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European city

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Contents

Different cultures, religions, systems of government, ethnicities, economies, planning systems and projects have paved the way for the development of various city characters in Europe. Social change has transformed cities again and again and resulted in the vestiges, upheavals and overlaps that characterise European cities today. Cities thus reflect the respective political, legal and administrative situations and long historical processes. The European city cannot be clearly defined.

1   Definitions

The term 'European city' is in vogue. It consistently has positive, dazzling connotations and invokes various images and perceptions. It is not clearly defined and is, at best, a metaphor. The term is used as an analytical category compared to other types of city and as a guiding principle of planning. These two levels cannot be distinctly separated from each other. The designation *European city* has morphological, social, historical, ethnic and cultural dimensions at both the analytical level and as a guiding principle.

The label *European city* means different things to different people: for preservationists (▷ *Conservation of historic buildings and monuments/heritage management*) it is the preservation of older buildings; for urban planners it is the compact, Wilhelminian city and the possibilities for its reconstruction; for humanists it is the relationship between private and public, inclusion and exclusion; for historians it is history, traditions and long durées; for geographers it is the structural types of cities; and finally for the legal profession it is legal systems and the legitimacy of power. As the European city is extremely diverse, it is difficult to agree on a substantive definition.

Even geographical demarcation in reference to European territory is problematic due to the vagueness of Europe's borders. There would also have to be a distinction made between a geographical, cultural and political definition of Europe. Furthermore, only selected (positive) aspects of individual cities in Europe are included in these types of definition. 'Europe is a continent of city characters' according to Braunfels (1977: 322), referring to the diversity of European cities. Much more complex aspects have come into play since the opening up of eastern Europe after 1989 with the post-socialist transformation of cities. The demand for a decidedly pan-European perspective makes a precise use of the term difficult. Eastern and southern Europe, which have thus far been neglected in research and urban policy, must also be included, as well as small, medium-sized and large cities on the periphery of Europe, which have been the subject of very few studies.

More recent research repeatedly emphasises the 'inherent logic of the cities' (Berking/ Löw 2008) and their unique features. Comparative studies have found divergent trends such as inter- and intra-municipal differences, not just between European cities. The analytical use of the term *European city* involves many distinctions by way of comparison. For example, the European city is contrasted with the North American city, even though the European city often includes elements of the North American city, such as out-of-town shopping centres and suburban expansion. In many cases, the range of variation between Europe and America goes no further than the differences between inner European and inner American cities (Lenger 2013: 14).

The Europeanness assumed when using the term furthermore ignores the major differences between continental European cities and English cities, where migrations to the suburbs and the outskirts of the city began earlier and were much more extensive, and where terraced housing still dominates today – in contrast to the compact building structures and multi-storey apartment buildings in central Europe. In the absence and low prevalence of city walls, the bourgeois middle classes began to move out of the town centres there as far back as the mid-19th century. On the other hand, there is evidence of major differences between southern and northern European cities in terms of the extent and implementation of urban planning measures.

All (European) cities have traditions, institutions and associations of meaning for their residents (Heit 2004: 10). The historical aspect when referring to the European city is also vague. Reference is primarily made to central European towns and cities and the presence of history in the everyday life and townscape, without, however, indicating the timeframe as a point of orientation. Cities, therefore, have a longevity, albeit one which encompasses transformations and diversity.

The question remains as to whether a more specific term with greater differentiation might be achieved with other terms and categories such as the preindustrial, industrial and post-industrial city, the capitalist and the socialist city, the occidental Christian city and Arabic Islamic city, the formal and informal city and any overlap of their respective dimensions. Other attempts at a definition are based on dominant economic systems. For example, a distinction can be made between (European) industrial cities, sea ports, mining towns, spa towns and capital cities (Schubert 2001: 274).

When the term European city is used without much thought, it implies a surplus of importance, restorative concepts of the city as well as fears of loss and cultivates a glorifying, retrogressive myth of a social utopia based on shared characteristics and structural similarities, without adequately reflecting the relevant differences and diversity.

