

### The Anthropology of Urban Comparison: Urban Comparative Concepts and Practices, the Entrepreneurial Ethnographic Self and Their Spatializing Dimensions:

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Färber, A. (2021). The Anthropology of Urban Comparison: Urban Comparative Concepts and Practices, the Entrepreneurial Ethnographic Self and Their Spatializing Dimensions:. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 22(3). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-22.3.3782>

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## The Anthropology of Urban Comparison: Urban Comparative Concepts and Practices, the Entrepreneurial Ethnographic Self and Their Spatializing Dimensions

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### Key words:

figurational sociology; cross-cultural comparison; sociology of space; spatial analysis; refiguration of spaces; urban anthropology; anthropology of knowledge; entrepreneurial self; ethnography; Berlin; Moscow

**Abstract:** In this article, I discuss comparison in urban anthropology from two perspectives. Using the fundamental epistemological significance of comparison as a starting point for all ethnographic cultural studies, I first present different comparative perspectives in urban anthropology and their concepts. These range from typological thinking to urban specificity and relational urbanity. Secondly, I examine comparison from the perspective of the anthropology of knowledge as an everyday academic practice in order to understand its subjectification and spatial dimensions. The possibilities and limitations of comparison resulting from everyday academic practice are thus seen as a prerequisite for establishing any concept of comparison. Finally, I critically explore the specific requirements of ethnographic comparison via the figure of the entrepreneurial-ethnographic self.

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## 1. Situating Comparison in (Urban) Anthropology

"Fieldwork, in the view of anthropology, is a privileged means for accessing unexpected similarities and differences and remaining alert to the possibility that the comparatists impulse across large swathes of world regions can generalize in problematic ways" (DEEB, 2013, p.140).

The disciplines that constitute the field of urban anthropology—from folklore studies to social and cultural anthropology—would hardly be conceivable without the epistemic distinction implied in the concept of *comparison*. Studying the culture and society of "the other" invariably entails contrasting the latter with one's own. Even in instances in which this relation is not explicitly articulated, the *analytical distinction between "own" and "other"* is a consistently comparative perspective used to organize similarities and differences. [1]

The criteria used for defining similarities and differences linked to the concept of comparison have, consequently, prompted major disputes regarding the *epistemological foundations of ethnography-based cultural studies*—such as folklore studies and empirical cultural studies, as well as ethnology, cultural and social anthropology. Regarding this "'troubled history' of the comparative method in anthropology" (BRETTELL, 2009, p.650), we may think of the controversial role of the DARWINIST, universalistic developmental scheme articulating a common human species on the basis of which different degrees of historical development were made comparable—or in its racist expression, in which different "races" were invariably made comparable in a (de)valuing classification. Finally, comparison as a relativizing, spatially classifying function has been used to organize similarities and differences up to the mid-twentieth century in these disciplines by contrasting clearly distinguishable entities as *Kulturkreise* [culture circles] with one other, and has long since been abandoned for its essentializing epistemology. Scholars have traced the conceptions and ideologies of society around which these comparative classifications of similarities and differences pivot precisely in the histories of each discipline and, above all, they have critically examined them regarding racist content or relativistic effect (GINGRICH & FOX, 2002; KUPER, 1999; STOCKING, 1999). However, comparison, as such, has remained almost unquestioned. Furthermore, there are two *aspects of comparison* in ethnographic cultural studies that are of interest:

1. *Comparison is a scholarly practice consisting primarily of making connections.* Understanding comparisons as a specific relational practice underlines the fact that similarities and differences are articulated quasi simultaneously. The differences worked out through the comparison are predicated based on a hypothesis that simultaneously adopts a fundamental similarity as the starting point for reflection. *Comparison implies distinguishing by relating and connecting in order to distinguish.*
2. The skillful handling of this paradox is by no means the sole preserve of the academic approach. Comparison in ethno-science is more of interest as an *everyday practice* and, hence, increasingly the subject of ethnographic

investigation. As Tim CHOY (2011) pointed out in his work on the ecologies of comparison in Hong Kong, an "ethnography of comparison ... analyses the acts of relation drawing" (p.6). His "*comparison of comparison*" enabled him to analyze "the roles of universality and specificity in political mobilization and the possibilities they hold for collaboration through and across difference" (ibid.). [2]

With this anthropology-of-knowledge diagnosis of a specifically entangled state of universality and specificity, CHOY anticipated—in the mode of comparison—what Hubert KNOBLAUCH and Martina LÖW (2017) referred to as the refiguration process. This is an approach that places the spatiality of the social at the center of social analysis. Seen in this way, sociality articulates itself in processes that are many things at once and, above all, not straightforward: "Instead of assuming a move from a modern order to a late modern, ultramodern or postmodern order, re-figuration makes it possible to grasp the meandering resulting from these kinds of conflicts, tensions and contacts" (p.11). As I will argue in this article, comparison as an everyday relational practice contributes to the meandering and, thus, contributes directly to the spatial dimensioning of the social. This holds for all three of the dimensions named by KNOBLAUCH and LÖW: polycontexturalization (pp.11-13), mediatization (pp.13-14) and translocalization (pp.14-16). Thus, the refiguration approach serves as a productive analytical framework for investigating the comparative quality of the social. [3]

