Editorial

Inaugural Issue: Urbanities 1

In recent years urbanity as a concept has gained vigour, importance and interest, moving away from locality as a fixed place of identity. Social scientists have analysed urban localities as places of strife, destruction of social relations and isolation, or as melting pots of different cultures. For the most part, however, anthropologists shied away from such localities and urban issues, regarding them as the traditional field of sociology. Anthropologists were to focus their efforts on the exotic, the 'unknown'. When I first suggested, in my Ph.D. proposal, to study the life of a small group of female electrical engineers in the city of Skopje, Maurice Bloch, the head of my anthropology department at LSE, bluntly said to me that a city, particularly a Western city, was not a place where anthropologists did research; it was the prerogative of sociology.

Anthropology, with its emphasis on long-term qualitative ethnographic field research, could only be practised in small, circumscribed places: that is, villages or tribal societies. It was only with the support of Peter Loizos that I was allowed to go and carry out fieldwork in Macedonia. He was interested in social change and international development and looked at dislocation and political uncertainty, studying how his informants drew on their experience of war strategies in developing their political and social relations. In my research I looked particularly at how individual actors moved from a Yugoslavian identity to a new identity in the Republic of Macedonia. I chose to apply participant observation as my main research method, which turned out to be both possible and very useful, even in the multifaceted scenario of an urban setting such as Skopje. My approach privileged qualitative as opposed to quantitative data, looking at the interactions between social actors and the broader context of the Yugoslav War and the establishment of the EU Maastricht Treaty in 1993. I was able to bring out the multitude of economic, political and cultural connections my informants built around themselves and to study how their lives were contextualized in the dynamic of war and in the creation of a nation-state ideology. While my informants stressed their urbanity and EU identity, they now lived in a newly established country where national processes drew on the rural and ethnic elements to create a Nation-State based on a grand historical rural past; at the same time resenting the EU, and especially its acceptance of Greece's opposition to recognizing Macedonia's national identity in the EU. Today an ever-increasing number of holistic ethnographic studies are carried out in

European cities using participant-observation and the collection of case material. In British Social Anthropology, this trend was pioneered by Italo Pardo's seminal work in Naples in the mid-1980s.

The difficulties in identifying and delimiting the field of study in the city lies at the heart of the discomfort some anthropologists continue to feel with urban research. *Urbanities* will endeavour to address such difficulties and their implications with the aim of making anthropology more comfortable with research not on 'the city,' but in 'the city,' envisaging urbanity as a concept that engenders meaning well beyond the mere definition of space as expressed by borders on a map. Urban space might create meaning for our informants; however, as the articles in this journal show, such a meaning is not necessarily bound to specific spaces and activities. As a concept, urbanity suggests distinctive means to express and give form to expectations and needs that are shared anywhere in our global world, in New York as in Brasilia, in Skopje as amongst the Merina of Madagascar.

Urbanities invites authors to engage with the concept of urbanity to demonstrate the relationship between micro- and macro-level processes that link individual and collective agency to the broader social system. The contributions that we seek should, therefore, contextualize social agency, urbanity and history.

This Journal is not interested in categorical assumptions, or in looking at changes associated with globalization and democratization through a dualistic and moralistic stance – the urban standing for the familiar, exploitation and colonization; the rural for the exotic and the purity of an untainted past. *Urbanities* encourages, instead, a more differentiated approach. The contributors to this first issue recognise the complex ways in which urban life is transformed and that such changes are not necessarily specific to given localities or to ideas of the exotic in the familiar versus the familiar in the exotic. Locality has long been recognized as a contentious concept in anthropology; the focus on urbanity highlights the tangled, unstable, shifting and all-too-often impromptu dynamics of power, as opposed to casting power and people as fixed in one location. We can find the rural in the urban and the urban in rural locations. Is the distinction between the rural and the urban still sustainable? Is the distinction between the exotic and the familiar still useful? Do we not, perhaps, need to try to reach much further than what we have been taught to see as the city proper, recognizing that urban life is not, nor can it be seen or portrayed as fixed into a location, that it can be virtual space, sometimes even without a place?

We need to take into account that urban life can be found in the virtual world of avatars, Wikipedia and YouTube, as Lesley Braun so graphically show in this issue. These reflections bring our analysis very far away from the diverse anthropological interest in urban research initially stimulated by the Chicago and Manchester Schools, or in the opposition originally expounded by mainstream British anthropologists.

Urbanities' objective is to step away from such straitjackets. Instead, we need to ask such questions as, for example, does inequality of globalisation reinforce the interdependence of rural and urban communities? Since anthropologists will be reluctant to give up the strict micro-demarcation of the 'people' whom they study, which is distinctive of research in 'developed' societies, *Urbanities* may play a leading role in understanding 'the urban' as a field for the detailed ethnographic study of critical, and often ignored, aspects of our 21st century world. *Urbanities* will encourage reflection on the vantage point that Urban Anthropology can provide in understanding the complexity of today's, greatly and ever increasingly urbanized, world. There are questions that urban anthropology needs to address. Can we define urbanity if we include virtual space in our definition? Is the city always, or merely, a place of oppression, neglect and misery, a world of corruption and endless consumerism? Can it, instead, be something marvellous, beautiful, despite pollution, urban sprawl and the deterioration of the built environment? The bizarre and the mundane, the mystical and the corrupt can be found in any form of associated life; none is idiosyncratically urban.

