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## Urban research



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# Urban research

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Urban research encompasses a number of scientific disciplines, which theoretically and empirically address the city or elements of it from a socio-economic, functional-spatial and socio-spatial perspective or from a historical viewpoint, particularly in the context of urban sociology, urban geography and urban history. The understanding of the city as a subject of research depends on the perspective of each discipline and is subject to change over the course of time.

# 1 Urban research and its subdisciplines

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As an umbrella term, urban research is not unambiguously defined within those disciplines which address the city (▷ *City, town*) or elements of it on a theoretical or empirical level, whether from a socio-economic, functional-spatial or socio-spatial perspective or indeed from a historical perspective, in particular in the disciplines of urban sociology, urban geography and urban history as well as urban economics and local public policy analysis. The understanding of the city as a subject of research depends on the perspective of each discipline and is subject to change over the course of time; accordingly, cities can be seen as a social space, a form of settlement, the result and backdrop of history, as a market and location or as an administrative system and political space of action. The extended context also includes urban ecology, which focuses on the city as an environmental system, or research in architecture and urban planning, where the city is primarily understood and analysed as a built ▷ *Space* and as a space to be designed (cf. Mäding 2005).

Each of these disciplines differs in the phenomena they deem significant, in their theoretical definition and scope as well as in the methodology used. A core discipline of urban research is without question urban sociology, which perceives the city as both ‘structure and process of social subsystems’ (Hannemann 2013: 64) and which focuses predominantly on the analysis of socio-spatial change in cities using the methodology of empirical social research (Hannemann 2013; Friedrichs 2017; Häußermann/Siebel 2004). A closely related field is urban geography, which deals with the description and analysis of urban development processes and city systems (▷ *City system*) on a national and international scale (Parnreiter 2013; Heineberg 2016). There is a long tradition of the city as a subject of historical research, which dates back to the early 19th century. In the early 1970s, urban historical studies experienced a ‘move toward enlargement, institutionalisation and scientification’ (Schott 201: 124), which was closely related to the thematic shift toward ▷ *Urban development* in the 19th and 20th century, and toward the connections between ▷ *Urbanisation* and industrialisation and daily life in the city. The conflicts at the level of municipal politics that prevailed at the time in connection with ▷ *Urban regeneration* also stimulated society’s interest in its own local history. This has brought urban history as a discipline thematically and methodologically closer to the other spatially-related social sciences (Schott 2013). Urban economics is a fairly young branch of economics and is particularly widespread in the Anglo-American countries; its focus is on economic explanations of the emergence and development of spatial structures (Spars 2003). Local public policy analysis examines the city as a political-administrative system and a political field of action; it deals among other things with the interaction between political and economic stakeholders, the power structures formed by them, their institutional orientations and embedding as well as the specific forms of ▷ *Governance* in the negotiation and implementation of objectives and agendas.

Urban research is characterised by interdisciplinary work on common issues; the disciplines involved cross-fertilise each other, adopt each other’s findings and reference each other’s methodological approaches, yet have never evolved into a single, coherent, theoretically and conceptually independent discipline. There is to date no single, integrated theory, nor is one to be expected in view of the enormous complexity of the city as a subject. Nevertheless, it can be observed that theoretical and methodological progress in individual disciplines has frequently come about by recourse to the knowledge of related fields of study. Hence, urban research is

definitively more than the sum total of all the contributions of all the participating disciplines (Schlichtmann 2018).

## 2 Beginnings and development of urban research

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The roots of urban research date back to the end of the 19th century, when accelerating industrialisation and urbanisation gave rise to new questions about the emergence, development and structure of cities/towns, their economic and social (and later also environmental) impacts, as well as possibilities for shaping them through policy-making and planning. Early studies – nowadays described in the broadest sense as contributions to urban research – addressed the city as a factor of social development (Weber) or in the context of urban poverty and social  $\triangleright$  *Segregation* (Marx, Engels), the quality of social relations in cities (Simmel), the division of labour and the differentiation of roles (Durkheim, Simmel) or social forms in progressing urbanisation (Tönnies) (for an overview, see Häußermann/Siebel 2004 and Schlichtman 2018). A systematic exploration of the development of cities, however, was only established with the Chicago School of sociology. Social ecology as it developed in the first decades of the 20th century at the University of Chicago continues to influence sociological urban research and urban geography – despite frequent criticism – from a theoretical and methodological perspective. The political economy of the urban environment, which has developed since the 1960s, can be described as another important trend. Proponents of the New Urban Sociology (Castells) and Marxist Critical Geography (Harvey) fundamentally reject the understanding of urban development as a natural, organic process of locational competition and the related analogies with ecological principles. They argue in favour of viewing urban development processes in their overall social context and in particular economic contexts. Unlike social ecology, the focus in this respect is rather on political actions. The city – according to this perception – is a material manifestation of the prevailing, politically regulated conditions of power and production. Moreover, factors on the supply side, such as players on the real estate market, are taken into account to a greater extent than in the studies of the Chicago School (Schlichtman 2018).