Hence, it is also worth critically analyzing the scientific conception of comparison as an everyday practice of connecting before going on to examine what form of sociality emerges or is subsequently reproduced. Such an *anthropology-of-knowledge view of scientific comparison* not only contributes to increasing one's own methodical precision. It attempts, above all, to grasp the value of scientific comparison. This anthropology-of-knowledge view of comparison, both as a non-scientific and scientific everyday practice, aims to contribute to a reflective and critical approach to comparative knowledge. [4]

I begin by discussing comparison as a means of shaping the cognitive identity in ethnographic cultural studies and shall confine myself in a second step to the field of urban anthropology (Section 2). The city, as a field of research, includes several everyday comparative operations that are both spatially productive and articulate each particular dimension of the refiguration process (Section 3). An anthropology of urban comparison points out the spatializing dimensions of urban comparative practices. In Section 4, I discuss a number of these urban comparative practices and refer, among other things, to my own research in a comparative project between Berlin and Moscow. My own comparative scientific work in the Berlin-Moscow project enables me, in Section 5, to reflect anthropologically on the meandering quality of this connecting practice. In its everyday dimensions, the ethnographic comparative consciousness is illuminated through the lens of the entrepreneurial ethnographic self. Bearing in mind these four analytical steps, I conclude with a reflexive discussion of the value of comparative knowledge in and about the city, and how such knowledge contributes to the refiguration of the social (Section 6). [5]

## 2. Comparison as Distinction and the Cognitive Identity of (Urban) Anthropology

Comparison is inscribed into the different disciplines discussed here as ethnographic cultural studies, even in cases in which interpretations differ as to the epistemological possibilities comparison has opened up, namely, between the particularizing/interpretive and the generalizing/explanatory (BRETELL, 2009, pp.650-656): "anthropologists see their discipline as inherently comparative because its fundamental intellectual dilemma is the relationship between human diversity (understood in terms of historical, social, and/or cultural particularity) and human unity (we are all members of the same species)" (HANDLER, 2009, p.628). Historians of the disciplines have also shown that comparison was not always—though it was for the most part—trapped in a *hierarchical structure of distinctions*, in which the researcher's own was the unquestioned and detached position to which the many other possible forms of culture were compared. In rare cases, the other culture also reflected the longing for a desirable state and was accordingly romanticized. The decisive factor for each respective tone was the contemporary world view, so that much of the history of anthropology in the twentieth century has been characterized by a struggle to critique and to transcend the racist, socio-evolutionary anthropology of the Victorian age. Making sense of incommensurable cultural differences has been, and remains, central to that intellectual project (HANDLER, 2009). [6]

One way to subvert the classifying, (de)grading power of comparison and to counter incommensurability is the *comparative analysis of relations*. This approach had already been adopted by cultural anthropologist Arjun APPADURAI in the 1990s. APPADURAI (1996) proposed investigating various "scapes"—ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes—rather than cultural units and essentialized peculiarities. With these specified scapes, he had already placed connections, as space-producing processes, at the center of a comparative investigation of the local conditions of global networking. At the same time, cultural anthropologist Laura NADER (1994) argued along similar lines—though with greater emphasis on methodology—for "comparative consciousness" as a multidimensional comparative approach to research and under the impression that globalization was intensifying. Thus, NADER not only raised the relationship between comparison and confluence, as discussed in detail by scholars in the humanities and cultural studies (HAUPT & KOCKA, 2009; NADER, 1994; WELZ, 1998; WERNER & ZIMMERMANN, 2004), but she also opposed simplistic, complexity-reducing comparative operations. She advocated—against the backdrop of a world of mobile populations, commodities, and ideas shaped by connections and movements (NADER, 1994)—more of a deliberately broad, meaning additive and scientifically historically informed, conception of comparison. Hence, she pleaded for the *interplay of different comparative operations* that include *direct, historical, and functional comparisons*. These procedures can be used in a *controlled way* (the same objects in the same material layer) and *contrastively* (unequal objects or unequal material layer). By contrasting, one sees a city through the eyes of another and vice versa. Though blurred methodologically, this multiplied approach seems

more appropriate to the degree of interdependence between cultures, states, social groups, practices of identity, and meaning constructions:

"an area in between, a place which holds the possibility of a comparative consciousness that illuminates connections—between local and global, between past and present, between anthropologists and those they study, between uses of comparison and implications of its uses" (p.85). [7]

This proposition is still found implicitly in urban anthropology. The way in which it is still at work and could be expanded, however, is something I would now like to illustrate by way of several examples in this multifaceted research landscape. [8]

