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LOOKING INTO THE DISCOURSE OF RESEARCHERS

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Abstract

"Urbanity" has become a "fuzzy/unclear concept" (Bourdin, 2010) which is even polysemous in the discourses of researchers in urban studies. I have undertaken, in my PhD, a series of interviews with researchers in order to try to understand and to deconstruct the discourse about urbanity, aiming to surpass a classical and limited bibliographic approach. This series of interviews was held with geographers, urban sociologists, psychologists, architects and urban planners. Urban studies, today, require an interdisciplinary approach, which is especially the case with such a difficult concept like urbanity. This additional methodological approach helps us understand this polysemous terms and the paradigms underlying the concept of urbanity, so as to recognize the different theoretical approaches suggested by the researchers about this topic.

At the crossroads of these approaches, this article proposes a theoretical typology to understand meanings of urbanity in the contemporary urban studies. It identifies four ways to tackle urbanity: Urbanity considered above all as an interaction; urbanity thought as an interaction in situation; urbanity thought in a critical and relative approach and urbanity as a key to reading contemporary urban realities. This categorization is not based on an existing line of thought but on specific ways to handle the topic of urbanity.

Introduction[1]

Urbanity has become a very polysemous concept in urban studies. It is particularly used in urban geography, urban planning, and urban sociology but is also found in environmental psychology. The multiple meanings of urbanity makes it a "fuzzy concept" (Bourdin, 2010). One of the most important parts of my work is precisely to clarify this fuzzy theoretical framework regarding the concept of urbanity. Today, one definition seems to emerge and to be shared by many researchers, coming from Jacques Levy, who considers urbanity as state of a space, resulting from a combination between density and diversity (1997, 2003). In Levy's definition, urbanity is used to characterize urban spaces according to a logic of "gradient". Nevertheless a second definition of the word exists, which depicts urbanity as a sum of social interactions and ways of being which enable people to live together, without conflicts, in dense places (Monnet, 1999, in Dorrier-Apprill, 2001). As a consequence, in a French speaking context, urbanity is at the same time the materiality (as morphological forms) and the substance (as social interactions) of the city (Berque, 1993, in Dorrier-Apprill, 2001). This idea can be illustrated by the metaphor of a coin with two sides, urbanity being a way of characterizing urban places as well as a set of interactions. In an English speaking context this definition of urbanity is different because two words exist. *Urbanity,* which is more linked with the question of the materiality of the city and which is usually used in architecture for example, and *politeness*, as civility which is more linked with the substance of the city and with the social interactions in this urban context, which is more used in urban sociology..

These theoretical questions cannot be considered only from a classical bibliographical point of view. Indeed, this theme has led to numerous publications, in which the concept of urbanity has often been superficially used. This is why we chose to cross this traditional approach with a second exploratory approach. This approach has led us to carry out some interviews with different researchers on the topic of urbanity, and the relationship between urbanity and other important notions found in urban studies today. These interviews allow us to bring out a series of meanings about urbanity. These various ways of thinking urbanity will be explored and discussed here. Having presented my methodology, I shall focus on these various ways of thinking coming from the interview and that our analysis has brought to the foreground.

Methodology

Twenty-one interviews, using an interview-grid designed around the topic of urbanity, were conducted in French with researchers. Respondents were met individually for the interview in variable conditions (face-to-face or by phone) over a period from November 2013 to June 2014. They came from different disciplines in order to capture the specificities of different disciplines.. Eight

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geographers, three urban planners, four architects and urban planners, three sociologists, one landscape architect and urban planner, one environmental psychologist and one photographer and researcher in social sciences were interviewed. These researchers were selected according to their areas of research, especially on urban research topics. A researcher on rural topics was also interviewed to have a different point of view on this thematic of urbanity.

Of the twenty one interviews carried out, three were discarded for technical reasons (e.g. being on the phone, empty batteries). Nineteen of them were analyzed in a satisfactory way. Some are rather short, less than one hour long, others are much longer, more than one hour and forty minutes long, for an average of interview of approximately one hour and fifteen. All were carried out using the same interview grid articulated around eleven questions distributed in three thematic blocks: a first block on representations of urbanity (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q11), a second one focus on the question how to operate the notion of urbanity (Q4, Q5, Q6), and a third one on urbanity towards the evolutions of contemporary societies (Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10)[2].

These three thematic blocks allow us to consider the fundamental themes concerning the topic of urbanity:

- for the first block: a theoretical question about its definition and its representation.
- for the second block: a question of the operating nature of the notion and thus its potential to be measured.
- for the third block: a question about the link between this notion and other important notions crossing the field of social sciences today.

