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City, town

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Contents

This paper enquires into and elucidates the terms related to the city/town and its characteristics from different perspectives – in everyday language and in interdisciplinary urban research. Since the terms associated with the city/town can be simple or complex and may relate more closely to society and/or space, particularly within urban geography, they open up a multifaceted approach to the topic, with references being made to specific aspects in the Handbook of Urban and Spatial Development.

1 The phenomenon of the city/town: a multifaceted term

In his early and influential research paper on urban geography, the geographer P. Schöller described the modern city as 'the most complicated element in our highly organised cultural landscape' (Schöller 1953: 161). Since then, cities and their development have assumed even more complex forms, very diverse functions and considerable dimensions – both in the strongly urbanised and industrialised countries (▷ *Urbanisation*) and in many developing countries; at the same time there is a large number of serious problems (cf. Fig. 1 for developing countries).

However, the term *city* has no generally binding or clear definition. This is not least a result of the urban spatial processes occurring particularly in highly urbanised, industrialised countries: ▷ *Suburbanisation*, peri-urbanisation/exurbanisation (i.e. urbanisation beyond suburban space), creating seamless transitions to ▷ *Rural areas* (urban-rural continuum), and ▷ *Village development*, which is often subject to urbanisation. Furthermore, in both industrialised and developing countries many larger urban regions (▷ *Urban region*), metropolises (▷ *Metropolis/Global City*) or metropolitan regions (▷ *Metropolitan region*) have emerged and are often growing rapidly. There are also other spatial categories like megacities, regiopolises ('the small cities in times of globalisation' according to Aring/Reuther 2008) or the development of 'in-between cities' (after Sieverts 1999) e.g. in the polycentric Ruhr area (▷ *Polycentricity*).

The spectrum of definitions for the term 'city' and for urban spatial constructs derived from it displays considerable variation and often terminological confusion in general and international language use, including within interdisciplinary ▷ *Urban research*. Extremely different combinations of features characterising the town or city are found when attention is directed towards past periods of ▷ *Urban development*, for instance in Europe from antiquity right up to the recent past, and for various cultural areas in the world, e.g. the Latin American city (Bähr/Jürgens 2009; Heineberg 2017: 281 et seq.).

Thus, there can be no universal, accurate characterisation of the phenomenon of the city/town and an all-inclusive definition of the term 'for all times, cultures and regions' (Fassmann 2009: 42; see also Wolf 2005: 1048; Schäfers 2010a: 16; Heineberg 2017: 26 et seq.). 'There are diverse and in part contradictory ways of understanding the "city": as a compact settlement area, as a player in global competition among cities (entrepreneurial city), as a hub of economic leadership functions, as an anchor for identity ("I am a Berliner"), etc. What the "city" is depends […] decisively on the terms and meanings with which the reality is grasped' (Füller 2014: 70 et seq.).

2 The city/town: terms and phenomenon

2.1 Colloquial terms for the city/town

The problems with terminology discussed above are particularly acute in colloquial language with its often diffuse or imprecise meanings. In German, there are many expressions that illustrate the multifaceted nature of the colloquial use of the terms, such as 'We're going into town' (usually meaning the inner city or town/city centre), 'He works for the city' (i.e. for the city administration), 'dressed up for town' (for the higher standards in the town or city) (Stewig 1983: 18).

2.2 Statistical and administrative terms for the city/town

These terms are or were defined very differently in different countries around the world, especially in relation to threshold population levels. A differentiation is commonly made in Germany between towns and cities on the one hand and non-urban settlements or municipalities on the other hand by using a minimal population of between 2,000 and 5,000 inhabitants. This is based on stipulations made by the International Statistical Congress in 1887, i.e. at a time of advanced urbanisation. Thus for a rural town a population of 2,000 to 5,000 inhabitants was stipulated, for a small town 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants, for a medium-sized town 10,000 to 100,000 inhabitants, for a city 100,000 to a million, and for a world city over a million inhabitants. Countries with a settlement structure dominated by individual farmsteads (e.g. Denmark or Norway) often set considerably lower minimum thresholds for urban settlements, while other countries such as Greece or Malaysia even had minimum thresholds of 10,000 inhabitants for cities/towns.