### **3. Urban Anthropology and the City as an Object of Comparison**

Comparison in urban anthropology is characterized by two concerns, similar to sociological or geographical comparisons of cities (ROBINSON, 2016), which are not developed on a broad but rather on an ethnographic scale: researchers focus on the comparative elaboration of urban types and the city-specific shaping of these types, and an increasing comparative interest in the relational, which deals with the (urban) specificity of connection-creating phenomena. [9]

#### **3.1 Typologies and characters: Comparing economic and cultural histories of cities**

Max WEBER's (1921/1922) sociological examination of the history of urban societies may serve as a point of reference for urban-specific research. In particular, the three ideal types of cities identified for Western urban development—the cities of merchants, consumers and producers—have provided starting points for urban anthropology. Thus, WEBER's idea of path-dependency is reflected in the interdisciplinary preoccupation with the relation between concise urban economic focal points and, thus, *types of production and labor markets* along with their habitus, and imaginary or cultural logic, which shaped German-language urban research in the 1990s and early 2000s (BERKING & LÖW, 2008; LEE, 1997; LINDNER, 2008). Such a generally valid rationale for the development of cities and, thus, city types, based on economic sectors and political forms of organization, opens up several *motives for comparison* that allow the individual urban types to be differentiated into actual cities. [10]

Rolf LINDNER and Johannes MOSER (2006) elaborated that the branches of production in Dresden that rely on exclusivity in their cultural staging—for example Volkswagen's Gläserne Manufaktur [Transparent Factory]—do not just refer to the historic capital's production of luxury goods. Rather, their staging fits with the accumulated conservative bourgeois habitus of the city, which has been established as a relational landscape of taste, and is attributed to it compared to other cities. A port city like Marseille, on the other hand, repeatedly evokes cultural representations that reproduce the tension between a Provencal Mediterranean metropolis and a stronghold of crime. These popular polarized representations, which Daniel TÖDT (2012) examined on the basis of production

conditions and contents of contemporary rap music, gain cultural depth if they are viewed against the backdrop of historic city competition—and thus everyday comparison—and the resulting cultural distinction from both the bourgeois city of Aix-en-Provence and the dominant capital, Paris. Following in the steps of LINDNER (2008), TÖDT (2012) therefore referred to the imaginary of the city of Marseille. The *shape of those cities* under comparison is, thus, based on economic conditions. The respective historical development and specific current form, however, are characterized by *cumulative cultural contexts of meaning and habitual influences* perceived and reproduced as city specifics (BERKING & SCHWENK, 2011; FRANK, GEHRING, GRIEM & HAUS, 2014; SCHWAB, 2013). [11]

### **3.2 Relations and connections: Exploring the specificities of urban interrelatedness**

Cultural research on medium-sized cities delves one step further. The research team around Brigitta SCHMIDT-LAUBER investigated two so-called medium-sized towns—Hildesheim in Germany and Wels in Austria—as part of an ethnographic team survey in an extensive research project (ECKERT, SCHMIDT-LAUBER & WOLFMAYR, 2019). The examination of the (communal-)political and demographic classification had already revealed that the category "medium-sized city" is diverse, depending on its context of articulation. However, researchers of qualitative comparative research showed that life in the medium-sized city is experienced as highly relational: "the importance given to and hierarchies between towns are not the logical result of objective facts and numbers. Rather, one town's position in comparison to another is reproduced repeatedly and in manifold ways" (SCHMIDT-LAUBER & WOLFMAYR, 2016, p.89). In this type of comparison, which also accounted for the respective city-specific differences of a lived medium-sized urbanity, the connecting differentiation—or rather a *relational urbanity*—has emerged as its own logic. To what extent this relational practice may also be described as an urban comparative practice will be explained in further detail in the following section. [12]

Finally, Ulf HANNERZ' (1993) reformulated concept of the "world city" may also be seen as an example of a city-type concept, explainable as such in that emphasis is placed on being intertwined. The cultural-anthropological variation of the classifying, comparative social-science model of thinking of the global city (SASSEN, 1991) or world city (FRIEDMANN, 1995) emphasizes the connecting element of comparison as an ontological part of the "world city" (MASSEY, 2007). HANNERZ (1993) first defined certain groups of actors that contribute to articulating the world city by way of a distinguishing link between periphery and center: According to him, international business people, artists, tourists, and migrants contribute to the specific figuration "world city." The specificity of the city results from the cultural compression brought about by the cross-location linking practices of these groups of actors. These linking practices enable cultural flows or cultural transfer of cityscapes, for example, that compete with the images and imaginaries of other cities. This unifying and distinguishing practice of comparison in the form of competition can be found in a multitude of everyday

practices. Cultural transfer, for example, usually involves a more or less implicit hierarchization through the linking of center and periphery. This is most clearly evinced in the example of migration and the accompanying cultural transfer: The world city as a place that receives migrants and is shaped by migrant lifeworlds is articulated as the center of other places perceived as peripheral. Hence, cultural transfer, as accounted for by HANNERZ, does not just define the state and form of connections. Furthermore, the idea of cultural flows and their significance for the role of world cities is inscribed with a constellation connected to cultural valuations, namely, between periphery and center. Therefore, comparison—as in other ethnographic cultural studies—can concentrate very productively on linking differences as objects. Though HANNERZ did not himself refer to comparison in this way—he developed the thesis using the example of Amsterdam in a contrastive comparison to New York, London, etc.—, his scientific comparison of cities identified, so to speak, a non-scientific, comparative everyday practice typical of world cities, which I will go on to describe in the following section in greater detail as urban comparative practices. [13]

