Comparisons

Julia Sattler

1. Preliminary Remarks

The notion of the comparison or the comparative approach to a topic is omnipresent across much of the Social Sciences, in Literary and Cultural Studies as well as in Urban Studies and related fields. Textbooks addressing the topic of comparative research as a way to link research and practice are evidence that the topic has reached the educational system as well. Still, there is no singular comprehensive theoretical or methodological approach that clearly defines the comparison. What unifies comparisons is "the aim to test, and to change, theoretical propositions" (Robinson 2015, 193). In Urban Studies, Robinson attests a track record for innovation to comparative approaches and praises the effect of comparison, which she describes as the extension of any conversation or research "beyond the single case" (2015, 194).

This contribution outlines the emergence and development of comparative approaches in Urban and Metropolitan Studies from a perspective including but not limited to the Humanities. Pointing to the chances and challenges comparative approaches pose in theory and practice, it reflects on different types of comparisons and their contribution to developing and testing new ideas around interdisciplinarity and generating new forms of urban knowledge. The outlook suggests possible further developments of and challenges for working with comparisons in Urban and Metropolitan Studies.

2. Comparative Approaches in an Urban Context

Generally speaking, a comparative project, study or approach takes "into account more than one event or object" (Ward 2010, 473). Such a format is defined by its comprehensive examination of at least two events or objects, not just by adding sweeping references to other possible examples. The mere mentioning of the existence of other relevant cases or contexts does not make for a comparative format either.

Throughout the past decades, comparative formats and approaches have emerged in such different urban research arenas as sustainability studies, the study of differ-

ent types of informal housing, the role of the financial markets, or urban governance. Still, there is no one particular theoretical approach unifying all these projects, studies and approaches under the heading of "comparison," but rather, "[d]efining comparative urban studies is not straightforward" (Ward 2010, 475). Due to the lack of a comprehensive theoretical approach or toolbox for comparative studies, "theory generation is at the heart of comparative urbanism" (Robinson 2015, 194) at the present time.

By implication, in urban and metropolitan contexts, comparisons contribute to the building of theory from many different angles, leading to a great diversity of approaches in the field of comparative research (Robinson 2015, 194). This is significant because in an interdisciplinary field such as Urban Studies, research approaches and project formats may be both qualitative and/or quantitative, may use methods from a variety of fields including but not limited to statistics, textual analysis, historical investigation, or infrastructure analysis, and may work on a micro- or macro-level of analysis (cf. Goensch/Gurr, Terfrüchte/Frank and Frank et al. in this volume).

Comparative approaches in Urban Studies and related fields first emerged out of the attempt to globalize the field and to look beyond the Northern hemisphere. The popularity of such approaches in urban contexts has varied over time, however (Palmer/ Simon 2020, 20). Very explicit comparisons between different cities in fields building on urban inquiry and research have existed at least since the 1960s and became rather popular in the 1970s, while in the 1980s such kinds of studies declined in popularity again (Ward 2010, 476–477). These developments are part of larger trends in research and opportunities for funding.

Jennifer Robinson credits the work of Louis Wirth (1938) as the first comparatist work in the field of Urban Studies (2015, 189). Wirth, in his essay "Urbanism as a Way of Life" does not only try to define what makes a city, but also recognizes "the great variations between cities" (1938, 6) and that they can be classified into "a typology of cities based upon size, age, and function" (ibid.). Suggesting that research should "lend itself to the discovery of their variations" (ibid.), Wirth paved the way for city comparisons of various sorts, and also recognized that it is worth noting the effects of industry and capitalism on cities when examining their characteristics in different settings (1938, 7).

Over time, different approaches to comparative studies in the urban arena have been brought forward. In turn, the ideas behind comparative studies potentially contributed to phenomena such as the emergence of a division "between analyses of wealthier and poorer cities in the wake of developmentalism" (Robinson 2015, 189). In the 1960s, the idea prevailed that through globalization – meaning by way of more intercontinental travel, new opportunities to conduct commerce and communication, as well as by way of the emergence of global financial markets – cities would become increasingly similar to each other (e.g., Murphy 1966). Here, studies with a comparative approach have been able to show that even global phenomena such as capitalism produce different local outcomes and have thus enabled a more profound understanding of both, capitalism and cities.