To enable international comparisons of urban development or urbanisation, Schöller (1983: 597 et seq.) proposed a minimum threshold of 20,000 inhabitants. Olbricht (1936) attempted to determine statistical delimitations of cities according to population thresholds for a range of baseline years in the modern era (see Table 1). In contemporary everyday language and in the media the German term *Großstadt* (city) usually only refers to cities with more than 200,000 or 300,000 inhabitants.

Table 1: Definitions of cities in the modern era

Year	Population
around 1600	15,000+
around 1790	20,000+
around 1840	40,000+
around 1930	100,000+

Source: Olbricht 1936: 22 et seq.

It is very doubtful whether this sort of subdivision according to population does 'justice to the qualitative differences between towns and cities of different sizes' (Stewig 1983: 19). In its recent delimitation of types of town, city and municipality (▷ *Types of cities and towns*), the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development *(Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung, BBSR)* therefore combines the criterion of population of the municipality with its respective function as ▷ *Central place*: 'If one of the members of a collective municipality or a unitary municipality alone has at least 5,000 inhabitants or at least basic central functions, then it will be termed a "town"' (*BBSR* 2012: 30). If either one of these criteria is not met, then the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development speaks of a rural municipality. Thus among the 4,627 unitary municipalities in Germany there are 3,132 cities/towns and 1,495 rural municipalities.

The United Nations (UN) uses the national definitions of urban population (density) when making international comparisons in their publications, which often form the basis of space-time analyses of urbanisation. Thus in their World Urbanization Prospects (2015: 101 et seq.) the UN use very varied spatial categories and data for the *urban population*, e.g. for Germany so-called *communes* (urban districts and districts) with a population density above 150 inhabitants per km², while for the African country Ghana the threshold is 5,000 inhabitants. The demographic degree of urbanisation (in Germany in 2014: 75% urban population, worldwide 54% according to the UN 2015) and the annual rate of growth of urbanisation (urbanisation rates) are therefore difficult to compare internationally – not least with regard to the different sizes of the countries used as references (cf. Heineberg 2017: 31 et seq.).

Today, the Federal Statistical Office of the Federal Republic of Germany *(Statistisches Bundesamt der Bundesrepublik Deutschland)* (2013: 29) stipulates that urban (or densely populated) areas (usually municipalities) should have a population density of at least 500 inhabitants per km² and an absolute population of at least 50,000 inhabitants. Semi-urban (or intermediately populated) municipalities should have densities between 100 and 500 inhabitants per km² and rural (or sparsely populated) municipalities less than 100 inhabitants per km². According to these categories, in 2011 35.4% of the population of the Federal Republic of Germany lived in urban areas/municipalities, 41.6% in semi-urban and 23.1% in rural municipalities (Federal Statistical Office [*Statistisches Bundesamt der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*] 2013: 29; cf. also the different classification of municipalities according to the degree of urbanisation in: Federal Statistical Office 2016: 29).

2.3 Terms for the city/town in urban history and urban archaeology

The development of the medieval German and European city/town was expressed in the granting of city/town status (municipality with city/town status). This involved a city/town being granted legal status (from the territorial lord) which included economically significant privileges such as holding a market or storing goods (historical-legal city/town status). Urban history research has uncovered a series of terms for the city/town linked to specific epochs. Thus Haase (1984) argues that the term 'city/town' (in the area of Westphalia) was most comprehensive in the high Middle Ages (around 1200 AD). Its characteristics were an autonomous administration, significance as a trading and commercial centre, and a coherent urban type of settlement with fortifications.

Turning to the town charter, with its significance for the historical-legal understanding of the term city/town, Gorki (1974) pointed out that these charters became empty titles after the legal difference between cities/towns and non-urban areas was abolished in the local government code *(deutsche Gemeindeordnung)* of 1935. In particular, the statistical-administrative use of the term 'city/town' does not always correspond to its historical-legal use. Thus, for instance, in the 'new' German federal states there were numerous municipalities with less than 2,000 inhabitants which were (are) still towns according to the historical-legal term because they were granted a town charter in the past. More important from a functional view in Germany today is the distinction between administratively independent urban districts and cities/towns that are part of districts. In the case of the latter the administrative functions are assumed by the district in question. The Federal Statistical Office (2012, Table 2.1.6) distinguishes between districts (in total 402,

which include 107 urban districts and 295 rural districts) and municipalities (in total 11,292, with 2,064 being cities/towns including the urban districts) (version 31 December 2011).

