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Doing the City from the Margins: Critical Perspectives on Urban Marginality*

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ABSTRACT

This special issue focuses on urban marginality in diverse contexts across the world (Africa, Latin America, Arab States and Europe) and proposes anthropological perspectives on contemporary urbanity that take into account the complexity of the social positions of those city dwellers that are on the margins. Three aspects of urban margins come to the fore. First, urbanites respond to increasing marginalisation through the production of alternative meanings and narratives about the city. While grand, powerful narratives may present cities as 'divided', 'dual' or 'conflicted', urban dwellers may carve out symbolic space through discourses of the non-spectacular and non-political, emerging out of lived space. Second, the cuts and frictions constituting urban margins do not only limit urban dwellers capacities, but can also provide spaces of agentic possibilities. As it is well known, the absence of state control can be turned by versatile urbanites into opportunities of the 'informal' economy. Third, urban dwellers engage in manifold practices that connect and entangle their marginalised position with spaces of power and resources. Through their practices urban margins become a relation to, not a disconnection from the 'centre'. In this special issue we understand 'urban margins' not as essence or entities, but as forms of relations between urban dwellers shaped by processes of political, economic, spatial and social marginalisation. Seen in this way, urban margins constitute a perspective on the urban: a lens to entice comparisons of urban agency in the world of cities [Robinson, J. 2011. "Cities in a World of Cities: The Comparative Gesture." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35 (1): 1–23. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2427.2010.00982.x]].

KEYWORDS

Urban margins; urban anthropology; urbanity; space; agency

Introduction

Elderly urbanites in the city of Zanzibar (Tanzania), Palestinian refugees in a camp in Ramallah and informal settlement inhabitants in the suburbs of Arica (Chile) all share

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the status of urban dwellers, who tend to be considered marginal to their respective cities by politicians, urban dwellers occupying a higher place in the urban hierarchy and sometimes also by academics. Often invisible and unwanted, they struggle with their social position at the urban margins, yet they also shape and change their respective cities. This special issue focuses on urban marginality in its diverse empirical realities across the world (Africa, Latin America, Arab States and Europe) and in doing so illustrates how certain marginalised groups are not merely subjected to their conditions but also engage as active agents in a variety of processes. It also explores the ways in which the social and the spatial dimensions of such processes articulate themselves in different contexts. Focusing on the everyday practices and agency of urban dwellers, this special issue proposes moving the urban margins to the centre of academic interest.

While there is ample analysis of the ways in which urban landscapes have changed over time, there is little understanding of how they impact urban dwellers' practices and their relations to one other. Through empirical case studies, this special issue aims to link the growing research field of urban agency (Simone 2004; Förster 2013) with urban inequality and urban diversity debates, and to develop an empirically based middle position between romanticising (conceiving urban contexts primarily as enabling) and condemning (conceiving them as constraining structural conditions). People and spaces at the urban margins are often conceived as deviating from the 'centre', which is taken as the norm by urban planners, politicians, academics and urban dwellers themselves. In this special issue, we start from the presumption that urban inhabitants living at the city's margins do not represent negligible minorities of the urban whole. Rather, we argue, those at the city's margins constitute and define the city.

The broad array of conditions that a concern with 'urban marginality' encompasses can range from various types of precarious labour to those who are forcibly displaced or discriminated against because they occupy contested spaces. Thus, in this special issue we understand 'urban margins' not as essences or 'all or nothing' entities, but as forms of diverse and multiple relations between urban dwellers shaped by processes of political, economic, spatial and social marginalisation. Seen in this way, 'urban margins' constitute a particular perspective on the urban and illustrate how the social and the spatial dimensions interweave in specific contexts. As urban marginality may take on different meanings in different local contexts (as will be seen in the five contributions of this special issue), it serves as a lens to entice comparisons of urban agency in the world of cities (Robinson 2011). We distinguish our approach from theoretically narrow models that treat urban margins (only) as themes or explain which compilations of variables (such as 'class' or 'intersectionality') cause which outcomes. Rather, we use urban margins as a lens to explore the diverse and complex ways in which urban dwellers actively contest, negotiate, dissolve and change margins–centre relations. This approach to urban margins therefore works against the compartmentalisation of urban studies. It provides a unitary framework for analysing urban dwellers' practices in the context of: neighbourhood segregation and stigmatisation ('ghettos', 'slums'); exclusionary citizenship regimes ('sans papiers', refugees); and marginalised social positions (gender, age, sexuality) limiting urban dwellers' access to the city's spaces and resources. In addition, this perspective on urban margins enables us to bring different scales of cities in dialogue with each other. The case studies from metropolises to small cities show how marginality takes distinct forms and meanings in different and distant urban contexts, yet they also contribute to working

out commonalities across scales. While we are inspired by the ongoing debate on urban marginality (Perlman 1976; Wacquant 2008; Lancione 2016; Thieme, Lancione, and Rosa 2017), we primarily want to relate this special issue to the ethnographic turn in urban studies (Simone 2004, 2014), the comparative urbanism paradigm (Myers 2011; Robinson 2011; Heer *forthcoming*) and the ever-expanding debate on urban diversity (Fincher and Iveson 2008; Maloutas and Fujita 2012; Vertovec 2015).

