



DIETRO LE QUINTE/BACKSTAGE

## An historical and critical reconstruction of disciplines and interdisciplinarity in urban studies (part 2)

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### Abstract

Dopo aver ricostruito la storia di quattro discipline (urbanistica, sociologia urbana, *cultural history* e geografia urbana), in particolare nei paesi di lingua tedesca -che è stata pubblicata nel numero 6 di TU-, si riflette qui sull'origine di un orientamento critico al loro interno e più generalmente nel campo degli studi urbani. Usando una forma dialogica, studiosi con una diversa formazione discutono di come e quando è emerso un orientamento critico, mettendo in discussione prima di tutto cosa è 'critico' nelle diverse discipline, approcci ed epoche, a seconda della predominanza di questioni o problemi, ma anche in relazione con i cambiamenti nel contesto socio-culturale e politico.

Following a reconstruction of the history of four disciplines (urban planning, urban sociology, cultural history and urban geography), in German-speaking countries in particular -which has been published in the previous issue of TU (6)-, we focus here on the origin of a 'critical orientation' within urban studies. Using a dialogical form, scholars with different education discuss how and when a critical orientation emerged, questioning first of all what is 'critical' within the different disciplines, approaches and times, depending on the predominance of issues or problems, but also in relation to changes in the socio-cultural and political environment.

**Parole chiave:** Studi urbani; approcci critici; *cultural history*

**Keywords:** Urban studies; critical approaches; cultural history

We present here the second part of a longer paper by Nina Gribat, Stefan Höhne, Boris Michel and Nina Schuster that appears originally in sub\urban, the German-speaking on-line journal in which the authors are engaged. The first part has been included in the previous issue of *Tracce Urbane*, dedicated to interdisciplinarity (TU6). As we explained there, the paper originated as a self-reflection of the four authors' commitment to the very aim and scope of that journal. In fact, s u b \ u r b a n is a scientific journal that provides a place for German-speaking

<sup>1</sup> A German version of this paper appeared in 2016 in sub\urban. 4, 2/3: 11-36 with the title: "Kritische Stadtforschungen. Ein Gespräch über Geschichte und Produktionsbedingungen, Disziplinen und Interdisziplinarität". Available on line at: <https://zeitschrift-suburban.de/sys/index.php/suburban/article/view/234>

interdisciplinary debate in critical urban research. It has two goals: to promote the exchange between different disciplinary approaches to urban research, and to stimulate reflections on what is the space of critical research in that context. Quite similarly to *Tracce Urbane* and its relationship with action-research, the discussion with urban movements in that magazine is just as important as the more theoretical reflection, which includes inquiring the conditions for knowledge production in the city, as well as in teaching and research. Although the magazine is in German, it is open to international debates and the translation of foreign language texts.

After having explored how different interests and points of view have crystallized in disciplines, and how these have approached or moved away from each other over time depending on the predominance of questions or problems, or even for ideological reasons, we focus here on the emergence of a critical approach, also reflecting on what can be defined as such.

Once again, we conceived this paper also as a sort of conversation among the two journals. Among our aims there is also to make emerge and to compare common problems and issues we face in our editorial and research activity, in trying to overcome disciplinary boundaries and academic fences that prevent new and different perspectives – as well as interpretation, approach, methods, visions and, not least, proposals – to emerge.

In this way, we want also to build a virtual bridge between two non-English on-line journals, with similar origin and scope, contributing at diffusing their approach and researches.

This allows us to hope that maybe the time is a good one for pushing research in a different direction from the one in which the academic system has encapsulated it.

As editors of *sub\urban*, we see ourselves as an interdisciplinary editorial team that produces an interdisciplinary journal for critical urban research. When the journal was established, we discussed the concept of interdisciplinarity a lot, asking ourselves whether we are or want to be more trans- or post-disciplinary. In our editorial work, we encountered disciplinary questions surprisingly often, which was not always an easy task, for example in the review process. A quote from Lefebvre (whichever discipline he belonged to) summarizes this tension.