#### **4. Anthropology of Urban Comparison: Urban Comparative Practices and Their Spatializing Dimensions**

##### **4.1 Everyday comparative operations as means of polycontexturalization**

I call the comparative activity that connects cities with each other and is reflected in the everyday lives of city dwellers and travelers in urban space itself "*urban comparative practice*." I use this terminology to describe a historical and current form of frequently mobile practices, as well as an identification requirement for urban societies, contingent upon intensified globalization in more complex contexts than hitherto. The research perspective of urban comparative practice reveals a multitude of *everyday comparative operations* that are space-productive and, thus, articulate the individual dimensions of the refiguration process. Ethnographic researchers on medium-sized cities, for example, have recently illustrated that fundamental self-location in the "in-between" is only possible if the necessary references for this central position—for example, the larger city and the even smaller city—are constantly comparatively articulated (ECKERT et al., 2019; SCHMIDT-LAUBER & WOLFMAYR, 2016). These different scales (CAGLAR & GLICK-SCHILLER, 2009), which are communicatively interconnected and simultaneously experienced, refer to the process of *polycontexturalization*. In the refiguration approach, polycontexturalization represents the

"simultaneous relevance of different spatial scales, dimensions and levels [...]. As communication is not reduced to meaning, but includes the bodies and their spaces, polycontexturality cannot be reduced to references of meaning only, as LUHMANN suggests. Polycontexturalisation is a process implying bodies, things and meaning, thus affecting space" (KNOBLAUCH & LÖW, 2017, p.12). [14]



#### **4.2 Mobility practices and urban assemblages as means of intertwining translocalization and mediatization**

Similarly, the urban anthropology of world-city research shows how comparison as an urban comparative practice is at work every day in the processes of polycontextualization, translocalization, and mediatization. Following HANNERZ' (1993) four groups of actors, we are, therefore, dealing with a highly mobile group of people whose multiple references to life are pervaded by comparisons between a here and there, between the past, the present, and an imagined future: be it the digitally supported comparison of price, speed, and comfort for the concrete *mobility practices* of, for example, business people, artists, tourists and migrants; or the individual comparison between work, home, and leisure increasingly expected by these actors in everyday communication. In the context of migration and flight, comparisons between the previous, the current, and the anticipated future center of life are of crucial importance, and the city plays a central role as a hub (among many others, AGIER, 2016; BRETTELL, 1981; FONER, 2000; HEGNER, 2008; KHOSRAVI, 2010; SINGER, HARDWICK & BRETTELL, 2008). Here, the urban comparative practices are, so to speak, the mode in which *translocalization* and *mediatization* intertwine and contribute to the city as an *urban assemblage* (FÄRBER & OTTO, 2016; FARÍAS & BENDER, 2011). In addition, the multiple legal forms of existence among these mobile actors, from simultaneous primary and secondary residences to electoral rights, based on membership or even residence status, affect the institutional frameworks involved in polycontextualization. They contribute to the everyday, contingent comparison of places where life seems worth living, or even possible. [15]

#### **4.3 Urban rankings as a means of entangling scientific and non-scientific comparison**

The *entanglement of scientific and non-scientific comparative operations* of the world city is significant for the refiguration approach. It is apparent, for example, in *urban rankings* of so-called "global cities" used for urban policy, whereby a global economic space is articulated and embodied as a competitive arena. These rankings are based on statistical data generating this type of city. The comparison here has made the degree of centralization of economic power and attractiveness—for service industries and international headquarters, among others, or for the immigration of both skilled and unskilled workers—the criterion for the classifying distinction. The fundamental similarity of this comparison was that an economic and political impact beyond the place of residence had to be demonstrable in order to arrive at a ranking of global cities/world cities by comparing the individual data. Furthermore, translated into descriptive tables and rankings, this comparison represents a connecting distinction between fundamentally similar cities (included in the ranking) that are at the same time differentiated in detail and therefore ranking in different places. [16]

Understanding ranking as an urban comparative practice opens up a field of research in which the everyday dimensions of refiguration can be investigated and answers to the spatiality of the social can be identified. Here, under the

competitive pressure of comparison, rankings find their way into everyday life not only through publicly and privately reproduced press releases on the "most liveable city." They flow into the urban political spheres of economic policy and urban marketing and articulate, among other things, the workings of a symbolic economy. Here, rankings are placed in competition with each other and translated into images that, in turn, compete with the images of other cities. Evidently, the dispositive of ranking in its entanglement with urban politics and marketing simultaneously calls to mind a series of institutional frameworks and, thus, plays directly into the processes of polycontexturalization. [17]

