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LIVING IN THE 21ST CENTURY CITY: INTRODUCTION TO THE CONFERENCE THEME

Marco Bontje

1. Introduction: 18 years of exchanging...

In 1991, shortly after the reunification of Germany and Berlin, urban geographers and urban sociologists from the Humboldt University Berlin and the University of Amsterdam agreed on an exchange of students and staff between their institutes. The remarkable ‘window of opportunity’ suddenly offered to Berlin, after the Wall was torn down and the two city parts reunited, was chosen as the central theme of this exchange: *‘Berlin im Umbruch’*. Both the Berliners and the Amsterdammers were interested in what happens to a city which has been cut in two halves for 28 years and then suddenly becomes one city again. Would Berlin re-establish its pre-World War II status of one of Europe’s leading political, economic and cultural centres? Would East and West gradually merge into one coherent city, or would the two halves remain different for decades still? Which possibilities did the enormous ‘no man’s land’ in the middle of the city, where the Wall once stood, offer for urban redevelopment? What would happen with neighbourhoods that were situated in the Wall’s shade and therewith in the periphery of West- or East-Berlin for three decades, and suddenly found themselves back in the city centre of reunited Berlin?

However, the comparative perspective of the two cities involved in the exchange has been important from the very start of this exchange too. In one of the first conference proceedings of what has meanwhile become a long series, Van de Ven and Van der Weiden (1994) are right to describe this comparison as a ‘tricky undertaking’, since the two cities’ histories are unique and actually incomparable, and Amsterdam has only one fifth of the population size of Berlin. We can easily add more factors that make the Amsterdam-Berlin comparison problematic: the city-regional setting (Berlin: large city in almost empty region vs. Amsterdam: part of polycentric region); economic dynamics (stagnating Berlin vs. dynamic Amsterdam); political status (Berlin: national capital vs. Amsterdam: not even regional capital), etc. Probably this was the most important reason why only few students and staff members of both institutes have dared to present comparative studies of both cities at the previous Berlin-Amsterdam conferences. Most often conference participants rather chose to present case studies of their own city. Still, there are enough parallels in the recent development of both cities that make a comparison interesting. Processes that affect cities throughout (and beyond) Europe can be studied comparatively in Amsterdam and Berlin; think for example of segregation, polarisation, gentrification, restructuring of former industrial areas, waterfront development. An intriguing question emerging in recent years is if our two cities, both with a unique development path also when comparing to any other

European city, are gradually becoming more ‘normal’ cities under the influence of globalisation and inter-urban competition. Are Amsterdam and Berlin becoming more like other world cities in Europe and North America, and therewith maybe also less different from each other? Or is a city’s path-dependent development so strong that each city will always keep a unique character?

Throughout the years we have noticed at our conferences that it was not always easy to find common research interests. Different research traditions, not only between the two disciplines involved, but also (and probably more) between the two universities, have materialised in different research agendas. Outside of the conferences, there was actually only one case of co-operating in a research project, when the Humboldt urban sociologists and the Amsterdam urban geographers both took part in the EU 4th Framework Programme URBEX (The Spatial Dimensions of Urban Social Exclusion and Integration, 1999-2002). Apart from this there were some cases of Berlin-Amsterdam partnerships in writing papers for the conferences or for journals, but unfortunately only few. Next to the search for common themes, at our conferences we had to find the compromise between the ambition of learning from each other’s expertise (and in the ideal case working together on common themes also beyond the conferences) and our aim to offer in particular young researchers in early stages of their career a stage for one of their first international conference experiences (albeit on a modest seminar-like scale). In recent years the success of our conferences has been challenged, especially on the Amsterdam side, by increasing demands in terms of publishable results, preferably articles in peer-reviewed journals. So at each conference we had to ask ourselves if there would still be a next conference. Fortunately we have managed to keep this long and valuable tradition for 18 years already. One tradition we could not maintain, though: the conference language has changed from German to English. While it is of course a pity that less Dutch academics sufficiently master the German language these days, the switch to English is the logical reflection of increasing internationalisation in academic research. Looking at it from the Dutch perspective, it created a ‘level playing field’ for the Amsterdam and Berlin participants, all being asked to communicate in their second language. The other part of the exchange, meanwhile, is still going strong: the student exchange. Amsterdam students have enjoyed the opportunity to study a semester abroad in Berlin from the very start of the exchange. Berlin students seemed a bit more hesitant at first, but many of them have meanwhile found their way to Amsterdam, too.