Modern urban history research differentiates much more precisely between terms and ideal conceptions of historical cities/towns and also between individual types of cities/towns specific to different epochs and cultures (e.g. the medieval European city/town), and in some cases across disciplines, and thus arrives at more complex geographical definitions. For example, Irsigler (1983: 22 et seq.) defines 'city/town' as 'a settlement that differs from a village and from a non-agricultural one-purpose settlement' and which is characterised by a relative size 'with dense, structured building', with a 'professionally specialised and socially stratified population' and 'central functions of political, authoritative, military, economic and cultic-cultural kinds for a specific region or regional population'. 'The appearance, internal structure, as well as number and kind of functions vary over space and time' while their combination determines 'the individuality of the town; in addition, typical combinations enable the creation of temporary and regional types or key types, depending on the prevalent criteria'.

It is important that urban archaeology, especially medieval archaeology, is able to use its sources (excavations, monuments) to formulate definitions of the terms for cities/towns and to categorise them spatially and temporally. Steuer (2004: 50 et seq.) has published a comprehensive bundle of criteria for the term 'city/town' as used in medieval archaeology which captures the 'general urbanity and the individual structure' of specific cities/towns, the 'dynamics in the constant transformation of all built structures', and the formerly specifically urban ▷ *Lifestyles*, etc. The reflections on the city/town term in medieval archaeology are important because they help to describe 'the first phase of preliminary forms and early forms, up to the 10th century, and the foundational epoch of the 12th and 13th centuries. For these early phases medieval archaeology is almost alone in being able to gain detailed information, with which it then supplements the picture of the city/town of the high Middle Ages from the 14th to the 16th century, as these epochs have also been preserved in modern urban forms and can be deduced' (Steuer 2004: 51). Medieval archaeology thus provides important foundations for interdisciplinary urban research (urban history, historical urban geography, etc.), urban heritage management (▷ *Conservation of historic buildings and monuments/heritage management*) and ▷ *Urban planning*.

2.4   Urban sociology studies

Sociological observation is fundamentally focused on the people in the city/town, especially on the 'city as the context for local life' (Harth et al. 2012). The city/town or municipality is viewed as a social habitat (with a social network of interactions, a local sense of place, identity, etc.) consisting of social spaces. Harth, Herlyn, Scheller and Tessin (2012: 145) argue that two positions or notions are apparent in urban sociology studies: 'firstly the town as a social entity/ nexus of relations (urban sociology), and secondly the town as a specific space-behaviour system (sociology of space or settlement sociology)'. In most urban sociology studies, however, the link with space and planning is secondary. Many locally based urban sociological studies have a very specific thematic focus and are restricted to e.g. ▷ *Segregation*, poverty trends, the integration of immigrants or ▷ *Migration*, and – in contrast to more complex and more holistic approaches – do not 'capture the many layers of the local living environment' (Harth/Herlyn/Scheller et al. 2012: 99). The urban sociology perspective is thus multifaceted, such that there is no single sociological

definition of the city/town. The settlement sociologist Hamm even doubts that it is possible to find scientifically viable definitions for the city/town and country in urbanised society: 'The city is becoming the universal form of life, *all* social phenomena are simultaneously urban phenomena' (Hamm 1982: 21). A move away from local studies is therefore frequently justified by referring to the general urbanisation of society and 'ubiquitous urbanisation' (cf. Häußermann/Siebel 1978). Recently it seems that a paradigm shift is under way in urban sociology, in that the 'concrete city' with its individual socio-cultural characteristics is again becoming the focus of urban sociological research (cf. Schäfers 2010a, 2010b).

