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## *Ethnographies of Urbanity in Flux: Theoretical Reflections*

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With more than half of the world's population now living in cities, and this proportion set to increase to two-thirds by 2050, the ethnographic study of life in urban settings has never been so urgent and important. Urbanisation proceeding at such a pace has meant increases in the number and size of cities, a process that continues to alter the social fabric of urban centres, sometimes in profound ways. While the definition of city is varied and culturally and politically specific, urban conglomerations are widely identified as hubs of cultural and ethnic interaction as well as challenging settings for future sustainable development. Not surprisingly, achieving 'Sustainable Cities and Communities' has become one of the 17 fundamental goals of the '2030 Sustainable Development Agenda' adopted by the United Nations in 2015. In such a framework, urban policies have become fundamental in the achievement of the whole Development Agenda that aims to bring peace, social justice and prosperity for all present and future generations. However, ethnographic research shows that all too often urban policies are failing to provide real solutions to the problems that mark life in contemporary cities worldwide — environmental and security issues continue to be major concerns alongside socio-economic disparities.

Ethnographic research is an 'art of the possible', and in cities there are many possibilities. Combined with specific research objectives, the application of ethnographic methodology leads to a great variety of approaches and to new paradigmatic challenges, as testified by the vibrancy of this peer-reviewed, open-access Journal, by the discussions developed in the volumes *Anthropology in the City: Methodology and Theory* (Pardo and Prato eds 2012), *The Palgrave Handbook of Urban Ethnography* (Pardo and Prato eds 2018), by the debate hosted by *Diogenes* (Pardo, Prato and Kaltenbacher eds 2015) and by the contributions to the series 'Palgrave Studies in Urban Anthropology'<sup>1</sup> and 'Urban Anthropology'.<sup>2</sup> Undergirding the intellectual and organisational efforts of the growing number of high-calibre scholars of different generations who contribute to the activities of associations like the International Urban Symposium-IUS<sup>3</sup> and the IUAES Commission on Urban Anthropology,<sup>4</sup> ethnographic research in urban settings and its findings are attracting increasing attention from non-anthropologists and from professionals and decision-, law- and policy-makers.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/14573>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.routledge.com/Urban-Anthropology/book-series/ASHSER1320>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.internationalurbansymposium.com/> especially 'Events'.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.iuaes.org/comm/urban.html>

Recent publications have stimulated a robust debate. The contributions to this Supplement to *Urbanities—Journal of Urban Ethnography* meet the Journal’s mission and track record developed under the joint editorship of a social anthropologist and qualitative sociologists with the active collaboration of a multidisciplinary Scientific Board. It is in such a line that the essays that follow take stock of the discussions developed through a one-day Conference on ‘Urbanity: Empirical Reflections’ held at Brunel University in May 2018 and a five-day School cum two-day Seminar on ‘Cities in Flux: Ethnographic and Theoretical Challenges’ held at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge in June 2018. Both exercises were organised under the auspices of the International Urban Symposium (IUS).

This Supplement brings together social anthropologists, sociologists, architects, historians and urban planners committed to an empirically-grounded analysis of cities in order to develop reflection on a number of pressing methodological and theoretical questions relating to urban change. Their work contributes to demonstrate the potential for methodological and theoretical development in the shared awareness of the unique contribution that ethnography offers for a better grasp of our rapidly changing and increasingly complex cities (Pardo and Prato 2018a, 2018b).

### **Developing the Field**

Considering anthropologists’ prominent role in this ongoing debate,<sup>5</sup> it will be useful to summarise key aspects in the development of anthropological research in urban settings — ‘urban anthropology’ for short. With a few exceptions (for example, Dumont 1951, Firth ed. 1956, Redfield and Singer 1954), until the 1970s, established academic disciplinary distinctions had led anthropologists to focus on tribal societies, or village communities, while staying generally away from the urban setting as a field of research. One reason for such a choice was rooted in late-nineteenth century disciplinary divisions, whereby cities, especially in Western industrial societies, were the designated realm of sociological enquiry.