2. Living in the 21st-century city: Current research and policy issues

After the conference, the participants have been asked to write a book contribution based on their presentations. Most of the contributors are early stage researchers: recently graduated master students, Ph.D. researchers or post-doctoral researchers. This is a reflection of one the traditional aims of our conferences: to offer an international stage for early stage researchers. While all contributions to this volume have been written by researchers from Amsterdam and Berlin, their contributions partly also deal with other cities: Paris, The Hague, Warsaw, and one contribution even deals with neighbourhoods in the entire German urban system. While the following collection of contributions may look rather eclectic (which is partly related to the different disciplinary and local research traditions referred to before), this section tries to

put them in a coherent framework of current research and policy issues related to the broad overarching conference theme: ‘living in the 21st-century city’.

It may be a bit ambitious and over-generalising to already speak of *the* 21st-century city, since we are only at the start of that century still. Moreover, the usual warning applies that despite the convergence tendencies that may be caused by globalisation, cities across the globe develop in very different directions. Even within Europe, contrasts in urban and city-regional dynamics can still be huge. The following therefore is only a rough sketch of the trends and challenges European cities are facing today and in the foreseeable future; trends which often already started in the last decades of the 20th century.

A first continuing trend that is also reflected in several contributions to this volume is the growing share of city inhabitants that has migrated from abroad themselves or is a child or grandchild of migrants. Definitions of who is ‘native’ and who is not and how this is registered in local and national statistics are different between European countries, but all over Europe we have seen a marked increase of absolute and relative figures of city dwellers with a migrant background. In recent years we have seen evidence of a gradual dispersion of ethnic minority groups across city-regions, from large core cities to smaller cities and even suburbs (see for example Musterd et al., 2006). Still, however, the major concentrations of migrants and ethnic minority groups are found in the largest European cities. Politicians and media in several European countries have the strange habit of calling all these people ‘migrants’, or in the Dutch context also ‘allochtonous’ (literally ‘not from here’), even if a significant share of them are already in the city or country for several decades or are even born there. In the first years of the 21st century, the added dimension of growing intra-European migration from the newest EU member states to the older member states has only made discussions about migration and integration more complex. Still, many politicians and opinion makers cannot resist over-simplifying an increasingly heterogeneous population composition in a dichotomy between ‘us’ (natives with native parents) and ‘them’ (all others).

Across Europe national and local governments have always struggled with their attitude towards and treatment of migrants and ethnic minorities, but in recent years the majority opinion in politics has become increasingly negative: migration is supposed to be restricted; minorities should integrate; cultural and language differences are less accepted, etc. In this political discourse, the diverse backgrounds of migrants and ethnic groups are too often ignored and the focus is increasingly on problems and incidents of only small parts of these groups (which are then generalised towards whole ethnic groups or even all ethnic minorities). Fortunately, academics generally take a much more nuanced stance: while not ignoring integration problems, they also bring positive trends in ethnic minority communities and their positive contributions towards European societies to the fore. An example of this is the growing body of work on migrant entrepreneurship, which is represented in this volume in the contributions of **Amanda Brandellero** and **Katja Adelhof**. This debate also continuously addresses spatial questions about the relationship between place of residence within a city and chances on societal integration and upward socio-economic mobility. Despite growing evidence that integration in fact largely takes place outside the residential neighbourhood, at the workplace or at school for example, residential segregation is still often seen as a negative trend that should be prevented. **Brooke Sykes**, **Christine Baur** and **Yvonne Hung** address such spatial questions in their contributions to this volume. Brooke Sykes discusses the

neighbourhood conditions of Dutch youth, comparing ethnic groups and socio-economic status categories. She explores the question to what extent the differences she finds between the groups are associated with their achievements at school. Christine Baur also looks at the relationships between ethnic segregation and school achievement. She states that the lower school achievements of children with a migrant background in Germany is partly caused by a discriminating school system, but partly also by a lack of native German middle class 'peers' in their classes. Yvonne Hung analyses how 4 youth organisations encourage youth participation in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods with a high share of ethnic minority groups in Berlin. Her main concern is the social and physical contexts in which young people learn 'everyday democracy'.