In *La révolution urbaine* he writes in 1970 that the complexity of the urban makes «the cooperation of the individual disciplines indispensable. The phenomenon of urbanization cannot be mastered in its entirety by a special science. [...] If one admits or postulates this, the difficulties begin. Who does not know the disappointments and setbacks one experiences at the so-called 'interdisciplinary' or 'pluri-disciplinary' conferences? [...] Either a dialogue of the deaf, or a pseudo-encounter without common points of view».

Considering the intrinsic interdisciplinarity of urban research, as well as the difficulties of its implementation, we have mobilized the resources of our interdisciplinary editorial staff to start a debate about critical urban research and interdisciplinarity, which we would like to continue in the future. The first step in this discussion was the reconstruction of a history of urban research in German-speaking countries. Through the perspective of different disciplines, we have tried to understand the development of urban research and to embed the emergence of an explicitly 'critical' reflection and its change into a broader historical context. On the basis of these initial results on the history of urban research, we outline the features of today's production conditions of critical urban research in the German-speaking world and formulate wishes for its further development. Representatives from geography (Boris Michel), architecture/urban planning (Nina Gribat), cultural history (Stefan Höhne) and sociology (Nina Schuster) took part in the discussion.

**s\u:** *We have talked about different disciplinary approaches to city/urbanity. How then did explicitly critical urban research approaches come about?*

**Nina Schuster (NiS):** I find it difficult to answer the question of whether and when critical sociological urban research already existed, i.e. in which social constellations, because the concept of critical must first be clarified. Engels (1845) had social criticism in mind early on when he used the living and housing conditions of workers in cities as an occasion for his analyses. Further empirical studies on housing and living conditions in large cities in the second half of the 19th century had rather

socio-reformist or socio-political ideas. The aim was to bring order into 'chaos', to improve the hygienic conditions in the proletarian residential neighbourhoods and at the same time to make the districts controllable. The emergence of empirical social research is closely linked to the emergence of large cities and the study of urban living conditions. This research, however, often served social policy.

**Nina Gribat (NG):** It certainly makes sense if we first agree on the concept of *critique* - but I am not sure whether we should assume an explicit socio-theoretical basis. In part, demands that were perhaps critical and radical at the time they were expressed no longer seem so from today's perspective (without wanting to assume an ideal of scientific progress). In urban planning, of course, the idea of ordering the chaos of the cities and contributing to better living conditions in terms of planning or construction largely applies - in other words, ultimately a social-reformist, applied approach. In addition, there have been and still are a number of ideal architectural and urban models that can be understood as critique of hegemony and as radical reorganization (e.g. some models do indeed deal with ownership).

It may also be interesting to mention that for architecture critique is always related to aesthetics and *Gestaltung*. For example, in the 1980s there was a debate on critical architecture that was shaped by Peter Eisenman. What could not be appropriated by means of the status quo (i.e. by capitalism), was considered as critical design. Rem Koolhaas cast doubt on this possibility: architecture per se cannot be critical, the possibility of appropriation exists always.

Ultimately, of course, the question remains whether a formal or aesthetic approach in architecture - therefore the object itself - can be critical, or whether it is more productive to think about social, political and economic changes. To me, the latter seems more reasonable - without fundamentally turning away from aesthetics and form. In my opinion, however, it is much more a matter of reflecting on critical practice in architecture and urban planning, which never takes place in a void. The question that seems central to me is what interactions there are between social contexts marked by power, exploitation, inequality or the like, on the one hand, and planning and construction on the other.

**Stefan Höhne (SH):** If you look at German cultural-historical research on urbanization as a critical approach and perspective, you will hardly find what you are looking for. I have researched for a long time and ultimately also asked some professors of urban history whether they know approaches and perspectives that consider themselves as critical, and this not only in an epistemological but also in a socio-analytical sense. However, this really does not seem to be the case. This is remarkable even for a discipline generally regarded as rather conservative, such as history, where there was a lively discussion about critical approaches, for example in the context of the journal *WerkstattGeschichte*. Likewise, there are approaches in the field of feminist or post-Marxist historical studies that describe themselves as 'critical' and also investigate urban phenomena. I can only speculate as to why this is a very limited case in German and Anglo-American urban history. One might assume, for example, that these studies are more strategically located in the field of social history, where there are stronger institutional structures than in urban history, which also often has a rather parochial reputation. However, in the field of historical research on urbanization there are also studies on colonialism or analyses of the class dynamics in urban transformations et cetera that are often critical of domination. Likewise, especially since the 1990s, a number of productive works have emerged that approach historical urban research from a gender perspective or are inspired by Foucault and Bourdieu.