Thus, until the mid-1980s, urban research in Western industrial societies continued to be left out of the mainstream disciplinary agenda (Pardo and Prato 2012). This applied, in particular, to mainstream British anthropology. Significantly, while the anthropological study of kinship in London directed by Raymond Firth in the 1950s (Firth ed. 1956) influenced sociological research on the effects of post-war governments’ social housing policy on working class communities (Wilmot and Young 1957), it did not lead to the development of anthropological research in Western cities. The lack of interest among British anthropologists might be explained by the proxy nature of the methodology applied in the urban work of Firth and his team, as

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<sup>5</sup> For extensive reflections of the development of this field and the state of the art, see Prato and Pardo (2013) and subsequent Fora on ‘Urban Anthropology’ (*Urbanities* 2013 and 2014), and Pardo and Prato eds (2012 and 2018).

exemplified by their work on kinship in North London (Firth et al. 1970). In this case, too, the research was motivated by the post-war social reconstruction policies. The North London research focused on a sample of middle-class families living in the Highgate area. The selected families were interviewed by a team of female graduate students under the directorship of Firth and his associates, Hubert and Forge, who were not actively involved in the collection of data. Participant observation intended as long-term immersion of the researcher in the field, was not carried out. As pointed out by Pardo and Prato (2012: 9), these problems encapsulated by research by proxy that lacked the long-term engagement of the researcher in the field resurfaced in the 1980s, raising the risk of seriously crippling the development of anthropological research in the urban West. Significantly, however, in the mid-1980s pioneering holistic anthropological research was done in a Western city which applied the traditional methodological paradigm of social anthropology, while also adapting new research methods borrowed from cognate disciplines (Pardo 1996: 4-9).

While, as we have seen, research in Western cities was initially largely neglected by mainstream anthropologists, since the first half of the twentieth century historical events and geo-political changes stimulated some to address processes of urbanization in developing countries, especially Africa and Latin America. Such research did not significantly contribute to the development of urban anthropology. Only in the late 1960s did the anthropological establishment, especially in the US, cautiously begin to acknowledge the relevance of such research, which, reminiscent of the British case of the late 1950s, focused on ‘problem-centred’ studies, such as poverty, minorities — including ethnic minorities — and urban adaptation.<sup>6</sup>

The 1970s saw the publication of several books and articles debating the conceptual and theoretical definition of ‘urban’ and the extent to which ‘urban’ anthropology differed from ‘traditional’ anthropology. Some endeavoured to define the city as a specific ‘social institution’ with its dynamics and social, economic and political relations, thus maintaining that urban anthropology was anthropology *of* the city. For others, urban anthropology was ‘simply’ (more or less classical) anthropological research carried out *in* urban areas. Anthropologists have strongly endorsed this second point of view, in line with the epistemological stance that since the 1990s motivates most to define their field of study as *anthropological research in urban settings*, rather than *urban anthropology* (see contributions in Pardo and Prato eds 2012 and 2018). This stance reflects a shift in focus from the community studies inspired by the ‘urban ecology’ model of the Chicago School and the processes of urbanization in post-colonial societies to political economy, city planning, the legitimacy of grassroots action and of governance, the relationship between the local and the supra-local and their significance to urban dynamics. However, these two approaches — anthropology *of* the city and anthropology *in* the city — need not be reciprocally exclusive. As Prato has noted (2018

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<sup>6</sup> Hannerz’s essay (1969) is a good example of this approach.

[2015]), they may well spring from — apparently incommensurable — conceptualizations of city and the attendant, rather pointless, classifications of ‘city types’ and the ‘essence of urbanism’. This has led to endless debates and various attempts, from different disciplinary perspectives, ‘to develop a grand theory of the city ... [and] generalizations about “urbanism” and “urban life”’. (Prato 2018: 2).