2.5   Other disciplines related to the city (a selection)

In addition to the aforementioned research focuses there are a number of other disciplines that are concerned with the phenomenon of the *city/town* – although often in passing and with a focus on specific aspects – and in some cases with the term 'city/town'. They include architecture, ▷ *Urban design* and urban planning, art history, cultural anthropology, municipal studies, transport studies, certain fields of law and political sciences, economics (e.g. urban economy) and not least urban geography and a series of other sub-disciplines of human geography (cf. Heineberg 2017: 12). Urban ecology acts as a bridge between ecology and geographical urban research.

2.6   The phenomenon of the city/town from the perspective of urban geography

The urban geographical perspective is related to space and usually also to society; it is also strongly interdisciplinary, meaning that many of the aforementioned research aspects are taken into consideration. Klöpper (1956) summarised the early state of research on the use of the term 'city/town' in geography. In this seminal work he judged four characteristics to be sufficient and necessary to categorise a settlement as a city/town: the coherence of the form of the place, a certain size of settlement, urban life within the settlement and a minimum of centrality (middle-order centre). The criteria applied to the term *city/town* or *urban* have been adapted and substantially supplemented over time. In the following, quantitative and qualitative determining criteria are used to succinctly describe numerous (selected) characteristics of the city/town, in particular in the context of Central Europe and related to the present period. Several aspects are only touched upon.

Although, as Klöpper suggests, the larger size of a settlement is an important criterion (e.g. population), it cannot be generally used by urban geography to define a universal minimum size for towns/cities. When only population size is considered, however, a ranking of cities according to size (depiction of the relationship between population and ranking in a diagram) may provide useful insights, because it enables certain conclusions about the development of national city systems (cf. Bähr 2010: 68 et seq.; Heineberg 2017: 80 et seq.). Thus Germany – similarly to the US – is characterised by a nearly balanced ▷ *City system,* in contrast to France, which tends towards a strengthening of the 'primate city distribution' (demographic dominance of the capital Paris).

Terms derived from *city/town* are also used differently in geography (and in neighbouring disciplines), such as *megacity*, *alpha city*, *global city* or *world city to describe the largest urban settlement category,* or also *edge city*. Megacities are variously defined as having minimum

populations of five, eight or ten million. Bronger (2004) stipulates not only a minimum population of five million for a megacity but also a minimum population density of 2,000 inhabitants per km² and a monocentric structure.

In addition to absolute population, demographic structures and socio-spatial developments are also of significance for cities. Thus larger cities in Central Europe are today usually characterised by an increase in one-person households, by a population influx particularly of foreign national population groups, i.e. by the internationalisation and increasing heterogeneity of the population and socio-spatial structures (▷ *Demographic change*; ▷ *Urban hierarchy and urban structure*). Pronounced spatial fragmentation, greater inequality and polarisation can also be observed in cities, often with social marginalisation in individual neighbourhoods in contrast to more privileged districts characterised by ▷ *Gentrification*, i.e. by the upgrading of the buildings of old neighbourhoods which is also accompanied by a social, functional and symbolic upgrading (see Glatter 2016; Krajewski 2006, 2013; Wiegandt 2012; Schnur 2013).

One of the most significant characteristics of the city/town is the coherent nature of urban settlements in terms of a horizontally and vertically compact built fabric (floorplan and elevation), often with high building densities (▷ *Settlement/settlement structure*). This feature of the cityscape particularly characterises the cores of Central European cities (▷ *City design*). At the same time it is usually still possible – despite wartime destruction – to detect the main urban design principles, strategies and ▷ *Guiding principles for urban development* of historical or more recent urban design epochs and historical city types. Compact, historic inner cities (▷ *Inner city*) that today are often upgraded through ▷ *Urban regeneration*, traffic calming measures (e.g. pedestrian zones; ▷ *Transport planning*), etc. are also of particular importance for urban identity (identification of residents with their city, outward image) and targeted, image-oriented ▷ *Urban development* including city marketing (Heineberg 2017: 272 et seq.). The compact city, with mixed land use for all spheres of life (housing, work, education, shopping and recreation), is also one of the most important guiding principles of today's sustainable urban development ('the guiding principle of the compact city with mixed land use' according to Jessen 2000).

