

## BOOK REVIEW

### STADT, LAND, KLIMA: A REVIEW OF RECENT GERMAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO URBAN STUDIES

With a review of:

**Uwe PRELL, *Die Stadt*, Verlag Barbara Budrich, Opladen & Toronto 2020, 148 pages, Sascha HENNINGER and Stephan WEBER, *Stadtklima*, Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, Paderborn 2020, 260 pages and Freerk BAUMANN, *Und jetzt aufs Land. Wie die Natur unsere Gesundheit fördert*, Bastei Lübbe, Köln 2021, 271 pages**

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

In international academic literature, it is by now almost a cliché to begin a treatise on cities and their development with the observation that the world now counts more urbanites than rural residents. Two of the three German-language books we review here are no exception. Their authors rightly argue that advancing urbanisation presents cities with enormous challenges, whether in housing, economics, mobility or sustainability. The city is where global trends, as well as the problems

they bring, converge. At the same time, it is also the place par excellence where smart solutions are devised, simply because necessity is usually the mother of innovation.

In a way, the books reviewed below are also innovative, since they are written from the perspective of the German context. Due to the dominance of English as the academic lingua franca in urban studies, ideas and examples from the German language area tend to remain underexposed. For this reason alone, it is interesting to see how today's German scholars writing in their mother tongue deal with topical urban themes and what new insights their contributions provide. Below, we discuss a social science introduction to the 'city', a textbook on urban climate issues, and a book that, on the contrary, argues against the city and that we will find the future in the countryside.

## 2. WHAT IS A CITY?

The first book, written by Dr. Uwe Prell, is simply called *Die Stadt* (The city). The thesis of the author, originally trained as a political scientist, is that the complexity of cities requires an integral scientific approach. Starting from the question for which problem the city offers a solution – Prell sees the city as a tool in this respect – he first briefly discusses the perspectives that nine disciplines apply to the city, from sociology and geography to law and philosophy. Then, referring to a range of thinkers, he discusses 'the great stories' about the city. Alongside such household names as Aristotle ('the good city'), Saskia Sassen ('the global city') or Richard Sennet ('the open city'), lesser-known thinkers and their concepts pass in review, such as 'the ordinary city' (Ash Amin and Stephen Graham), 'the non-existing city' (Jürgen Friedrichs), and 'the multifunctional city' (Werner Sombart).

According to Prell, however, this conceptual review does not provide an unambiguous view on the city. Therefore, he joins the idea of the German sociologist and economist Sombart to approach the topic from a linguistic perspective. After all, a word has an embedded meaning of a phenomenon. Relying on the insights provided by languages and their speakers, Prell considers how the word 'city' has been defined in three ancient languages (Egyptian, Greek, Latin) and eight modern languages (including, for example, Chinese and Japanese in addition to English). This is by far the most innovative and interesting part of the book. For example, did you know that the Egyptian hieroglyph for 'city' is a circle with a cross through it (symbolising a concentration of roads, resources and power) or that in Chinese and Hindi, the term 'city' has particularly economic connotations?

Based on the concepts and meanings of the word discussed in different languages, Prell arrives at his own general definition: in his view, a city should be understood as a creative, compacted diversity within a structured unit. With this theoretical baggage, the author then explores and evaluates the numerous designations of cities we encounter in policy practice, such as the megacity, smart city, and shrinking city. His conclusion is that while such concepts refer to relevant urban themes and offer possible answers to sub-questions, they also unnecessarily narrow the view. This brings us back to the beginning of the book: the city is too multifaceted to engage with from a single perspective. This is why Prell once again calls for the necessity of interdisciplinary urban research. Such research also enhances the creativity that is needed to meet the urban challenges of the future.

