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'Place is not enough' – Some considerations concerning theory, context and models when comparing urban political cultures in modern history

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Introduction

In recent decades, urban history has come to play a key role in the renewed interest in the unique character and development of European societies. As an academic field, urban history has offered a framework for addressing issues in political and economic history, at the same time as it has suggested possibilities to explain and give deeper insight into isolated local circumstances and specific patterns of change.[1] By combining the political and the cultural with the study of economic, spatial and technological progress, urban history has combined novel perspectives with a focused insight into unique cases that have drawn attention to the more complex nature of general historical explanatory models. Urban historians have repeatedly been required to counter criticism from above all the social sciences, to the effect that their object of study is not properly defined and that they tend to create mystique around the city as an autonomous historical actor. The criticism has led to a strong receptiveness among urban historians to new theoretical and methodological perspectives and tools. As current research shows, urban history has proven especially open to new perspectives on cultural history, involving the interpretation of the city as "a highly differentiated, spatially aggregated condition of society".[2] New operational fields such as environmental, consumer, media, and gender history have attracted growing attention within the general historical approach towards urban development. The previously predominant heavily quantified social and economic approaches have in some respects lost ground.

Comparison has recurrently appeared as the most attractive methodological approach within modern urban history. The reason is, I believe, to a large extent due to contemporary changes, given the increased importance of cultural and economic exchange between major cities in Europe and the continuous subordination of the national, social and economic redistribution system. Furthermore, comparative urban history has also demonstrated the possibility to integrate the whole historical landscape of Europe, as towns and local communities in Centre and Eastern Europe have been able to reconnect to a once-lost historiographical tradition of urban societies in Europe.

In other words, many of us nourish the belief that we in fact are studying the essential element, the core of European society when dealing with urban history, and perhaps even – if this is allowed by historians – taking the pulse of a community in progress. I am saying this with a stroke of irony, because the confidence of contemporary importance does not justify methodological haziness. The requirement of comparative research perspectives on urban history have not so far been accompanied by any painstaking theoretical and methodological discussion. Given the complexity of urban situations, and the range of disciplines drawn into this field of research, a broader theoretical and

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[1] Helen Meller; "From Dyos to Daunton: The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, vol. III", in: *Urban History*, 28, 2 (2001), p. 269.

[2] Heinz Reif & Marcus Funck; "Introduction", *Journal of Urban History* – Special edition on European Urban History, Volume 30, Nr. 1, November 2003, p. 4.

methodological awareness could only strengthen the intellectual resources of urban history – and encourage it to relate local circumstances with general configurations of historical development in an even more resourceful and sensitive way.

In this paper I will discuss some practical processes and complex considerations when actually conducting comparative research in urban history, its methodological problems and sometimes unorthodox solutions, using examples from my own research on urban political cultures, property legislations and social conflicts in cities in Northern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century.

The argumentation falls into three interrelated themes: the emphasis on place or problem (concerning the use of theory); the relationship between variables and context (concerning method and the use of models) and the amalgamation of interest and culture (on the concept of "political culture" in comparative analyses).

1. Place or Problem? Concerning the use of theory

To formulate an interesting problem you have unavoidably to think in theoretical terms. This, urban historians have done not very explicitly, and when they have done it, not without some fear. Perhaps because the very disheartening words by social scientists like Philip Abrams – that general comparative study is "a graveyard for urban history".[3] This is due to the fact, I believe, that previous discussions on comparative method have, to a large extent, been occupied with the importance of explanations in the methodological approach. Without dismissing the explanatory factor, I think that urban history is also ruled by other priorities. Urban history devotes much attention to particular differences, which means that comparative analyses are well suited to demonstrate the restricted applicability of general concepts and theories rather than to establish theoretical connections themselves. There is a certain tension between the process of comparison and historians' critical scepticism of generalisations, their hope for special realism and the great significance of the principle of uniqueness in historical science. The historical context is such an important component of historians' work that it cannot be regarded as an instrument of interpretation. The same applies to the need for actors, intentions and actions. The task of historical comparison therefore involves a fine balance between hermeneutical questions and structural investigation. In comparative analysis, the constructing process of history science becomes inescapable; it breaks continuity, interrupts narrative and it need not even have anything to do with change and development; but primarily with similarities and dissimilarities.[4]

Urban historians, however, should be put off by any suggestion of abstraction and de-contextualisation. On the contrary, the aspect of methodological and theoretical awareness is well in line with the field of investigation and the knowledge goals of the academic specialisation in history. By questioning the meaning of general concepts in history proper, concepts such as "modernisation", "urbanisation" and "bureaucratisation", urban history could offer a more profound understanding of the practices and shift of values behind change processes in historical societies without simply using comparative method to demonstrate the limits of generalisations and hypothesis and the specificities of separate cases. There is a lot of mentioning of "generalisation" when discussing comparative method. I would dare to suggest another methodological catch-word: "minimalization".

