DIOGENES

Positioning Urban Anthropology: A Road Map for a History of Ideas

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Abstracts

Anthropological research in urban contexts reflects the fundamental mutations in social sciences. The boundaries between the traditional academic disciplines have become blurred. New clusters of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research emerge. These changes involve risks and chances. Philosophy of science insists on clear concepts and terminologies. Does it make sense to use the term 'urban anthropology'? If new disciplines or sub-disciplines arise, they should have distinct shapes, and the nomenclature should reflect their scientific profile. Starting from a diachronic comparative analysis of anthropological theories and methodologies this article proposes a road map for heuristic and epistemological investigations of anthropological research in an increasingly urbanized world.

Keywords

Social sciences, philosophy of science, epistemology, history of ideas

Enormous efforts have been made in the last years to promote urban anthropology on the scientific and the institutional level. The Commission on Urban Anthropology (CUA), which gathers leading scholars and researchers in this field, has become one of the most active and effective of the IUAES's commissions. With the peer-reviewed international academic journal *Urbanities – Journal of Urban Ethnography*, the scientific community has a powerful venue for presenting and discussing new trends and the volumes published in Ashgate's series 'Urban Anthropology' (now published by Routledge) and in 'Palgrave Studies in Urban Anthropology' have become an indispensable point of reference for further research.

It is precisely this undeniable success in recent years that inspires us to take stock of what has been accomplished and explore the contours of the field of urban anthropology. To be clear from the outset, urban anthropology is undoubtedly an established field of research and its *raison d'être* is no longer challenged as it once was, but it is nonetheless still quite difficult to plot the position

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of urban anthropology in the landscape of the social sciences, to identify its essential characteristics and to determine its relationships with neighbouring disciplines. Urban anthropology deals with subject matters that often seem to be occupied by other disciplines. In particular, it has been a challenge to distinguish urban anthropology from urban sociology. However, even the boundaries with other disciplines have become blurred. The interdisciplinary connections and overlaps with other fields of research are numerous and new interfaces between urban anthropology and other branches in urban studies are continuously emerging. To distinguish urban anthropology from other scientific endeavours has become increasingly difficult, particularly because various other disciplines and sub-disciplines have adopted anthropological methods. A pool of quite similar social and human sciences has developed, and more specifically a pool of disciplines of qualitative social research that apparently share many characteristics. Like sociocultural anthropology in general, urban anthropology is forced to interact with 'a rainbow coalition of racialized and queered post-isms, from feminism, to structuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, postpositivism, post-scientism, Marxism, and postconstructivism' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011: ix). Whereas, in the past, rigid demarcations between academic fields hindered new developments, today the lack of clear disciplinary competences threatens scientific research. The need for interdisciplinary collaboration is self-evident, but interdisciplinarity always relies on disciplinarity.

It is not possible to offer here a complete genealogy of the contemporary intellectual landscape, but some historical retracing can help us see past the current blurriness. The following remarks suggest a road map for a more detailed exposition. Our interest is not in history itself, but rather in how a historical perspective can contribute to place urban anthropology today. We believe that there needs to be more conceptual and historical analysis before deeper epistemological questions can be addressed.

Two landmark events in the history of urban anthropology were the First International Symposium on Urban Anthropology held in Vienna in 1982 and the foundation of the Commission on Urban Anthropology in 1983. Ulf Hannerz has reconstructed and analysed the development of urban anthropology from its beginnings until 1980 in his seminal work, *Exploring the City*. Today Hannerz would consider some aspects of this exposition in a different manner, but the book marked an important stage in the self-reflection of urban anthropological research. In 2012, Giuliana B. Prato and Italo Pardo published in the *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems* (EOLSS) the most up-to-date survey of urban anthropology (article reproduced in *Urbanities*, Prato & Pardo, 2013).