Moreover, under the influence of the cultural-historical turn as well as of the *spatial turn*, historical urbanization research has become highly differentiated in recent years and offers a multitude of new productive approaches. Thus, studies on urban environmental history as well as (post-)colonial studies, works on the role of wars and catastrophes for urbanization, demography and health, on the history of urban forms of representation and image politics, local governance and self-administration, city and infrastructure and much more can now be found. At the same time, the strongly Eurocentric view of previous research is increasingly being recognized and this now urges more and more to pay attention for example to Eastern European or Asian urbanization history. It is precisely the efforts made in recent years to work out the 'global' connections of historical urbanization movements that seem to me to be an

important corrective to the classical urban history, which is often still very much localist and provincial. These approaches make it possible not least to deconstruct conceptual and methodological nationalism and regionalism in urban history research and to open up new perspectives.

Since historical research on urbanization has also a close interaction with social transformations, a renaissance of historical urban research can be expected in view of the increasing importance of urban issues, also offering space for a research that is critical of power and emancipatory.

**Boris Michel (BM):** If I see that correctly, then critical urban geography and especially critical German-language urban geography is something that has very little history. What there is of history is neither critical nor German-speaking nor urban-geographical. I don't think the term appeared anywhere in a German-language publication before the mid-1990s. But this may also have something to do with the fact that those who did something like this didn't necessarily define their actions so narrowly in disciplinary terms and perhaps didn't even conceive of 'the city' as so central. But if you look at how 'city' and 'critical' – both as concepts and as a perspective somehow in the tradition of a critical theory of society – entered geography, there are a number of interesting observations.

The old urban geography and the geographical examination of the city were, as I described earlier, anything but critical – except perhaps 'critical of the city'. And if for sociology the city was certainly central to the forms of socialization that interested it, geographers also after 1945 were rather interested in communal forms, in villages. This is not surprising, since geography was not thought of as a social science before 1945, and even after that only sluggishly at first.

But that was certainly the basic condition for something like critical geography. Attempts at such a critical and socio-scientific geography, which emerged parallel to a more applied, planning-oriented and quantitative-theoretical geography in the late 1960s, were largely isolated by the dominant positions in the discipline. While applied and scientist's geography was slowly able to assert itself as a modernization of the discipline from the 1970s

onwards, a socio-critical perspective was largely prevented and suppressed. Where critical geography took place, it was more concerned with general theory of science and perhaps also with social theory than with empirical or theoretical urban research.

Of course, there were some publications, such as the works of H. D. von Frieling and a number of contributions in the series "Urbs et Regio" or the anthology *Theorien zur Stadtentwicklung* (*Theories on urban development*) by Hartmann, Hitz, Schmid und Wolff in the early 1980s. Even in the mostly very short-lived leftist journals such as *Roter Globus*, *Geografiker* oder *Geographie in Ausbildung und Planung*, which appeared in the 1970s, there was occasionally what could be described as critical urban geography. For example, contributions with titles such as "Das Ghetto als interne Neokolonie" (*The Ghetto as an internal new colony settlement*), a translation from *Antipode*, or texts on urban problems in the 'Third World'. Critical here means quite exclusively: Marxist. The first feminist contributions appeared in the late 1980s, but they certainly hardly understood themselves as a 'critical urban geography'.

Critical urban geography emerged elsewhere. Probably without much risk one can call David Harvey's *Social Justice and the City* of 1973 the founding text for what today runs under the label Critical Urban Geography. Several decades passed before this entered German-speaking geography, and many of the geographers socialized in the 1970s described the 1980s as a rather leaden time.

And even here it is not quite clear whether the impulses really came from German-speaking geography. The first translations of Harvey's urban geography works were published rather by planners (*Stadtbauwelt* 1974), sociologists such as Krämer and Neef or in a magazine such as *prokla* (1987). This was almost not acknowledged in German-speaking geographical journals.

