



Is it possible to write a history of urban knowledge?

Stéphane Van Damme



Translated with the support of the Institut Français

Historian Stéphane Van Damme puts the origins and foundations of urban studies into perspective, highlighting the difficult “disciplinisation” of a set of hybrid research fields, and exploring the ambivalent relationship between urban knowledge and public policy and the role this plays in the affiliation and mobilisation of social actors around urban issues.

As our starting point, let us take an observation made by the philosopher Thierry Paquot (2000): the disciplines that deal with the city seem to hesitate between two poles, namely “urban studies” on the one hand, and “urban and territorial science” on the other. Despite enjoying little in the way of recognition from universities, these disciplines have nonetheless, for at least two centuries, helped to “naturalise” a space shared by researchers, planners and politicians. This field of knowledge in no way lies beyond the scope of investigations into the history of the social sciences; indeed, it plays an active role in problematising, motivating, affiliating and mobilizing social actors around the question of the urban condition. So how can the low level of autonomy of these urban-related disciplines be explained? It is true that the definition of the city as an “object of study” resists a simple disciplinary designation, as it is based on a fundamental ambiguity, and because the approaches adopted oscillate between choosing a seemingly well-defined geographical area and undertaking an in-depth analysis of a research object. Furthermore, study of the city calls for a never-ending negotiation of its boundaries. The choice of definition, whether territorial (fortifications, citizenship, etc.) geographical (site, conurbation, population density, etc.), sociological or cultural (lifestyle, behaviour, amenities, etc.) or even economic (trades, industry, etc.) leads to endless discussions on the limits to be ascribed to the urban phenomenon. Here, we shall consider the broad lines of an initial debate on the “disciplinisation” of urban knowledge (Van Damme 2005).

The weak “disciplinisation” of urban studies

First, we must examine the weak institutionalisation and “disciplinisation” of city-related research. The dominant factor here most often is interdisciplinarity, and a federating of disciplines. In 1992, when the CNRS (French National Centre for Scientific Research) tried to bring together urban research by developing a transversal, interdisciplinary city-based research programme, it was quickly abandoned due to an insufficient level of cohesion among the projects undertaken. Here, we must consider the following question: how has the city become a legitimate object of study in the modern era? Although it is not our intention to trace all of the disciplinary “genealogies” in question, two examples may help to clarify the different timescales and the variety of intellectual

traditions: first, the emergence of archaeology; and second, the rise of public health awareness and urban medicine.

The emergence of urban archaeology manifested itself in the writing of local histories, which began to appear in earnest in the modern era, especially during the Enlightenment in the wake of moves to defend local liberties and promote provincial claims. Such histories conform to an antiquarian and monumental conception and draw their power from their close links with urban powers, which often subsidized them. Accordingly, this link with history is also found in the formulation of urbanity at the dawn of the Enlightenment, built on the foundations of a collective memory established permanently by inventories of local resources (Roche 1988). Historical knowledge is developed following the rediscovery of cities' ancient pasts, and of archaeological practices. In Paris, the trajectory of this knowledge emphasises the heterogeneity of actors involved, who are drawn from the intellectual world, the milieu of city public-works engineers and architects, and a more diffuse sphere of enthusiasts and collectors. The protection and promotion of objects and sites through the implementation of conservation or listing procedures (engravings, sketches, plans, atlases) has also played an exemplary aggregative role in terms of establishing these different practices and giving a physical form to the apparent invisibility of Roman Paris. From this accumulation of data, this cartography and these archives, a field of analysis and an intellectual space has emerged. The fact that urban archaeology has been institutionalised on the margins of universities reflects the weakness of disciplinary identities alluded to earlier.

The second example comes from the medical world. In the field of social sciences, the modern city is defined as an object of study in the 19th century in varying ways and often at the margins of the state and its universities: neo-Hippocratic thinking among doctors, the public hygiene movement, and Saint-Simonianism among engineers are but three of the intellectual movements that sought to understand the changes in the urban body, seen as a space to be developed and a society to be reformed (Amiot 1986; Backouche 2000; Picon 2003). The genre known as “medical topographies” came to Paris later: the first example dates from 1786, by Jean-Jacques Menuret de Chambaud (1733–1815), a doctor and contributor to the *Encyclopédie*, with some 40 articles to his name. In 1826, Claude Lachaise would complement this geography of salubrity and insalubrity by producing a neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood analysis of the city's health. Similarly, the dangers of the city – such as crime, the perpetuation of a transient population, and urban violence – were a powerful driver of research that would lead to the development of measurement tools and statistics. In these analyses, it is the growth of the big city that seems to be the preferred embodiment of “modernity”.