The beauty of Prell's book is that the reader can quickly – the work has no more than 148 pages including references and indices – gain an overview of how the city is approached academically. The author has succeeded in capturing the essence of the main analytical perspectives and linking them to urban practice. And that is not all: he supplements this overview with his own linguistics-based analysis, which I think is an elegant way of connecting theory and practice. Scattered throughout the book are also figures, boxes and literature tips that enliven the text. Interesting, for instance, are the personal top ten-lists shared by Prell, listing his favourite cities, city books, city songs, and city homepages. Clearly, the author is someone who has set his heart on cities and wants to share his fascination with them with a wider audience, also outside the academic community.

### 3. URBAN CLIMATE ISSUES

One of the biggest challenges of contemporary cities is how to deal with climate change. It is, therefore, vital that city authorities, policy advisers, and spatial professionals understand the interplay between climate, air quality and urban planning. Sascha Henninger and Stephan Weber, professors at the Technical Universities of Kaiserslautern and Braunschweig, respectively, address this issue with their textbook *Stadtklima* (Urban climate). They discuss the physical principles and processes of urban climatology and urban air quality, and their application in policy practice around the world. In the first chapter, they show how a city's buildings, anthropogenic emissions of heat, and trace substances and their interaction with the atmosphere determine the urban climate. They argue that this field of study is relevant not only for European cities, but also precisely for cities in Asia and Africa, which are expected to experience huge population growths in the coming years.

The four chapters that follow deal successively with the key concept of 'urban boundary layer,' the interaction between urban surfaces and the atmosphere, urban heat islands, and urban air quality. The authors discuss not only relevant concepts and theories, but also statistical findings, such as the well-known 'heat island-effect,' i.e., the phenomenon that the average temperature in urban areas is usually higher than in the countryside. Technical terms and mathematical notations are not avoided, but non-technically-trained readers need not be deterred by this because the accompanying text provides clear explanations and figures in each case. The chapters show how much is known about the urban climate in detail, whether it is about the relationship between the urban morphology and wind speed or the reflex radiation of different types of building materials. By means of the application of smart maps, techniques, and methods it is possible to, for example, measure air quality at a district level. If anything, this theoretical part of the book demonstrates how popular slogans such as 'Paint your roof white' are based on empirical findings from carefully designed studies.

In the last two chapters of their textbook, Henninger and Weber discuss applied urban climatology, a domain they see as the link between urban climate theory and urban planning. Various mitigation and adaptation measures cities can take in response to climate change are discussed, as well what methods and tools city professionals can use in practice. In part, the authors draw on what is possible within German planning culture, but they also cover measures that are universally applicable, such as building pocket parks, investing in urban retention areas, and greening roofs. Preferred policies are 'no regret-strategies': measures that have a clear added value and that are widely accepted by the population. After all, climate adaptation ultimately depends on people's behaviour.

For me as a human geographer this book was an eyeopener because it introduced me to a new branch of urban studies. The authors consider urban climatology as a subfield of environmental meteorology, and emphasise that 'Despite the complexity of the study area, urban climatology is not a 'case study discipline,' but uses reproducible and scalable sizes for comparison, as well as for transferability of the research findings to other locations' (p. 41, *translation GJH*). Even though this is a strong claim, in the book we find numerous examples of research findings proving their value everywhere. For example, studies make clear that one urban tree does not necessarily equal another: deciduous trees have a different effect on urban climate than conifers. To achieve the desired effect of a green space, such findings could be used more in the discussion of urban greening. Another case in point is the 'park cool island' concept: research across cities in the world demonstrates that, thanks to the so-called 'urban park breeze,' a park may have a range of several hundred meters. In summary, the book provides food for thought, not only for academics, but also for urban practitioners.

#### 4. THE CALL OF THE COUNTRY

Professor Baumann's book demonstrates that a health and sports scientist can also make a meaningful contribution to urban studies. Baumann is affiliated with the University Hospital of Cologne, among others, and in his book *Und jetzt aufs Land* (And now to the country) he makes a warm plea for the countryside as a habitat. In doing so, Baumann refers to numerous results of empirical studies published in authoritative medical and psychological journals. Unlike the two books discussed above, this book is less tightly structured and lends itself less well to study purposes. For example, it does not contain clarifying diagrams or illustrations. It also lacks an index that would be useful for checking terms used in the text. Instead, the author has included some interviews with experts and closes the book with tips for city dwellers who are considering moving to the countryside or who want to 'import' aspects of country life into their urban living environment.