For the studies conducted in the global context today, such comparisons analyzing in detail the local effects of global phenomena are still useful to understand cities in detail in their networks. They contribute to an understanding of how global pressures or tensions, but also new opportunities, may manifest differently in different local set-

tings, and which parameters might shape such differences. They can also highlight the long-term consequences of colonialism or other systems of oppression. Building on this idea, comparative studies can support particular groups in gaining political agency, or can help to make the long legacy of the past visible. In order for this to be achieved, researchers will need to be open to the other forms of urbanity they may encounter once leaving the West and its analytical practices behind. Its by and large Western focus is an ongoing challenge for urban theory in comparative and other arenas: "[t]here is an urgent need in urban studies to build cultures of theorizing which appreciate and foster diversity of theoretical starting points" (Robinson 2015, 192). For practitioners and researchers, observing how cities elsewhere address shared problems very differently may lead to crucial new insights as to how the 21st-century city can develop, but may also generate less Western-centric theoretical approaches to the analysis of urban and metropolitan areas.

Generally, "whether policy-oriented, structural or historical, comparative studies rely on the idea that key cities have something in common with each other, and that international comparison can provide fresh insights into when, how and to what effect local differences emerge" (Kwak 2008, 317). In the long run, comparative urbanism "might help to develop new approaches to understanding an expanding and diverse urban world, [...] being respectful of the limits of always located insights" (Robinson 2015, 194). Essentially, a comparative approach establishes new networks and enables different ways of looking at the urban at large. The popularity of such approaches has helped make urban research a key actor in the co-production of knowledge (Simon et al. 2020a) 4): "it is precisely the variation across the cases that has provided the grounds for conceptual innovation and invention" (Robinson 2015, 194). Thus, there are many arguments for comparative approaches to the study of urbanity, urban complexity and urban phenomena at large.

In many cases, the basis of a comparison between cities is perceived to be a kind of "formal equivalence" (Ward 2010, 475), which then proves to be misleading and is analyzed in detail: Comparisons are specifically useful in contexts where such pronounced differences become clear as "[u]nderstanding the potential uniqueness of cities and the specificity of the local are essential for knowledge production" (Palmer/Simon 2020, 18). At the same time, comparative studies have contributed to the establishment of a supposed hierarchy between those cities that are taken into account in studies and those that tend to be left out. This contributes to the visibility of some cities and urban phenomena and the invisibility of others (Palmer/Simon 2020, 21). This may add to some cities being perceived as secondary cities in relation to others. Further, comparative studies potentially contribute to enforcing binaries such as North/ South, East/West and thus those involved with them need to be aware of this risk.

3.   Types of City Comparisons

Depending on the setup of a project, it is possible to differentiate between types of comparison which are used in Urban and Metropolitan Studies, as well as in related fields when comparing cities or metropolitan areas and their characteristics.

The most obvious strategy to classify comparisons is via numbers – here, the crucial factor is how many items are compared to each other in a study. Paired comparisons build on the comparison of just two entities, such as cities or regions. This type of comparison does not necessarily mean a simplification of facts, a strengthening of binaries or the production of simplified dichotomies which must be avoided (Grashoff/ Yang 2020, 4), but rather, it can be useful to point out both similarities and differences via a detailed analysis. Triple case studies are more complex, and multi-case studies tend to be more abstract and less detailed than paired and triple case studies, but often prove inspiring for future research (ibid.).

Stepping beyond the classification by way of numbers, typologies are a device to "systematize heterogeneity" (Grashoff/Yang 2020, 11) and often specific to an established context. One of the better-known typologies in Urban Studies is the typology of the so-called group of world cities, which form a global network of cities important in and to the capitalist system. Behind this typology "is the assumption that cities situated in any of the three world regions will tend to have significant features in common" (Friedmann/Wolff 1982, 311) if they have great importance for the world financial markets. But this is not just a matter of the markets: "Their roles were not simply functionally determined but emerged through political action and contestation" (Robinson 2015, 190).