Some questions required hierarchical answers, particularly Q1, Q2, Q5 and Q11. For these, answers were ranked according to both the order in which they were quoted by the researchers and the importance given to the answers in their discourse. This method, associated with a thematic coding of the answers, allowed us to highlight frequencies with which certain terms or ideas stood out. The analysis of contents is inspired here by the structural method of analysis of social representations (Vergès, 1992, Abric, 1994). Considering the reduced sample, this methodology is exploratory here. This methodology is particularly interesting in that it balances the answers of the researchers according to the rank where these answers were given by researchers. To allow such an analysis, it was necessary to classify the researchers' answers by association to established categories, discussed below.

Concerning the question of the definition of urbanity (Q1), answers can be classified into seven categories[3]:

- *Diversity* (at various levels, social diversity, diversity of the offer etc.)
- *Density* (also at various levels)
- *Interactions* and places of interactions
- The question of the *quality of life* and of *urbanity as an historic and cultural construction*
- *Movement* (as mobilities and as spatial evolution)
- The question of *morphology* and the way of planning cities
- And the idea that *urbanity could have no sense*

The analysis is built on these seven categories, summarizing important issues connected to urbanity that have previously been observed by myself in a bibliographical approach. For example we find in these categories elements which are central in the different scientific definitions of urbanity, as density elements, diversity elements, morphological elements or interactions (as normative courtesy, sociability elements or claiming). So, and for this example of this question of definition, what seems to stand out as a central element of the representations connected to urbanity for all the researchers is *interaction*. The categories *movement* and *morphology* are least frequently quoted. This methodology is particularly interesting as far it allows to complete a classical content analysis by a weighting connected to the spontaneity with which terms are cited by the researchers in their discourses.

It is particularly interesting to cross the results of the central questions in our interview grid. Here it is questions one, two, and eleven on the question of urbanity representation; and questions five and six on the question of the operating nature of the notion of urbanity. Although it is difficult with 19 interviews to generalize, the results provide interesting new lines of research.

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Results: Four ways of thinking:

Different understandings of urbanity

Question one is the main one to consider different ways of thinking urbanity ("What does the word "urbanity" makes you think about? How would you define it in five words?") . It is from this first question that we can try to distinguish different meanings of urbanity. It is also the central question to formulate hypotheses on these different meanings before verifying these hypotheses with the results of the other questions that were identified as particularly discriminating to think urbanity. In regards to the results of this first question, four meanings of urbanity seem to emerge. Before going further, it is necessary to specify that our purpose is not to essentialize the researchers' discourses, but to distinguish different ways of understanding urbanity—different meanings that are not completely independent to each other. One researcher, of 19 interviews analyzed, could not be connected with any groups because he adopted very transverse postures and because he has no disciplinary belonging (he is a photographer and he presented himself as a "researcher in social sciences"). Our thematic coding allows us to highlight ways of thinking based on some of these themes. For this question one, we can thus identify four ways of thinking:

Group one: Urbanity considered above all as an interaction (n=8)

We can figure out a shared way of thinking; eight researchers can join this way. The most important idea with regards to rank and frequency is the term of *interaction and places of interactions* and the second most important term is *the quality of life*. For this group urbanity is always meaningful (the *no sense* category is never quoted here). And the terms of *morphology* and of *density*, which are useful to characterize spaces, are also very secondary here. This meaning is inspired by the definition of urbanity as a sum of interactions and ways of being, much more than a way of characterizing spaces.

We note that this group consists of researchers stemming from different disciplines (geographers or planners) and that urbanity seems to be considered in a shared interdisciplinary way.

Group two: Urbanity thought as an interaction in situation (n=3)

We face here a meaning shared by three researchers which can be rather close by certain aspects of the previous one. The shade is relative to the theme of *quality of life* which returns here in the first position in terms of rank and frequency, the question of the *interactions* occurring only in second position here (that is the exact opposite of the previous group). For these researchers a basic idea in the way of considering urbanity is that the individuals can appropriate spaces, or not, according to the quality of these spaces; according to the appropriation allowed by these spaces; and finally according to the nature of spaces. Thus the question of *morphology* is also important for these researchers. Here a fundamental role is given to the designer of these spaces.

This group is quantitatively less important than the first one and less interdisciplinary too; we find here only researchers who are also involved in urban planning. It is a very small group here in terms of quantity but it is very interesting to note that researchers who are involved in urban planning can have a specific vision of urbanity.