#### **4.4 Town-twinning as a means of a connecting-comparative format**

If, by way of its transfer to these urban practice fields, the comparative practice of ranking is aimed at the production of differences and competition, then there are several other *comparative urban formats that are used to arrange differences and similarities, the objective of which is cooperation, by emphasizing connections*. One such example is the format of cultural encounter, cooperation, and local political exchange in connection with *town twinning*. Town twinning itself is a basically unifying format, but one that presupposes two distinct units—two cities—and deals with the production, reproduction and perception of differences and similarities arising between these two units. [18]

The way in which a *connecting-comparative format* such as twinning comes to bear in a comparative urban study was illustrated in the research project on Berlin and Moscow which I worked on together with Cordula GDANIEC from 2003 to 2007. In our analysis of city twinning between Berlin and Moscow, we showed that the various activities—whether cultural encounters, touring exhibitions, or political exchanges—produced multiple asymmetries (FÄRBER & GDANIEC, 2006). Berlin seemed to look more to Moscow than Moscow to Berlin, while migration movements were the other way around. These asymmetries were due to the different cultural logics of the city pair within each of the respective cities. In Moscow, this comparative city constellation had evidently less plausibility than in Berlin. In contrast to the active Moscow-related imagineering in Berlin—from popular culture to official city marketing (FÄRBER, 2008)—Berlin triggered virtually no urban identity work in Moscow that would also have been perceptible in the public space. In Berlin, the widely advertised exhibition "Berlin Moskau/Moskau Berlin 1950–2000" (CHOROSCHILOW, HARTEN, SARTORIUS & SCHUSTER, 2004) was widely discussed, stirred up controversy, and seemed to implicate all possible cultural spheres in an event cultural programming. The same exhibition was featured in Moscow, at the Historical Museum on Red Square; but apart from one banner close to the exhibition venue, media coverage was limited and remained within the spheres of diplomatic and high culture, without materializing in the urban space through further active imagining. [19]

One explanation is a certain path-dependency: The connection to the later twin city was established much earlier in the everyday life of Berlin and, thus, in the imaginary of the city (LINDNER, 2003, 2008). This cultural density had had its heyday in the years between the 1920s and the end of the Second World War.

Thus, Karl SCHLÖGEL (1998) characterized the perceptible reference *in Berlin* to the "Russian" as a "reference system" that "functioned because all those who moved in it had the same horizon of life and expectation. Such a common horizon does not emerge from agreements but is something very rich in preconditions that was created in generations"<sup>1</sup> (pp.9-10). This cross-generational and binding cultural horizon points to what may best be described as the everyday cultural expression of a comparative urban imagination: "Berlin educated to the perception of Russian presence. Not one meter was left unmarked" (p.11). [20]

In a number of current studies, researchers have adopted a similar approach on everyday comparative cultures that simultaneously connect and distinguish cities. They work out similarities and distinctions in scientific, comparative operations between previously defined units of investigation, such as city-specific orders of class, milieu, and gender. Sonja PREISSING (2019), for example, investigated the self-representations of marginalized youth in Cologne and Lyon, Yuca MEUBRINK (2016, 2018) compared policies for affordable housing in New York and London, and Nicola THOMAS (2018, 2020) examined the differences and similarities between allotment gardens under the pressure of current urban developments in Basel, Hamburg, and Copenhagen. These studies addressed the connecting elements of these individual scenes and, thus, grasped, in my view, urban phenomena of knowledge transfer as urban comparative culture: the translocal mediatization of youth protests, the transnational concepts of housing policy or the exchange between urban social movements. In this way, the share of everyday urban comparative practices becomes clear in urban specificity, that is to say in the potential spaces of stigmatized young people as specifically relating to Cologne or Lyon, in the housing policies specific to New York or London, or in the futures of green space as urban commons specific to Basel, Hamburg, or Copenhagen. Scientific comparison in the context of urban research is, thus, ideally concerned with everyday comparative connections between cities, revealing them as urban comparative practices. [21]

## **5. Mulling and Meandering: Insights Into Comparison as an Academic Knowledge Practice**

Comparative practices are by no means as smooth as the image of the "flow" might suggest. They rather resemble the meandering quality (KNOBLAUCH & LÖW, 2017) of processes of polycontextualization, mediatization and trans-localization that become tangible in the refiguration perspective. Comparison, as I intend to show in a reflexive turn to the everyday practice of ethnographic comparison, takes part undeniably in meandering. And not merely due to the fact that *human perception is accompanied by an "internalized comparison,"* "constantly oscillating between momentary and prior experience. It is an oscillation between now and then, between here and there" (BRINGÉUS, 2000, p.89). Contrary to the impression that comparison would systematically reduce complexity, ethnographic practice is only selectively controlled based on targeted

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1 Translations from German to English are mine.