Another way to systematize comparative approaches, generally, but also in Urban and Metropolitan Studies, is via the relationship between the researcher and the object of study. Here, the number of comparisons established in a study is not the decisive factor. This way to differentiate between different types of comparisons was established by Charles Tilly. According to his classification, there are four types of comparison: the individualizing comparison, universalizing comparison, variation finding comparison and encompassing comparison. In the first case, a small number of cases is investigated "in order to grasp the peculiarities of each case" (Tilly 1984, 82). The second type has a more generalizing function, assuming it is possible to find instances where "a phenomenon follows essentially the same rules" (ibid.) every time it manifests. The third aims to "establish a principle of variation in the character or intensity of a phenomenon" (ibid.). This kind of study tends to work with many examples of one phenomenon in order to understand how differences in reactions to this very phenomenon come to be. An encompassing comparison "places different instances at various locations within the same system, on the way to explaining their characteristics as a function of their varying relationships to the system as a whole" (Tilly 1984, 83).

Ward criticizes that comparative studies in relation to urban topics all too often lack attention to scale (2010, 478). Here, he refers not simply to the scaling of maps, but to the idea that studies which take into account two or more cities in different national contexts only focus on the city itself as their subject without taking into account, for example, national policies or other regional factors and their contributions to urban phenomena. Further, these studies do not tend to look at cities as parts of their particular networks but consider their subjects of study as a type of isolated phenomenon (Ward 2010, 479). This leads to instances where power dynamics are not taken into account sufficiently. Instead, the causation of a problem or phenomenon is addressed as the only focus (Ward 2010, 480).

Due to these challenges, a "relational comparative approach" (Ward 2010, 280) to urban subjects may be needed. This approach "recognizes both the territorial and the relational histories and geographies that are behind their production and (re)production" (Ward 2010, 480) and helps shift attention away from the attempt to find similarities between different closed entities. This often happens in comparative investigations of a subject and leads to "stressing interconnected trajectories" (ibid.). A relational comparative approach makes it possible to see cities as sites connected to each other over time, and to view cities as entities in constant interaction with their surroundings – to speak with Doreen Massey, to recognize how "places are both unique and interdependent" (quoted in Ward 2010, 48). Especially in the era of globalization, including global financial markets and the global flow of information, cities are not as independent from their context as it might seem to a narrowly focused researcher. Changes in the global dynamics will have an impact on the situation on the ground and thus no phenomena can be viewed in isolation from each other (Ward 2010, 482).

4.   Comparing Urban Phenomena and their Representation

As an interdisciplinary field, Urban Studies is certainly not limited to quantitative comparisons that focus on objectively measurable similarities and differences. Since it is heavily shaped by the Social Sciences and the Humanities, qualitative research and qualitative projects are used in order to compare urban and metropolitan phenomena in a variety of contexts. Such comparisons range from questions of comparing youth cultures and spaces associated with nightlife in different cities and regions (e.g., Chatterton/Hollands 2003), to investigating phenomena such as urban violence and their triggers (e.g., Moran/Waddington 2015), or undertaking comparisons of the media representation of cities and regions, including ways of dealing with their pasts and ideas for their future (e.g., Sattler 2019). Here, methods can range from approaching questions of storytelling or narratives to analyzing imagery (e.g., symbols, metaphors; for a discussion, see Parr in this volume), looking at patterns of linguistic change in a particular area, or focusing on a close reading of select textual material (novels, newspaper reports, films, interviews etc.), e.g., with the help of one or several theoretical approaches.

The Social Sciences and the Humanities often define a "text" as any material that enables "reading" – an advertising poster can be a text just as much as a poem, a television documentary or a map. In literary studies, comparative studies are a field of their own and enable "making comparisons between literary works and architecture, music and paintings, and also comparisons between different literatures" (Cuddon 1999, 164), meaning that items submitted to a comparison can be very different from each other and once again pointing to the understanding that a building, a piece of music or a film can also be read as a "text" and can be analyzed with methods of textual analysis. This suggests that in Urban Studies, such types of comparison that might seem unlikely to the more quantitatively oriented researchers focusing on data are also possible, and that indeed, data and poetry or architecture and statistics may be used together.