Time and again, urban research has had to acknowledge epistemological crises. At the end of the 1980s, for example, Friedrichs (1988: 8) criticised the discipline's failure to establish a link between urban sociology studies and general formation of sociological theories. Keil (2018: 41) has criticised urban research for its one-sided focus on large, densified cities and demanded stronger theoretical scrutiny of suburban and/or post-suburban  $\triangleright$  *Spatial development*. Overall it can be said that the theories of urban development, which are mostly based on Western experience, have been fundamentally questioned in the recent past. It is argued that Western experiences are hardly appropriate to adequately explain the diversity of urban development and specifically urban development in the global South (e.g. Robinson 2016; Brenner/Schmid 2015; Roy 2009).

Irrespective of the above, it can be observed that the social attention to issues of urbanisation and urban development have significantly increased in recent times (Iossifova/Doll/Gasparatos 2018). This may in part relate to the enormous dynamic with which urbanisation is taking place in the global South in particular (see also the discussion about 'megacities' and 'mega-urban' settlement development). In times of an 'Urban Age' (Burdett/Sudjic 2006), sustainable forms of urban development become increasingly important ( $\triangleright$  *Sustainability*).

Cities/towns are perceived to some extent as laboratories or a frontline, in or along which the future of humanity will be decided. The social and political demand for urban research, which is problem-focused and application-oriented, has unmistakably increased.

The upturn in urban research probably also results from more recent theoretical debates in the social, political and economic sciences. In a certain way, it could be described as a rediscovery of the city as a subject of interest and research. Examples to be mentioned in this context are the current discussions about new forms of urbanisation ('Planetary Urbanization', 'World of Suburbs'; Brenner/Schmid 2015 and Keil 2018), about  $\triangleright$  *Gentrification* as a global phenomenon or even strategy (Lees 2012; Smith 2002), or about the need for a post-colonial theory of the 'urban' (Roy 2009). Moreover, new fields of knowledge are emerging, some of which make use of novel methods from mathematics or computer science. This includes studies that address the complexity of (urban) systems ('complexity science', see e.g. de Roo/Silva 2010), or those which identify urban correlations with complex, data-based methods (the 'science of cities'; see e.g. Batty 2017).

### 3 The city as a subject of scientific knowledge

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A cross-disciplinary question of urban research is whether the city should be investigated as a subject, as an independent factor in social, economic, or ecological development (Häußermann/Siebel 2004: 89 et seq.). Marxist urban research, in particular, has consistently rejected this approach. The city and the morphological-functional and socio-spatial structures that defines it could be understood to be merely an expression of social conditions and developments. Proponents of this view do not believe that urban problems exist in and of themselves; instead, they define them as problems of a social nature that are manifested in urban settlements (Saunders, cited in Häußermann/Siebel 2004: 91). As far as urban research is concerned, this gave rise to the demand that the economic, social or political phenomena associated with cities/towns should be examined within the social contexts that define them.

Likewise, the perception of the city as a spatial category has been the subject of criticism time and again. The city should not be understood purely as a spatially demarcated unit of space or a specific settlement form. It is alleged that the urban dimension is not an empirical object but rather a theoretical category (Brenner/Schmid 2014). Urbanisation should be understood as a multi-scalar, global process of a continuing functional, socio-spatial and morphological transformation within flexible boundaries. Accordingly it is argued that there is also no universal, predefined form of the 'urban'. The established typologies of urban research (such as metropolises, cities, suburbs, rural municipalities) are said to have become obsolete.

In urban economics and urban geography, there are concepts that define the city as a spatially comprehensible category. Storper and Scott (2016: 1116), for example, perceive cities/towns as gravitationally generated agglomerations of people, their economic activities and social interactions and, moreover, of the elements of the built environment created by them, which materialise as densified, interconnected and multimodally structured land uses ( $\triangleright$  *Agglomeration, agglomeration area*). The agglomerations thus demarcated (as a city/town or  $\triangleright$  Urban region) are presented as a 'space of flows' in regard to their complex, functional interrelations (Hall 2009). They also serve as hubs in supra-regional, global networks of  $\triangleright$  *Migration* and  $\triangleright$  *Mobility*, of the trade

in goods and  $\triangleright$  *Services*, of resource transfers and an exchange of innovation and information (Florida/Adler/Mellander 2017). Cities/towns and urban-like regions can thus be perceived as network hubs, the development and global integration of which are inseparably linked to the restructuring and repositioning of their hinterland.