Methodologically, as anthropological research in urban areas started to grow, concern among the disciplinary establishment engendered a paradoxical situation. While sociologists became increasingly interested in the ethnographic method, some senior British anthropologists working in cities openly questioned the applicability of participant observation in urban areas, which eventually translated into an advocacy for new methods and for an ‘anthropology by proxy’.<sup>7</sup> Initially, such a methodological stance played the perverse role of justifying the objection that (classic) anthropology could not be done *in* the Western Industrial city. So — as mentioned earlier — for a while, the danger of this subfield being dismissed altogether was clear and present. However, in the mid-1980s a new generation of British-trained anthropologists convincingly proved that not only was participant observation possible, but that its combination with new techniques in the construction of case studies produced good results in urban Europe (Pardo 1996). This pioneering work emphasized that the application of the tried and tested anthropological paradigm in Western urban settings produced findings that had broad theoretical relevance, pointing to the key fact that a holistic analysis and attention to the relationship between micro- and macro-processes raise no question on the validity of traditional fieldwork.

During the 1990s, new developments in urban anthropology led to the investigation of the relationship between ordinary people and the ruling élite and the legitimacy of governance, as well as social space, marginalisation, crime, violence and conflict, and movements of resistance. In the early twenty-first-century situation marked by the re-emergence of localism, transnationalism and the political project of multiculturalism, this trend addresses the urgent need to understand the city as a ‘crucial arena in which citizenship, democracy and, by extension, belonging are critically negotiated’ (Pardo and Prato 2011: 12; see also Holston ed. 1999) and the morality of law and politics are increasingly questioned and scrutinised (Pardo 2004, Prato ed. 2009, Pardo and Prato eds 2011). These issues are increasingly relevant in Western and non-Western societies. There is a growing interest in ethnographically-based analyses on urban change in Africa, Latin America and post-socialist countries; mega urbanization in India and China; urban conflict in the Middle-East and South-East Asia (Pardo and Prato eds 2018).

Anthropology has come a long way since the days when the only legitimate ethnographic research was to take place in exotic, rural locales. Today an increasing

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<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of this approach and its consequences, see Pardo and Prato (2012: 9-10) and Prato and Pardo (2013).

number of anthropologists carry out research in cities, including Western cities. Contemporary urban anthropology is intrinsically trans-disciplinary (Pardo et al. eds 2015), and it often gets very close to or draws from related disciplines such as sociology, history, geography and communications (to name a few), which need not be cause for concern. Unlike much work produced under the rubric of ‘urban studies’ — most of which focuses on physical space as a central paradigm — anthropology is based on rich and detailed empirically-based ethnographic analyses. Anthropologists and their methodological apparatus are uniquely positioned to cast light on the evolution of our urban world and its political, economic and cultural dynamics.

While it is, of course, true that too rigid boundaries between disciplines do not reflect reality, it would be misleading to erase all boundaries. It is now widely agreed that our commitment to the ethnographic soundness of our findings should promote fruitful contaminations. Today anthropologists find it increasingly difficult to define their field of study, for global changes force them to take into account data that traditionally are academically ‘allocated’ to other social sciences and to the humanities; in particular, sociology, political science, economics and history. The main concern is how to apply the traditional anthropological methodology to contemporary Western and non-Western societies and, where adaptations are needed, how to avoid losing disciplinary identity. Of course, like cultures, scientific disciplines are not static. They are dynamic entities, continuously changing and developing. They alter their identity, though they always do have an identity.

Thus, new collaborations arise, widening the field of interdisciplinary research; and yet there is no interdisciplinarity without disciplinarity (Pardo et al. 2015). In studying the complexity of the world in which we live, interdisciplinary work — in the sense of cooperation among scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds and the exchange of ethnographic research findings — is undoubtedly of critical importance in gaining an informed, adequately articulated understanding of human beings in society and — as mentioned at the beginning of this Introduction — in the achievement of ‘Sustainable Cities and Communities’.