The rise of sociological research in the early 20th century often found fruitful fieldwork locations in the city, as evidenced by the rich tradition of the Chicago School. Here too, the history of sociology and anthropology has its share of scientific realities and mythology specific to theories on disciplinary origins (Platt 2003). In France, in 1909, Maurice Halbwachs brought the study of the city into the arena of the social sciences with his law thesis, *Les Expropriations et le prix des terrains à Paris (1860–1900)* (“Expropriations and land prices in Paris (1860–1900)”), which was presented as an economics study. He undertook to “rid this field of the illegitimate disciplines that litter it with their irrelevant divisions, and in their place construct new objects and new relationships that will transform it into a field conquered by science” (Amiot 1986, p. 14). In place of the monograph, Halbwachs proposed a study of urban morphology. However, this isolated case aside, it was not until 1949–1950 that a French research team specialised in sociology and urban anthropology would come into being, led by Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. Chombart de Lauwe combined his interest in the working classes with an ethnographic method inspired by Marcel Mauss and imported from fieldwork in Asia and Africa. Between 1955 and 1960, the resultant Social Ethnology Group undertook a collective research project on the mechanisms of social segregation, published in 1960 under the title *Famille et habitation* (“Family and Home”). The field investigation, comprising 1,521 households from three new social-housing estates, offers a site for the observation of everyday life. And yet sociology and

urban anthropology struggled to assert themselves as “major fields” of research in France, unlike Britain and the United States, where a true field of “urban ecology” was established quite early on. This field was developed above all in the late 1970s, in the context of urban planning meetings organised in association with architecture schools (Séguret and Jeudy 2000; Berdoulay and Soubeyran 2002). In a recent report, the sociologist Claude Dubar stated that he still regretted the segmentation of the field of urban sociology in the Paris region, “which split into many sub-groups based on territorial themes, architectures and spatial dynamics, which, having often been absorbed by the field of geography, do not occupy a strong position” (Dubar, 2004, p. 20).

Between social science and public policy

Another observation that can be made concerns the obvious relationship between knowledge and public policy, where urban knowledge becomes a hybrid field of research that calls for links between the sociology of knowledge and the sociology of public policy. In recounting this history of urban knowledge, it is essential to provide a rich description of the social world that revolves around urban issues. With this mind, attention should be paid to a dual process at work.

First, we must question the organisational work that has, since the 19th century, sought to create non-scientific institutions that produce knowledge about the city. For example, Emmanuel Bellanger (2005, 2008), by focusing on the history of the *École nationale d’administration municipale* (ENAM – French National School of Municipal Administration) established under the Third Republic, shows that the professionalisation of municipal staff is obtained through a better understanding of the urban condition. Moving forward to the first half of the 20th century, Renaud Payre (2007) highlights the attempts to institutionalise knowledge relating to municipal government as a discipline, centred on the 1934 conference of the International Union of Local Authorities. These efforts to create a “communal science” ultimately resulted in failure, but this does not take away anything from the projects, the heuristic practices, the concepts, the justifications and the intellectual homogenisation operations that accompanied them and which should be taken seriously. Similarly, Fabien Milanovic, who since 1965 has been following a series of historical configurations from which contractual urban research has emerged, reveals the logics of action that prevail in the joint “problematization” of urban issues by local-government officials and university researchers. Although central government has played an increasingly important role in creating an urban research institution through the “Urbanisation” concerted action programme launched in 1970 and led by the *Délégation générale à la recherche scientifique et technique* (DGRST – General Delegation for Scientific and Technical Research) and the French ministry for public works, the reaffirmation of the work of university researchers in the 1980s turned its back on this functionalist conception of the social sciences in order to introduce new objects and new investigative procedures. In fact, owing to a lack of resources, Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe had sought assistance from the government as early as the 1950s, sealing a lasting partnership between researchers and organizations outside the world of academia. As a result, “contractualisation” has since been a common form of funding for urban research (Amiot 1986, p. 48).