Three dominant perspectives exist on urban marginality. Combined, they offer essential theoretical insights for a relational, unitary approach to urban marginality. By bringing together the debates on urban agency, the spatiality of margins and urban diversity, we offer a perspective on urban marginality that entices comparisons of urban margins across different contexts.

Urban Agency

The growing field of urban agency perceives urban contexts primarily as enabling (see Enwezor 2002; Trefon 2004; Murray 2008; Simone 2010; Myers 2011; Förster 2013; Pieterse and Simone 2013). Simone (2004, 407) describes ‘people as infrastructure’ by emphasising the economic cooperation of urban dwellers whom he sees as marginalised from the city life. Cities are constantly evolving and allow, based on urban dwellers’ agency, for practices that create new social spaces (Förster 2013, 246). Proposing that urban contexts are enabling, some scholars claim that creative ways to cope with the hardship that urban life brings can be found anywhere, while others point to the fact that one has to look more closely at the kinds of social practices that enable new social and cultural spaces (Förster 2013, 2017).

Especially the marginalised areas within a city are described as places of potentialities. New urban practices have their origins at a city’s margin and gradually take over the whole city (de Boeck and Plissart 2004, 34). Simone even claims

Many of the so-called lacks – of amenities, infrastructure, livelihood, markets, and governance – become occasions for residents to assemble ways of working together that otherwise would not be possible given existing cultural norms, political practices, and urban experiences. (Simone 2010, 34)

Urban margins are thus taken as particularly innovative when exploring the agency of marginalised inhabitants to make their city liveable. Rather than being urban conditions which solely determine the lives of those at the margins, urban margins constitute spaces and places of change, which bring to the fore urban dwellers’ agency in sometimes unexpected ways.

Focusing on urban dwellers’ everyday practices and their potentialities allows for an enabling perspective on urbanity that distances itself from a ‘crisis-driven narrative’ of cities in the South (Myers 2011, 6). Scholars working on urban inequality concentrate mostly on constraining structural conditions of a city (see, for example Merry 1981; Schneider and Susser 2003; Davis 2006). With their focus on social problems, these publications therefore describe the city as hotspots of violence, prostitution and disease. Davis (2006, 16–17) points in this connection to a ‘mass production of slums’ due to an overurbanisation of many cities in the Global South where illness and death are the order of the day.

The debate on urban agency as depicted above mainly derives from scholars working in African cities. It finds some of its origins in the work of the Manchester School of Social

Anthropology (van Binsbergen 2007) that describe in their studies on African urbanisation in Central, East and South Africa processes of 'social action', although they do not use the word 'agency' (Neubert and Scherer 2014, 2). Parts of the debate on agency departed from the naïve assumption that studies have to emphasise that people (in Africa) have agency as antidote to a discourse of passive victimisation (van Dijk, de Bruijn, and Gewald 2007, 6; Neubert and Scherer 2014, 4). An urban dweller who is not acting in a particular situation does so for a reason that is not reducible to structural constraints. It would, therefore, be wrong to assume that the person does not have agency and it would bring us back to the abovementioned pessimistic debate on the structural constraints of city spaces. Hence, by 'moving away from an ill-conceived premise of agency towards a promise of agency' van Dijk, de Bruijn, and Gewald (2007, 6) propose to look at how people *realise* agency in their daily practices.

While scholars working in African contexts usually criticise the application of urban theories from the US or European cities to understand non-Western contexts (Robinson 2006), we propose going the other way around. We would like to take the rather Africa-oriented debate on urban agency and expand it to other contexts. With empirically grounded case studies from urban margins from four different world regions, we would like to contribute to a broadening of the debate.

