

European Urban Traditions: An Anthropologist's View on *Polis, Urbs, and Civitas*

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Abstract

The argument developed in this article originates from the reflection that what constitutes a city or what is meant by urban are differently understood in different parts of the world and by different scholars. Thus, I first address the problematic of incommensurability. I argue that this key issue in the philosophy of science is central to how the debate on urban anthropology has developed. Then I ask whether this problematic extends to cross-disciplinary debate among the contemporary social sciences and what relevance the resulting understanding of the city has outside the academic world. I maintain that social analysis should endeavour to bring out the political, economic, and socio-cultural complexity of urban life. Having carried out research in urban Europe, I offer an analysis of the city that encompasses the meaning of *urbs*, *polis*, and *civitas*. Finally, I discuss the epistemological significance of urban ethnography, drawing on my field research in Brindisi, a South-Italian city.

Keywords

Civitas, urbs, polis, incommensurability, ethnography, Italy

In this article, I first address the problematic of incommensurability. I argue that this key issue in the philosophy of sciences is central to how the debate on urban anthropology has developed. Then I ask whether this problematic extends to cross-disciplinary debate among the contemporary social sciences and what relevance the resulting understanding of the city has outside academia. Having carried out research in urban Europe, I go on to offer an analysis of the city that encompasses at once the meaning of *urbs*, *polis*, and *civitas*. Finally, I reflect on the epistemological significance of urban ethnography, drawing on my field research in Brindisi, a South-Italian city.

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Incommensurability and urban taxonomies

In his Introduction to *The City in Modern Africa*, the anthropologist Horace Mitchell Miner (renowned also among non-anthropologists for his satirical essay ‘Body rituals among the Nacirema’) wrote: ‘Everyone knows what a city is, except the experts’ (1967: 11). The experts in question, who had contributed to the volume, were anthropologists, geographers, economists, and sociologists. They had focused on different ‘types’ of African cities; traditional cities, new mining towns, trading and administrative towns. At the time, however, many of these experts were not yet interested in urban research per se but, rather, in the relationship between cities and modernization in so-called Third World societies. They wanted to understand how rural people adapted to urban life; they were particularly interested in the emergence of new, occupation-based, forms of social and economic stratification and in the relevance of ethnic groups and networks. Later, as more ethnographic research was carried out in urban areas around the world, anthropologists joined other social scientists in attempting to develop a grand theory of the city – hence, the generalizations about ‘urbanism’ and ‘urban life’ – leading to a seemingly never-ending debate on whether there was such a sub-field as ‘urban anthropology’ (for a recent review of this debate, see Pardo & Prato, 2012a, Prato & Pardo, 2013). Notwithstanding such a debate spanning several decades, academic ‘experts’ are still attempting to answer Miner’s implicit question: ‘what is a city’? Is it possible to provide a simple universal definition? Most important, what relevance may a new debate on ‘urban anthropology’ actually have? Any attempt at answering these questions should begin with the sobering consideration that there are probably as many different ways of conceiving what a city is as there are cities.

Miner’s observation brings to mind a discussion in which I became involved shortly after I joined the Department of Anthropology at the University of Kent in 1995. During a lunchtime break in the Senior Common Room, two fellow anthropologists who had carried out research in Mediterranean countries were debating whether research in an Italian agro-town should be considered ‘urban anthropology’. As I entered the room, one of the two said: ‘Giuliana is an urban anthropologist. Let’s see what she thinks’; which took me by surprise because, although I had carried out research in a South-Italian city, thus far I had been ‘labelled’ as a specialist in ‘political’ anthropology. A general discussion ensued on what each of us thought ‘urban anthropology’ was, or should be. Each view drew on a specific understanding, or definition, of city. As more colleagues, including non-anthropologists, joined the conversation, it soon emerged that we all had different conceptions, and therefore gave different definitions, of what a city was. Most of the participants were British, the rest were from various European countries. Many of the anthropologists there had carried out research in Africa, India, or South-East Asia. This casual lunch-time exchange revealed that: (1) a ‘single’, straightforward translation from one language into another was almost impossible; at best we could come up with individual culturally-influenced ‘interpretations’; (2) the anthropologists’ understanding of city appeared to be influenced also by their ethnographic experience (that is, where each of us had carried out their fieldwork).