Cities are usually characterised not only by a high density of housing and places of employment or job density with a dominance of secondary and tertiary activities and a simultaneously distinct division of labour, but also by a clear internal functional structure, e.g. with a city centre or primary business centre, subcentres in the urban boroughs and larger shopping centres as elements of the inner-city system of centres. In addition there are, for instance, (larger) recreational and cultural facilities – traditional ones like libraries, museums and theatres but also newer institutions and event-like activities. Also widespread, primarily in larger cities, is a ▷ *Festivalisation* of urban development (policy) with large cultural, sporting, economic and social events such as urban festivals, open-air concerts or garden shows, which are especially significant for ▷ *Tourism* in cities (see Krajewski 2017). The urban hierarchy and structure also consists of local recreational areas, various residential areas, industrial and commercial areas (▷ *Industry/trade*), a concentration of offices and extensive wholesale and ▷ *Retail trade* facilities (including retail warehouses). Outdoor food outlets are also increasingly common, especially in inner cities, which in recent years has often led to a considerable increase in the attractiveness of inner city locations (squares and streets) (see the example of Münster in Hauff/Heineberg 2011: 139 et seq.).
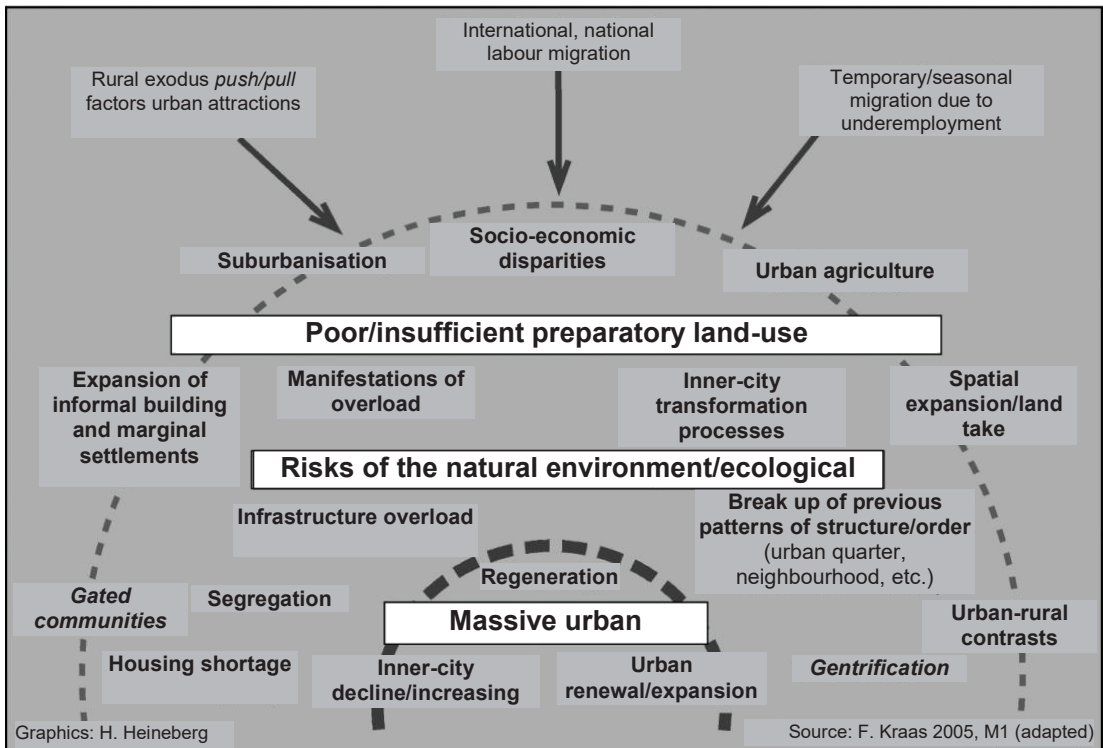
Also characteristic of urban development in the last 50 years in Germany is suburbanisation both within and beyond the borders of the city/town resulting from a deconcentration of the population; in eastern Germany this is largely catch-up residential suburbanisation (cf. Friedrich/Knabe/Warner 2014). The development of large-scale wholesale and retail trade facilities as well as industrial and commercial sites on greenfield land is also typical. The characteristics, development and supra-local importance of tertiary sector functions (▷ *Relations between cities and surrounding regions*) determine the centrality of a city/town, which has long been viewed as the most important feature of a city/town by geographical urban research.