The book begins with the grand and classic question of where people are better off living: in the city or in the countryside. From the start, it is clear that Baumann goes for the latter. While the advantages of the city are briefly listed in the introduction, the rest of the book is a tribute to the countryside. To be sure, the author admits that he is a rural resident himself and thus might be somewhat biased. But it must be said: the studies cited in the first part of the book on the value of rural life for people's health and life satisfaction seem to prove him right. In this respect, the book illustrates what has been termed 'the rural happiness-paradox' (Sørensen, 2021): even though the city is generally seen as the place to be, country dwellers tend to report higher subjective well-being than urbanites, at least in developed countries. Based on empirical research in Denmark Sørensen (2021) has explained this paradox with reference to two factors: higher access to natural amenities (e.g., a forest or a lake), and higher bonding social capital in local communities.

Back to Baumann's book: in the first four chapters, he reviews studies that highlight the value of nature for our well-being. For instance, apparently children in rural areas play outside more than urban children and, therefore, come into contact with more microorganisms, such as viruses, bacteria and fungi. As a result, their immune systems are challenged more, making them less susceptible to allergies. In addition, urban dwellers appear to be exposed to greater health risks (e.g., respiratory or hearing disorders) than rural dwellers due to the heavier traffic in cities. Furthermore, research shows that the easier access to green amenities in rural areas is valuable: nature invites outdoor and sports activities, while the abundance of green boost our bodies and minds.

However, in the penultimate two chapters on the social side of the countryside, i.e., village life, readers can notice that Baumann is less at home in the extensive sociological and geographical literature that has appeared on this subject,

both in international and German academic circles. He does not get much further than referring to results from social-psychological studies that social bonding is important. And when it comes to the issues at play in village communities, he has limited himself largely to observations from research and policy reports by German agencies. This is unfortunate because the book would be more convincing if these chapters were as thoroughly documented as those on the role of the natural environment of the countryside. For the village part of the book, Baumann could have collaborated with the German geography professors Henkel or Bätzing who have written standard works on the social characteristics of the countryside (Henkel, 2012; Bätzing, 2020).

## 5. THE CITY IS TOO IMPORTANT...

Each of the three recently published German-language books we reviewed in this article deals with interesting and relevant aspects of *Stadt*, *Land*, and *Klima* (city, country, and climate). Having browsed them, what can we conclude? If you ask me, all of the books are original in their own way and enrich the field of urban studies. For instance, I am charmed by Prell's linguistic perspective for approaching a complex geographical phenomenon such as the city, while I think an English translation of the accessible textbook *Stadtklima* could expect a broad international readership. However, because they are written in German, the books remain out of the picture among colleagues who are not fluent in the language. This is unfortunate but a fact of life in contemporary spatial research where 'international' actually equals 'Anglo-Saxon publication space' (cf. Paasi, 2005).

At the same time, the books show the value of not approaching the city from the traditional spatial disciplines of geography or planning. Especially as the city increasingly becomes the focal point of future-oriented developments, it is crucial to take a broad view. For social scientists it is also relevant to take note of insights from colleagues trained in, say, meteorology or health sciences – and vice versa. In this respect, Baumann's book makes it clear once again that interdisciplinary cooperation might be useful. Nobody expects scientists to be versed in all areas of their research focus. For those fields you are less familiar with, the credo simply applies: seek collaboration with colleagues, some of whom might even work within the same organisation. Paraphrasing the famous German philosopher Hannah Arendt, who wrote about the importance of politics and the role of politicians, one could say: 'The city is too important to be left to spatial scholars.'

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