These two considerations have stimulated my reflections on the question of incommensurability, with particular reference to Thomas Kuhn’s argument (1962) that there may be multiple ways of seeing the world and that it is difficult to establish ‘scientifically’ which one is right, or true. Anthropologists have been familiar with the complex problem of ‘cultural translation’ and incommensurability since Evans-Pritchard’s fine work on the Zande system of thought. Interestingly, Kuhn’s analysis of incommensurability was in part influenced by the anthropological debate, specifically by Michael Polanyi’s reflections on Evans-Pritchard’s work, which had stimulated a debate on whether scientists from different schools ‘think differently, speak a different language, live in a different world’ (1958: 151; see also 1952).¹ An important aspect of Kuhn’s theory, which

is most relevant here, is the notion that incommensurability goes beyond semantics. In order to be fully understood, incommensurability should be defined taxonomically; we should consider that: (1) competing paradigms group concepts in different ways; (2) it is this different grouping (categorization) that causes fundamental problems in the communication between the proponents of different paradigms; (3) these groups, or categories, cannot be learned through 'simple' definitions, but are learned through scientific training and prior research experience. Thus, according to Kuhn, because conceptual differences precede the application of language, it would be analytically misleading to equate translation and interpretation. Translation *per se* is an almost mechanical activity. Instead, interpretation is a process that implies the development of translating hypotheses. It is like learning a new language; that is, assimilating a new vocabulary, keeping in mind that groups of concepts cannot be learned in isolation. Interpretation is therefore a learning process that involves the generation of expectations.

Kuhn's concept of incommensurability problematizes the very idea of a neutral language of comparison, which would allow one to choose the theory with the greatest empirically-verified contents. It is precisely this taxonomic incommensurability that emerged during the aforementioned lunch-time exchange. Such incommensurability became particularly evident when we tried to 'translate' concepts or categories from one language to another; some languages resulted more 'commensurable' than others. For example, regarding definitions and classifications of urban settlements, the English language appeared to be one of the most incommensurable. The British categorization of 'city' and 'town' offers an illustrative example of the difficulty in providing a strictly linguistic translation. To start with, 'city' is a legal status granted by 'letters patent' or by royal charter and is not linked to the extent of 'urbanization' (in the sense of size and population density). Historically, up to 1888, in order to be granted city status a settlement had to have a cathedral. Accordingly, small – cathedral-endowed – settlements like Ely in England (about 20,000 inhabitants) or Bangor in Wales (about 15,000 inhabitants) have long had city status, while still today there are large 'towns' with hundreds of thousands of inhabitants that legally cannot call themselves cities; for example, Milton Keynes (over 200,000 inhabitants), which epitomizes the model of the twentieth-century British 'new city', is legally a town despite its size. The criteria for granting city status have been periodically revised and attempts have been made at providing unambiguous definitions of city and town.² Nevertheless, while a town is (rather ambiguously) described as a settlement larger than a village but smaller than a city (*sic!*), no clear definition is given for the category of 'city' other than it is a 'legal status' that gives prestige to the town upon which it is bestowed. In some cases, the status of city does not coincide with the wider conurbation of which that area is part (think, for instance, of the City of Westminster, which is part of Greater London). In other cases, the 'city' status is applied to a local government district that includes a number of towns and rural areas and is named after the main settlement in which the local government is located; a good example is provided by (the district council of) Canterbury City, which extends well beyond the urban settlement of Canterbury. The complexity of the British legal classification of cities, towns, boroughs, urban areas, and metropolitan areas would require a separate essay. Here, let us focus on an important question that emerged during the 'common room' discussion; that is, how significant is this classification for a social scientist? Does it mean that if I do research in a place like Ely I can describe myself as an 'urban' anthropologist, whereas research in a place like Milton Keynes or Bournemouth (over 400,000 inhabitants), would not be regarded as 'urban' simply because, legally, they do not have 'city status'?