More recently the (traditional) city centres and urban district centres have been affected by vacancies of department stores and other shops caused by the decline, 'thinning out' or 'levelling out' of the retail trade. This often even involves the complete disappearance of numerous branches, and at the same time the increasing 'textilisation' of the supply through national or international clothing chains. This is due not least to increasing competition from online trade and large-scale retail trade established on the edge of cities/towns, including newer factory outlet centres. Among the causes of this sort of recent functional transformation in cities/towns is demographic change.

Today, numerous cities and municipalities in Germany (especially in the eastern federal states and the old industrial regions like the Ruhr area), and also in other countries, are affected by demographic and economic urban shrinking (▷ *Shrinking cities*) with considerable problems in relation to ▷ *Urban redevelopment* (see Heineberg 2008), the funding necessary for the provision and maintenance of urban infrastructure, etc.

On the other hand, there is also a large number of growing cities/towns. There has been considerable success in countering instances of local decline through diverse promotion initiatives by the Federal Government (cf. Urban development promotion by the Federal Government 1971–2015 *[Städtebauförderung des Bundes 1971 bis 2015]* in: Heineberg 2017: 259), individual federal states and cities/towns, including in areas where private (business) stakeholders play an important role like city or district marketing, business improvement districts, lobby and marketing associations of local retail traders and new shopping centres integrated into the inner city or borough. Such efforts have often led to local revitalisation, especially of city/town and borough centres (cf. Mossig/Dorenkamp 2010; Jessen 2010; Heineberg 2017: 263). The strengthening and development of polycentric principles of spatial structure within cities/towns is also one of the most important guiding principles of sustainable urban development (▷ *Sustainability*).

Figure 1: Characteristics and key problems of cities/towns in developing countries

Source: Heineberg 2017: 15 after Kraas 2005

German and Central European cities/towns face a series of key problems, for instance in relation to increasing social fragmentation and socio-spatial polarisation (including increased social and ethnic segregation), current and future ▷ *Urban development planning*, especially urban redevelopment in times of a shrinking population, transport planning (▷ *Urban traffic*), and the growing competition between cities (regional up to international level), etc. Nonetheless, these cities/towns are characterised by a great deal of ▷ *Urbanity* and diverse forms of urban life with relatively good living conditions and provisions for visitors, and a high quality of experience. More recent strategies and measures of sustainable urban development planning have made a substantial contribution here. This is true not only in comparison to most cities and the rapidly expanding large metropolises in developing countries with significant urban problems (see Fig. 1) – from slums to frequently ungovernable locales (Kraas 2000, 2005) – but also in relation to many other industrialised countries.

3 The city/town in regional, national and international contexts

Cities/towns must be considered in the regional context, that is, within densely populated areas or an urban region/metropolitan region, and in their regional and national networks of city systems, urban networks/associations (Heineberg 2017: 85 et seq.) up to international and even global 'city competition systems' (▷ *Globalisation*).

Recently there has been a series of new approaches and instruments of spatial planning policy (▷ *Spatial planning (Raumordnung))* on the regional level in Germany and up to the European level. This includes, first, ▷ *Regional planning* as the link between ▷ *Urban land-use planning* and federal state spatial planning (▷ *Federal state spatial planning, federal state development*) with a 'regional plan as an instrument of design and coordination', e.g. for the Association of the Stuttgart Region (Priebs 2013: 107 et seq.). Second, since the mid-1990s when the European metropolitan regions were introduced (▷ *European spatial development policy*), new but also changeable spatial categories have been created – although not usually as new administrative units. The strategy behind these new categories involves 'raising the international profile of the locations, especially in cooperation with territorial authorities, businesses, representatives from scientific fields and other stakeholders' (Priebs 2013: 282). However, metropolitan regions of this sort involve not only cities and towns but also large parts of rural areas (see also Adam/ Wacker 2009; Blotevogel/Danielzyk 2009; Heineberg 2017: 72 et seq.).

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