The emphasis on agglomeration and physical interaction helps to separate the inherent urban dimension from other social realities. A distinction can be drawn between phenomena that are found in cities but cannot be explained through agglomeration effects (i.e. effects that are caused through the cognitive and social proximity of individuals) ('issues in cities' according to Scott and Storper 2015) and those phenomena that are of a genuinely urban nature, because they are a manifestation or result of agglomeration and its externalities ('issues of cities').

In this sense, cities and their structures can be defined as independent causal factors for explaining individual behaviour and as socio-spatial developments in the form of aggregated individual actions (see Næss 2016). Hence, the city is not merely a reflection of society, it also feeds back into urban life as a specific factor. This is also the context for theoretical approaches in urban sociology, which have gained traction in recent years, on the 'intrinsic logic of cities' (Berking/Löw 2008; for a critical viewpoint, see Siebel 2013), according to which cities/towns form specific individual characteristics, which define the behaviour and value systems of their inhabitants but which are also shaped by them in return. Reference should also be made here to the intense debate about so-called neighbourhood and contextual effects in urban sociology and urban economics (see e.g. Galster 2010; Sampson 2012; Florida/Adler/Mellander 2017). This term refers to certain properties of cities or neighbourhoods that obstruct, prevent, facilitate or suggest human behaviour. Cities/towns and their functional, morphological and socio-spatial patterns can be defined as systems for allocating different opportunities (Häußermann/Siebel 2004: 117) or as an 'opportunity structure' (Friedrichs 2011: 37), which opens up or limits the potential courses of actions of people in various dimensions.

Proponents of the social constructivist approach, which perceives the city as a social product or a discursive construct, have an entirely different perspective. Urban spaces, according to this viewpoint, should not be seen as a backdrop or container against or in which social processes play out. They are rather artefacts of processes of social construction that are continuously formed and reproduced through language and everyday actions. According to this approach, urban research must develop a perspective which encompasses the social production of city and space as well as the spatial aspects of social processes in their interaction. Urban developments should be explored as the result of communicative practice and the linguistic setting (Hesse 2012: 69). This theoretical approach to the city emphasises the importance of a subjective, interpretative perspective of the phenomena under research. Of special importance in this context are linguistic constructions, because – it is said that – to formulate communicative rules is to exercise a certain power of interpretation, which could even change material processes.

## 4 Methodological approaches

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Due to its multidisciplinary nature, urban research does not follow any clear methodological paradigm, as is characteristic for many traditional scientific disciplines. Instead, it forms the base for a large number of quantitative and qualitative methods that are frequently combined when

designing a research study (triangulation). At this point, only the most important methods can be briefly mentioned. Social space analyses and approaches from factorial ecology, inspired by the tradition of socio-ecological research, were particularly influential for many years. Analyses of the spatial distribution of population groups with secondary statistical data played and still play an important role in segregation research. Quite rightly, these studies were criticised for their lack of explanatory power, which was deemed to be due to weak theoretical anchoring (Friedrichs 1988).

Yet quantitative methods continue to be part of the basic toolbox of urban research. Using statistical methods that rely either on their own surveys or external data sources, such methods can describe not only structures and changes in cities/towns, but also the impact of certain factors (variables) through mathematical verification against other determinants. In this context, cartographic methods based on geoinformation applications (▷ *Geoinformation/ geoinformation systems (GIS)*) are beginning to play an important role as well. Mapping as a method to visualise structures and interrelations in a city/town has a long tradition in urban research.

In the digital era, statistical analyses based on large data volumes are experiencing a boom. Advances in computing power and (geographical) data processing and new data inventories from the digitisation of urban functions (such as mobility) are deemed to offer an opportunity to better understand cities as complex systems ('Science of Cities'; see e.g. Batty 2017 or Barthélemy 2016). Neo-positivist and universalist scientific notions frequently show through in big data applications, wherever regularities and generally valid principles of urban development are to be 'discovered' with academic and scientific methods.