2   The European city as a guiding principle

The guiding principle of the European city became increasingly significant towards the end of the last millennium and has now reached virtually hegemonic proportions (Jessen 2004: 93). It is overused in conferences, programmes, plans and manifestos of municipal policy. Through the use of synonyms such as *compact urban development*, *sustainable urban development* or *social urban development*, it also implies a departure from and a counter to functionalist modernity and a type of revisiting of ostensibly proven spatial building structures with the corresponding social implications. The rediscovery and reevaluation of the past by safeguarding the uniqueness and historical townscapes reflect the changes in standards and the search for effective, up-to-date objectives. Reconstruction in the old style, on the old ground plan with restorative ▷ *Urbanity*, was considered an appropriate model in response to functionalistic urban design. The Wilhelminian city is thus held in increasing esteem, while all urban design structures that have come about thereafter have fallen out of favour. This rediscovery of the qualities of the historical city has led to a fundamentally different interpretation of what is considered to be the better city. The city of modernity, under the banner of structural and social progress, thus not only lost its fascination, but has in fact become a symbol of destruction, inhospitableness, sobriety and coldness.

As a guiding principle, the European city involves a paradigm shift towards mixed-use neighbourhoods, a focus on conservation and preservation, compartmentalised, gradual processes, ▷ *Inner development* and in-fill development, dense, compact urban structures, the city of short distances and the participative processes of ▷ *Urban development* (Becker/Jessen/Sander 1998: 14). It is no coincidence that this reorientation of objectives corresponds to the renaissance of the city, in other words the increasing attractiveness, influx and upgrade of inner cities and neighbourhoods close to the city centre (▷ *Neighbourhood/neighbourhood development*).

The concept has become a planning objective in guiding principles ($\triangleright$ *Guiding principles for urban development*), without being explicitly defined. It refers primarily to dense, compact and mixed-use urban structures and to the city as it was before the First World War. This guiding principle refers to different building and spatial settings, both to transformations of existing buildings, such as the refurbishment of large residential settlements, and to conversion projects and new districts. Based on the criticism of guiding principles such as the functional, zoned city, this tendency towards the European city represents the lowest common denominator amongst urban planners and policymakers in the absence of more coherent strategies.

Given the growing importance of the urban-regional level, however, the objectives of the European city are problematic. From a conceptional point of view, there is virtually no allowance for the dispersal of the city in the region and the phenomena of urban sprawl and in-between cities, which in any case are scarcely manageable with this guiding principle. The dispersion trends of the past decades are now, however, being superseded by new, counter-trends of densification and city-centre-oriented lifestyles, which are increasingly valued.

Many current urban development objectives are being pursued globally and ubiquitously, even if they operate under different labels and do not explicitly refer to the European city. Principles such as mixed use, inclusion, participation, the compact city, improving public transport, inner development and sustainability represent – with varying emphasis – normative benchmarks for more recent urban guiding principles such as *Smart Cities*, *New Urbanism*, the *Networked City* and the *Resilient City*.

The model of the European city is intended to provide guidance that can be followed in urban planning and policy. Adaptability, durability and resilience are characteristics that can integrate new challenges, incorporate existing buildings and history and combine continuity with flexibility. Not only does this approach to urban development aim to design and structure a target state, it means that procedural implementation and the involvement of civil groups are integral components of the guiding principle. Other inherent elements of the *European city* project include similar basic values, shared attitudes, mentalities and a common cultural heritage.

It is no coincidence that $\triangleright$ *Urban planning* was known as urban expansion in the 19th century. It was intended to bring order to the growth, expansion and spread of growing cities. The planning of shrinking communities ($\triangleright$ *Shrinking cities*) became increasingly significant in the last decades of the 20th century. Urban shrinkage is an undesired process. It is an unplanned side effect and the indirect result of political and economic decisions (Oswalt 2006: 16). In the context of urban shrinking, urban planning is reactive and will increasingly have to make use of flexible instruments, but cannot influence the causes of shrinkage.

Shrinking cities also require a change of thinking with regard to the *European city* vision. They represent not only a new economic and social but also a cultural challenge. Old industrial regions – not just in Germany – are seeing a decline in economic activities and inhabitants combined with demographic change, which will result in long-term population decline in Europe. Additional expenditure is accompanied by falling revenue in shrinking cities (Bernt 2008: 109). In many parts of shrinking cities, local residential and landed property as well as civic commitment is being replaced by real estate companies operating at an international level, and local ties, memorial sites and commemorative cultures are continuously dwindling away.