The entwinement of past and present rural-urban and urban-rural migrations linked to changes associated with globalization and democratization has reinforced the interdependence of rural and urban communities. This Journal will encourage reflection on the spatial multiplicity of urbanity as a way to approach difference and power. The articles published in this issue take on such a theoretical challenge discussing, among other things, website broadcasting and transnational complicities and conspiracies. Ruffo's article on the Murdoch affair has been included, as a special contribution by a non-anthropologist, because it addresses this complex issues in the media, a problem all anthropologists face in the preparation and execution of their field research and in writing up their material. Ruffo's article eminently helps to point out the intertwinement of academic study and the professional world, a key element in researching and discussing urbanity.

The notion of land as a means to ensure solidity, as found in traditional anthropological

theory on rural or small-scale societies is a theory that *Urbanities* will question. Bardhoshi's article encourage the reader to reflect on the creation of informal areas in the quest to secure legitimacy, which does not suggest fluidity versus solidity, but solid fluidity or the fluid solidity of space. Bardhoshi points out that the state no longer seems to be seen as a 'reified' power but as a solid human with a face and a name. As I have mentioned, Braun's article looks at the 'YouTube phenomenon' and at the possibility that it offers to embody urbanism in the most remote places. Lindsey's article looks at a phenomenon that he calls 'Olympicisation', offering an examination of the social implications of an Olympic-related urban regeneration. He argues that the Olympicisation of space focuses upon transforming and, subsequently, controlling a city. Lindsey contends that Olympicisation needed community solidification during the bidding phase and then required the dismantling of such a community during the delivery phase. In her research report, Petronoti views transnational migration as instrumental in understanding the creation of a Greek national identity based on the ideal of a solid and local Western lifestyle. Torsello helps us to understand transnational institutions, such as the EU, and environmental organisations and their interaction with local people and space. He addresses the challenges faced by the sovereignty of the state's policy-making and development plans under the broader influences of neoliberal capitalism and global governance. He demonstrates how these influences, via direct political intervention, lead to a decreasing mobilisation from below, which is often characterized by personalised and informal strategies and by the transposition of public and private interests. These contributions indicate progress in the study of urbanities, at the same time raising question whether the urban-rural differentiation is more apparent than real, amongst many other very current under-theorised and under-portrayed nodes of action. These concerns point to intensifying disagreements about the utility of 'the urban' as a concept. The contributors offer a variety of refreshing views which invites debate. Some seem prepared to discard 'the urban' as an analytical notion, while others try to pin down the paradigm of urbanity and inequality.

The current challenge to anthropology and its holistic claim is to develop an understanding of the macro processes that mark the context in which people live and operate according to different but distinct micro processes. As Touval shows, a direct path to such an understanding is to seek out the connecting links, real and symbolic, among the various aspects of the urban system. I would advocate an analysis of symbols and actions that addresses the ways in which they are used to separate or join individuals and groups. Petronoti alludes to these issues in her

contribution. The point of departure for *Urbanities* is to acknowledge the multidimensional character of urban life. One issue that requires debate is the urbanity of the anthropologists themselves. I think it can be said that anthropologists introduce urbanity into the localities were they carry out their research. We, as anthropologists, have come a long way from the idea of an objective representation of the life 'they' live, widely acknowledging that our research is based on the social encounters we have in 'other' spaces. We recognize that our research is subjective, and that it is influenced by our own urbanity. The question is how can we acknowledge this in our research?

We invite researchers to address the issue of urbanities as well as to acknowledge and reflect on urbanities as they exist and are represented, in the fieldwork site and by the researchers themselves.

Through field research, anthropologists acquire specific knowledge of the world of their informants. We need to draw lessons from such knowledge, which should be reflected in the critical analyses that we develop. The emphasis should always be on combining critical theory with sound ethnographic evidence from the urbanities that we enter, live in and re-enter. *Urbanities* will offer a platform for intellectual discussion and exchange of new ideas, as they are developed through the work of junior and established anthropologists, as well as through doctoral research, letters and comments. This Journal will endeavour to help to secure urbanity as a field of anthropological investigation. I hope that *Urbanities* will serve anthropology as a generator of in-depth, informed knowledge and stimulating thinking.

Ilka Thiessen, Editor

Announcement from the Editor

The first issue of *Urbanities* is being published too close to the established deadlines. Therefore, it has been agreed to extend the next deadline for major contributions, such as articles and review articles, to 30th January 2012. Other contributions should be submitted by 30th March 2012.