Much like their quantitative counterparts, comparative approaches of the qualitative sort – which can mean comparing urban narratives in fiction, or comparing the

media representation of one particular city across different time periods, but also include such approaches as conducting standardized interviews with residents of different cities to learn about their perception of their lives – help to highlight local specificities, but can also enable the recognition of shared characteristics of different cities.

Ward (2010) detects a particular emphasis on the idea of comparing cities in terms of their livelihood and ranking them accordingly. City rankings can be a motor of tourism, but also of investment, as companies may invest in such regions where their employees can expect to live a good life – meaning a place where they can find good housing conditions, superior educational opportunities, but also ways to spend their free time. City rankings thus have become part and parcel of city marketing strategies. This also shows that quantitative and qualitative approaches often go hand in hand – it is not measurable factors alone that qualify a city or region as 'livable'; rather, the representation of particular places and sites in marketing materials as well as in the media at large also contribute to such a perception.

In any comparative study one will have to pose the question of whether it actually looks at urbanity and urban phenomena, or whether the city or the metropolis is the context of a study (e.g., in studies focusing on diversity, it makes sense to work with cities, as the urban environment enables encounters with a variety of lifestyles). Generally, a comparative approach places emphasis on understanding "the general" vs. "the specific" (Ward 2010, 474). One of the central challenges remains adequately commenting on the specificities of cities or sites within cities while at the same time paying close attention to similarity and difference between them. Ideally, undertaking a comparison – especially one in which quantitative and qualitative data work together – will help recognize which characteristics of a phenomenon are singular and which of them are universal. When researching a subject from a comparative angle, the comparative agenda sets part of the goal and in that sense may limit the options of what can be found out (Tilly 1984, 82). At the same time, a comparative approach in its particular complexity may be especially useful when studying equally complex topics such as those relating to urban identity or urban development. Ideally, comparison enables transgressing boundaries of the nation, the region or other perceived separating factors, and may thus contribute to an entirely new understanding of a phenomenon that is not caught in preconceived notions of it.

5.   Comparative Approaches in Practice

There are several examples of projects in the field of Urban and Metropolitan Research that productively integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches. These illustrate the potential of comparative studies beyond the immediately visible, meaning beyond tourism or marketing and ranking cities according to their supposed importance or quality of life. One example is the project Shrinking Cities, which took place from 2003 to 2008. Shrinking Cities investigated urban shrinkage as a cultural phenomenon.

This project can be considered especially significant in the context of comparative projects, as it focused on those cities that usually do not appear in such studies, that are not 'global' cities, and that do not loom large in city rankings: Detroit in the US Rust

Belt, Ivanovo in Russia, the Manchester/Liverpool region in the United Kingdom and Halle/Leipzig in Eastern Germany (former GDR). All four cities and city regions are confronted with shrinkage: due to suburbanization, post-socialism, de-industrialization or a mix of all or some of those. This means that they lend themselves to comparisons of shrinkage in terms of its spatial, economic and cultural dimensions. Shrinking Cities, which resulted in several print and digital publications and in the first *Atlas of Shrinking Cities*, which fills some of the gaps for research on shrinkage, started from the assumption that modern processes of shrinkage are different from earlier such processes of urban decline that often were due to accidents or natural disasters. In the project, human geographers, urban planners, economists, filmmakers and others worked together.

The sites chosen for studies, as well as the further places included in the context of local projects and exhibitions, are the kinds of places for which a discipline like Urban Planning, which traditionally focuses on development in terms of growth, has to still find approaches. So far, the discipline "has had little to say about what cities should become following decline – population and employment loss, property disinvestment, and property abandonment" (Dewar/Kelly/Morrison 2013, 289). But the processes that manifest in these shrinking cities and regions across the globe make evident that "[t]he planning profession needs to develop the language, data, tools, and pedagogical frameworks that deal with the reality of America's [and other] shrinking industrial cities" (Dewar/Kelly/Morrison 2013, 300). For this new field of discovery, comparisons may be particularly fruitful, for example to see which answers and which terminologies have already been found for such scenarios beyond the immediately obvious, and to build a community of learning from each other.