A warning is probably due here. Engaging in the study of what has become a universal goal — and possibly identifying solutions to problems — should not translate into attempts to produce ‘universal models’ (a well-known underlying temptation in the social sciences); that is, blueprints that inevitably fails to take into account the sociologically significant diversity of urban traditions across the world. Nevertheless, a lesson may be learned from Weber’s analysis of the city ‘ideal type’. As Prato notes (2018), although Weber was stimulated by the European medieval city — and its ancient antecedents of *polis* and *civitas* — in describing the city ideal type he ‘offered a comprehensive language for a comparative analysis of ethnographically diverse cities. Significantly, while previous theorists had focused on European cities, Weber looked comparatively at urban traditions across the world, stressing that different cultures and

historical conditions would result in different types of cities.’ (Prato 2018: 4). The Weberian ideal type moves beyond the conceptualization of the ‘urban’ in terms of physical space. It refers to ‘qualities’ that characterize urban dwellers, which could be applied to the analysis of contemporary urban realities and dynamics; most importantly, ‘citizenship, in the sense of “individual” civil, economic and political rights.’ (Prato 2018: 6). These ‘qualities’ ask scholarly research to look at the city ‘at once as *urbs*, *civitas*, and *polis*; that is, as a built-up area, as a social association of citizens, and as a political community. Focusing only on one of these aspects would be inexcusably reductive.’ (ibid.). Of course, suggesting that a sociological analysis of contemporary cities should take into account the aspects of the *urbs*, *civitas* and *polis* does not mean imposing a new Western model. It means that we should be aware that ‘it is not the city [...] as *urbs* that produces the distinguishing qualities of urban life; rather, it is new historical conditions that determine the emergence of a new meaning of “being urban”, influencing our conception of the common good and of associated life in a shared “urban space” that is not just the physical built-up space (the space of the *urbs*) but is also the space of the *civitas* and if the *polis*, which is increasingly manifested in a virtual space.’ (Prato 2018: 9). Comparative ethnographic analysis across disciplines has a pivotal role to play.

Ethnographers, we suggest, need to engage with the argument that, although the complexity of life somehow compels to specialise in a specific field, there is absolutely no need for such a complexity to translate into academic complication and disciplinary insecurity. Current urban ethnography carries recognizable stature and profile.

## **Urbanity**

The foregoing stimulates on-the-ground reflection on ‘Urbanity’. Clearly, Urbanity refers not only to a specific form of life, aspects of urban policy, sociological demands or political changes, but also to intercultural relations in the complexity and heterogeneity of urban life. Urban settings are undoubtedly places where cultural, social, economic and ethnic coexistence can be explored. There, the political aspect of difference becomes visible.

Urbanity can adopt many different forms according to the city’s historical, social, cultural and political trajectory. Values and norms, and a shared sense of identity to people’s understanding, and living, their urbanity. To address urbanity, we need to look at the changing nature of social interactions, and its effects on the structuring of political and economic spaces. We need to look at how urban dwellers encounter others and how they distance themselves from others — creating social spaces of and for themselves.

By definition, cities have always hosted heterogeneity, open-endedness, broadness, lack of prejudices and self-criticism. However, contemporary experiences of urbanity ask us to reflect on a key issue that is becoming ever more pressing, politically, socially and economically, therefore analytically. Specifically, tolerance of the other

may translate into welcoming attitudes and social and economic exchanges (see, for example, Pardo 2009, 2012). However, under certain conditions, tolerance turns into toleration. It has been observed how such shift has often been an unintended consequence of the political project of multiculturalism. In particular, multicultural policies have in some cases ‘exoticized otherness’ (Grillo 1998), while in other cases they have produced the further marginalization and ghettoization of minorities, or at best, policies marred by mere ‘tokenism’ (Prato 2009). Under those circumstances, heterogeneity gives rise to outbreaks of violence.

Urban settings can be seen as places of opportunity and danger. Typically, urbanites may talk of a particular place as ‘dangerous’ and of another as ‘safe’, giving reasons based on their own experience or that of others. Examples abound of how these perceptions of urbanity have been seized upon to implement policies that challenge fundamental democratic principles and rights of citizenship.

As with many other themes engaged with in this Special Issue, the tensions inherent in the liberal-democratic model of citizenship have only rarely been the focus of ethnographic fieldwork, though the few exceptions have brought out the complexity of this field while helping to clarify key issues (Pardo and Prato 2011 and contributions in Pardo and Prato eds 2011). This scarcity of production is surprising given more general interest in the affective, or substantive, element of citizenship (as opposed to its more formal dimension). Exceptions to this trend have offered valuable insights and allowed us to flesh out the substantive dimension of citizenship (Baumann 1996, Fenster 2005, Pardo and Prato eds 2011, Rosbrook-Thompson 2015).

