en dehors des restrictions spatiales. D'autre part, des concepts culturels tendent à superviser les caractéristiques socio-culturelles globales qui sont partagées par les villes autour du temps et de l'espace. En fin de compte, les deux approches ont chacune une part de vérité. L'idée de la *time-geography* d'un futur espace d'opportunités / futur prisme sera mise en relation avec les théories sociologiques existantes sur l'urbanité afin de déterminer son potentiel comme moyen de relier ces deux volets de la théorie urbaine.

**MOTS-CLÉS**

urbanité, sociologie urbaine, espace urbaine, cultures urbaines, *time-geography*

## 1. URBANITY. A CONTESTED CONCEPT

"Urbanity" –this term beholds many promises. Promises of advance and modernity, sophistication, freedom, pulsing cultural and economic life, to name but a few attributes connected with the city both in scientific and in public discourse. As contemporary as the term might sound, the idea of urbanity as an intangible socio-cultural quality evoked by city life is quite old. It dates back to ancient Greece (named then *asteiotes*), where it described the *poleis'* inhabitants cultivated manners, refine verbal expression and tolerance in comparison to the so-perceived uncultivated and clumsy manners of the rural population. The concept has been later adopted in ancient Rome, where the terminological foundation has been laid with the word *urbanitas* (derived from *urbs,* city).

Urbanity has experienced a new heyday research-wise with the rise of modern urban sociology at the wake of the 20th century. The term has undergone a spurring development since then. The by now manifold theories on urbanity within and across subjects have led to an increasing disagreement about the concept, turning it into a somewhat empty signifier by the turn of the millennium. The definitory challenges are fuelled by discrepancies concerning the wording (does urbanity describe the same as urbanism?) and questions on its scope and scale (is it mainly a socio-cultural concept or also a political and/or economic one? Is urbanity rather bound to certain places or types of space; is it inscribed in society overall, or at the level of the individual?). This contribution filters urbanity down to the level of the individual, connecting it to Hägerstrand's time-geographic idea of the individual's pat that is demarcated by time-space constraints (1970). Before that, a theoretic time-space problem is presented by shedding a light on two opposing strands of sociological

theories on urbanity, namely structural and cultural. It will be shown that, in a world where cities remain identifiable as concentrated big settlements in space, only conceptual time shifts allow for the structuralist notion of a spaceless urbanity. Nevertheless, structural features should not be dismissed and simply replaced by place-specific cultural traits in the search for an appropriate theory on urbanity, if the concept is not to lose its overarching character as a feature that distinguishes city life and culture from other types of space. Introducing the concept of time-geography in urbanity research might be a means to propitiate the opposing structural and cultural positions in sociological urbanity research.

## 2. THEORIES ON URBANITY AND THEIR RELATION TO TIME, PLACE AND SPACE

Since decades, a majority of urban sociology and urban geography is proclaiming an ongoing disentangling of the city as a big, densely populated spatial structure, and of urbanity as a social quality (among others: Lefebvre, 1990; Brenner & Schmid, 2011; Soja, 2013). This position is faced by voices insisting on urbanity remaining the offspring of the city to this day (among others: Fischer, 1975; Berking & Löw, 2008; Roy, 2016; Schindler, 2017). The immediate, yet non-exclusive, connection to city space and to social, cultural, economic and/or political life within it makes up for the idea of urbanity at its core. This point is largely agreed upon in urban sociology and urban geography. Almost all theories on urbanity are thus informed by a somehow spatially bound conceptualisation of city life. How can urbanity leave the city behind then? A structuralist answer to this question has been given by early urban sociologist Louis Wirth in the 1930s already: "Rural life will bear the imprint of urbanism [used here a synonym for urbanity] in the measure that [...] it comes under the influence of cities" (1938: 7). Cultural theories on urbanity proceed inversely: Instead of defining overall, structural characteristics of cities and urban societies, cultural theories stick with specific times, places and (usually) city spaces, inducing their urbanities (in plural!) by individual analyses.