Of course, anthropologists have long accepted that size is poor indication of 'urbanity'.³ However, they, like other social scientists, have failed to agree on whether there are universal parameters that define 'urbanism'.⁴ Most important, we need to ask whether incommensurability of language means that a comparative analysis, eventually leading to theoretical generalization, is

not possible. If we follow Michael Polanyi's approach to incommensurability – which was at the basis of his criticism of positivism and of the attendant attempts at formulating universal social laws – we risk falling into the kind of relativism that makes comparison futile. It seems to me that Kuhn is trying to deal precisely with this problem when he argues that incommensurable paradigms are not disjointed rivals but complement each other, which may help to assess how the anthropological methodology can deal with apparently incommensurable urban realities. This requires further reflection.

In the next section I will briefly address some aspects of the nineteenth-century sociological theorizations of cities and urban life. I shall then suggest that some characteristics of ancient urban ideal-types (like the *polis* and the *civitas*), taken together, may provide a 'neutral' language of communication for a contemporary comparative analysis.

Polis, civitas, and urbanism

The problematics of incommensurability in the taxonomic sense and that of language neutrality have afflicted the history of urban anthropology, giving rise to diverse debates such as, for example, that between Africanists and Indianists and those on the classification of city types, on the essence of urbanism, and on the nature of this disciplinary sub-field – the latter asking whether we should practise an anthropology *in* the city or an anthropology *of* the city (for a recent discussion, see Pardo & Prato, 2012a and contributions in 2012b). Interestingly, in the attempt at producing universal models and explanations, the initial anthropological debate did not seem to take fully into account the sociologically significant diversity of urban traditions across the world.

Archaeological excavations had brought to light a wide range of urban variation in such diverse places as the Indus Valley, China, the Andes, Mesoamerica, and sub-Saharan Africa (in the latter case, far preceding the Arab influence). The variety of urban settlements showed that some cities had a dense population; others lacked a large associated population but were either political capitals or important religious centres; still others were important trade centres. Regardless of this diversity, most theories attempted to explain ancient urbanism and urbanization monistically (in terms of one single principle). Furthermore, Western scholars tended to focus on European settlements or the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean and the Near-East (especially Mesopotamia). Significantly, also those anthropologists who did research in Africa were influenced by this scholarly tradition – perhaps because, as Miner's edited book indicates, their primary concern was the study of modernization; the colonial and, later, post-colonial urbanization were viewed as corollaries to the modernizing process.

The anthropological debate was in good part influenced by nineteenth-century sociological conceptualizations of the city; in particular, those by Tönnies (2002) and Durkheim (1997) via Wirth (1938) and Simmel (1950). Part of this debate would later address Western scholars' ethnocentric bias stressing that most influential sociological theories drew on the analysis of European and North-American industrial cities. Surprisingly, the early 'urban' anthropologists virtually ignored, or never openly acknowledged, Max Weber's *The City* (1958). Yet, I believe that, although Weber essentially drew on the example of the European medieval city – and its ancient antecedents of *polis* and *civitas* – to describe the city 'ideal type', he offered a more comprehensive language for the comparative analysis of ethnographically diverse cities. Significantly, while previous theorists had focused solely on European cities, Weber looked comparatively at urban traditions across the world, stressing that different cultures and historical conditions would result in different types of cities.

To start with, Weber clearly rejects a definition of the city solely in terms of size and population density. He characterizes the nature of the city in economic, political, administrative, and military

terms. He describes the city as a free and autonomous community composed of free and self-determining citizens who participate, through elections, in the decision-making process. In fact, for Weber this city ideal-type represents a truly 'urban community' if, apart from a relative economic predominance (specifically, a market with the attendant trade and commerce relations), it has a partial political autonomy, an autonomous elected administration, and a partially autonomous court and law, it is militarily self-sufficient for its own self-defence and has forms of association or organizations that promote social and civic participation. Weber argued that, in this sense, the city appeared as an 'urban community' only in the West and occasionally in the Near East. According to him, the Orient, particularly India and China, was restricted by caste and guild relations that overrode urban associationism. This does not mean that Weber disregarded the relevance of Oriental urban traditions; he was pointing out that in most of those traditions city citizenship was not considered a special status of the urbanite.