Yet, in recent years, qualitative methods have prevailed in urban research. Ethnographic research, to which the Chicago School devoted great attention, may serve as an example. Characteristic in this respect is the linking of the theory formulation with micro-analytical and meso-analytical methods, such as participatory observation, interviews, archival work and historical research (Schlichtman 2018: 21). Of major significance are case studies that allow researchers to make descriptive statements about the research subjects in their respective context. Case studies are particularly well suited for researching complex phenomena with little secure theoretical knowledge about their manifestations and causal links (Flyvbjerg 2006; Yin 2014).

In this context, the value of comparative case studies is also emphasised (Ward 2008). This includes approaches that are based on universally valid theories in regard to the urban dimension which seek to identify and explain differences and similarities through systematic comparisons. On the other hand, there are approaches that largely work without generalising preliminary assumptions and that understand and explain processes in their specific context (Robin 2016).

## 5 The research landscape in Germany

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Even though issues related to the management and shaping of spatial processes at least indirectly form the background for almost all urban research, a distinction can be made between basic research and application-oriented research. In basic research, which addresses the issue of the emergence and dynamic of urban development processes and their determinants, the mutual interrelation of the spatial environment and social behaviour and also the subjective perception

of spatial processes, issues and methodological concepts are defined by the researchers themselves. In Germany, basic research is conducted primarily at the relevant university institutes and the network of five spatial sciences institutes (*Netzwerk raumwissenschaftlicher Institute*; www.5r-Netzwerk.de). The network includes the Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development (*Leibniz-Institut für Ökologische Raumentwicklung, IÖR*) in Dresden, the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (*Institut für raumbezogene Sozialforschung, IRS*) in Erkner, the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography (*Institut für Länderkunde, IfL*) in Leipzig, the Academy for Territorial Development (*Akademie für Raumforschung und Landesplanung, ARL*) in Hanover and the Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development (*Institut für Landes- und Stadtentwicklungsforschung, ILS*) in Dortmund, all members of the Leibniz Association, which can rely on basic public funding from the federal and state governments. The most important funding source for basic research is the application-based funding by the German Research Foundation (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG*). This funding also includes grants provided by other donors through corresponding research programmes, such as the Volkswagen Foundation and the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (*Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, BMBF*).

Although no reliable figures are available at this point, it can be assumed that in Germany the scope of application-oriented urban research is far larger than the city-specific basic research. In this regard, the federal and state ministries and their subordinate agencies regularly launch research programmes as part of their departmental research and contract them out. Another focal point consists of the various funding guidelines of the European Union (▷ *European Union – EU*), the common denominator of which are mandatory cross-border research alliances composed of several partners from various member states. It should also be noted that since the early 1970s the local authorities in large cities have established their own research sections in the departments responsible for urban development.

In application-oriented research, the specific research issues and the chosen methodology are largely defined in advance in line with the respective requirement for information and action of the funding body. They include foundations with their own thematic focal points, such as the Wüstenrot Foundation (▷ *Housing*; ▷ *Conservation of historic buildings and monuments/heritage management*), the Schader Foundation in Darmstadt (▷ *Socially Integrative City*) or the Montag Foundation in Cologne (▷ *Neighbourhood/neighbourhood development*). A broad range of research institutes, which spans from university research groups and private-sector research firms to major research facilities, such as the aforementioned spatial sciences 5R Network, the German Institute for Urbanism (*Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik, DIFU*) in Berlin or the Institute for Housing and Environment (*Institut für Wohnen und Umwelt, IWU*) in Darmstadt, compete for grants.

To ensure greater practical relevance of the results, special formats within application-oriented research have been developed and promoted in recent years. These formats are essentially model projects, pilot projects and real experiments, which are funded and implemented by local authorities and other civil society bodies and supported through research. This includes Experimental Housing and Urban Development (*Experimenteller Wohnungs- und Städtebau, ExWoSt*) projects, Model Spatial Planning Projects (*Modellvorhaben der Raumordnung, MORO*) as part of the MORO action programme, and the ‘real labs’ which have long been supported by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research and some federal state ministries.

The most important interdisciplinary urban research publications are *Raumforschung und Raumordnung* | *Spatial Research and Planning (RuR)*, published jointly by the five institutes of the spatial sciences network, *disP – The Planning Review*, published by The City and Landscape Network (*Netzwerk Stadt und Landschaft*) at the Technical University of Zurich (*ETH Zürich*), *Informationen zur Raumentwicklung (IzR)* (Information on Spatial Development), *Zeitschrift des Bundesinstituts für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumentwicklung (BBSR)* (Journal of the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development) and *Forum Stadt. Vierteljahrszeitschrift für Stadtgeschichte, Stadtsoziologie, Denkmalpflege und Stadtentwicklung* (Quarterly Journal for Urban History, Urban Sociology, Heritage Management and Urban Development), published by *Forum Stadt – Netzwerk historischer Städte e.V.* in Esslingen. In addition, the salient journals in the fields of geography, history, cultural studies and political science offer important platforms for publications on urban research.

