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Assembling the multitude: questions about agency in the urban environment

DOROTHEE BRANTZ

Centre for Metropolitan Studies, Technical University Berlin, Germany

In recent years, urban history has witnessed an expansion of actors. Historians have substantially and continuously extended their perspectives when it comes to examining the forces that drive urban developments. This expansion to an ever-broader range of human and increasingly also non-human actors (e.g. animals, technological systems and resources such as water) has opened up many new venues for investigations. It has also raised new questions about the role of cities in the history of social change. One of the most provocative ideas involves the claim that cities themselves should be considered agents and proprietors of change. Such notions of urban agency are premised on the assumption that, on the whole, cities are more than the sum of their parts. In this context, urbanization is not just viewed as the outcome of other determining societal forces, most notably capitalism. Instead, cities themselves are understood as determining entities and powerful enablers or preventers of material transformations. The investigative potential of such a perspective is tremendous, but the possible pitfalls should also not be underestimated. Exploring the explanatory prospects of urban agency requires, first of all, a critical engagement with both of the terms ‘agency’ and ‘the urban’. In my brief contribution to this roundtable, I would like to offer two points to the discussion: the first centres on the relationship between agency and intentionality/responsibilities, which is ultimately a political concern; the second aims to differentiate between the city as an entity and the urban as a process. Such a distinction, in turn, poses conceptual as well as methodological questions regarding the efficacy of agency as an urban concept.

The question of agency has been raised in a number of other contexts, among them Science and Technology Studies and the burgeoning field of human-animal-studies.¹ When I started working on my dissertation about the history of slaughterhouses, especially the changing role of human-animal relations, in nineteenth-century Paris and Berlin some 15 years ago,

¹ On the question of animal agency, see the special issue of *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, 52 (2009); R. Hediger and S. McFarland (eds.), *Animals and Agency: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (Amsterdam, 2009); and A. Laue and S. Wirth (eds.), *Das Handeln der Tiere: Tierliche Agency im Fokus der Human-Animal-Studies* (Bielefeld, 2015).

I repeatedly encountered the question of agency, which, at the time, led me to the sociological scholarship on structure and agency, particularly to the work of the social historian William H. Sewell. In a well-known article about notions of structure and agency, Sewell argued that 'to be an agent means to be capable of exerting some degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree'.² Hence, notions of agency are closely tied to intentionality and the ability actively to shape social relations. Perhaps one could even go a step further to argue that, ultimately, agency is tied to notions of rights and responsibilities. Regarding animals, it seemed useful to me to draw a distinction between actants (animals) and agents (humans). While the former certainly have the ability to act in social settings, only the latter can be held responsible for their actions within the context of human society. Modern legal systems, at least in democratic societies, are premised on such differentiated notions of responsibility and liability. In contrast, many early modern legal systems in Europe did not draw such distinctions, hence considering animals liable subjects that could be accused of stealing or even murder.³ To be sure, this is not the line of argument carried forward in contemporary debates about granting subjecthood to certain animals, but the question whether rights imply responsibilities still remains. While such concerns about animal agency and related issues regarding their rights and legal status are fundamental in the field of human-animal-studies, this is not the central point of this forum, so let us turn instead to our 'other creature of interest' – the city.

Can cities be held responsible for developments that take place within their territorial confines or even within larger configurations of nodal networks? This is not only a legal, but a political question. Put differently, if we assign agency to cities, what does that mean on a political and ethical level – who holds responsibilities? To take up one of Chris Otter's central concerns – are cities responsible for climate change? If we maintain such a line of argument, what political consequences grow out of such a view? Can we wipe our hands clean in light of an agency that is so much larger than we are and perhaps even beyond our grasp? Are we clearing the way for the further neoliberalization of the urban? Looking historically, what do we stand to gain by shifting questions of responsibility upward to such a meta scale? What kind of analysis is possible with such a notion of agency? One might insist that the study of history should not be about ethics or politics, but it might nevertheless be worthwhile to consider that angle as well. To be more specific, where do questions of inequality, exploitation and uneven development find room in conceptions of urban agency? For example, would a 'city' be responsible for poor housing conditions and public health problems? And how can radical social transformations be

² W. H. Sewell, 'A theory of structure: duality, agency, and transformation', in *Logics of History* (Chicago, 2005), 143.

³ E.P. Adams, *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals* (New York, 1906).

explained if cities themselves appear as agents of change? What happens to the individual urban dweller and how does s/he face up to the city as opponent in everyday life and more long-term developments? All of these questions require consideration and debate. On a more sociological level, if we assign agency to cities, what does that imply about structures? Structures as the more permanent (even if by no means impermeable) forms of societal organization are often studied as the counterweight to individual or collective action. If we individualize and perhaps even anthropomorphize cities as objects of study, what happens to structures, how can we illuminate them and their impact on urban processes? More concretely, where do institutions figure in this set-up?