A traditional line of critical urban geography probably does not date back to the time before Harvey. I would strongly suspect that if critical urban geographers today refer to older texts – let's say those from a time before Harvey and Lefebvre – these are rather the texts of authors like Marx, Engels, Simmel or Benjamin.



**NG:** To my knowledge, Harvey's first translation into German appeared as a supplement to the second edition of the publication *Sanierung für Wen?* (*rehabilitation for whom?*) by the Büro für Stadtsanierung und soziale Arbeit. Rolf Czeskleba-Dupont, a sociologist from the FU Berlin who worked closely with architects at the Büro für Stadtsanierung, translated in 1972 Harvey's *Revolutionäre und gegenrevolutionäre Theorie in der Geographie und die Probleme der Ghattobildung* (*Revolutionary and counter-revolutionary theory in geography and the problems of ghetto formation*). And Castells, as I said earlier, was surprisingly first translated by architects.

**s\u:** *It seems from all narratives as if the late 1960s were quite decisive. Did what we would now call 'critical urban research' only emerge in the 1960s? And do we nowadays define in this way the same research that already at that time was conceived of as critical? This also brings into play the question of the production conditions of critical science. Despite all criticism of institutions, the university and the networks were certainly important places for critical urban research. How would you describe the institutionalization of (critical) urban research in your disciplines?*

**BM:** The beginning of a critical geography is generally considered to be an association of students who published the journal *Geografiker* and caused some trouble at the Geographer's Day in Kiel in 1969. The Kiel Geographer's Day 1969 is such a mythical event in geography. But as I said, its focus was rather general. In the 1980s there were networks such as WISSKRI, a group of critical geographers, and a first network of feminist geographers was founded during this time. But even there, the city remained rather a marginal topic. Topics such as ecology and 'Third World' were certainly the more decisive for geography.

**NiS:** I would say that an urban sociology that, due to its research orientation, explicitly understood itself as critical, flourished from the late 1960s to the 1980s and then allowed itself to be all too strongly integrated into social reform policies. I am thinking above all of the successful suggestion and support of the *Soziale Stadt* (Social City) programme in the 1990s, which would hardly have been conceivable without urban

sociology research on segregation, and neighbourhood-based participation approaches, which also emerged within the new planning faculties. Nevertheless, explicitly socio-critical works were written again and again, even though they were never in the majority. This also includes the initially militant and polarizing feminist city criticisms. This area has experienced very little institutionalization (for example, as regards permanent positions or denominations of professorships). At best, feminist teaching and research was found at universities because individual female academics had corresponding research emphases in addition to their usual topics. However, centres for gender studies were founded at many universities in the 1990s, in whose thematic frame women sociologists concerned with city and space played a major role, for example in Frankfurt am Main, Kassel and Marburg.

The disappearance of most professorships for urban sociology in undergraduate sociology courses since the 1990s clearly answers the question of the institutional position for (critical) urban sociological knowledge: Urban sociology as a whole in German-speaking universities is mainly considered as an ancillary science or a 'basic subject' in planning courses, where students are focused on the applied domain and have little interest in critical-theoretical confrontations with reality.

**NG:** The faculties of architecture underwent institutional change in the course of the [university] major restructuring, as a result of the student movement in the 1968s (faculties were divided into departments, whose titles in some cases no longer referred to *architecture* at all, but have names such as 'building design' and 'building construction'). During this time, in some universities urban and regional planning departments got separated from that of architecture. Since then, the subject of 'urban planning' has been anchored in both architecture and planning faculties. In the faculty of architecture, new subject areas and approaches have been integrated into teaching programmes (more theory, more basic subjects). Today at some universities the theoretical chairs are being cut down again. In addition to institutionalisation, what I consider important are a number of critical networks, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, some of which were Marxist or anarchist, such as the *Rote Zelle Bau* (Red Cell Building) or the Marxist-Leninist University Group Building.

At that time there was also a group that was active in the trade union *Bau Steine Erden* (Build Stone Earth) for architects as “employees”. Collectives or associations were founded which organised office work differently. I suspect that in the 1980s and 1990s there were other groups that I do not know. For the early 2000s, the architecture collective *Freies Fach* (Free Subject) is to be mentioned, which also published the critical architecture magazine *AnArchitektur*.