Cities have recurrently staged mini-dramas of how solutions of political problems have taken place in practice. The fact that local government was first to put into practice the paradigm of social regulation has commonly been seen as a result of the physical proximity and the immediate effect that urbanisation and industrialisation had on the urban environment. There were, however, more profound currents embedded in the character of self-government that had to do with social organization. Local government – and this is a common European feature of immense importance – was a kind of extension of civil society, more in contact with the family and voluntary associations that with any autonomous entity floating over society. Hence, the line between local society and local governance

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[3] Philip Abrams; "Introduction", in: Abrams (Ed.); Towns in Societies.

[4] For a recent comment on the advancement of historical comparison, see: Jürgen Kocka; "Comparison and Beyond"; in: *History and Theory*, February 2003, p. 39-44.

was thin. It was also a common; one might even say a *traditional* opinion, that local governance had the outmost responsibility for crisis management, and the regulation of small-scale social tasks. Local politics are not mere extensions of larger processes, but contribute themselves significantly to historical outcomes. Political hegemony is promoted at local level – just as opposition to domination becomes more evident at local level.[5] What I am suggesting with "minimalization", is that urban history studies, for comparative purposes, focus on the intersection between local culture, administrative culture and a history of political ideas – to promote what has been widely neglected, namely a history of ideas of political practice.[6]

Example (1):
A couple of years ago I was writing a book about property ownership and urban development in Stockholm and Berlin during the industrial era. When talking about the study with non-experts, I repeatedly got the question, why compare such a megaconglomerate as the industrial capital of Germany with a fairly middle-sized, peripheral Nordic capital like Stockholm?

Well, then you have to proof your case. After all, I was not intending to write two books on two interesting cities, but one book on a corresponding corpus of problems – and then the fascination of "place" was not enough.

The theoretical interest was rather concerned with the cultural and political meanings attributed to property and to the status of ownership and in what ways individual and market were embedded in social norms and political and legal structures to sustain the dynamics of development. This could also be studied in other aspects of society rather than cities, but the urban setting added further aspects to the theoretical framework. Since the cities were both capital cities and simultaneously the largest industrial cities in their respective nations, the complexity of development and the different social confrontations were actually played out in and remoulding the urban fabric. The question of property was a mini-drama, where practically all the institutional, legal and political transitions during the time-period could be, not only mirrored, but be given a more distinct, unique shape.

Having written all this, I recently scrutinized the study and instantly recognized the strong influence of methodological tools from traditional social sciences: the contrast of contexts to produce a profile; the use of ideal types and typology as fundamental pillars for more subordinated context-thick questions. And last but not least: even though the work is not ruled by a theoretical hypothesis, the sole presence of a theory means that you will test its validity – whether you want to or not.

Example (2):
In a more recent project, I wanted to investigate the character of municipal liberalism during the late 19th century in cities around the Baltic Sea. This in some way also meant trying to bridge the gap between Western and Eastern historical societies. My interest fell on Helsinki and Riga, because they were both expanding capitals in semi-attached regions within autocratic Russia during this time-period. The cities were allowed to develop urban self-government to a larger extent following their own traditional apprehension of local community power structures. The central issue was concerning the "social question", social reforms, municipal involvement in the local education system, health care and urban development – a fairly well explored field in Western European urban historiography.

But in the cases of Helsinki and Riga, how do you, so to speak, study "municipal liberalism" without liberalism, since the word was more or less banned from political and administrative discourse in both Helsinki and Riga? The very concept of "liberalism" was, in the city of Helsinki, by the end of the 19th century understood as elitism, or as a Swedish import ideology, and could only find its advocates in bureaucratic and educated circles. In Riga, the concept had a pronounced corporate character, and not until the turn of the 20th century did liberalism consolidate non-nobility groups

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[5] Cf. George Steinmetz; *Regulating the Social. The Welfare State and Local Politics in Imperial Germany*, Princeton UP 1993, p. 149.

[6] Administration historians has recently advocated such a research perspective, see here: Klaus-Gert Lutterbeck; "Methodologische Reflexionen über eine politische Ideengeschichte administrativer Praxis", in: *JEV* 15 (2003), p. 343f.

within the German minority in the city. Nevertheless, local politicians and administrators in both towns were actually advocates of liberal policies you could find elsewhere in contemporary Europe, but since this was never out-spoken, I had to chisel out certain criterias.

