

Uwe Prell

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An Interdisciplinary Introduction  
to Urban Studies



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Translated from the German by Laura Radosh  
English version fully revised and edited by Ute Reusch

Verlag Barbara Budrich  
Opladen • Berlin • Toronto 2022

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from  
Die Deutsche Bibliothek (The German Library)

© 2022 by Verlag Barbara Budrich GmbH, Opladen, Berlin & Toronto  
[www.budrich.eu](http://www.budrich.eu)

ISBN 978-3-8474-2612-7 (Paperback)  
eISBN 978-3-8474-1771-2 (PDF)  
DOI 10.3224/84742612

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Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme  
Ein Titeldatensatz für die Publikation ist bei der Deutschen Bibliothek erhältlich.

Verlag Barbara Budrich GmbH  
Stauffenbergstr. 7. D-51379 Leverkusen Opladen, Germany

86 Delma Drive. Toronto, ON M8W 4P6 Canada  
[www.budrich.eu](http://www.budrich.eu)

Jacket illustration by Bettina Lehfeldt, Kleinmachnow, Germany –  
[www.lehfeldtgraphic.de](http://www.lehfeldtgraphic.de)

Cover image by Uwe Prell

Translated by Laura Radosh

English version fully revised and edited by Ute Reusch – [www.englishagency.de](http://www.englishagency.de)

Typesetting by Ulrike Weingärtner, Gründau, Germany – [info@textakzente.de](mailto:info@textakzente.de)

Printed in Europe on acid-free paper by paper & tinta, Warsaw

# THE CITY IS THE ANSWER. BUT WHAT WAS THE QUESTION?

Most people have more important things to do than to worry about what a city is or is supposed to be. They know all about cities anyway, because they were born in one, or because at one point in their life work, travel, love, or maybe even the promise of a better life brought them to the one they now live in. They know exactly what their city does and does not have to offer – either from experience, from talking to friends, or because their digital assistant recommended something to them. They know the route to work like the back of their hand, just like the stores around them, or how long you need to wait for which services. And, of course, they know where to find entertainment or distraction. More recently, people have got to know their cities in pandemic standstill.

One thing is clear, though: Some people love their city, others hate it, and most people don't spend much time thinking about the world, as long as it works.

That has probably been true since the birth of cities. What is *new* is the scale of things. At no other time have there been so many cities and never before have they been so large. Today, more than half of all human beings on earth live in a city, and there is no end in sight to urban growth. *New*, too, is the rise in cities' status, as well as the wealth of their problems and the sums that are spent on urban programmes. Never has self-improvement been at such a premium and has competition been fiercer. Finally, the scope for failure is also *new*, the threats posed by war, terrorism, and illnesses, as well as by radically changing economies, resource consumption, and man-made environmental change, in particular climate change.

All these factors force us to give the city more than a passing look. But how? As critical as the current problems are, the past can give us the decisive methodological nod. In his study of the origins of the city in the *Orient*, archaeologist *Hans J. Nissen* came to the conclusion that developments there could be understood as “the result of a series of specific responses to specific local challenges”.<sup>1</sup> This realization contains a key idea. If the city is the answer, then what was the question? In other words: For which problem is the city a solution?

That is the guiding question of this book. I propose that the city can be understood as a tool – an old, incredibly versatile, and enduring tool for improving personal and collective opportunities. Tools can be used in very different ways. Shovels, for instance, can be used to dig the foundation for a house. But they have also on occasion been used to take people's lives. A detailed knowledge of a tool's characteristics can help us to understand both how to use it and, more importantly, what it *cannot* do.

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1 Nissen, Hans J. (2005), Vom Weiler zur Großstadt im frühen Vorderen Orient, in: Falk, Harry (ed.) (2005), *Wege zur Stadt. Entwicklung und Formen urbanen Lebens in der alten Welt*. Bremen, p. 57.