Many of the arguments of the actual debate were already the subject of discussion in the 1970s, the decade in which urban anthropology established itself as a subfield of anthropology. Until the 1960s, one could hardly speak of urban anthropology *per se*. Important research has been carried out in urban contexts since the first half of the twentieth century, but it was only in the 1970s that 'urban anthropology' became a label. This development is evidenced by the appearance of various publications with the title 'Urban Anthropology' and the foundation of the journal *Urban Anthropology* by Jack R. Rollwagen. The first issue of the journal appeared in 1972 and soon afterwards important authors could be convinced to join its editorial board. In 1973 a conference on urban studies in anthropology was organized during the 9th International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Chicago. Ghaus Ansari and Peter J.M. Nas considered it as 'the first international gathering of scholars interested and involved in urban anthropology' (Ansari & Nas, 1983: vii). It took another ten years before the Commission on Urban Anthropology was founded. At the end of the 1970s, however, urban anthropologists formed a community (Hannerz, 1980: 2). In the US there were enough people interested in founding an association for urban anthropology within the American Anthropological Association (AAA). At the 1979 meeting of the AAA, the Society for Urban Anthropology was founded and Jack R. Rollwagen elected as president. In the early 1980s, Rollwagen began to compile a worldwide directory of urban anthropologists in order

to create an international organization of urban anthropologists. Robert Van Kemper suggested the name, World Union of Urban Anthropologists (WUUA) with the intention of requesting affiliation with the IUAES. Rollwagen could not realize his plans, but he asserted that the idea behind his proposed WUUA was to stimulate the later creation of the Commission on Urban Anthropology in 1983. In the 1980s Rollwagen's interests shifted to new areas and as a result he changed the name of his journal to *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* (Rollwagen, 1991).

It is no accident that it was not until the 1970s that urban anthropology established itself as a proper scientific subfield. The formation of this new field coincides with one of the most profound crises of sociocultural anthropology triggered by the end of colonialism. Many anthropologists had doubts about their discipline and some scholars even declared that it was in its final days. Richard G. Fox was one of the anthropologists who struggled to overcome his doubts. Urban anthropology, the new branch in anthropology, gave him that possibility: 'If anthropology could say new things about cities, if anthropologists could carry forth effective research in urban locales, I reasoned, then surely the discipline was alive and well and living in the complex present rather than expiring with the primitive past' (Fox, 1977: xi). Fox presented the ambitious programme 'to study urban institutions and their cultural settings in many different societies and time periods' (Fox, 1977: xi). The feasibility of such a large project has been doubted. The subtitle of his book *Urban Anthropology*, can nevertheless be read as a short definition of urban anthropology's agenda: *Cities in Their Cultural Settings*. Fox defended his project by stating that he just followed 'a long tradition of comparative research instituted by Morgan, Maine, Durkheim, and Mauss that thought to illuminate (often quite incorrectly) the present from the past' (Fox, 1977: xi).

When Fox wrote his book, urban anthropology was still in the making and there was no consensus 'as to what questions urban anthropology should ask and what problems urban anthropology is capable of solving' (Fox, 1977: 1). Still in the late 1970s there was no general agreement on what urban anthropology was. Many authors, however, tried hard to clarify the nature of urbanism. Fox distinguished the anthropology of urbanism from the anthropology of urbanization and the anthropology of urban poverty. Though all three approaches were considered legitimate and should be integrated 'into a general framework for the analysis of cities' (Fox, 1977: 16), only the first focused on urbanism, on the research of the specific characteristics of life in urban settings. The anthropology of urbanization addressed the question of the migrations of rural people to cities and the anthropology of urban poverty was occupied with problems that had a great relevance for life *in* the city, but were not exclusively topics *of* the city. Ulf Hannerz, who in the 1960s had dedicated his studies to 'ghetto culture' (what Fox called the 'anthropology of urban poverty'), himself argued in *Exploring the City* for 'an urban anthropology more strictly conceived, where the focus is on urbanism itself' (Hannerz, 1980: 4), concerned that if urban anthropology were too loosely defined, it would lack a solid disciplinary profile. Hannerz's position, however, must be distinguished from other authors who claimed an anthropology *of* the city, hypostatizing the city as a special social institution with particular and incomparable characteristics. Pardo and Prato distance themselves from conceptualizations like those of Gutkind (1983) and Southall (1983), who insisted on the classification of city types, declaring instead that 'urban anthropology should be intended simply as (more or less classical) anthropological research carried out *in* urban areas' (Pardo & Prato, 2012: 8). Tired of the never-ending debate on the definition of 'urban' and 'urban anthropology', they recently proposed to speak of 'anthropological research in urban settings' (Prato & Pardo, 2013: 79). This makes the position clearer but does not relieve us of the task of explaining the specificity of urban settings. We share the view of Pardo and Prato that hypostatizations and classifications are unhelpful. The passion for clear conceptualization, anyhow, pushes us to give some definition to the term 'urban'. We agree that in an increasingly urbanized world 'it