**SH:** The situation in the history of the city is not dissimilar. Here, too, professorships have become very rare. At best, one can say only incidentally that a research is critical. However, thanks to the increasing internationalisation of research, for example through the European Association for Urban History since the 1990s, and the founding of the *Gesellschaft für Stadtgeschichte und Urbanisierungsforschung* – GSU (Society for Urban History and Urbanisation Research), new institutional contexts were established that could certainly make spaces, resources and networks available for such research and collaborations. It is worthwhile to use them.

**BM:** The situation is probably a little different in geography. It is not the case that urban geography has experienced a decline and I don’t believe that the number of urban geography professorships has been reduced in recent years. And if you look at how geographers position themselves today, the description of their own work as urban geographers is quite common, and this certainly applies especially to people who would locate themselves in the tradition of a critical social theory.

**s\u:** *So far, we’ve heard quite an academic story. At sub\urban we try again and again – even if it doesn’t always work – to establish a relationship between academia and activism (without wanting to establish such a clear dividing line now). Can you think of anything in history about that? Did the critical urban researchers go to the assembly lines and in front of the factory gates?*

**NG:** Some architects and urban designers were definitely activists too. Some of the facts I described above, such as the initiative of various grassroots groups in neighbourhood activities, already indicate this. Many contemporary witnesses

have told us (in the context of the book *Vergessene Schulen* - Forgotten Schools) about regular demonstrations, the distribution of leaflets - sometimes directly in front of the factory gates of large companies - and other actions. One person fought in Angola's civil war alongside with rebels, and from others we heard that they went to the assembly lines, at least for a while. On the other hand, in 1960s and 1970s architecture there was also a deep reflection of the working conditions of architects as employees, as I mentioned above. At the same time, some of them were very strongly involved in the trade union *Bau Steine Erden*, or founded other collective or cooperative professional associations. The claim to change social and professional practices was widespread at the time. Ultimately, however, also academic practices should undergo a similar change. There were various self-organised teaching and learning formats that were also supposed to contribute to a reshaping in the architecture faculties.

**NiS:** I'm assuming that many sociologists went into the new projects: the left-wing and feminist housing projects, squats, collectives and cooperatives for housing and work, which have emerged since the 1960s and partly still exist today. In this practice of a 'Will-to-Dissociate' and of a 'Will-of-New-Form', there are clear connections to critical, academic debates, and this is certainly also due to the fact that many of the actors have studied or at least engaged themselves with a lot of theory in reading circles in their spare time. And many of them were certainly involved in the neighbourhood work too, also together with spatial planners and social pedagogues. However, I don't have a detailed knowledge about this, and as far as I know, this has not been systematically researched so far. Your research by way of contemporary witnesses with the wild architects of the 1968s is certainly ground-breaking.

**SH:** Local history workshops in the 1970s and 1980s, saw a number of groups that worked in close cooperation with social movements and devoted themselves to topics such as urban struggles, housing shortages, etc. This was a kind of 'urban history from below'. Even today, there are groups in many cities such as *Berlin Postkolonial* e.V. that critically argue about urban colonial history. They not only organize city tours, events and

commemorative political initiatives, but also conduct research and publish books. Significantly, however, this research has so far largely taken place outside universities and is still acknowledged far too little within the institutions.

**BM:** I don't know. Critical geographers have certainly done something like this and, of course, taken part in urban social movements and conflicts. But I don't think that this has become part of collective memory. I think there is still a lot of excavation work to be done on the history of critical urban research and critical geography in particular.

*s\u:* *What do you wish for your respective discipline to strengthen critical urban research? And what is missing? Different working conditions, different research focuses, different funding opportunities?*

**NiS:** For a critical sociological urban research it is not enough to refer to poverty and social inequality in the cities – although more research on their reproduction and expansion would at least be something. Also the demand for an urban 'social mix' and for 'integration' frequently testifies of the lack of a critical debate on the rule of law and the corresponding foundation of social theory. A reflection on power relations and hegemonies, but also on democratic deficits and contentious urban developments, for example in the field of 'security policy', would entail a more radical demand or attitude towards the prevailing (increasingly stronger and more clearly economically based) conditions, and thus a more resolute stand against social inequalities in many social contexts, including the cities. The represented sociological positions are surprisingly pale and almost always one-sidedly bourgeois, which is actually not the object of reflection. Yet in urban sociological works there is a lack of perspectives of the marginalized – those of workers, immigrants, people of colour, women, queers, people with disabilities, opponents of capitalism.