The following two sections shed a light on these contradictory strands of urban theory on the basis of selected examples. At the end of this contribution, a path will be outlined for reconciling structural with cultural approaches, among others building on ideas from Hägerstrand's concept of time-geography (1970).

### 2.1. Urbanity through the Time Machine: Structuralist Approaches

In 1970, Henri Lefebvre presents the idea of an all-encompassing urbanisation in his *Révolution urbaine*. The theory recurs to the capitalist economic system and its social consequences, which is predicted to spread into the most remote corners of the globe. While at that time Lefebvre considers global urbanisation only as a possibility, it is described as the unavoidable outcome of ongoing capitalist development (Lefebvre, 1990). Likewise, the concept of Postmodern Urbanism focuses on capitalism and its socio-spatial outcomes. Fragmented spatial expressions of capitalism, like urban sprawl or exclusionary spatial developments, serve as the main reason for postmodern urbanists to proclaim the end of the city (Soja, 2013). A city-specific theory on urbanity seems outdated in the light of global economic connections and processes which increasingly supersede local structures.

Brenner and Schmid (2011) directly refer to Lefebvre in their theory of a "Planetary Urbanisation". Accordingly, the urban is not a distinguishable socio-spatial unit anymore, but has turned into a process closely interlinked with capitalism. It takes shape through spatial concentration of people, goods or knowledge on the one hand and spatial extension, marked by the exploitation of resources, on the other hand. Planetary Urbanisation takes shape through this extension of urban –i.e. capitalist– processes into the most remote corners of the globe.

Like the examples above, several structural theories on urbanity are built up around the political economy. With capitalism at the heart of these theories, other possible indicators for urbanity are merely being explained through capitalist structures and processes, if they come to play at all. While it would thus be evident to claim a *global capitalisation*, the theories presented do not reach far enough to call out the end of the city, or, vice versa, a *global urbanisation*.

In addition, claims of a spaceless urbanity usually refer to typical characteristics of city life in the past –in this case to capitalism– which are being mirrored in contemporary society. They only succeed in leaving the city behind with the help of a conceptual time-shift, applying formerly typical characteristics of city life to other epochs (as well as to other places). The spatialness of urbanity is thus being superseded by means of its temporal fixation to a certain point in urban history.

Two questions arise from these structuralist approaches to urbanity. First: What dimensions of city life are actually sound to display urbanity? Second: When is the right time and the right place to fix a meaning for urbanity? One might argue that capitalism is/was a powerful indicator of city life. Does this justify the equation

of capitalism with urbanity through times, places and spaces, though? Cultural theories on urbanity draw more versatile pictures of the topic.

### 2.2. Time-Space-Place Fixes or 1 000 Urbanities in 1 000 Cities: Culturalist Approaches

"Postcolonial Urbanism", a comparably recent topic in the field of Urban Studies, sheds a light on the varieties of urbanity in the Global South (Schindler, 2017; Roy, 2016). The approaches are manifold, oftentimes built around individual cities or city regions, which makes it impossible to describe one congruent theoretical position of Postcolonial Urbanism. What unifies them is their criticism of hegemonic Western theories on urbanity centred on political economy. Such structural approaches are considered deficient when it comes to capturing everyday-life social and material realities of millions of urban dwellers around the world.

The "Intrinsic Logic of Cities" (Berking & Löw, 2008) is marked by the idea that each city bears its very own kind of urban culture which expresses itself locally through interactions of the built environment with people's perceptions and with symbolisms as well as with institutional structures. Similar to Postcolonial Urbanism, the concept paves the way to capture urbanities in cities that might not be considered to be typically urban, like shrinking or medium-sized cities or cities in the Global South.