could be said, that contemporary urban anthropology *is* Anthropology' (Pardo & Prato, 2012: 17; Prato & Pardo, 2013: 100). That means that most of the anthropological research is carried out in urban contexts. But what is the difference between anthropological research in 'urban' and 'non-urban' settings? If there were no difference, the term 'urban anthropology', as well as the formulation 'anthropological research in urban settings', would have little significance. This question is clearly to be distinguished from the debate on the difference between 'anthropology *in* the city' and 'anthropology *of* the city', although there is certainly a connection. The desperate attempts in the 1970s and early 1980s to define the 'urban' had, among others, the objective to overcome a situation in which a 'generous inclusiveness of all sorts of interest, ideas, and findings, together with a relative unconcern for what might be their common denominator [...] contribute to the picture of an anthropology which seems to lack a coherent, unifying structure of ideas' (Hannerz, 1980: 4). Many are the reasons why those attempts had no sustainable success. Not all authors who tried to define an anthropology *of* the city, intended to find the 'metaphysical essence' of the city. Some, like Hannerz, simply tried to concentrate on phenomena that are typical of the city. Pardo and Prato, however, renounce any definition of 'urban'. They want to keep the urban space open for diverse kinds of anthropological research and collaboration with other disciplines. Their plea for an anthropology *in* the city has undeniable advantages for research practise, but also the heuristic disadvantages of a generic disciplinary definition.

The early literature on urban anthropology was much concerned with the definition of the specificity of the new sub-discipline within sociocultural anthropology. A further step in placing urban anthropology is the rather difficult task of distinguishing it from the adjacent disciplines and sub-disciplines outside of anthropology. Extending this question to its historical dimension we must even be careful in the choice of the designation, for the term sociocultural anthropology is an appropriate label only for its contemporary development. The combination of synchronic with diachronic reflections opens up an endless field of investigation. For our purposes we will only look at the cross section that regards the relationship between anthropology and sociology. Both disciplines are creatures of the nineteenth century. Early on, the relationship between anthropology and sociology underwent different developments in different countries. Best documented are the four ways that these disciplines took in America, in Great Britain, in France, and in the German-speaking countries. In *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology* (2005) Fredrik Barth, Andre Gingrich, Robert Parkin, and Sydel Silverman reconstructed four important traditions of anthropology. Chris Hann justified the 'strong "Western" bias' and acknowledged the 'obvious inadequacy of selecting only four [traditions]', simultaneously pointing out the relevance of 'the rich traditions of Russian anthropology, or more recent developments in China and India' that were excluded for organizational reasons (viii). These four essays on the history of anthropology indicate the manifold links between the four traditions and some of the links between anthropology and other disciplines. Evident is the close relationship between sociology and anthropology in France, at least until World War II. In Great Britain social anthropology has for a long time impeded the development of a proper sociology. Things changed there in the 1960s. In Germany, sociology experienced significant theoretical and empirical developments, rather dramatically diverging from anthropology. Austria, which in the first half of the twentieth century had important anthropologists, followed a similar path. Most important for our topic is the unique situation in the US, where the influence that the 'Chicago School' exercised on anthropologists is well documented.

Looking at the biographies of the disciplines' main representatives offers some indication of the origins of the links between the different traditions. William Isaac Thomas, the major figure in the first twenty years of America's first Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago

(founded in 1892), studied at the Universities of Berlin and Göttingen in the late 1880s, where he became acquainted with the work of the psychologists Moritz Lazarus, Heymann Steinthal, and Wilhelm Wundt. These influences helped him develop his theories of social psychology (Barnes, 1948). Attuned to both theory and empirical analysis, he managed to close the gap between the two tendencies, the speculative social philosophy and the social survey movement, that characterized the intellectual environment at the University of Chicago (Hannerz, 1980: 21).