comparative consciousness (NADER, 1994). *Comparison, thus, remains multi-layered and, by means of reflexivity, systematically contingent.* [22]

### 5.1 Coping with the simultaneity of different comparative practices

Cultural anthropologist CHOY (2011), in his study of ecological concerns in Hong Kong, pointed out just this complexity in one's own comparative practices and those observed. It results from the *simultaneity of the different comparative practices* that make Hong Kong a site of negotiated difference and similarity:

"Any discussion of Hong Kong inevitably slides into some kind of discussion of East-West relationships, in which 'China' stands for the 'East' and Hong Kong becomes the hyphen the function of which is to differentiate, even as it gathers and conjoins, East and West" (p.10). [23]

This is also why, for CHOY, ecology and comparison are closely linked: "Ecologies work through comparison, and comparisons work through ecologies" (p.12). Thus, he opted for "*ecologies of comparison*," namely, as a heuristic, "to keep things in view *simultaneously* when thinking about these political renderings of relations" (p.11, my emphasis). From this simultaneous assessment of various articulations of ecology (the activist and the environmental-scientific, both of which are closely linked to political arenas, and a more conceptual variant that points to ecology as a system), one's own ethnographic position emerges:

"mulling over the urgency and shape of some political acts in Hong Kong, and the urgency and shape of certain ways of theorizing culture and politics. Its method has been to take note of what gets left out, an ongoing practice of reframing and revising things I have done, said, thought, or written. [...] Too much mulling for an activist handbook, perhaps—but a good amount, I hope, for the practice of conceiving other possibilities" (p.18). [24]

The actors in the field may also perceive "mulling" as "meandering." In my view, CHOY's proposed "mode of attention," which points to the *simultaneity of differences* (p.11), by no means reduces but rather expresses complexity. The following is a more detailed discussion of complexity as applied in everyday practices of ethnographic comparison. Scientific comparison is not solely surrounded by a multitude of other scientific or non-scientific comparative practices, which, following CHOY, can become the object of ethnographic analysis. According to NADER (1994), comparative consciousness in ethnography is much better at facilitating *different comparative operations to be carried out simultaneously*:

1. The direct, historical, or functional comparison can be carried out in a controlled manner by researching single, similar fields of research with as *much material density as possible*—e.g., the emerging world cities of Berlin and Moscow in an ethnographic team research project conducted in parallel —; or

2. each of these constellations (immediate, historical, functional) can be *contrastively compared*, either by comparing *non-similar fields of research*—i.e., city and country—or
3. by *comparing unequal material densities* that lead to a contrasting comparison—comparing the ethnography of marginalized youth in Cologne with the results of focused ethnographic research in Lyon. [25]

Such comparative contrasts are *illuminating and sharpen the understanding of individual research fields*, although they are not systematic in the sense that they attain a similar material density in both cases. [26]

## 5.2 Making comparisons work individually or in group research

In my view, ethnographic comparative meandering may be explained in terms of an anthropology of knowledge. As a result, *ethnography* becomes tangible as a *mobile and entrepreneurial practice*, uncovering its disciplinary and social potential and obstacles. Hence, contrastive comparison appears closely linked to working conditions in individual research projects, whereas controlled, direct comparison is more compatible with those of team research projects. And although I cannot rely here on a systematic survey of the everyday practices of comparison in these urban research projects, I would like to gather some observations as a supervisor of doctoral theses in comparative urban anthropology and during exchanges with colleagues working in comparative research projects. They may shed light on the praxeological foundations of comparative epistemology in this field. [27]

Ethnographers conducting *individual research*—for example, a doctoral thesis—often have the impression that they are more knowledgeable in one field of research than in another field. In some cases, individual ethnographers are already familiar with one or the other research fields from an earlier research undertaking and are unable to come close to investigating the new case as comprehensively as the previous one. This may also be due to the changing requirements of an ongoing academic career. A postdoctoral position, for example, may no longer facilitate the exclusive focus for which a doctoral thesis ought to allow since, in addition to research, this requires dealing with teaching and academic self-administration. Hence, contrastive comparison is best suited to the actual research conditions and everyday ethnographic practice of individual postdoctoral research projects. In light of the above, *team research* seems more likely to start with the claim of implementing controlled comparisons ethnographically, whether direct, functional, or historical—or a combination thereof (FRANK et al., 2014). The fact that the control of these comparative operations can hardly be sustained is, in part, owing to *specific spatio-temporal constellations*. [28]