Second, we move from a conception of the social sciences as a form of technical assistance – cognitive support to establish public policy in a planning-based vision – to diverse and multiple uses of scientific research that go far beyond the administrative rhetoric of “social demand” or “social benefit”. If knowledge became operational in the context of government decentralisation in France between 1975 and 1988, it was because the measure known as “action research” was developed, which broke down boundaries between the world of public policy and the world of research. Thus the success of interdisciplinary measures does not depend solely on the affiliation of various epistemic communities; instead, it lies in their ability to bring together socially heterogeneous groups. Rising municipalism introduced new political uses for the social sciences that reflects in part the creation of historical services. In the United States, urban studies programmes are associated with urban planning, and contribute to the scope of action of planners

and architects. This confusion between theoretical knowledge and action-based knowledge blurs the clear distribution of different worlds of action (intellectual or academic on the one hand; economic and political on the other). In fact, the city appears as the place where associations are formed between the scholarly sphere, the political sphere and the general public; where the interests of one sphere reconfigure the work of the others and profoundly change the research agenda, as well as, more unexpectedly, the identity of the city. This attention to ordinary knowledge-based practices in the urban environment, to knowledge *of* the city and not just knowledge *about* the city, should enable feedback on unspoken knowledge, and on know-how and expertise and the way this is passed on in the urban space.

Dreams of a unified urban science?

With the invention and development of urban ecology in the wake of environmentalist standpoints, we are confronted with the desire to reconnect with a total urban knowledge that encompasses both the natural sciences and the human and social sciences. In recent decades, under the influence of a new school of thought regarding the “sustainable city”, urban ecology has displaced these old questions and reformulated them according to a more environmentalist perspective. Urban nature has therefore made a comeback on to the historiographical stage via a dual interpretation: first, through the paradigm of exploitation of nature as a resource; and second, through the paradigm of risk and disaster. In the first case, analysis of a predatory economy and the exploitation of “natural resources” contrasts two approaches: on the one hand, the negative effects of industrialisation are shown, raising regulatory and social awareness of pollution in the context of urbanisation (Bernhard and Massard-Guilbaud 2002); on the other, this exploitation of resources is considered in terms of transformation through the study of land uses, recycling and waste (Barles 2005). In the second case, nature appears to be uncontrolled and harmful in its effects. It opens up a field of research linked to a history of intervention and prevention of “natural risks” such as flooding and environmental health concerns. From this perspective, environmental history seems to have favoured a socio-economic approach in which urban nature is primarily shaped by socio-technical networks, rather than by the aesthetic dimension of urban landscapes (Cronon 1992; Stradling 2010). Indeed, the metropolis is presented as both a “social laboratory” and a “natural phenomenon” (Robert E. Park). The term “environment” is not synonymous with “nature in the city”, but instead refers to the balance between the inhabitants and users of the city and the urban space itself, and concerns all aspects of urban development. From the Athens Charter (1933) to the Grenelle de l’Environnement round-table discussions (2008), the question of the urban condition is one that mobilises experts on the sustainable city, urban planners and politicians alike (Veyret and Le Goix 2011). Moreover, it opens the way for a new alliance between the natural and social sciences (Charbonnier and Kreplak 2012).

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Stéphane Van Damme is professor of modern history in the Department of History at Sciences Po. From 2006 to 2009, he headed the "Sciences et capitales européennes" ("Science and European Capitals") collective programme set up by the ANR (French National Research Agency) and, together with Romain Bertrand (CERI), currently co-organises a seminar at Sciences Po titled "L'Épreuve des Indes" ("The Test of the Indies"), which seeks to establish a critical dialogue between European history, global history and the history of "cultural regions" based on the circulation of knowledge.

His publications include *Métropoles de papier : naissance de l'archéologie urbaine à Paris et à Londres (XVII^e–XX^e siècles)* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2012) and *L'Épreuve libertine. Morale, soupçon et pouvoirs dans la France baroque* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2008).

To quote this article:

Stéphane Van Damme, translated by Oliver Waine, "Is it possible to write a history of urban knowledge?", *Metropolitiques*, 11 September 2013. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Is-it-possible-to-write-a-history.html>.