Here, we might heed a warning from the urban planner and social activist Peter Marcuse, who recently criticized the growing depoliticization of urban discourses through the use of what he calls 'one-dimensional language'.⁴ By one-dimensional language he does not mean the deliberate defamation of terms, but the quiet acceptance of linguistic simplifications that flatten out differences and immobilize conflict and political responsibility. He warns that an inherent anthropomorphization of institutions will lead to the anonymization of actors and hence to the potential denial of conflict. Marcuse also cautions against the homogenization of entities such as the 'city' because it might cancel out internal variations and diversities that are contained within such a single term, which brings me to my second point – the city as entity.

One might argue that the terms 'city' and 'urban' are interchangeable and indeed they are often employed synonymously. But is the city really the same as the urban? The term 'city' refers to a *place* that is demarcated and exists in contrast to other places such as the countryside. It can be categorized into distinct city types such as small towns, capital cities, colonial cities, metropolises, world cities, mega cities, etc. In contrast, the 'urban' signifies a *state of being* that is constantly subject to change because it is driven by processes rather than typologies. Scholars who focus on the production of urban spaces usually talk about the urban rather than the city. The city and the urban are certainly closely linked, but they are not necessarily interchangeable concepts. In that sense, it makes a difference if we think about urban history or the history of cities. If we look at the historiography of urban history over the past century, we can see a gradual expansion and shift away from the history of specific (western) cities to the study of (global) urban processes. To be clear, I am not arguing that the city as type does not exist, but I would like to raise the question if it makes sense to retain the city as our central object of study? Cities should not be regarded as quasi-natural entities but rather as a concrete agglomeration of forces shaped by the continuous spatiotemporal (re)production of social, and I would add natural, relations.

⁴ P. Marcuse, 'Depoliticizing urban discourse: how "we" write', *Cities*, 44 (2014), 152–6.

In critical urban theory, a growing number of scholars starting with Henri Lefebvre have questioned the explanatory value of 'the city' in light of a rapidly changing urban world that extends far beyond the boundaries of any given geographical place.⁵ Starting with the idea that the thing we call 'city' grows out of a process called urbanization, the Marxist geographer David Harvey calls for a dialectical way of thinking that gives primacy to processes rather than things even though processes are of course always mediated through the things they produce.⁶ Identifying high modernism as an era that tended to privilege things over processes, Harvey contends that while this perspective allowed us to study urban forms, it prevented us from unmasking or even more importantly overcoming the underlying ideological currents that drove capitalist (or even socialist) social productions. In other words, if we are interested in social change rather than the positionality of things, we need to focus our attention on processes of urbanization rather than urban forms. And if that is what we are trying to do, where do conceptions of urban agency lead us, both with regard to our historical perspectives and with regard to how we, as historians, want to contribute to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary debates in urban studies?

To illustrate this distinction, we might look at a particularly telling embodiment of such an urban type – the metropolis. The term is frequently invoked even though it certainly defies easy definition.⁷ Traditionally, the study of metropolises has centred on specific (western) cities such as London, Paris, Vienna or New York that were viewed as bounded places within which particular societal developments unfolded. Not surprisingly, such histories tend to focus on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and more often than not they are couched in discourses about modernity. Indeed, these metropolises were often cast as laboratories of modernity because they vividly showcased the political, economic, technological and/or cultural developments of their respective societies.⁸ We have wonderful studies of metropolises as bounded entities and we have certainly learned a great deal through this approach. At the same time, it has been a rather hierarchical perspective premised on a more or less explicit understanding of inside and outside, city and country, centre and periphery, first and second city and so forth. In a more critical vein, metropolises have been viewed as specific sites that elucidate the contradictions of modernity, for instance with regard to wealth and poverty, inclusion and exclusion, conservative and progressive

⁵ H. Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis, 2003; orig. publ. 1970).

⁶ D. Harvey, 'Cities or urbanization', *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, 1 (1996), 38–61.

⁷ D. Brantz, S. Disko and G. Wagner-Kyora (eds.), *Thick Space: Approaches to Metropolitanism* (Bielefeld, 2012).

⁸ For two very different approaches on this perspective, see D. Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity: Critical Explorations* (New York, 2001); and D. Matejovski (ed.), *Metropolen: Laboratorien der Moderne* (Frankfurt, 2000).

politics, reason and irrationality, war and peace. Of course, all of these studies portray their respective cities in terms of urbanization, but for the most part, such urbanization is presented exclusively from an internal perspective. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the dependence of metropolises on their hinterland and empires further afield.⁹ After all, European metropolises would never have become what they were if it was not for their colonial empires and all of the exploitation that went along with it. Consequently, notions of centre and periphery have been reframed and the notion of territoriality has been questioned, particularly in the fields of subaltern and post-colonial urban studies. Looking at urban history in a more global context has led some scholars to emphasize the flows and networks that pass through cities and how they have shaped urban developments. This perspective has led to a certain deterritorialization and to a critical reassessment of power relations and entanglements.