### 5.3 Asynchronicity between practicing ethnography "at home" and "at a distance"

A fundamental and hardly controllable *asynchronicity* occurs when one field of research in a team research project is located "*at home*" while the other is located "*at a distance*." The possibility of learning about the field of research in one's home town on a day-to-day basis, as it were, brings with it other challenges than field research elsewhere, which is restricted to individual, longest possible—though limited—periods of time. *At home*, information must be filtered and boundaries between research and private everyday life have to be drawn differently than in the exceptional situation of field research elsewhere, where, among other things, as much material as possible is collected by keeping the boundaries between research and private everyday life to a minimum. As a team, my colleague Cordula GDANIEC and I experienced and analyzed the differences of this space-time constellation in ethnographic comparative research on Moscow and Berlin as emerging world cities. While GDANIEC traveled regularly from Berlin to Moscow for research stays of several months, I carried out ongoing research in Berlin over the course of the project (aside from a few short guest stays in Moscow used for direct comparison, and workshops). Following the ethnographic research paradigm, my research in Berlin was very porous, despite the present separation of private everyday life. "At home" in Berlin, private everyday observation could also be an ethnographic observation. The concurrent institutional working day, by contrast, was an element that had to be more explicitly distinguished from local research in order to achieve concentrated working hours for ethnographic research. The situation was different in Moscow: *At a distance*, limited time had to be intensified, for example, in extending it and including private time. This time pressure led, among other things, to the inclusion of friends in the research process. [29]

### 5.4 The entrepreneurial ethnographic self

The demands placed on comparative practices in urban anthropology—whether in individual or group research—are also revealed from the perspective of an anthropology of knowledge through the specific subjectifications that accompany ethnographic research (MRUCK, ROTH & BREUER, 2002; ROTH, BREUER & MRUCK, 2003). I would like to use the conceptual construction of the "entrepreneurial self" to highlight the proximity of the ethnographic self to the "anthropological figure" of the entrepreneurial self (BRÖCKLING, 2007). *Managing the relation between working life and private everyday life*—often experienced as their "dissolution"—as well as the *blurring of working and social relationships* are characteristics of this entrepreneurial social self-design, deeply anchored as they are in the ethnographic self (FÄRBER, 2009). Institutionalized by Bronislaw MALINOWSKI's field research paradigm from the early 1920s onwards, the normative figure of the ethnographer remains an individual researcher imbued with the spirit of the entrepreneurial self. The tradition of ethnographic team research (see for the French context LAFERTÉ, 2016, for the US context and the meaning of collaborative ethnography LASSITER, 2005) is constantly adapting itself to the demands associated with the entrepreneurial

ethnographic self, something which becomes evident, among other things, when reflecting on comparison as an everyday practice. The economies associated with the entrepreneurial ethnographic self become particularly clear in ethnographic comparison as team research, in which two people under different spatio-temporal working conditions deal with this requirement. [30]

The spatio-temporal constellation of ethnographic comparison as everyday practice also exerts a *fundamental epistemological effect*. This is due to the fact that the ethnographic case studies under comparison can never be examined "all at once," despite CHOY's heuristic claim (2011, p.11). In order to best conduct participatory observational research in an instance of individual research, *the researcher can never be present at more than one research site or case at any given time*. Hence, she/he invariably finds her/himself in a research situation that brings with it knowledge advances for the one as opposed to the other case. She/he always knows something at one place that she/he can only guess at the other. Furthermore, there is an ethnography-specific openness: The cases are outlined only once research is underway, and questions can change over the course of the research. Viewed from the outside, this meandering is meant to develop a scientific concern by way of the cultural logic of the unfolding object of research. [31]

Thus, together with the specific temporality of ethnographic comparison, it may be that the *sequence of research stays* is accompanied by a *change in the research perspective*. Consequently, as everyday practice, ethnographic comparison is characterized by a *continuous lack of simultaneity*. Due to individualizing field research practice, comparative ethnographic practice is either experienced as a constant advance or as lagging behind—perhaps what CHOY meant by the term "mulling" in relation to comparative consciousness. The ethnographic comparison as everyday practice is contingent—and must be. Evaluating this everyday practice reflexively, however, is important—not in order to pay homage to the self-evaluative reflection of the entrepreneurial ethnographic self, namely, the evaluation of mistakes as personal failure, but rather to work out the conditions of ethnographic knowledge and, thus, also its critical potential. [32]

## **6. The Value of Comparative Knowledge in and of the City: Four Hypotheses on Acquiring Urban Expertise**

Bearing in mind the reflections on the constitutive significance of comparison in (urban) anthropology, I would like to conclude by discussing the value of comparative knowledge in and of the city and how it contributes to the refiguration of the social. The additive extension of ethnographic comparison demanded in ethno-science, namely, comparative consciousness, can be turned reflexively as scientific practice in the context of intensifying and accelerating processes of social transfer and transformation within an anthropological perspective on knowledge. Seen in this light, *ethnographic comparison* must be understood as a *cultural practice* no less part of the culture it regards (KASCHUBA, 2003). Gisela WELZ, in a critical analysis of "The Uses of Comparison" (1998), drew a positive

conclusion on comparative practice in ethno-science and "its non-disciplinary or transdisciplinary status": "because of its strongly transnational impetus, Cultural Studies may well be a forerunner of future developments" (p.12). [33]