Robert Ezra Park was also greatly influenced by German intellectuals. In 1899–1900 he studied philosophy and sociology at the University of Berlin under Georg Simmel, and after a semester in Strasbourg (1900) and three years at the University of Heidelberg (1900–1903), he earned his PhD in philosophy under the neo-Kantian philosopher Wilhelm Windelband and the geographer Alfred Hettner with the dissertation *Masse und Publikum. Eine methodologische und soziologische Untersuchung* (1904). There is no doubt that Simmel's antipositivism, Windelband's axiology, and Hettner's chorology left traces on Park's thought. Simmel was completing his essay *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* (2006 [1903]) when Park was in Berlin. With this text Simmel contributed to the foundation of urban sociology. No less important for Park was Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1963 [1887]). Pardo and Prato have repeatedly highlighted the importance of Tönnies' concepts of community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*) for the '[e]arly anthropological theorizations on the specificity of urban life, institutions and social relations' (Pardo & Prato, 2012: 5; Prato & Pardo, 2013: 81–82). This is a reasonable assertion when we consider the direct influence that Tönnies exercised on a whole generation of social scientists. However, what this historical reconstruction leaves out is the first modern interpretation of the concepts of community and society found in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and its relevance for the development of social theory throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Kaltenbacher, 1994). Tönnies was not only a theorist, but also an important contributor to field studies. This made him more attractive for social scientists than pure philosophers. Hegel's conceptual tools, however, have a greater range. It was Hegel who coined the modern concept of civil society, having recourse to the longstanding concept of *societas civilis* and attributing to it a new meaning. In Hegel the concepts of community and society are deeply rooted in the conceptual spaces of *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*, which are not only categories of practical philosophy but also principles of the history of humankind. These principles, however, cannot straightforwardly be attributed to a particular stage of historical development. Moreover they express elementary orientations of the human mind that certainly have different historical origins, but which in modern times coexist in the same society: that is, the pursuit of individuality and the striving for community (Kaltenbacher, 2008: 269). This revolutionary conceptualization paved the way for the subsequent development of social theory. It should not be forgotten that Durkheim's concepts, which are always invoked in this context, are 'marbled by elements of German philosophy' (Adorno, 1976: 7). Hegel's philosophy was fundamental for sociologists in continental Europe, but almost of no importance for anthropologists (*Völkerkundler*) in the German-speaking counties. However, the deep structure of his dialectical philosophy can help us resolve various contradictions that have emerged in the development of theory in urban anthropology, beginning from problems of conceptualization.

In the late 1920s, urban sociology began to favour quantitative research methods and to move away from ethnography. This development became marked in Chicago even at the institutional level with the creation of separate departments of sociology and anthropology in 1929. 'Park, for his part, had his doubts about the wisdom of neglecting qualitative data, but also had a stake in making sociology scientific. And science, at the time, was big on measurement' (Hannerz, 1980: 29–30).

The attempts to define the city and to develop categories to comprehend urban settings continued with the works of Louis Wirth and Robert Redfield. For a long time their analyses of urban life

influenced sociologists and anthropologists, but their ideas were not at all original. Evident are the influences from Marx and Engels, Tönnies, Simmel, and Durkheim.

The impact of Central European thinkers on British social anthropology was less evident, but Malinowski can be considered a case apart. Having grown up in the intellectual atmosphere of the late Austrian-Hungarian Empire, he was greatly influenced by Ernst Mach and Wilhelm Wundt before he began his studies at the London School of Economics under Charles Gabriel Seligman and Edvard Westermarck (Gellner, 1988). Two of his students, Audrey Richards and Godfrey Wilson, made pioneering urban field studies in Central Africa. Richards, a trailblazer in nutritional anthropology, conducted innovative fieldwork among the Bemba, one of the principal ethnic groups affected by the problems of rural-urban migration in the industrialized zones of Northern Rhodesia (Richards, 1939). Whether or not it is true that she always remained an 'orthodox Malinowskian' (Kuper, 1999: 119), she certainly was a functionalist anthropologist. Godfrey Wilson, appointed as the first director of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in 1938, conducted his research among the urbanites of Broken Hill, investigating the disequilibrium in urban-rural relations. Like Richards, Wilson was a functionalist in his theoretical and methodological approaches to fieldwork. Max Gluckman, his successor as director of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, who later would become known as the founder of the Manchester School of anthropology, was an Oxford structural-functionalist with strong Marxist inclinations. Gluckman had been mainly shaped in his formation by Radcliffe-Brown who had, in turn, been deeply influenced by Durkheim. We find elements of Durkheim's sociology again in Gluckman's works. The structural-functionalist approach is still important in many of Gluckman's disciples, but the direct or indirect influence of French sociology is much weaker. The resumés of his successors and colleagues at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute illustrate that professional careers often did not evolve within the borders of only one discipline. Clyde Mitchell, for example, started as a social worker with some training in sociology and psychology, coming to anthropology by chance after World War II. When he joined the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, he used his sociological skills to conduct a significant number of social surveys, interviewing about 12.000 people (Mitchell, 1956).