If we consider the city to be a tool, it is astonishing how many people use it and how little we know about it. That is why this book attempts what is perhaps the hardest thing of all in a world that, as the Israeli historian *Yuval Noah Harari* among others has noted, is inundated with irrelevant information, namely clarity. And clarity, in a time of excess, is nothing other than power. This book seeks to shed light on humanity's most important tool.

To answer the question of what makes a city, this book aims to give the most concise answer possible. First, it explains why the city is such an important tool. This is followed by an examination of the approaches adopted by key "academic disciplines". We find that some texts are cited again and again. Therefore, in a kind of academic speed dating, we take a closer look at the ideas proposed and lessons learned by key experts. These two steps are necessary, but neither delivers convincing results. To delve deeper, the book applies a method proposed by the economist and sociologist *Werner Sombart*. Trusting in the intelligence of language, the word "city" and its semantic content is examined in a dozen of the world's languages. In doing so, following a concept drawn from the *philosophy of language*, we reveal something that we can call the "genes" of the city.

That, at least, is the theory. In practice, this method allows us to examine the still innumerable terms for and concepts and types of cities and to gain more clarity about what they mean. This is rounded off by an overview of some important issues that cities have to tackle today. And, in conclusion, we look to the future, which we at least know will be decided in and with the city, whether we are interested in it or not.

All of these rational ideas create a scientific overview – which is the least we can expect from academics. So as not to lose sight of the vibrancy and sensuality of urban life, these analyses are complemented by a few hopefully inspiring digressions.

Berlin, autumn 2020

## NOTE ON THE ENGLISH EDITION

This book is the distilled essence of an exploratory journey that began back in the 1980s. Empirical-analytical case studies on the German city of Berlin during the Cold War were followed, in the early 1990s, by a city lexicon and, in 2005, by a comprehensive scholarly biography of the German capital. That study attempted a new, holistic “thick description” of the city that was inspired by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Based on this “case”, the following decade was spent formulating an interdisciplinary theory of the city. My book, published in German in 2020 under the title *Die Stadt*, summarizes the theoretical insights gained up to that point and outlines first practical applications.

The English edition of this book differs only in one respect from the German original in that I have deleted one infobox with literature tips in the section “City and countryside”, as it refers solely to the German debate and is difficult to transfer to other languages and cultures. Other than that, the bibliographical references have been pared down somewhat by eliminating those titles that I presume are of only limited interest to an international readership. All referenced websites were checked when preparing this edition and, where available, were replaced by English sites.

Berlin, summer 2022





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# I. THE DIFFICULTIES OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY

The city lies crosswise. It is in all senses of the word too big to be an object of scientific investigation – too complex, too unwieldy for easy answers. That is why many academics conclude that holistic answers will not do. But that is not the only explanation for the lack of progress when it comes to research on the city. Its development has been horizontal, not vertical, and so there has been little advancement despite minor innovations, and an overview is at best available for individual disciplines. Following well-travelled paths is, therefore, insufficient to get a handle on the city.

This introduction attempts to break new ground. It should be seen as an experiment. It began with an incident and an encounter with one of the greatest contradictions in contemporary social sciences.

The incident occurred during a working day at a trade fair in *Shanghai* gone wrong. It was late, and my colleagues had all long since gone back to their hotels. In front of the trade centre, I found that public transportation had shut down for the day and there were no more taxis to be had. As it was long past midnight, the only way back to my bed, around 10 kilometres away, was on foot. Even back then, Shanghai was already one of the second-tier global cities. Recalling *Saskia Sassen's* eponymous study, which I had read not that long before, I walked past multiple *residential cities*, at least two *industrial cities*, a pristine *smart city*, an *old city*, and, finally, in *Pudong*, a *global city*. What was Shanghai then? I asked myself. One of those city types? A global city? Or all of them together? These thoughts prompted me to ask the fundamental question: What is a city?

Each of the above-mentioned prototypical city types can be adequately described, but it is not clear how they are connected. There were no criteria for making an informed assessment.