I wanted to threat both cities as essential "European" cities – and the broadest theoretical hypothesis of the development of European cities I could construct was that "the history of European towns is the history of emancipation". In following this hypthesis, and breaking it down into small areas of survey, a highly differentiated palette of municipal policies came to the fore.

Urban history is inclined to be in some broad sense materialistic. I discovered that you could in fact study "municipal liberalism" in terms of material redistribution, fiscal policy and property awareness. Were the institutions of urban self-government willing to take loans to embark on public investments? In what areas of society? And, if blocked in their economic actions by for example the Imperial government, what fiscal reserves were used and how did that affect the local power structure?

In some way, you could say that the hypothesis regarding the emancipating nature of urban development had to be modified, but not completely abandoned. No such straight line exists in historical development, and in these cases, not even a successful organisation of municipal liberal investment politics lead automatically towards a democratisation of local society.

2. The relationship between variables and context. Concerning methods and the use of models.

Comparative method has predominantly been nourished by the social sciences. The traditional way of regarding the purposes and functions of comparison in historical research and presentation, since Marc Bloch, has been to stress the method's usefulness to test a theory and making generalisations; contribute to causal explanations in macro-casual analysis or to contrast different historical contexts to chisel out a subject's historical profile. Methodologically, history has borrowed from sociology, economic and political science. But a more sensitive esteem of the historical aspects had largely been missing in the methodological stance. In the last decades, the claims of general explanation in historic comparative studies have been questioned in various ways. Contemporary society and contemporary politics was asking questions "thick of context", which also influenced the debate on historical method. More and more historians received their methodological influence from other neighbouring academic fields, such as anthropology, linguistics and art history.

A profoundly methodological renewal demands not only that you make clear what you do when you compare – but – you must be clear about the pre-methodological question of the intentions and knowledge goals of comparative method. This issue was of vital importance in for example the book on comparative method that Hartmut Kaelble published in 1999.[7] It was also of importance for the strivings of defining a comparative methodological stance for history as a scientific discipline in its own right and thereby an indirect criticism of historical sociologists stating that a critical-analytical, synthetical comparison must primarily be based on secondary research material.

History writing does not – following these recommendations – necessary have to be purely descriptive; comparison could still work with typology, break the flow of chronology and governed by theoretical questions. In fact, it is rather impossible to work any other way, since there is something highly "constructed" about comparison. You can question everything: selection, levels of abstraction, the relationship between primary material and literature, the thematic, which tends to take the overhand over chronology. Consequently, the ambitions to "explain" historical development have been somewhat toned down. Instead the hermeneutic methodological features were emphasized; and that man, in all times, has been a social creature seeking meaning, both in individual existence as well as in societal organisation.

In embarking upon urban comparative history, one has to come to terms with the difficulties inherent in delivering an exhaustive analysis according to a pre-set theoretical or methodological

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7 Helmut Kaelble, *Der historische Vergleich. Eine Einführung zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt/New York 1999).

perspective. There is a much to gain from embracing realism instead of methodological principles, something the anthology as a whole does in a successful way. For a comparison to be profitable, however; for it to promote new knowledge and raise questions and perspectives of an innovative nature, there is a need to address different legislations and different criteria for legitimacy and power in a creative way. In practice this means "mixing models". It is my opinion that the use of models – or typologies – should primarily help empirical clarification, not serve as a vehicle for general explanation.

Working with urban historical comparison that transcends the national and language boarders, it is important to try to establish historical concepts and heuristic models. This enables the analysis to follow up on pre-set sub-themes, like the establishment of patterns of authority and legitimacy at local level, the emergence of social regulations or the differing roles of municipality and central state in policy making.

Exampel (3):
To take an example from my own property-study again: In comparing the emergence of the social question and its importance for such an "urban" field as tenant legislations by the end of the 19th century in Germany and in Sweden, I took help from legal historians promoting what they called the "social history of legal cultures" – something which is often vital for the understanding of urban life.[8] By fusing different aspects of liberal reforms concerning the social task of civil law, I came up with three model types of political intention:

The tenancy legislation should either protect the weaker social groups in an unequal relationship. Or it should help the socially lower classes to advance to the position of fully-fledged contract partners. Or, finally, the legislation should principally aim to remove those parts of the existing legal code that could be found unjust in order to safeguard social stability.

In this way I tried to deal with the empirical problem of different legislations and types of legal administration. By adopting this model on the historical discussion of the social situation in Stockholm and Berlin I also got an in insight in the different experiences of the authorities when dealing with specific "urban" circumstances.

To summarise my reflections: working with models is much more important to making the empirical material analysable, than formulating general explanation hypotheses. The validity of the comparative approach is closely connected to the efforts one makes and the possible success one has in shaping analysable models from empirical resources.