Let me stress that Weber developed his analysis starting from the ancient and medieval forms of the western city, taking the Greek and Roman traditions as primary examples; that is, the *polis* and the *civitas*. Usually, these two words are erroneously translated as 'city'; yet, the word city does not convey the nature of the ancient *polis* and *civitas*. These two words indicated a social body of citizens (*polites* and *cives*) united by laws that gave them both responsibilities and rights. For Aristotle, the *polis* was a political community, the development of which marked the end of both the household and the village – as two separate spheres – as it brought together the private (the household economy) and the public (the common good).

In the preface to Weber's book, Don Martindale rightly places Weber's analysis in the section on European urban theory, concluding that 'the age of the city' as described by European theorists seems to be at an end (1958). Martindale meant that the size and number of urban settlements had grown and continued to grow in a way that had brought to an end the rural–urban divide, which had allegedly characterized industrial society up to the mid-twentieth century – the whole of society, he suggested, had become urbanized.

If by urbanization we simply mean the growth of built-up, densely populated areas, then we might agree with Martindale, given that the so-called metropolitan areas have grown exponentially across the world. However, the 'urban' has extended beyond the administrative boundaries of the city not simply in terms of built-up area but also, as I have pointed out, in terms of life-styles, behaviours, social interactions, economic activities, and so on. The development of transport and communication has contributed to accelerating this process. Furthermore, we must consider that, in the last two decades of the twentieth century, cities have experienced a double demographic process – which continues and which has affected urban life socially, economically, culturally, and politically. On the one hand, there has been a decrease in the autochthonous population as people have moved to the suburbs to live or work – we could thus say that the 'urban' has been delocalized. On the other hand, apart from the rural-urban (internal) migration, there has been an increase in foreign immigration also in cities that until relatively recently had not experienced this phenomenon; involving, in particular, migrants from poorer countries or asylum seekers from conflict zones. These new migrations have often found the hosting cities unprepared, as they lacked the structures and the services to host the newcomers; they are complex phenomena, having engendered conflict but also forms of cooperation with the autochthonous population (for recent works on European cities see, for example, Pardo, 2009; 2012a).

It is worth stressing that here the word city does not refer simply to geography or physical space. It refers to qualities characterizing urban dwellers; most importantly, citizenship, in the sense of 'individual' civil, economic, and political rights. Thus the city should be understood at once as *urbs*, *civitas*, and *polis*; that is, as a built-up area, as a social association of citizens, and as a political community. Focusing only on one of these aspects would be inexcusably reductive.

The individual, including the urban individual, does have rights in so far as s/he contributes to the common good. In the Greek *polis* and in the Roman *civitas* we witness the rise of the ‘public’ realm over the private. The private, however, does not disappear; it becomes part of what the Romans called the ‘*res publica*’. From an anthropological perspective, this urban *res publica* could be seen as a ‘whole’ that encompasses politics, law, economy, and culture – including religion and material culture, as well as those institutions that are meant to safeguard both the individual and the common good. The organization and role of the *polis* and of the *civitas*⁵ is that of a city-state, of which the medieval *comuni* were in a sense the heirs. It is this ideal-type of an almost autonomous urban organization that Weber emphasizes in his work. In contrast, most of the nineteenth-century theorists who have influenced the urban anthropological debate focused on the city as subordinate to a larger territorial and political unity; the nation-state.

We should ask whether, and to what extent, these categories of *polis* and *civitas* can help social scientists to understand the current situation. Since the second half of the twentieth century, the almost autonomous, ‘resilient’, and self-sufficient city has resurfaced as a key administrative, economic, and political entity in the dynamics of regional, national, and world politics. The centrality of the city has then continued to increase. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, substantial funding has as its target sustainable urban development and the promotion of so-called ‘smart cities’. Even programmes such as ‘Future Earth’ rely heavily on the environmental sustainability and economic resilience of urban areas, including small and medium-sized cities but especially large metropolitan areas.

Thus, Martindale’s claim that the age of the city is at an end may well apply to the industrial city that emerged in the nineteenth century; that is the city of *anomie*, of the *flaneur*, of the individualistic *Gesellschaft*. It certainly does not apply to the city intended at once as *urbs*, *civitas*, and *polis*, which is becoming ever more sociologically significant today. Let me explain this drawing on my Brindisi ethnography.