Group three: Urbanity thought in a critical and relative approach (n=2)

The two researchers in this group have a very clear-cut position on the question of urbanity. For them, the term has lost of meaning and is nowadays only an ideological term used by certain researchers to hide a certain contempt for non-urban spaces. This critical and relative approach challenges the definition of urbanity as a way of characterizing spaces, but also as a sum of interactions. If urbanity is a sum of special interactions allowing people to live together, it can be everywhere and it can be every kind of interaction, normative courtesy as elements of sociability, or claiming. It is here clearly the *no sense* theme which returns most. The terms of density and of diversity are never quoted by these researchers and it is no coincidence, placing these researchers in opposition to Jacques Levy's theories presenting urbanity as a combination of density and diversity (2003).

This conceptualization is generally one claimed only by sociologists. We find here a classical sociological approach, which gives great importance to the question of rigorous definition of the concept by maintaining certain distrust with regard to fuzzy concepts.

Group four: Urbanity as a key for reading contemporary urban realities (n=5)

For group four, urbanity can be an interesting concept to use in order to give simple reading keys for complex contemporary realities. It is an approach connected with the definition of urbanity as a way of characterizing spaces. Here notions of *diversity* and *density* return the most often, and tend to coincide with Jacques Levy and Michel Lussault's definition of urbanity (2003). Naturally in this meaning of urbanity the term *no sense* is never quoted. However, themes about *interactions* and *quality of life* are not absent in the speeches here, what also illustrates a kind of porosity between the various groups.

This group of five researchers is interdisciplinary with geographers but also researchers involved in urban planning like planner-architects.

What kind of indicators, for which vision of urbanity?

These groups resulting from only the first question can now be confronted with results stemming from the questions identified as discriminating, particularly to test their homogeneity. Crossing question one, at the core of the thematic block on representations of urbanity, with question five, at the heart of the thematic block on the operating character of urbanity, reveals a possible connection between the way of understanding the word urbanity and the way to operationalize it. Indeed question five also concerns possible indicators for urbanity, and that is particularly discriminating as far as it raises the question of the possible or impossible measurement of urbanity ("What indicators could you imagine?"). Yet, in the definition of urbanity as a sum of interactions, a measurement of interactions seems to be difficult, even impossible. Interactions are not material things and cannot be clearly defined, or measured. Thus we could make the hypothesis that the upholders of this definition would join the idea that urbanity may be difficult to quantify. On the contrary, the upholders of an approach of urbanity as a key for reading contemporary urban realities would be more in a logic of a quantification of urbanity with concrete and measurable indicators.

For question five, we used the same method as for question one. And we also coded the answers in seven themes:

- Indicators on *values and urban attitudes* (quite difficult to quantify)
- An approach by the *mobility* in quantitative terms especially, but also in qualitative terms (for pedestrians in particular)
- Indicators quantifying *density* forms (human or services intensity)
- Indicators on *events*
- Indicators to measure *accessibility*
- Indicators quantifying *diversity* (social or services diversity)
- And indicators concerning *politics* (the question of the vote in particular)

Some indicators were not able to be classified in these categories (4 here). We can summarize each of the groups previously evoked in the prism of this question of indicators:

Group one: Urbanity thought above all as an interaction (n=8)

Here most quoted indicators refer to the theme of *values and urban attitudes*, what seems to confirm observed results of question one. Urbanity is essentially understood here as interactions, as being in cities, which can be measured by special attitudes, special states of mind[4], which would allow to live together without clashes in spite of important human densities. But in this logic, this initially urban state of mind is present in the whole world today, in cities but also in non urban spaces. From then on, measuring this urbanity does not make sense, it would be everywhere and it cannot be measured. Nevertheless we notice that indicators of *density* and *mobility* are also quoted here in a major way. Yet the question of density makes reference to an urban frame, as well as the question of the quantity of pedestrian mobility. This way of thinking urbanity everywhere is not unanimous among the researchers of this group. The issue of *diversity*, for instance, which is fundamental in the approach of urbanity as a combination of density and diversity, is not at all represented here.

Group two: Urbanity thought as an interaction in situation (n=3)

We find here the question of *values and attitudes*, as for the first group, and as we already observed in the question one. But what is interesting here is that the issue of *diversity* is far more important. Yet, if attitudes and values are difficult to quantify, it is

different with diversity, which can be quantify with social and economics indicators. It is not surprising to find here this question of density as far as this group is essentially established by researchers which are also planners. And today this topic is central in many development projects, which try to create, on reorganized spaces, some diversity, in social terms and in economic terms.

Group three: Urbanity thought in a critical and relative approach (n=2)

The answers here must be taken with caution as far as the researchers did not answer what they really think but what they imagine researchers using the word "urbanity" would think regarding of this question of indicators. Indeed, as urbanity make no sense for them, it can be hard to quantify it with indicators. Nevertheless these answers can be interesting not for what they say but for the representations that they illustrate for these critical researchers. And we can note that the three most quoted indicators are *density*, *diversity*, and *values and attitudes*, which correspond somewhat to the ways of thinking of the three other groups.