In the 1960s functionalism lost its pre-eminence and was supplanted by a plurality of new approaches, most of them attributable to the linguistic and cultural turns. The rise of urban anthropology can be placed in this period of radical change in the humanities and social sciences. Sociocultural anthropology entered a stage of profound self-reflection, one that is in many ways ongoing and that cannot be regarded as simply another crisis in the discipline's history. According to Andre Gingrich, 'sociocultural anthropology is undergoing a long process of transition into a transnational and global phase of critical research' (552). This means that the era of national traditions is gradually coming to an end. In Gingrich's historical survey the period of national orientations in anthropology began in the early twentieth century, with World War I and the end of scientific internationalism of the Belle Époque. This is a reasonable assertion inasmuch as the global conflict and the political radicalization after the war significantly complicated international collaboration. The roots of the national anthropological traditions, however, date back to the nationalism of the nineteenth century. Gingrich proposes the term 'transnationalization' to characterize the latest development in sociocultural anthropology and distinguishes it from the 'concept of "internationalization" [which] implies cooperation on the basis of entities whose priorities nevertheless continue to be defined within national limits' (544). He conceives 'transnationalization' not only as a descriptive, but also as a normative concept. That is, he believes that we should promote transnational research, while remaining aware that national and quasi-national traditions will not completely disappear. Gingrich even finds something positive in the possibility that some of the national anthropological traditions will remain alive: '[T]he best of anthropology's national legacies became part of international anthropology and will remain a defining and inspiring part of the

discipline's record for the future' (544). If something of the national traditions continues to exist alongside new local, regional, quasi-national, and transnational research models, what concept would best express this coexistence if the notion of 'international' is rejected? It could just be the concept 'transnational', if it is conceived dialectically, i.e. as a concept that in its totality comprises itself and its opposite, the identity of identity and difference. Transnationalization in this sense does not aim at homogenizing diverse perspectives but at preserving a plurality in which everyone is engaged in the debate and everyone is willing to question the own position.

In the actual process of transition small academic fields risk being marginalized. In order to defend them, their representatives need to present a persuasive scientific profile and to clearly define their particular competencies. Reflections on epistemology and methodology therefore become fundamental. Gingrich has lamented that epistemological debates in sociocultural anthropology have remained underdeveloped. In particular, he is critical of the fact that the discussions have been based almost exclusively on the Euro-American epistemological legacy. In the process of transnationalization it is obvious that other traditions should also be taken into consideration (560). This request is not identical but in line with the claim of intercultural philosophy and other intercultural studies to pay attention to the cultural dimension of conceptualizations in the diverse disciplines (Kaltenbacher, 2011).

Within the four mentioned European traditions of anthropological research the Anglo-American legacies have been decisive for the development of urban anthropology. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to ignore the direct and indirect influences of the other traditions. A history of urban anthropology must take into account the reciprocal penetration of theories and the circularity of ideas. Detailed knowledge of the histories of the reception of ideas will also contribute to a better understanding of the complex relationship between urban anthropology and contiguous disciplines and sub-disciplines.

Our point of departure was a reflection on the meaning of the term 'urban anthropology'. Encouraging a wide range of research approaches without limiting them to certain paradigms can be productive. On the other hand, it is necessary to indicate the field's specificity, lest it lose its distinctive qualities and get reabsorbed in general sociocultural anthropology or divided among other sub-disciplines. At first sight, the term 'urban ethnography' seems to be less problematic. This is only partly true, but at least it enables us to aggregate all forms of ethnographic research in urban settings. Of course the concept 'urban ethnography' is not conterminous with 'urban anthropology'. They share ethnography as their starting point, which is undoubtedly the most important feature, but the theoretical frameworks differ according to the particular research perspective. Hence, urban ethnography houses anthropologists, sociologists, economists, and political scientists, but they produce different ethnographies, as fieldwork is not separable from the theoretical framework adopted.

Critical movements in the past decades have prompted sociocultural anthropology to engage in deep self-reflection, sparking irreversible changes in theory and methodology. Urban anthropology has not remained unaffected by these developments. In the adjacent disciplines of qualitative social research, incessant self-critique has produced counterproductive effects. Compared to these paralysing excesses urban anthropology has maintained a sense of agency and a reasonable equilibrium between critical self-examination and a pragmatic approach in fieldwork. Theoretical debate must continue, but without the exaggerations of the past.

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