Politics and urban identity in Brindisi

When I began my research in Brindisi in the mid-1980s, I was interested in investigating the political changes that were occurring in Italy.⁶ In particular, I was intrigued by the new political formations that appeared to me as trial runs for new models of party organization, which later turned out to be exactly the case. One of these formations was called *Cattolici e Laici per il Cambiamento* (Catholic and Lay People for Change, from now on CLC). Established as an electoral list on the occasion of the 1985 administrative election for the city council, CLC brought together political actors with apparently incompatible political stances. They were a Catholic group called *Presenza Democratica* (Democratic Presence), the extra-parliamentary leftist party *Democrazia Proletaria* (Proletarian Democracy, at the time the most extreme left party in Italy), and splinter green politicians; most of the latter were former members of the Socialist party who had joined the nationwide environmental association *Legambiente* (League for the Environment). In spite of having gained only two of the forty council seats, for many years CLC played a significant role in local politics. They became particularly influential when, in 1987, they supported a ruling coalition formed by the Communist, Christian Democrat, and Republican parties. On that occasion, however, *Democrazia Proletaria* left CLC.

Significantly, CLC was not an isolated local phenomenon. It drew on the experience of the so-called ‘civil lists’ that had emerged in Italy in the mid-1970s, mainly in opposition to a system of party rule known as *partitocrazia* (Party-ocracy), but also to promote specific social and civic issues. Established political parties strongly criticized these civil lists, labelling them as too territorially partisan and, therefore, as potential threats to the harmonious government of the country

as a whole. Against such criticism, the members of these lists argued that, of course, they were 'territorially based', it being the task of administrative institutions to deal with local problems, but their commitment to the principle that the renewal of politics had to start from good local governance had nothing to do with partisanship.

This emphasis on the need to 'rediscover the meaning of politics' starting from the local level acquired increasing significance during the 1980s, especially as local groups throughout Italy tried to draft a common national programme. They described themselves as 'urban political movements' and involved mainly Catholics who did not feel represented by the Christian Democratic party. In Brindisi they formed the group Democratic Presence. These movements found original inspiration in a political coalition established in Palermo in 1980, significantly called *Città per l'Uomo* (City for Man – here, the masculine noun 'man' should be intended in the sense of human being). Their main argument was that Italy was predominantly urban and that the shortcomings and contradictions of the traditional parties and their political programmes were particularly visible in the urban situation. Thus, they argued, the 'politics of the city' and the 'policies for the cities' were bound to give political guidance to the whole country. They also argued that, while their political roots were 'in the cities' because they reflected different local situations and needs, their aim and scope were national.

In spite of rejecting the label of civil list, CLC was territorially based. In line with the approach that I have outlined, it did nonetheless address issues that went well beyond the local level. The main themes shared by CLC's three original components were basically an anti-capitalist ideology, a stress on environmental issues, and a strong criticism of the existing political system. All these themes were clearly expressed in CLC's political programme. In order to understand their programme, we should briefly contextualize their formation also in relation to the economic policies of development for South Italy and the local economic situation.

Brindisi was one of the South-Italian cities affected by the economic policies of the 1960s that aimed at boosting the lagging economy of the South in order to finally solve the so-called Southern Question. A major aspect was the industrialization of the South. However, by the early 1980s, Brindisi was experiencing industrial decline and a high rate of unemployment. Its urban identity was also seriously challenged by the proposed construction of a new power-station at its periphery, which would undermine the commercial and touristic activities of the port; historically a major economic asset of the city. CLC identified the construction of the power-station as evidence of Brindisi's 'institutional, administrative, political, moral, economic, social and environmental crisis' (CLC's electoral programme, 1985). The formation of the electoral list was an attempt to institutionalize the battle that thus far had been carried out separately by the three groups. Together, they claimed, they would now fight for the 'real' participation of citizens in the government of their city, which would 'overcome the party bureaucracy and give the city a real chance of development' (CLC's electoral programme, 1985).