Furthermore, as indicated above, anthropology shows the everyday conditions of this fit of ethnographic comparison in the context of *dissolving disciplinary orders and a trans-nationalizing academic world*. The associated meandering and mulling may be understood as specific cultural knowledge practices that produce the social in the context of science, and the *entrepreneurial ethnographic self* evolving from the fieldwork paradigm as the normative social figure that was ahead of its time. Considering the value of this meandering mode of knowledge production—that is, comparison is not banal—it is not banal to take into consideration that there "is then the problem of the cost of such research beyond the research ideology of 'one problem, one country'. It is much costlier" (JEPPIE, 2013, p.142). I would suggest it is much *costlier* in many ways. If comparison, as an everyday practice in ethnography, requires greater financial resources than ethnographic fieldwork in one location, then what does it promise? Without providing an answer to these questions, I would like to conclude by introducing four *hypotheses on the value of ethnographic comparison and its relation to refiguration research*.

1. *Comparing ethnographically requires the capacity to be mobile*. Furthermore, the resources on which any mobile practice depends (temporal, social, financial) and the capacities that are involved (organizational, communicative), produce moments of presence and absence in at least two places, both of which are mutually related by way of the flexibility required by the entrepreneurial ethnographic self. The scope and limits of this mobile practice rely very much on the entrepreneurial ethnographer's social and economic capital and tend to reproduce gender differences—according to studies of entrepreneurial practices in other fields of practice.
2. *Ethnographic comparison is an academically vulnerable act*. As a relational and mobile practice, it produces varying degrees of observational depth, as I have shown above. It leads to a kind of intensified discontinuity within the different fields of research and produces knowledge in asynchronous accumulative modes. The ethnographic self seeks invariably to be one step away from the place it leaves instead of one step closer to the destination to which it is headed. While this can be very productive, it is often experienced as a repetitive deficit.
3. *Ethnographic comparison brings forth distinctions*. Comparing two field sites within a city or, even more so, two cities, makes one an expert of more than one city, community, institution, or cultural phenomenon. Within a competitive academic field, this may well make all the difference. Compared to her/his colleagues, the entrepreneurial ethnographer who compares at least two distinct field sites knows more "things." Her/his field of expertise seems broader. This symbolic value of "difference" relies on comparison as a specifically flexible and mobile everyday practice (see the required capital and



biases mentioned above) and spatialized knowledge, though perhaps not of equal depth (see vulnerability mentioned above).

4. *The sociality of ethnographic comparison as an everyday practice is (in)tense.* Studies in everyday flexible mobile practices reveal that they are based on a high degree of social capital or, in other words, on a pronounced loose form of social interaction. Migrants build on a wide network of more or less familiar individuals who support their highly volatile trajectories (be it spatial or social); commuters communicate virtually and intensely at spatial distances; they require reliable social relations to maintain their multiple locations; tourists rely on multiple services that articulate temporal social relations, such as accommodation, care, and entertainment. The same holds true for ethnographers who compare different field sites. Comparison multiplies the social relations in which they are involved at work. Perhaps they also require more private social relationships as a way of dealing with absence from home. How do they care for these multiplied social relationships? How do they gain access in fieldwork in an effort to build up reliable social relationships that may be loosened when necessary in the coming and going of a comparison? It may well be that certain groups and their representatives are more responsive actors in this kind of reliably loose sociality, more so than individuals and their lives. Such questions that also arise in single-site ethnographies are, nevertheless, intensified in ethnographic comparison. In my view, they may be handled because of the (historical) disposition of the ethnographic self as an entrepreneurial self. The specific, reliable informality intensified by a comparative ethnographic practice is anchored in the ambiguous capacity of the ethnographic entrepreneurial self to "manage" these kinds of socialities. [34]

The ethnographic comparison responds to a historical moment in the spatialization of research objects, the transformation of academic worlds, and socialities favoring mobilized modes of living, cumulative knowledge and discontinuity. This may have contributed to considering ethnographic comparison in the ethnological sciences as an academic forerunner of the refiguration process—a process also criticized for transforming risk management and control within universities—for qualitative research in German-speaking countries, see, for example, Hella von UNGER's, Hansjörg DILGER's and Michael SCHÖNHUTH's (2016) contribution—and shaping them into entrepreneurial universities (AUDEHM, BINDER, DIETZE & FÄRBER, 2015; JOSEPH, 2015). Consequently, the role of the entrepreneurial ethnographic self, which appears at this point, cannot be exclusively assessed as positive and forward-looking. It echoes the entrepreneurial orientation of universities, which can be critically examined independently of all the valuable knowledge they generate, and shows once again how closely the two fields are related to each other. [35]

## **Acknowledgments**

This article was translated by Philip SAUNDERS and Tom GENRICH. Zachary MÜHLENWEG did additional language-editing. Vanessa ULOTH did copy-editing.

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## Citation

Färber, Alexa (2021). The anthropology of urban comparison: Urban comparative concepts and practices, the entrepreneurial ethnographic self and their spatializing dimensions [35 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 22(3), Art. 13, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-22.3.3782>.