A second remarkable trend is 'urban renaissance'. Since the late 1980s, large European cities have become popular residential locations again. This turnaround after decades of population loss is not only related to residential preferences of migrants and ethnic minorities, but also to a growing popularity of the inner city among students, recently graduated and professionals in their earliest career stages. More recently there is evidence that inner city popularity has extended beyond these 'usual suspects': a process like gentrification that long seemed to be exclusively linked to singles or childless couples now also involves families in cities like Amsterdam (Karsten, 2003). Next to gentrification of former working class areas, most often in the historic city core or in 19th-century neighbourhoods, many European cities have also experienced a reappraisal and redevelopment of former manufacturing and harbour areas. The 'rise of the creative class' suggested by Richard Florida (2002) seems to link logically to this comeback of the inner city. He suggests that people with creative and innovative professions are becoming the new leading 'class' in advanced capitalist countries, and that these people would have strong preference for (inner) city living. In 2005 the creative city paradigm was rapidly gaining popularity in political and academic discourse; it was therefore chosen as the central theme of that year's Berlin-Amsterdam conference (Deben & Bontje, 2006). While we could then still suggest that the creative city and related concepts were over-hyped, meanwhile the rise of the creative economy seems to have become a structural long-term trend. Whatever we think of Florida's claims, that have meanwhile rightly become heavily contested for various reasons, creative and knowledge-intensive industries and the people working in them are still interesting research subjects. In this volume, **Martin Sondermann** addresses the role that 'bourgeois bohemians', a concept affiliated with Florida's creative class, are playing in the renaissance of the inner city. Two contributions pay attention to the dynamics of the creative industries: **Amanda Brandellero** focuses on migrant musicians in the world music industry in Paris, while **Katja Adelhof** looks at migrant involvement in Berlin's creative industries.

This urban renaissance may in the end be quite short-lived, though, when we consider a third trend with increasing impact on Europe: demographic stagnation or shrinkage of urban and regional populations. In the context of an ageing and eventually shrinking European population, we already have many shrinking cities and regions in Europe now and we will see many more in the not so far future. Population shrinkage so far is mainly found in Central and Eastern Europe (both in rural and in urban areas), where only few growth centres can still be found, in particular the national capitals; and in peripheral rural areas in other parts of Europe. Throughout Europe we also have seen several examples of mono-functional and mono-

sectoral cities, mostly focused on heavy manufacturing, which faced economic demise and population decline in the 1970s and 1980s; some of them managed to find new sources of growth since the late 1980s, while others continued a path of decline or stagnation. Thus, in an increasing part of Europe, cities and regions are facing the demographic impact of ageing, which is not compensated by an in-migration surplus and in many cases even is exacerbated by a negative migration balance. Shrinking cities and regions have already caught lots of attention of German researchers, especially focusing on the extreme case of East Germany (Glock & Häußermann, 2004; Hannemann, 2003; Wiechmann, 2008, among many others). It is now gradually becoming a Europe-wide research subject too. However, most researchers look at shrinkage and related demographic trends like ageing, lower birth rates and out-migration surpluses at the city or regional scale; much less attention is given to the impact of demographic change at the neighbourhood level. The contribution of **Olaf Schnur** in this volume is partly filling this lacuna by studying the demographic impact on several neighbourhood types in German cities.