In spite of initial success, CLC was dissolved in 1990. Elsewhere, I have discussed at length their activity, political programme, and the main reasons for their dissolution (e.g., Prato, 1993; 1995; 2000). Here, let me point out a key methodological and theoretical question. Although my initial aim was to study political change, I soon realized that in order to understand the local political dynamics I had to take into account other aspects of urban life, such as economic and social processes and the relationship between the micro and macro levels. This approach was not new in anthropology. As regards urban Europe, Pardo's book *Managing Existence in Naples* (1996) is an example of an anthropological 'holistic' study that takes into account political, economic, and cultural aspects. Most important, Pardo suggests that these aspects should be studied processually, looking at the relationship between individual agency and the system and examining how the individual's purposeful and rational action may influence changes in the structure. Stimulated by

this approach, when I began my research in Brindisi I sought to understand to what extent political change might be influenced by individual political actors and civic associations of individuals; I looked both at people who operated within the system and at people who operated at the margins of, or outside the system. At the same time, being interested in the relationship between citizens and their elected representatives, I asked to what extent the system allowed the full participation of citizens in the government of the *res publica*; in other words, I asked whether the city was ruled democratically. It emerged that frequent infringement of democratic procedures was a major issue not just in Brindisi; in fact, this was one of the problems that, in time, led to changes in the Italian party system.⁷ The real impact of these ‘changes’ is questionable (see also Pardo, 2012b). In spite of the apparently revolutionary character of these changes, the powers-that-be continue to make a mockery of the democratic process as all too often non-elected ‘experts’ are appointed to key posts in the regional or national government and in the administration of cities.

Over the years, many of the actors who were initially involved in the CLC group have continued to campaign for the ‘rediscovery’ of politics starting from the local level; that is, again, through a ‘politics of the city’ and ‘policies for the city’. I have recorded their activities during my periodical updating field-trips. However, during my recent fieldwork I realized that my research needed to incorporate new elements if I wanted to understand the current urban situation of Brindisi. In particular, it has been critical to assess the extent to which the ‘politics of the city’ and ‘policies for the city’ have had to take into account new EU legislation on urban areas as well as pressure from neo-liberal policies demanding the ‘marketization’ of the city. Because of the urban tradition of this part of Italy, it is unlikely that Brindisi and the surrounding towns will become a unified ‘metropolitan area’. Nonetheless, they must come to terms with demands for environmental sustainability and urban resilience, on the one hand, and with the implications of self-branding aimed at attracting investment, on the other. As these processes are affecting urban areas across the world, I believe that anthropologists can contribute significantly to our understanding of how they are negotiated at the local level.

Concluding reflections

I have argued that the debate on urban anthropology has been significantly affected by an incommensurability of language. Before considering whether a continuing debate on urban anthropology is relevant today, I have pointed to past shortcomings deriving from an almost exclusive and exaggerated focus on nineteenth-century sociological theories based on analyses of European and North-American industrial cities. Then, I have suggested that perhaps a closer attention to Weber’s work would have helped anthropologists to come to terms with the diversity of urban traditions across the world.

In arguing that a sociological analysis of the contemporary city should take into account the aspects of the *urbs*, *civitas*, and *polis* that constitute the ‘urban community’ I do not wish to impose a new Western model. Of course, as an anthropologist I am fully aware of cultural, economic, and geopolitical variations, and of different cultural understandings of the common good, of public space, of civic and individual rights and citizens’ participation. In fact, the approach to the contemporary city that I have proposed may well be valid only in contexts where secular and democratic values prevail. For instance, a different approach would be needed in the study of contexts where dominant religious ideologies deny the fundamental principles of democratic and free citizenship.

My point is that most contemporary scholarship seems to be unable to get away from an idea of the city – of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – that no longer finds correspondence in real life. The ‘urban’ has been transformed and continues to be transformed. Paraphrasing Weber, it could be said that it is not the city (perhaps I should say, the ‘imagery’ of the city) as *urbs*

that produces the distinguishing qualities of urban life; rather, it is new historical conditions that determine the emergence of a new meaning of 'being urban', influencing our conception of the common good and of associated life in a shared 'urban space' that is not just the physical built-up space (the space of the *urbes*) but is also the space of the *civitas* and of the *polis*, which is increasingly manifested in a virtual space. What is the role of anthropology in all this?