3   Intellectual traditions and discourse

Cities have always been the subject of conflicting perceptions oscillating between admiration and euphoria, criticism and repudiation. The ideology that developed towards the end of the 19th century of agricultural romanticism and city enmity – which was not just a European phenomenon – was embedded in socio-critical, empirical studies of urban problems as well as culturally pessimistic trends which lamented the disintegration of society.

The notion of the European city was formed by Max Weber's influential distinction between the oriental and occidental city and its development of the ideal type. Weber's (unfinished) inner-occidental comparison of ancient and medieval cities and their contrast with oriental cities dates from shortly after the First World War. Implications for the European city – Weber does not use the term – in the 20th and 21st century can therefore only be derived from his work to a limited extent, even though Weber's omnibus on the city is often mined for definitions and current issues. According to Weber, characteristics such as a (at least relatively) closed settlement, density and size do not sufficiently define a city. He adds distinctions such as remote markets, the consumer city, retirement city, producer city, commercial city or merchant city and defines the term *City of the Occident* more specifically by achievements such as a relatively strong tendency towards commercial trade, fortification, the market, its own jurisdiction (guilds), executive control, rights to land holdings and thus partial autonomy (Weber 1976: 72). 'In spite of all the outer similarities in development, there must also be profound differences" (Weber 1976: 788). He further stresses: 'The occidental city was […] a place of ascent from bondage to freedom by means of monetary acquisition" (Weber 1976: 742).

The discourse before and after the First World War about European towns and cities referred to the rapid changes in the context of ▷ *Urbanisation*. Even Werner Sombart noted that there was no optimal definition of the city and it is the purpose that determines the correctness of a given definition. 'A special notion of the "city" can be postulated' for every point of view (Sombart 1907: 4). Even if Simmel did not approach the city with the 'attitude of judge', he did see 'apparent uprooting'. The city dweller responded with his intellect rather than with emotion, and thus created a protective body against the 'violations of the city' (Simmel 1903: 189, 206). Today, positively described features of cities such as bustle, diversity, chaos, size and density were the subject of fierce criticism then, and were consequently superseded by modernist, functionalistic attempts at order in planning. The contemporaneous evaluation of the (European) city at the start of the 20th century was thus often much more critical than current *ex-post* references would suggest.

Ascribing primarily positive attributes to the European city from this period of the 19th century should not, therefore, obscure the view of problematic developments back then. Indefensible hygiene conditions, overcrowding of apartments, exploitation and hardship of the working masses were byproducts of the urbanisation process. The exclusion of lower classes from elections through the three-class franchise system of voting and the shocking images of Berlin tenements and rear courtyards are prime examples.

4   Attributions of diverse characteristics

The European city has certain attested structural spatial and sociopolitical characteristics. Historically, cities represented oases in the desert of the feudal agricultural world and the nuclei of modern civil society. Characteristics attributed to the European city as generalisations – regardless of the vast diversity of city types and urban lifestyles – refer to the period from the mid-19th century to the First World War, the Wilhelminian city. Even though the city centres originate from Roman, medieval and early modern times, they still today define the identity and image of cities with their churches, town halls and marketplaces, but have by no means remained unchanged. Even the urban-regional sub-centres developed from former village centres in many cases.

In Europe, urban redevelopment measures and the clearing of existing structures for new streets highlighted the representative character of the centres, and planned new neighbourhoods such as areas around railway stations, villas and residential areas came into being (Kaelble 2006: 36). Often it was the districts created during this time that we consider to be the characteristic areas of the respective city today. They became influential places of commemorative cultures. The planning models did not usually follow a standardised grid of blocks, but rather took distinctive topographical features into account. Diagonals, boulevards and parks were important elements. Annual rings, so to speak, from different time periods formed around the old centre. For example, types of neighbourhood emerged which still differ today in terms of image and social stratification. Varied local building regulations and specifications for the use, density and height of buildings allowed for virtually no informal urban growth. Other integral components of urbanisation included planned infrastructures and a minimum level of public services as well as hygiene and fire and police stipulations. Walter Siebel (2004: 12), following on from Max Weber, names five characteristics, none of which in their own right constitutes the special nature of the European city, but which together make up the European city: differentiation, emancipation, urban lifestyle with a polarity of the public and private, centrality, size and density as well as social state interventions.