3. The Amalgamation of interest and culture. On the concept of "Political Culture".

The term "political culture" inevitably calls to mind attempts by political scientists, such as Almond, Verba and Pye in the 1960s and 1970s to ascertain the potential of individual societies for achieving a modern political system on the Anglo-American model, by means of transnational and transcultural comparison. The ideal of "civic culture" became a theme for a scientific political science which believed that it could not only pronounce on the chances for the future success of singular political systems, but also discover procedures with which to direct their development. This perspective have of cause little to do with cultural historical research interests today. But the awareness of the "subjective" dimensions of politics – and the norm-structures of political communities – have revitalized attempts to investigate how concepts, customs and interests has been articulated, expressed and modified in political discourse.

The fundamental come-back of political history after 1989 also fostered a turn towards a "political cultural history", less focused on political decisions and outcomes as traditional social history had been, but more interested of politics as events, occurrences and a field for the exchange of

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[8] Willibald Steinmetz, "Introduction. Towards a Comparative History of Legal Cultures 1750-1950", in: Steinmetz (Ed.); *Private Law and Social Inequality in the Industrial Age. Comparing Legal Cultures in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States* (Oxford 2000).

values. In connection with this theoretical and methodological turmoil, serious interest was also rendered comparative history – which one can follow just by looking at the number of publications in the 1990s, which in one way or the other was concerned with comparative methodology.

A "culture of governance" on the municipal arena addresses the question of heuristic models working closely with empirical findings, where the approach is to seek the connection between political discourse and institutional practice. Advocates of that label "political culture" have stressed the fact that political communities constitute themselves largely through political discourse. My conviction is rather that there exists a system of rules and not least practices for the application of socially relevant knowledge in urban society, which you can discuss in cultural terms. A cultural history of administration and representation presents two sides of a general endeavour of local governance, namely to connect the changing practice of governance to social, economic, cultural and political change. The concept of political culture is a heuristic tool, for new perspectives and knowledge – and therefore scholars tend to emphasize different aspects. But a common feature, I believe, is to try to understand a value system and organizational patterns in their historical context, without getting stuck in ready-made ideological boxes. Organisation, not least local government organisation, is permeated with "culture"; shared values that are often connected to social practices.[9]

This also highlights the question of reductionism for comparative purposes, such as for example concerning the amalgamation of interest and culture. As an analytical concept "political culture" needs to transcend the outcomes and discussions of everyday politics; to refer not merely to the "match" but to the "rules of the game", to quote an analogy by Stephen Welch.[10]

The concept of political culture gains a certain distinction when used as a tool for conflict analyses. The construction of identity and meaning within a societal group has a tendency to develop and grow under oppositional pressure. Changes in political norms, concepts, and theories provide information about experiential and learning processes that are taking place within political societies. But the reconstruction of political culture cannot be restricted to a description of the ideological stock of the period. Other phenomena are equally important: the structure of contemporary communications and the contemporary media; the institutional setting of politicization; forms of political association; the capacity for political self-organization, and the world of political symbols. This is, admittedly, a highly provisional concept of 'political culture' – more a heuristic tool than a precise definition. A study of political culture emphasizes, in the actual working process, detailed empirical investigations and an intensity of interpretation of concrete social and political processes, not least to overcome one of the main obstacles of comparative urban history working on a transnational level – namely, the differences in national historiographical traditions.

Concluding remarks

I have understood this conference session as one primarily dealing with methodological issues, and I have therefore tried to isolate questions of method that I have been confronted with in my own research, and questions that I personally find motivating, challenging and difficult. But finally, I must admit that I am not totally in agreement with the general formulation of the topic of the session; I do not think that the main intellectual interest lies in the attempt of finding indicators of success or backwardness in cities' historical development. I have tried to discuss the notion that "place" is not enough as a methodological impetus for conducting comparative urban historical research. But on the other hand, it cannot be so that the question of "pioneer" or "laggard" societies simply has taken its refuge in urban or local studies after being dismantled on national historical level. The conscious choice of comparing urban societies have to have methodological consequences – and not just

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[9] Peter Becker; "Überlegungen zu einer Kulturgeschichte der Verwaltung", in: *JEV* 15 (2003), p. 312f., 315. See also Christian Topalov; „From the 'Social Question' to ‚Urban Problems'. Reformers and the Working Classes at the Turn of the Twentieth Century", in: *ISSJ* 125, 1990.

[10] Stephen Welch; *The Concept of Political Culture*, London 1993, p. 156f.

becoming an acceptable "light-version" of Barrington More, Charles Tilly or Theda Skocpol. Comparative urban research is a methodological field of its own, I would argue, and to a large extent a field still to be discovered.