Both Postcolonial Urbanism and the Intrinsic Logic concept focus on city life across different cities around the globe, searching for contemporary, socially and culturally informed meanings of urbanity. They start off with the city, embedded within a specific social context, and derive their urbanities from its particular socio-cultural features. Such approaches might bear a conceptual problematics at times and places where cities are anything but clearly defined elements in space. Then again, the question arises whether a place, with all its social and material realities, can actually behold a specific culture, or whether this idea rather catapults us back into the era of space and place determinisms, once popular in human geography at the wake of the 20th century. In addition, while place-specific constellations might cover for the "fine-tuning" of urbanity, macro-level structures like population size and density make up for overarching traits of urbanity like social alienation, deviant behaviour or capitalism, that can be found to a more or less pronounced degree in cities all over the world. Thus, culturalist approaches on urbanity might eventually create a misleading notion of a myriad of different urbanities being lived more or less exclusively in cities across the world, while missing out on the overarching, socio-cultural aspects of city life.

### 3. BLENDING SPACE WITH TIME AND PLACE IN URBAN THEORY

I argue that a contemporary theory on urbanity should not generate its major features form an urban past, which oftentimes results in the denial of the city being an independent object of sociological analysis nowadays. Neither should such a theory on urbanity be reduced to the culture of individual cities at specific times and places, ignoring the overarching socio-cultural features that are shared by cities all over the world.

While urban sociology and urban geography keep arguing about different approaches to grasp the social sphere of contemporary cities (and beyond), this paper aims at highlighting the similarities between structural and cultural theories on urbanity. The question is on finding a common denominator in city life and culture that is shared across cities and times, and, most importantly, that finds resonance across diverging approaches on urbanity.

A starting point for such a unifying concept has been outlined by Fischer as early as 1975 with his "Subcultural Theory of Urbanism". A central observation is that urban residents "are more likely than rural residents to behave in ways that diverge from the central and/or traditional norms of their common society" (Fischer, 1975: 1321). This behaviour is referred to as subcultural and is related to the population size and concentration in a city. While this seems to be merely another structuralist notion related to the city as a big, dense type of settlement, the precise content of subcultural behaviour is not defined by Fischer. It depends on the particular context and local culture, i.e. dominating mainstream conduct, values and beliefs at certain places and times. This overarching (subculture as a trait of urban societies in general), yet relational trait (subculture as a variable dependent on the local context) is what qualifies the Subcultural Theory of Urbanism to be a promising starting point for propitiating both structural and cultural perspectives on urbanity.

This is where time-geography comes in: Transmitted to the individual, subcultural expressions are to a great extend the result of expanded individual spaces of opportunities. While in Hägerstrand's concept of time-geography, the space of opportunities of an individual (referred to as "prism") has a strictly spatio-technological connotation (Ellegård, 2018: 7; Hägerstrand, 1970: 13-14), opportunities for future action of a person are not merely delimited by such practical burdens. They also depend on the person's experiences, knowledge, values and beliefs as well as on the socially structuring context within which one is embedded. Hägerstrand's (1970) idea of a future space of opportunities thus needs to be shifted to the mindset of an indi-

vidual in order to be fruitful for urban theory. Put in simplified terms: supposing that the subcultural intensity in cities is generally higher than in non-urban areas (Fischer, 1975), individuals in cities have a higher exposure to a broader range of behavioural expressions than residents in other types of space. This context of diversity and uncertainty is described in manifold sociological theories on urbanity. While it is common sense in most structural theories, uncertainty as a feature of urban lifeworlds is also addressed by cultural theories, especially by the Postcolonial Urbanism (Schindler, 2017: 59). The frequent exposure to a comparably broad range of behavioural expressions subsequently enlarges the individual space of opportunities. Obviously, classical time-space constraints have a share in the future prism of an (urban) individual as well, as reachability-related possibilities for future action are generally higher in dense urban areas than in other types of space, too. Hägerstrand's time-geographic idea of a future space of opportunities can thus contribute to a sociological understanding of urbanity in a double sense: It might eventually be an element of a theory on urbanity which departs with the socially structuring forces of city life, but which leaves room for the textual "fine-tuning" that allows for adapting the concept of urbanity to cities across cultures, times, spaces and places.

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