Group four: Urbanity as a key for reading contemporary urban realities (n=5)

The results are not surprising here as far as the indicators of *density* and *diversity* are quoted the most often in comparison with the three other groups. If urbanity is understood as a way to characterize spaces and is based on a combination between density and diversity, it seems necessary to be able to quantify this combination. And to quantify this combination, it is necessary to find indicators, as the density of pedestrians in public spaces in cities or as the question of density and diversity of accessible services. Without these indicators, it is impossible to think of urbanity gradients and to make this combination density/diversity effective.

We can thus note in a general way a relative correspondence between the analyses of the results of these two central questions, which tends to confirm our hypothesis of four ways of thinking urbanity.

Conclusion and Discussion

This additional theoretical approach allows us to enrich a traditional bibliographical one, and on certain points in particular. If the logic of the first and the fourth groups recalls elements identified

in the literature (they are both faces of our coin), it is particularly interesting to think about the secondary ways of thinking, which are less visible in the literature. Indeed the relative and critical way of thinking urbanity does not express itself for the simple reason that these researchers (for the researchers who are interviewed) never used the term urbanity in their scientific works. Furthermore, for the approach of urbanity as an interaction in situation, researchers are also often urban planners and they are less visible in the bibliography, even if their conception of urbanity is very vivid and concrete because it is not only spread by the scientific media but above all in concrete operations of planning. However it would make no sense to essentialise these ways of thinking as far as the limits between them are very porous and they can very well integrate researchers who besides have rather divergent opinions on certain questions. It is particularly the case on the issue of urbanity gradients, which is the object of lively and constructive controversies between researchers (Charmes, Launay, Vermeersch, 2013, against Levy, 2013, in La vie des Idées). The debate concerns the ideological relationship that this question of the urbanity gradients carries, in particular on the underlying domination of central spaces on the peripheral spaces. For Eric Charmes, Stephanie Vermeersch et Lydie Launay (2013), peripheral spaces can also have a strong urbanity even if the combination density/diversity on this spaces are not very strong. These different ways of thinking the topic of urbanity are not opposing but rather complementary: It is indeed the same coin. And researchers sharing a vision of urbanity as an interaction can also consider that urbanity could be used to characterize spaces, and vice versa.

Finally, analysis of the results reveals that the researchers who mostly use the term of urbanity in their work are the researchers belonging to the group four. These researchers operate a reflection on the sense of the word urbanity. The researchers of groups one and two, in particular those of the group one, join a logic where the term of urbanity is less used and discussed. This observation can be interested to develop in future works.

These four ways of thinking urbanity can also be particularly interesting for the continuation of our work because they can be compared with the discourse of the inhabitants. This logic of comparison between the discourse of researchers, a "scientific" posture, and that of the inhabitants, an "ordinary" posture, on

a subject more operationalized by the former seems particularly relevant in the framework adopted here. Future work will deal with the discourse of inhabitants by questionnaire and guided-commentary tours in an attempt to develop comparisons between scientific and ordinary postures on the question of urbanity.

Notes

1. This work comes from my PhD research that I currently led on the topic of urbanity through the prism of ways of living. My work is based on a geo-psychological, thus inter-disciplinary approach because I am a geographer.

2. The interview-guide:

First block:

Q1. What does the word «urbanity» makes you think about? How would you define it in five words?

Q2. Does it evoke specific places or specific situations? Which ones?

Q3. How do you study it? Why?

Q11. Could you quote me two or three key authors (or reference texts) on the topic of urbanity?

Second block:

Q4. How can it be operated (how to observe it in urban studies)?

Q5. What indicators can you imagine?

Q6. Evoke the idea of "gradient of urbanity" ("gradient d'urbanité", Levy, 1997, 2003).

Third block:

Q7. What do you think about the relationship between urbanity and mobilities?

Q8. What do you think about the relationship between urbanity and rurality?

Q9. What do you think about the relationship between urbanity and virtuality?

Q10. What do you think about the relationship between urbanity and society?

3. English equivalents of recurring French words in interviews

French	English
Diversité (diversité sociale, des services, du bâti)	*Diversity*
Densité (densité sociale, des services, du bâti)	*Density*
Interactions	*Interactions*
Qualité de vie / aspects culturels et historiques	*Quality of Life*
Mouvement (comme mobilité et évolutions spatiales)	*Movement*
Morphologie et manières d'aménager la ville	*Morphology*
Idée que l'urbanité n'a pas de sens	*Urbanity as a term makes no sense*

4. It is the french expression "c'est très urbain" in the sense of being polite.

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