Nevertheless, the international reception of the results of urban research in German is largely dependent on their publication in English-language journals. Despite the growing number of publications in major UK and US journals, e.g. the *International Journal for Urban and Regional Research (IJURR)*, *Urban Studies*, *City or Landscape and Urban Planning*, their visibility in international scientific discourse does not adequately reflect the weight and reputation they have achieved at the national level.

## 6 Current issues in urban research

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As the thematic range of urban research has always been very broad and subject to constant change, this article can only outline some broad trends of the past two decades. The issues of application-oriented urban research are particularly strongly defined by the needs of the funding bodies. Long-term as well as current political issues and fields of action with spatial aspects largely define the topics pursued.

In the first decade of the new millennium, key urban research issues in the German-speaking areas centred around demographic change, in particular urban shrinking processes and the growing socio-spatial polarisation within cities (▷ *Demographic change*; ▷ *Shrinking cities*). Numerous studies described and analysed the decline in population and employment figures, and the resulting consequences for regional and local development (purchasing power and tax revenues) and on local policy and planning (▷ *Housing policy*, ▷ *Provision of public services* and ▷ *Urban land-use planning*). The Eastern German federal states and mining regions formed a key spatial focus. Segregation and poverty studies examined the small-scale consequences of the growing social divide, analysed the specific living conditions in neighbourhoods and addressed the conditions and challenges for social and urban policy-based interventions. The policy frame of reference and funding basis for many of these studies were primarily the programmes of the federal and state governments adopted at the turn of the millennium for ▷ *Urban development promotion*, e.g. *Stadtumbau Ost* (Urban Redevelopment in the East) (2002) and *Stadtumbau West* (Urban Redevelopment in the West) (2002), or *Soziale Stadt – Stadtteile mit besonderem Entwicklungsbedarf* (Socially Integrative City – Urban boroughs with special development needs) (1999).

For some time, and at the latest since the massive wave of immigration to Germany, the urban research agenda has been more strongly defined by the problematic conditions associated with the growth of urban regions. This is also the context for the focus the professional public places once again on the intensive research on ▷ *Reurbanisation* processes in the sense of the redevelopment of (inner) city residential areas and their problematic social consequences for the regional ▷ *Housing market*. They are also the subject of the currently expanding research on gentrification, especially in the large, fast growing metropolitan regions (▷ *Metropolitan region*). This also concerns the economic and socio-spatial impacts of the global capital market on land and real estate markets (▷ *Land market/land policy*; ▷ *Real estate sector*). A further focal point of urban research refers to the transformation, densification and modernisation potential of the post-war built stock and the potential for structural ▷ *Inner development* and further densification ('compact city').

Since the turn of the millennium, additional lines of research have emerged, which result from the now irreversible climate change (▷ *Climate, climate change*; ▷ *Climate change adaptation*) and the energy transition, as well as the expansion of digital ▷ *Information and communication technology*. More recent city-related climate and environmental research focuses on the assessment of the consequences of climate change (increase in average temperatures, greater temperature fluctuations throughout the year, the rising number and intensity of extreme weather events such as hail, rain, heat waves) for cities and their ability to cope with these consequences. In this regard, comprehensive funding and research programmes have been established at the EU and federal level, often in conjunction with the guiding principles for a resilient city/town.

A further, current focal point of research, often in conjunction with the technology-inspired buzzword '*Smart City*', addresses the challenges and opportunities in connection with the new information and communication technologies, which have penetrated society and the economy over the past two decades. The triumph of mobile internet has taken the digitalisation of everyday urban life to a new level. The question is generally how these technologies can be used to an even greater and more focused extent to achieve sustainable urban development through smart applications. The focus is also on the long-term, currently scarcely foreseeable impacts on social and economic practices in the city, e.g. the consequences of e-commerce on the urban ▷ *Retail trade* or the potential and limits of digitally-based transport services, such as carsharing, hire schemes for cars and bicycles, or electromobility and self-driving systems. Finally, the critical aspects of the increased digital penetration of everyday urban life should be addressed, such as the acceleration of everyday activities, threats to privacy due to the surveillance or monitoring of ▷ *Public space*, the misuse of personal data or the unequal access to public services ('digital divide').

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