Although, 'anthropologists have the tendency to look at the apparently positive aspects of the urban in the midst of what others would call chaos' (Förster 2013, 236), we perceive a lens of urban marginalisation to be fruitful in avoiding over-romanticising urban life at the margins as particularly creative and innovative. By looking at people's enabling and constraining environments (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) at the urban margins, we therefore call for a middle position that critically reflects the limiting power of the urban, whom we feel is sometimes missing when exploring agency in urban contexts. As the example of older urban residents in this special issue shows (see Staudacher, this issue), their possibilities at the urban margins depend much on their social relations in and outside the city, while the absence of access to the city's infrastructure limits these older people's participation in urban life. Their declining health and increasing frailty furthermore make it difficult for them to keep up with the constant flux of a city and encounters with other urbanites become challenging (see also Kaiser-Grolimund 2017). Staudacher presents two ethnographic cases which exemplify what she calls a cosmopolitan and transnational agency; these elderly employ this agency in order to respond to their struggles for urban ties. Staudacher's contribution to this special issue reveals that older urbanites may be socially isolated even in the city's geographical centre, and thus live at social margins in houses surrounded by high walls. Staudacher's example shows that the relation between social and spatial marginality may be more complex than classical research on urban marginality like the Chicago School had implied (see below).

A similar struggle for urban presence can be found in Aedo's (this issue) contribution. Aedo analyses the agency of settlers in unauthorised camps on the geographical margins of Arica at the northern border of Chile. Aedo puts forward that these politically marginalised settlers employ a 'politic of presence' in order to create space for themselves in the city. Aedo points to the practical and political side of what he describes as the 'emplacement' processes of the often-invisible and unwanted migrant-settlers at the urban margins of Arica, and emphasises innovative and creative ways in which these migrant-settlers cope with their marginalisation.

As becomes apparent in Staudacher's and Aedo's contributions, diverse structural constraints at social, political and spatial margins shape people's actions. Empirical case studies that focus on marginalised people's daily practices and engagements within particular contexts of action (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1996, 371) may help disentangle different powers of the urban at stake that consequently shape how these urban dwellers relate to the city as a whole.

Spatiality of Margins

In urban sociological and anthropological research there has long been and continues to be a tendency to understand and study urban marginality in terms of space or territory. Poor and stigmatised neighbourhoods, be it 'ghettos', 'informal settlements', 'townships' or even 'camps', are the most common and most visible socio-spatial formations in cities where economically, politically and socially marginalised urban dwellers come to live. A large, diverse body of scholarship has been produced on such neighbourhoods, among them the classical Chicago School of Urban Sociology, the more recent field of advanced marginality in the neoliberal age and studies on favelas in Brazil.

The classics of the Chicago School, although widely criticised, continue to influence contemporary thinking on space and society (Tonkiss 2005, 2). The human ecology model, based on neighbourhood ethnographies, tended to assume an isomorphism between space and identity: spatial marginality tends to be equated with social marginality. According to Park, boundaries between neighbourhoods lead to social boundaries ('moral distances') so that the city is 'a mosaic of little worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate' (1915, 608). All immigrant groups or otherwise marginalised groups would, over time, 'find its habitat in the various natural areas that the city affords' (Wirth 1998 [1928], 226). As an outcome of these early works by the Chicago School, urban marginality and spatiality continue to be understood as tightly linked and mutually constitutive. The relation between the social and the spatial, though, is more complex and multifaceted.

The problem with this form of understanding originating in the spatially oriented work of the Chicago School, which we call, based on Heer ([forthcoming](#)), 'mosaic thinking', is that it approaches marginality largely as a form of (spatial) disconnection from the rest of the city. When territorialising marginality, there is the danger that social forms of marginality hidden in 'normal' or affluent areas, go unseen. 'Mosaic thinking' with its focus on disconnection also makes the Chicago School and its successors pay less attention to the social relations between more powerful and less powerful groups, which, in our understanding, constitute the social processes leading to urban marginality. In addition, they set the base for a recurring interpretation of community relations within marginalised territories; they romanticised that 'village-like' ghettos become integrated through tight communal ties.

A more recent 'school', if we may address it this way, studying urban marginality in relation to territory is the comparative urban sociology initiated by Loïc Wacquant. Generalising from a careful comparative analysis of the black American ghetto and French working-class banlieue, Wacquant (2008, 2016) claimed that a new regime of 'advanced marginality' emerged on both sides of the Atlantic with distinctive spatial properties. For him, the proper topic of study are not the neighbourhoods nor their residents' agency, but rather the multiple structural processes that lead to their emergence (like

territorial stigmatisation). While we value the empirical insights from this type of research and the resulting comparative awareness on the diverse constitution of marginalised areas in cities across the globe, we agree with Lancione (2016) that such a structural analysis cannot illuminate aspects of urban marginality that go beyond race, class and state policy (Lancione 2016, 5). Research inspired by Wacquant investigates the link between neighbourhoods and larger economic and political processes; yet, like many other neighbourhood studies, the relations to the rest of the city and other areas tend to fall out of sight. With Castañeda (2012, 160), we believe that ‘it is impossible to understand banlieues, ghettos, and other stigmatized spaces without studying their relationship with what lies outside of them’.