Doubts over the allegiances of would-be citizens are often alluded to in the context of migrants, especially those suspected of occupying space above, below or between nations. Again, here there is a tendency for scholars to wax theoretical rather than explore the loyalties and affinities of migrant groups at a more granular level via ethnographic enquiry. Attempts at the latter have certainly paid dividends, with fieldwork detailing how identities play out in terms of concrete actions and behaviours (Prato 2009, Pardo 2009, Rosbrook-Thompson 2015, Ciubrinskas 2018). The theme of the movement of population cuts across several contributions to this Supplement, from the dynamics of diaspora across continents (Ciubrinskas, Pardo) to economic migration in the EU (Armstrong, Rosbrook-Thompson and Hobbs) and the stereotypical categorization of migrants (Prato).

In many instances practices and rituals associated with memory and remembrance order, renew and embellish people’s identifications with urban spaces (Cervinkova 2016). Memories of suffering and tragedy are conducive to the retracing of group boundaries — poignancy has an adhesive quality (Cervinkova and Golden, and Maidano and Armstrong in this Supplement). Sometimes, it is loss in a sporting sense that demands the reliving of misery amid company. This is not to trivialise sport and the identities which, as ethnographic work has shown, are expressed and embroidered

through sporting contests (Armstrong and Giulianotti 1999, Armstrong and Giulianotti eds. 2001).

Many of these ethnographies analyse behaviours and practices at the intersection between sport and crime, in many instances these correspond with contests over the ownership and meaning of urban space. The themes presented in these studies underline the fact that notions of legality and legitimacy are seldom coterminous. As Pardo (1995, 2004, 2018, 2019) has shown on the basis of ethnographic fieldwork in Naples, what is legal is not always understood as legitimate and what is illegal is not always understood as illegitimate.

People's reasoning along these lines is often prompted by engagement in informal economic activities (Moretti, Spyridakis in this Supplement). It is here that city dwellers avail themselves of structures of opportunity and, in doing so, demonstrate that the formal and informal, legal and illegal, often shade into one another (Pardo 1995, 1996; Rosbrook-Thompson and Armstrong 2018; Spyridakis 2011; Vande Walle 2008). It is perhaps in the sphere of housing where informality most profoundly shapes urban space (Prato 2017). As van Gelder (2013) has illustrated, there are many paradoxes concerning the relationship of informal settlements and respective legal systems in cities, particularly in the developing world (Moretti and Prato in this Supplement).

Several contributions bring out the vagaries of the relationship between governance and the people on the ground. We see how informality in the housing sphere often entrenches existing spatial segregation between groups defined along class and/or ethno-religious lines (Jones in this Supplement). Sometimes, it is the effects of official policy that reinforce, embellish or bring to an end the relationship between groups and places (Malzer in this Supplement). In some cases, government-sponsored schemes engender significant changes in the urban landscape (Chakrabarti in this Supplement), while in other cases mismanagement of governance significantly harm tolerance and integration (Pardo in this Supplement).

The outcomes of top-down urban regeneration for marginalised groups have been well documented (Lindsay 2014), while problems with so-called 'culture-led' urban regeneration have also been identified and explored (Miles and Paddison 2005; DeSena and Krase 2015). For those on the receiving end of state austerity measures, informality can emerge as a survival strategy (Rosbrook-Thompson and Armstrong 2018, Spyridakis in this Supplement) while here, again, questions of legitimacy are relevant (Pardo and Prato 2019). Welfare programmes introduced and intensified in the name of austerity are tied to notions of trust and responsibility (Pardo 2000); the way such programmes are experienced by recipients/subjects reflect mechanisms that create different 'categories' of citizens (Pardo and Prato 2011).

In a nutshell, the story of urban ethnography points both to the ruddy complexion of current empirical research in urban settings and to the epistemologically healthy state of the art. The essays that follow exemplify both these key points, as they demonstrate



the quality of the growing ethnographically-based work in this field and the contribution that the findings make within and without the academic disciplinary boundaries. They underscore the conviction that urban ethnographically-based research may well be key to the future quality of urban life.

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