The "Shrinking Cities" project successfully intervened into ongoing discourses of urban decline and showed how shrinkage can enable new ways of looking at the city and at urbanity from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. While it certainly asked for possible scenarios of future development for Detroit, Ivanovo, Liverpool/Manchester and Halle/Leipzig using the mode of comparison, it also pointed out the significance of interdisciplinary cooperation in comparative studies. The cooperation between artists, social scientists, architects, planners and others enabled a renegotiation of shrinkage as an urban phenomenon of the present, as well as a discussion of the local and global characteristics of this phenomenon in a discussion that went beyond lament and opened a public debate about the challenges and possibilities ahead (*Projektbüro Schrumpfende Städte*).

6. Future Potential and Challenges of Comparative Approaches in Metropolitan Contexts

More recently, research in Comparative Urban Studies has taken to transgressing established boundaries of North and South to enable comparison and co-produced research between partners from supposedly very different backgrounds. One such project, the MISTRA Urban Futures project connecting sites across the world in relation to questions of urban sustainability, highlighted the potential for learning from each other in each and any direction – from the North to the South, but very definitely also the other

way around (Simon et al. 2020b, 156). The project illustrates that comparative studies as an investigative strategy has moved beyond its 1970s normative stance and towards the understanding that justice in the city is also and crucially a matter of productively working with local specificities and taking into account the diversity of cities and their citizens (Simon et al. 2020b, 161f.).

At the same time, in city marketing and associated disciplines, but at times also in politics, the idea of ranking cities according to characteristics and prestige is still prevalent. This is especially true in a time shaped by shrinking budgets and fewer opportunities for funding. Such campaigns provide much material for comparative studies in those branches of Urban and Metropolitan Studies that are working with approaches from the Humanities and Social Sciences such as with methods of textual analysis.

Comparisons between cities such as the ones used in the media or in marketing materials or material relating to development projects can be used to inspire and to create goals worth aspiring to – such as when the post-industrial Ruhr Region in Germany is linked to New York, "the Big Apple" (Wilms 2008). But they can also point to a perceived superiority of one city or region over another. This is the case, for example, when the struggles and challenges of Detroit, Michigan, are used in order to create a threatening scenario for the city of Bochum, Germany, also located in the Ruhr Region, and other European cities in which General Motors produces or formerly produced cars. In the "Detroit-Projekt", one of the follow-up projects of the European Capital of Culture – RUHR.2010 –, citizens are not only made aware that "This is not Detroit" – one slogan of the project, which was publicly funded. They are also being informed that "[t]he people of Detroit have already faced what we do not want to experience: the closing of the automotive and steel industry, moving away and leaving behind a landscape of ruins" (*Urbane Künste Ruhr*). While this statement can potentially serve a motivating purpose and invite people to think about the future of their city, the comparison with Detroit also points to the perceived superiority of those who – supposedly in opposition to Detroiters – participate in a process of reinvention. The project does not ask, for example, how postindustrial cities may learn from each other when faced with the closing of factories (Sattler 2017).

Still, comparing, as McFarlane has emphasized, ideally becomes a practice building on "learning through difference" (quoted in Simon et al. 2020b, 162), a notion that was present in the Shrinking Cities project already. Comparative Studies have moved away from a rather static setting to developing more dynamic approaches, and toward an idea of mutual learning in local contexts that points to furthering justice, equality and diversity in research as well. At the same time, there is great need for innovation in theory in the light of new experiences and with urban scholars travelling and conducting investigations globally (Robinson 2015, 193): Comparative setups are an opportunity to speak for the need for greater openness and fewer formal limitations to cooperation around the globe, and further theorizing on the subject will have to take this factor into account – both as a challenge and an opportunity.

7.   Works Cited

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