There is a reliance on the citizens and their public spirit, who, as supporters of urban culture, become key stakeholders and are expected to promote identification, social integration, mixing and stability in the neighbourhoods. The link between the concept of citizenship and property causes some problems here, as it encourages displacement and exclusion. It was not just the European city that was defined by rapid immigration before the First World War. For the migrants, the city became an integration model, a prospect of breaking free from rural dependencies in the hope of better living conditions. The housing of the compact European city opened up – and, it was assumed, would offer more options in the future for managing social change than the monostructures of modern urban planning. Despite the deregulation and neoliberal trends in many countries, European cities still include elements of the welfare state at municipal level (Siebel 2004: 17), which can make it easier for immigrants to integrate, even if the current influx of refugees to Europe represents a tough new test.

5   The future viability of the European city

European cities are places which offer a broad horizon of possibilities between hopes and fears. The European city is juxtaposed with the North American city as a battle cry and positive guiding principle. The latter city type, however, is associated with negative attributes such as urban sprawl, unpredictability, hyper ghettos, the swallowing up of the landscape and a mishmash of settlements. But the European city also once witnessed the same type of (global) phenomena and trends as the 'future laboratory' of the North American city, as it is frequently called. Whether the cultural strength of the European city is sufficient to counter neoliberal globalisation processes (▷ *Globalisation*) and urban policies, disintegration and socio-spatial disparities, must be viewed with some scepticism. To begin with, the historical core cities are under pressure from the retail trend towards chain stores (▷ *Retail trade*), the decline of owner-operated businesses, the privatisation of public spaces and the shift towards out-of-town shopping centres. The current predominant focus of neoliberal, competitive urban policy on concepts such as *Intelligent Cities* or *Smart Cities* tends to ignore unique features of the past and reinforce homogenisation. Normative guiding principles and (European) ▷ *Planning law* will in future thus have less of an impact on urban development than economic trends and forces. Urban planning and municipal policy have very little room for manoeuvre left between globalisation trends, the ceding of national powers to the supranational institutions of the EU (▷ *European Union*) and options of reterritorialisation and localisation. Whether focusing on the model of the European city incorporates enough steering options for planning and is not to be seen as a thing of the past against the background of economic momentum can definitely be viewed with scepticism.

Even national urban development policy in Germany refers to the 'idea of the European city as a model for space, society and values. On the one hand, this European city is a success story: as the focus of economic development, as an environmentally worthwhile form of settlement and as a functional social and ethnic integration machine. On the other hand, a new balance is being sought everywhere in Europe: between economic growth and sustainable development, between building expansion and preservation of historical heritage, between erratic development of spatial mobility and a reappraisal of neighbourliness' (*BMUB* [Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Construction and Nuclear Safety] undated).

It may be considered a peculiarity of Europeans that they are always looking for a historical centre, and (non-European) tourists like to marvel at the fossilised history of the centres and the colourful everyday life of European cities. When new neighbourhoods in Asia and America are named after European cities, this may be an indication of the high esteem in which European cities are held.

The EU has noted that cities are 'crucial for the sustainable development of the European Union', but that the 'European model of sustainable urban development is at risk'(European Union 2011: VI). Reference is made to 'unique cultural and structural qualities, major social forces for integration and exceptional economic development opportunities' which are characteristic of the 'European model of urban development' (European Union 2011: 1). An EU study of 258 cities in Europe in 2006 found that: 'The disparities between cities are far greater than the differences between regions or countries' (European Commission 2006: 4).

Even in the age of globalisation and the increasing influence of the EU, (formal) planning law in Europe is still codified in national law. This reflects diverse historical traditions of law, order, administration and planning. It is this diversity that characterises the richness, range of variation

and specialness of the cities of Europe.

At the moment, the European identity is not faring so well. Attempts at devolution, independence, the demand for rights of self-determination and voices critical of the EU may aggrandise the cultural quirks of regions and cities in their wake, but ultimately they will undermine the European sense of togetherness and belonging. Nevertheless, identities cannot be prescribed, and decades of upheaval between eastern and western Europe cannot be denied. Myths and symbols are key elements of the history of European cities. After travelling through over 60 European cities and making a journey through the 20th century Mak writes (2004: 905): 'Europe's weakness, its diversity, is also its greatest strength.' This opinion may be helpful in defining and explaining the distinctions and unique features of the European city.

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