There is, however, also a body of scholarship across the history of urban ethnography that addresses the relation between marginality and territory while also attending to interconnections across spatial and group boundaries. Key to this are a number of theoretically highly valuable studies on urban marginality in Brazil. A study from the 1970s in Brazil by Epstein (1973) systematically investigates relations of dependence between Brasília’s spontaneous, poor areas and the planned city. He theorises them as reciprocal, yet asymmetric, patron–client relationships, on which both the elite in the planned city and the poor in the satellite towns depend. Similarly, Perlman, in her first study from 1976 on favelas in Rio de Janeiro, re-conceptualised the urban poor not as marginal in the sense of ‘outside the system’, but as asymmetrically integrated into society (Perlman 1976).

We believe that these theoretical insights from Brazil were highly important and that inquiries into urban marginality should reject static notions of duality (margins–centre), but should investigate shifts, interconnections and dependencies. Spatiality is clearly a highly important dimension shaping and being shaped by urban marginality, yet in more complex ways than concepts employed by Wacquant, like ‘class’, ‘race’ and ‘the state’, can grasp. In addition, we believe that one needs to understand urban marginalisation as a relation between spaces and groups and not as a unit or a fixed position, as the Chicago scholars used to do in their ‘mosaic thinking’.

Neighbourhood studies are still a key methodology for urban ethnography, not least because they seem to make ethnographic fieldwork feasible in large cities. In this special issue, Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska and Aedo chose this more classical approach, which continues to have many merits, to illuminate aspects of urban marginality. Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska (this issue) explores how a refugee camp in the city of Ramallah (Palestine) turned over the years into a distinctly urban place, and she shows how its residents negotiated their relations to other urban areas and the state through the realm of urban governance. Yet moving beyond a dichotomy of the city as the norm and the camp as an exception, she points out the importance of acknowledging the camp’s entanglements with what lays beyond its boundaries. Aedo explores processes of emplacement by migrant-settlers in the city of Arica in northern Chile. The territorial and social marginalisation of the unauthorised camps opens up room for agency for illegal migrants who can build their urban lives here. With careful attention to boundaries and internal diversity, Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska and Aedo’s neighbourhood studies move beyond the Chicago School’s isomorphism of space and identity and constitute a case in point about why we need to approach urban marginality as diverse, complex and contextual.

Urban Diversity

The complex and multifaceted ways in which urban dwellers negotiate their marginal positions in the city bring to the fore that diversity is not an exception, but rather an inherent characteristic of the urban. Cities have always been diverse in socio-economic, ethnic and religious terms, and with respect to values, lifestyles, attitudes and practices (see Tasan-Kok 2013), yet we contend that this is not always sufficiently taken into account. One strand of research which recently put diversity on the urban research agenda is the scholarship on diversity in European cities (Vertovec 2007; see also Tasan-Kok 2013, 6; Vertovec 2014, 2015). Both Vertovec and Tasan-Kok et al. aim to grasp the increasing ethnic and demographic diversity as a consequence of migration in European cities, claiming that diversity needs to be reconceptualised due to the 'intense diversification of the population in socio-economic, social and ethnic terms, but also with respect to lifestyles, attitudes and activities' (Wacquant 2013, 6).

Increasing immigration and the increasing diversity that is associated with it are inherent characteristics of cities, but the need to recognise these phenomena explicitly and find the best ways to incorporate them in the policy-work in cities and beyond are still the most important challenges that the scholarship is facing. The research field has recognised these needs and a large number of published works so far have indeed focused on governmentality, policy-making and urban planning (see, for example: Fincher and Iveson 2008; Raco 2017; Raco and Kesten 2017; Schönwälder and Bührmann 2017; Tandé 2017). In addition, a large number of studies have raised important questions about migration and diversity in cities (see, for example: Maloutas 2012; Acosta-García and Martínez-Ortiz 2015; Biehl 2015; Boccagni 2015; de Bock 2015; Meissner 2015; Mellor and Gilliat-Ray 2015; Spoonley 2015; Vonderlack-Navarro and Sites 2015). More importantly, the research field on diversity is rightfully dealing with perceptions, constructions and narratives about diversity (see, for example: Hooghe and de Vroome 2015; Parks and Askins 2015; Scuzzarello 2015). Among the other topics, the research field has investigated a number of questions related to urban communities that are becoming increasingly popular (see, for example: Colic-Peisker and Robertson 2015; Hall 2015), as well as questions related to religious diversity (see, for example: Burchardt 2017; Martínez Ariño and Griera 2017).