**SH:** I can also unreservedly subscribe to these demands for historical urbanization research. Here, too, the aim would be to strengthen approaches critical of domination and advances in social theory as well as to promote perspectives of the marginalized, beyond the still astonishingly dominant bourgeois

narrative. If it is true that the questions and themes of historiography are motivated by the current problems and debates, then this must also apply to historical urban research. Consequently, for example, the perspective on global migration dynamics and a decentering of European urban history would be just as important as studies on the history of urban governmental techniques and urban modes of subjectivation, which are now increasingly undertaken in Anglo-American research. Instead, at least in my opinion, the trend towards an uncritical German-language urban history seems to continue among younger researchers, with a few exceptions.

This can be seen, not least, in a strong focus on actors' histories and in a limited cultural-historical perspective, which shows a remarkable lack of interest in questions of political economy or historical conditions of domination and exploitation.

In addition, historical urbanization research seems to me to be very suitable for exploring the range of dominant concepts and models of urban and spatial research. Here, for example, one might ask what explanatory power the theories of Lefebvre, Castell and others actually have in non-capitalist contexts and which models might be more useful here.

**BM:** I am perhaps a little more optimistic. My impression is that in German-speaking geography a critical perspective on city and urbanity is more strongly represented today than ever before. In geography, the thesis is often put forward that, paradoxically, there was a boost to internationalization following neoliberal restructuring. However, since Anglophone geography was and is strongly influenced by critical authors, it was suddenly possible to participate in the 'excellence-game' with Marxist and feminist positions. How far this history will go, is not quite clear to me, but what is perhaps missing, in disciplinary practice, but also in our conversation, is the question of mediation and teaching. What does 'critical urban research' mean in 'critical' university teaching? As Thomas Bürk says so well in the conversation with us (in this issue), it can't just be about reading Harvey.

**NG:** In architecture and urban planning today, the perspectives of the marginalized that Nina S. has just mentioned are also largely absent. However, I can just observe a rather mixed picture. Certain topics such as housing shortage, social movements, urban conflicts, migration and alternative opportunities, i.e. urban

development not in line with the market, are once again discussed somewhat more intensely in the fields of architecture and urban planning. I find this fundamentally positive, and it seems to me that it might even give us some room for critical practice. At the same time, some debates, for example on 'social architecture' or on the 'self-organized city', seem somewhat short-sighted to me. Here I would like to find production conditions, power relations and exclusion principles taken a little further into consideration (see also my contribution together with Hannes Langguth and Mario Schulze in sub\urban Issue 3/3).

*s\u:* Thank you very much for this interesting discussion, which gives an insight of the history of German-speaking (critical) urban research and the conditions of its production. I believe that your considerations already provide a good basis for a discussion on the production conditions of urban research and its interdisciplinarity. Your historical reconstruction could certainly be specified, deepened and expanded. For example, one might ask whether the relevance of the contacts between German-language urban research and the global circulation of ideas and scientific practices, which you situated in the second half of the 20th century as particularly strong, should not be pre-dated.

Concerning your entire approach, the question of interdisciplinarity presupposes the existence of disciplines. But one could also ask whether it makes sense at all to conduct such an exploration of disciplinary perspectives if many of the mentioned authors have always moved at the boundaries of the disciplines. In short, one could ask whether the problem of multidisciplinary -and therefore the need for interdisciplinarity- is not rather a very recent historical development.

In your reconstruction of the history of German-speaking urban research, you have pointed out a few white spots, among which a deeper examination of urban research in the GDR seems to be a desideratum for all of you. Another point that remained open in the discussion is the definition of critique and 'critical'. In this respect, it would be worth asking whether one needs an absolute notion of critique that can be used a priori, or whether one should rather use a 'situational' notion of critique that emanates from the self-location as scholars. In order to answer this question, one should also question the strategic usefulness of the term 'critical' and the role that sub\urban claims for itself in this context.

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