While sociologists like Sassen (1991) may argue for a general theory of the contemporary city, it is the task of the anthropologist to bring out and address the aforementioned ethnographic variations. Therefore, even if we agree with Sassen that 'global cities' have the same financial, economic, and trading prominence, and the same global enormous power and influence, as an anthropologist I must ask to what extent it is true that global cities have much more in common among themselves than with other cities in their nations. We should therefore ask to what extent their role as prominent and powerful global centres is culturally mediated. Why, for example, my experience of Tokyo, Paris, New York, or London is that they are distinctly different from each other; what is it that makes these cities so different from one another even though they are all 'global cities'?

However, anthropology can do more than just bring out specific cultural differences. I would argue that the anthropological methodology can make commensurable the apparently incommensurable, through a comparative analysis that addresses not just differences but also the similarities and, at this historical juncture, both the various forms of resistance to the kind of bureaucratic 'homogenizing' models dictated by supra-national regulations and the attempts to adapt these 'bureaucratic models' to the local reality (as opposed to succumbing to them).

This does not mean that one disciplinary paradigm is more right or truer than the other, for the two disciplines of sociology and anthropology do complement each other. Furthermore, true scientific understanding should go beyond bureaucratic academic categorizations, particularly considering such categorizations' tendency to produce misleading disciplinary assumptions and misunderstandings. Interestingly, still in 2011, the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) classified socio-cultural anthropology as a sub-field of sociology. Of course this classification draws on a serious misunderstanding of the disciplinary paradigm and methodology and has been robustly opposed. However, such an opposition implies more than a bureaucratic struggle. This contention involves critical epistemological issues, such as the production of knowledge and the *way* in which such knowledge is produced.

Some scholars take categorizations too seriously and insist on teaching their students some particularistic view of their discipline that inevitably leaves out important aspects of its history and intellectual production. This becomes even more problematic when the categorizing is internal to the discipline, leading, we have seen, to sterile debates on how we should 'label' ourselves. I believe that, at length, a discipline committed to dividing itself into sub-fields risks intellectual death. Besides, not irrelevantly, such fragmentation is bound to attract ever less funding. Of course, disciplinary, or sub-disciplinary, categorization is ultimately a sterile question of power; a power which is exercised through a particular construction of knowledge and can thus appear as a 'theoretical' problem, but is in fact a political problem, in terms of both academic politics and real politics.

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I would like to thank Michel Rautenberg, who pointed out that these three terms – *polis*, *urbes*, and *civitas* – have equivalents in French: the city of civilité, the city of citadinité, and the city of citoyenneté. These terms were defined, for example, by Jean Métral (2000). However, I use them in their ancient sense.

Notes

- 1 Intriguingly, the philosopher-anthropologist Michael (Miháli) Polanyi was originally trained in physical chemistry.
- 2 For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Home Office stated that ‘towns’ that aspired to city status should satisfy at least the three following criteria: population density; a local metropolitan character (which meant a distinct identity and being the centre of a wider area); and a record of local government. New criteria and regulations were introduced with the Local Government Act of 1972, which demanded that new letters patent should be issued for cities to maintain their city status. ‘Historical’ cities that did not follow the right legal procedure lost their city status (as in the case of Rochester). EU regulations have added to this complexity, imposing a new classification of urban areas, which in the British census are reported as ‘built-up’ (rather than urban) areas.
- 3 Small, ‘homogeneous’ towns may well exhibit some of the aspects that Wirth (1938) identified with ‘urbanism’. It should be pointed out that Wirth himself recognized that the influence of the metropolis extended well beyond its administrative boundaries and that ‘urban’ ideas and behaviours often extend beyond these boundaries.
- 4 It is noteworthy that Wirth’s urbanism was criticized for being ethnocentrically based on a model of city that existed in a specific place and at a specific time (see Pardo & Prato, 2012a; Prato & Pardo, 2013).
- 5 In Roman Law, *civitas* indicated the community of citizens and their juridical status as subjects with duties and responsibilities. By extension, *civitates* were the city-states that were linked to Rome by special treaty or by a legally-defined relationship.
- 6 I carried out six months of preliminary fieldwork intermittently between 1987 and 1988 and 15 months of extended fieldwork between 1989 and 1991. Several updating field-trips followed. In 2012, I carried out new extended field research.
- 7 For example, in Brindisi, the city council was not consulted in the decision-making process regarding the construction of the new power station. Moreover, the outcome of a popular consultation on this matter was completely disregarded both by the regional and by the national governments.

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