In a similar vein, albeit from a very different perspective, Science and Technology as well as Urban Environmental Studies have deepened our understanding of entanglements and the significance of flows and networks in charting processes of urbanization. For both, the interaction of humans and non-humans is central. While Science and Technology Studies focuses on the impact of socio-technological systems, environmental scholars emphasize the socio-ecological dimensions in urban developments. Concepts of metabolism and circulation are of particular import in both of these fields.¹⁰ Urban ecologist Eric Swyngedouw characterizes metabolism as a dynamic process by which human and non-human elements enter into a productive/destructive relationship that transforms given entities into new assemblages.¹¹ Circulation plays a decisive role in this continuous creation of assemblages whose material existence is based on socio-ecological hybrids. This hybridization should be viewed in conjunction with the concept of cyborg urbanization, which also implies the purposeful joining of human, non-human and/or technological components into new types of urban hybrid organisms. Swyngedouw identifies urbanization as a 'continuous de-territorialization and re-territorialization through metabolic circulatory flows, organized through social and physical conduits or networks of "metabolic vehicles"'.¹² One exemplary metabolic vehicle that has received particular attention from scholars is water because it signifies a perfect

⁹ W. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991); F. Driver and D. Gilbert, *Imperial Cities: Landscape, Display and Identity* (Manchester, 2003); J. Schnerer, *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis* (New Haven, 1999).

¹⁰ P. Ferrão and J. Fernández, *Sustainable Urban Metabolism* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).

¹¹ E. Swyngedouw, 'Metabolic urbanization: the making of cyborg cities', in N. Heynen, M. Kaika and E. Swyngedouw (eds.), *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism* (London, 2006).

¹² *Ibid.*, 22.

hybrid mediated by technologies and the politics inherent in ecological and social transformations.¹³

In order to visualize these processes of hybridization, the notion of assemblages might be especially useful. Following the initial evocation of the term by Giles Deleuze, assemblages should be understood as heterogeneous compositions made up of different kinds of objects and ideas that enter into relations with one another in specific spatio-temporal contexts. Employing the notion of urban assemblages offers various possibilities to grasp cities as spaces of multiple enactments consisting of heterogeneous associations and subjectivities. According to Ignacio Fariás, urban agency is an emergent capacity of assemblages.¹⁴ The term 'emergent' is significant here because it underscores that agency is not necessarily an inherent quality of urban assemblages. Similarly, Bruno Latour usually speaks of assembling (the process of bringing together) rather than assemblages (the state of being together). In that sense, Actor-Network Theory (ANT) can help us to elucidate the constantly changing, contingent and heterogeneous nature of urban productions that are continuously (re)assembled through everyday practices as well as long-term transformations.¹⁵ It opens up new perspectives for thick descriptions of the multiple materialities and socio-natural relations that make up urban spaces. As Fariás has argued, ANT opens up new possibilities for thinking about and empirically approaching the ontological status of cities. However, one has to be careful not to fall prey to one of the major criticisms that has been levelled against ANT approaches, namely that they are just descriptive rather than explanatory. In other words, the challenge is not just to describe cities as forms, but to explain the socio-spatial complexities and temporal dimensions that undergird urban processes, which also requires close attention to the historical contingencies in which particular network relations arose while others were prevented. This brings to the fore the notion of power, which has also been a big point for ANT critics. Many of the questions stated above with regard to notions of responsibility could be posed in a very similar fashion with regard to the unequal access to positions of power within urban society. If we want to foreground urban assemblages and operate with an expanded conception of urban agency, how do we account for social inequalities and societal injustice?

To be sure, I am very much in favour of conceptualizing the urban through a broad spectrum of actors, but we need to pay careful attention to the distinct positions of power within human society where gender, class, race, ethnicity, and age continue to play a crucial role in a person's ability

¹³ See, for example, S. Castonguay and M. Evenden (eds.), *Urban Waters: Rivers, Cities and the Production of Space in Europe and North America* (Pittsburgh, 2012); M. Gandy, *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 2014); M. Kaika, *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature and the City* (London, 2004).

¹⁴ I. Fariás and T. Bender (eds.), *Urban Assemblages: How Actor-Network Theory Changes Urban Studies* (London, 2010), 15.

¹⁵ B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York, 2007).

to participate actively (or refuse to participate) in the production of urban spaces. It is precisely this unevenness in claims to political agency that is being problematized by advocates of the 'right to the city' movement.¹⁶ Moreover, we also need to distinguish much more carefully among the wide variety of non-human actants that feed into urban assemblages because a car is obviously not the same as a horse. Consequently, their capacity to participate actively in the assemblage of the urban world needs to be critically and conscientiously evaluated. Only then can we arrive at a representative conceptualization of agency and its impact on the structuration and everyday practices in urban agglomerations without running the risk of removing ethics and politics from social analysis.

¹⁶ N. Brenner, P. Marcuse and M. Meyer (eds.), *Cities for People Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City* (New York, 2012); and D. Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York, 2003).