Our take on 'urban margins' contributes to the growing field of urban diversity in two significant ways. First, our project gives cities and the urban experience a major voice: It is in cities where one can observe the ways in which people with different and changing values, identities, lifestyles and attitudes can coexist in the same space. Urban public spaces may contribute to further development of the relations among people, but they may also produce segregation. The case studies presented in this special issue's contributions focus on specific groups in particular local contexts in order to show that diversity in many ways is a circumstance in which urban dwellers find themselves in their everyday lives. For example, Aceska and Heer (this issue) look at encounters in shopping malls in cities that are divided along ethnic, racial and class divides, and show how diversity is played out in everyday settings. Unlike the common association of diversity with migration, ethnicity or religion, the 'urban margins' approach allows us to go beyond such categories and tries to capture the complex ways in which urban dwellers negotiate their position in the city and the state alike. With this approach, we neither idealise nor

routinise diversity; the papers in this special issue rather show in which specific ways the city as such contributes to how diversity is played out in the everyday lives of city dwellers. Second, the variety of marginalised city dwellers addressed in this special issue reveals the significance of the interplay of scale and agency in the everyday ways diversity is experienced. Lane (this issue) tells us the story about Belfast's 'Ten by Nine', a monthly, public storytelling night in which city dwellers tell their personal, everyday stories that challenge the 'big' narratives about everyday lives of people in contested places. As becomes evident in Lane's contribution, it is important to look at the ways individual actors and groups understand diversity, which challenges they recognise, what instruments and strategies they develop and what kinds of bonds they form in order to make sense of their lives in the city. Thus, we understand the city as both an enabling and constraining context in which diversity can be played out; this, we believe, is crucial in understanding the role of the urban experience in contexts of urban diversity.

Key Arguments

Based on ethnographies of urban marginality, this special issue offers three arguments about the ways in which urban dwellers make the city from the margins: through the production of narratives of the non-spectacular city, creative engagements in oppressive conditions and entanglements with spaces of power and resources.

First, by producing narratives of the non-spectacular city, we mean that urbanites respond to their position at the margins through the production of alternative meanings and narratives about the city. While grand, powerful narratives may present cities as 'divided', 'dual' or 'conflicted', urban dwellers in their everyday lives produce spaces and narratives of the non-spectacular and non-political city, emerging out of their 'lived space' (Lefebvre 1996). The physical and social settings for the emergence of such narratives are often urban spaces that bring urban dwellers together in ways not imaginable in the previous dispensation, like shopping malls (see Aceska and Heer in this special issue) and public storytelling nights (see Lane in this special issue). In cities marked by deep divisions, they constitute meeting spaces (Heer 2015, *forthcoming*).

Second, by creative engagements of actors in oppressive conditions we mean that the cuts and frictions constituting urban margins do not only limit urban dwellers' capacities, but also provide space for agency and creativity. Much of the dynamism of cities emerges in the marginalised spaces where urban dwellers who have little to lose appropriate spaces outside of the state's control. Against all odds, migrants and refugees manage to emplace themselves into cities in what Aedo (this issue) calls the 'politics of presence', a politics through which marginalised urban dwellers make themselves become 'present' as legitimate urbanites (see Aedo, Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska, Lane and Aceska and Heer, this issue). The engagements by socially marginalised urban dwellers can even go beyond the city when mobilising, for example, a transnational network. These transnational strategies may positively impact the marginalised when contributing, as in Staudacher's case (this issue), to older people's access to urban infrastructure and consequently to their health, which again shapes their relation to the urban.

Third, by entanglements with spaces of power and resources we mean that socially and politically marginalised groups (elderly, refugees, poor, ethnic and racial 'others') engage in manifold practices that connect and entangle their marginalised position with other actors

across spatial and social divides (see Staudacher and Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska in this special issue, also Aceska and Heer). Elderly people in Zanzibar city exert a ‘cosmopolitan agency’ by drawing on the resources of relatives, even across transnational spaces. In the governance of a Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank, the rigid binary between camp and city is called into question by the political actions of its residents, who resist and subvert the condition of urban marginality. Through such practices urban margins become a relation to the ‘centre’, not a disconnection from nor location outside of it.

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