My search for an answer led me to those disciplines that have examined urban life, which revealed a contradiction. On the one hand, everyone is agreed that the city is complex and can only be grasped via an interdisciplinary approach. Research on the city even gave birth to a new discipline that is meant to provide an overview: *urban studies*.

But after theory comes practice. Interdisciplinarity is an admirable goal, but science is divided into disciplines and that is how research is in the main conducted. Hence all researchers of the city are confronted with the dilemma of the necessity of interdisciplinary investigation without being able to cope with the scope of this task. Furthermore, experts fear the criticism of colleagues from other disciplines if they spend too much time butting in where they do not belong.

Pragmatism reigns. While answering the key questions nearly always means having to think outside the box, anyone who takes the risk of doing so is usually timid about proposing their solutions. Few researchers have made serious inroads into interdisciplinarity. One exception in the field at hand is *Saskia Sassen*,

whose highly innovative “Global Cities” study links *sociology* and economics, although the latter discipline has been happy to ignore her to this day. Or the geographer *Elisabeth Lichtenberger*, whose best works connect *geography*, *history*, *urban planning*, *sociology*, and *economics*, with illuminating results.

Interdisciplinarity is no small risk, but it is often rewarded with insights that could not have otherwise been gained. Along its arduous path lie questions that must be answered, such as: “Why should geographers be interested in the etymology of the word ‘city’ in 12 languages?” Yet the answer is obvious: Because knowing it makes them smarter and increases the value of their expertise, transforming it from an individual well-crafted tile into part of a mosaic. Through interdisciplinarity it may be possible to eradicate one of the greatest weaknesses of urban studies, namely that the relationship between individual insights is rarely explained. As a result, we know the price of everything, but rarely the value.

Any interdisciplinary approach raises the question of who is applying it. My doctoral studies were in political science and my post-doctoral thesis was in the field of history. Since the 1980s, I have been interested in the city as a research area, at first in an empirical analysis of the role of Berlin during the Cold War. That was followed by the creation of an encyclopaedia of the city of Berlin, commissioned by the Berlin Senate, as well as academic essays on the city and the description and theories of the city.

Looking at the city from an interdisciplinary perspective entails delving into a variety of disciplines. The most important tools for gaining such an overview are handbooks, encyclopaedias, and surveys. Going through this wealth of resources takes time – in this case around 10 years. Ignoring the maxim “publish or perish”, however, has often been rewarded with surprising results.

This introduction is, therefore, an attempt to learn from other disciplines. What has been most fruitful is not only the answers provided by individual disciplines, but even more so their way of asking questions. They radically changed my idea of the city. And so, in the hope that this study can do the same for other inquiring minds, let us begin.

## II. ON THE BENEFITS OF A TOOL

We do not know who built the first city. We do not know where it was erected or when, or by whom, and certainly not why. But we do at least have evidence enough to make an educated guess. While the exact site of the first city is not known, we can be fairly certain of the general area: the *Fertile Crescent*, as the American Egyptologist and historian *James Henry Breasted* called the winter rain area north of the Syrian desert in 1916.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1. The Fertile Crescent extends from southeast to southwest along the northern bank of the Persian Gulf, including parts of what are now Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and Jordan. Occasionally northern Egypt is also included in the area.

Many of the ruins of ancient cities found to date are situated in this area. Whether or not one of these sites was in fact the first or oldest city is a question of the definition used. When does a settlement become a city? When is it large enough? When it has a certain number of inhabitants or when it covers a certain area? When a particular population density has been reached? When it has large buildings? When there is evidence of a division of labour, diversity of population, or even of transregional functions?

Depending on one's viewpoint, there are many candidates for the title of the first city.

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2 Hans J. Nissen provides an up-to-date, scientifically precise overview in his history of the ancient central Asian region, in which he also explores the geographical and climatic conditions that made a sedentary lifestyle possible. See Nissen, Hans J. (2012), *Geschichte Altvorderasiens*. Munich, p. 6–11 and p. 23–9.