A fourth and final theme in the contributions to this volume, not only related to demographic changes but also to economic and political changes, is urban governance. It is meanwhile a well known fact that political participation of many types of ‘stakeholders’ (e.g. citizens, entrepreneurs, private investors, branch representatives, lobby groups, labour unions,...) has grown significantly in most European countries. National, regional and local governments to an increasing extent take their decisions in partnership with or after extensive consulting rounds with organisations representing relevant parts of society. Though ‘governance’ still is a rather vague and seemingly all-encompassing concept, it applies better to such situations of negotiation and joint decision making than ‘government’. Three contributions address governance issues in different ways and at different administrative-geographic scales. **Henrik Gasmus** reports on a process he describes as ‘re-suburbanisation’ in Kleinmachnow in the Berlin city-region. Kleinmachnow was already a suburb in the early 20th century; its development came to a standstill in the GDR era; after which population growth resumed in the mid-1990s. This new growth has led to a debate in the local community between ‘pro-growth’ and ‘anti-growth’ lobbies. Both recent suburbanites and long-established residents mobilised themselves politically, sometimes working together against a generally growth-oriented local government, sometimes facing each other with mutually clashing interests. **Florian Koch** looks at the evolution of urban governance in post-socialist Warsaw. He distinguishes three dimensions of governance: polity, politics and policy. The shift from the socialist to the post-socialist city produced huge shifts in each of these dimensions. For years, Warsaw was virtually powerless at the city level and most decisions about land use planning were taken at the district level. A stable and influential city government was only introduced in 2002. Still, co-ordination and long-term planning remains difficult because of the multiplicity of actors involved, the huge influence of private investors, and the lack of a strategic planning document. **Simone Buckel** analyses governance issues linked to the presence of irregular migrants in the city of The Hague. There is a clear tension between control and security on the one hand and social problems and human rights on the other. Since both national and local government want to limit or even prevent irregular migration, the irregular migrants that want to stay have to rely on NGOs and informal social networks for basic needs. Even if local governments want to be less restrictive, they cannot ignore the national immigration rules. Finally, at the neighbourhood level, **Gesine Baer** studies to what

extent community health partnerships can be considered an example of ‘good governance’. The community health partnerships are part of the *Soziale Stadt* programme with which the German federal government wants to improve living conditions in marginalized urban neighbourhoods. Three neighbourhoods were selected as pilot areas to test whether such partnerships helped to improve the health of neighbourhood dwellers, in particular children and adolescents. Due to different neighbourhood settings and differences in their population composition and organisational infrastructure, each neighbourhood organised this in its own way. A general conclusion from all three cases is that this neighbourhood development strategy rather results in short-term co-governance than sustainable self-governance structures.

3. What is next?

This collection of conference contributions is once more evidence of the eclectic and heterogeneous research foci and interests of urban geographers and urban sociologists. Though each of the institutes involved in this exchange has its own coherent research programme, these programmes still offer lots of room for a wide array of research topics. In addition, as mentioned before, research traditions seem to differ significantly between Amsterdam and Berlin. It remains hard therefore to find common ground to analyse our two cities in a comparative perspective; a challenge only increased because of the differences between our cities in terms of size, regional context, functions, economic specialisations and international status, to mention just a few characteristics. Still, if we want to develop our exchange beyond an exchange of students and an exchange of (academic) thoughts, we should think of concrete options to collaborate in research projects or programmes. Both sides of the exchange have contacts and networks in their respective national research funding systems; we should explore the opportunities to finance joint research projects with contributions from Dutch and German funds (like NWO, DFG, national ministries, city governments, or German private funds). Maybe there are in addition also funds that specifically stimulate Dutch-German research partnerships? Finally, the EU is continuously expanding its funds for academic research and we should be able to claim our fair share, in collaboration with other partners across Europe. Possible research themes to explore may include segregation; social polarisation; stagnating and shrinking cities; spatial impacts of demographic change; the socio-economic impact of the creative knowledge economy on cities and neighbourhoods; issues regarding effective neighbourhood development and governance; socio-demographic and economic shifts and trends in city-regions (re-urbanisation, re-suburbanisation, ‘post-suburbia’, or all three at the same time?); and probably many, many more.

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