



Thirty Years of Urban Sociology

A French Viewpoint

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

What is urban sociology in France? Christian Topalov, one of the key players in the history of this discipline, looks back on the two key periods during which the label “urban sociology” came into its own: the 1970s, and the era that heralded the “problem of the banlieues” from the early 1980s onwards – two periods in which academics’ and public policymakers’ visions of the city coincided.

“The city is what we choose to make it for the purpose of analysis.” This is the observation made in 1964 by Leonard Reissman, a most interesting American sociologist (Reissman 1964, p. 153). Indeed, in the massively urbanized world of the 20th century, urban sociologists have always been faced with a problem: how can the specificity of their research object be defined? If everything – or almost everything – is urban, how does urban sociology differ from “standard” sociology? I shall not proffer a response to this question, which would merely be another “good definition”.¹ Instead, I shall strive to retrace the history of some of the “points of view” evoked by Reissman, and which have given rise to different “urban sociologies”.

Despite what the textbooks tend to say, it could be something of an optical illusion to describe the history of this discipline in terms of a linear development with precursors, founders and “classics” that we all share. Nor is it even a set of problems or controversies discussed continuously over time. This discipline has not experienced any process whereby knowledge has been accumulated in the context of stable institutionalization; rather, it consists of a discrete series of local emergences followed by eclipses. The definition of the object has often changed, sometimes radically. The reason for this is that each of these definitions is linked to the particular historical configuration at a given time and in a given country – despite episodes of partial internationalization.

The term “urban sociology” appeared in the United States in the 1910s. It began to spread a little within America from 1925, and a lot from 1950 (Topalov 2008). From the very start, various paradigms have coexisted or superseded one another, each based on a profound revision of the bibliographical corpora of the discipline and thus on a new version of its past: Max Weber became an urban sociologist in 1958 in the United States (Martindale 1958), Simmel emerged from oblivion around 1970 (Sennett 1969; Levine 1971), and Halbwachs began his career as the founder of French urban sociology in 1986 (Amiot 1986).

Very often, what we teach is not really the history of the discipline but rather the accepted legend surrounding this history at the time and place in which we are speaking. That said, there would appear to be some common ancestors that have featured in every standard national history since the late 1960s, namely the Chicago sociologists of the 1920s. It was precisely because this group was

¹ This text is a slightly reworked version of a contribution to a conference held in Buenos Aires on 25 October 2012 in the auditorium of the Instituto de Desarrollo Económico y Social, in collaboration with the Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, Instituto del Conurbano, Programa de Estudios Urbanos.

promoted as founders of the discipline in the US that, from 1964, Morris Janowitz invented and sought to promote the “Chicago School” in an exportable format (Topalov 2004), to which Burgess and Bogue (1964), Sennett (1969) and Short (1971), among others, would contribute. For the rest, however, the histories related in each country diverge considerably.

It is for this reason that I have given this text the subtitle “A French Viewpoint”. Indeed, it is only a “point of view” on the past that I wish to present here, and one that I wish to explicitly situate not just in time and space but also within my own trajectory, which was also that of quite a number of French sociologists of my generation – the “generation of ’68”, whose first books date from around 1975.

We shall therefore observe the instability of a discipline, its analytical tools and its preferred research objects. This case study asks a more general – and, in my view, quite interesting – question of the social sciences: how do academics choose their objects? And what socio-historic conditions are necessary for a specialized sociology to be developed and potentially stabilized? I propose to recount the past from the standpoint of two successive observation points: 1981 and 2013.

Looking back from 1981: the fall of a shooting star

In 1981, over two decades after the founding of the Fifth Republic, which had until then been dominated by right-wing governments with no sharing of power, France saw the first electoral victory of the Union de la Gauche (Union of the Left, bringing together the French Socialist and Communist Parties). It was also the moment when a shooting star began to disintegrate and fall to the ground: “the French school of Marxist urban sociology”. In France, there had been a sudden and brief expansion in urban studies, albeit at least a decade behind the North American explosion in the field. The relationship to tradition that could be observed at this time was quite specific: often through ignorance, but also through conviction, a generation of young researchers had decided to take a *tabula rasa* approach, forgetting the discipline’s past and advancing in new directions. One of the protagonists of this experiment was the author of a little book published in Mexico: *La urbanización capitalista* (Topalov 1979). I therefore advise you to take what I am about to say with a pinch of salt, as the actors of a given history are not in the best position to view it objectively. In other words, what follows is a testimony and not a presentation of research results.

In 1968, before the “events” of May and June (a student revolt, a general strike, an electoral victory for the Right), two texts were published that would have a major influence on future agendas.

The first (Ledrut 1968) was a short book titled *Sociologie urbaine* – the first occurrence of such a title in French – published in the “Le Sociologue” series of the Presses Universitaires de France, coordinated by Georges Balandier, a professor at the Sorbonne: this predisposed it to becoming the university textbook of reference. Its author, Raymond Ledrut, had defended his thesis, two years earlier, under the supervision of Georges Gurvitch, another Sorbonne professor, under the title “Sociologie urbaine et aménagement urbain” (“Urban Sociology and Urban Development”). At the age of 49, as a lecturer at the humanities faculty in Toulouse, Ledrut entered the race for control of a speciality where two other authors had already solidly established their positions: Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, since the early 1950s, and relative newcomer Henri Lefebvre.

As a fan of ethnology in his youth, Chombart had been director of studies at EPHE² – a rather marginal institution at the time – since 1960. He had authored numerous surveys and works on Paris, produced with the financial support of several public administrations responsible for urban-planning policy (Chombart de Lauwe 1959, 1960 and 1965). He had recently cut ties with his protectors, whom he felt were not following his advice closely enough – and also with researchers

² EPHE: École Pratique des Hautes Études, literally “Practical School of Advanced Studies”. Part of EPHE would break away in 1975 to form EHESS (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales – School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences).

in his own team, who were focusing on “applied research” too much for his liking. The remaining group would soon become collectively known as the “Centre de Sociologie Urbaine” (“Centre for Urban Sociology”) or CSU.

Lefebvre, a Marxist philosopher who was expelled from the French Communist Party, was a professor of sociology at the then brand-new humanities faculty (now the Université de Paris-10) at Nanterre in the western inner suburbs of Paris. He had written a great deal on “everyday life” (Lefebvre 1947, 1968a) and a little on social-housing estates (Lefebvre 1960) before publishing, in 1968, a manifesto: *Le Droit à la ville* (“The Right to the City”) (Lefebvre 1968b). Empirical studies began to emerge from the Institut de Sociologie Urbaine (Institute of Urban Sociology) that he had founded.

In *Sociologie urbaine*, Ledrut clearly defined the reasons for the discipline’s existence, and his vision for its future. Urbanization was a challenge to which French society had to find a response. The solutions offered by the field of urban planning called into question the organization and operation of the social space; there was therefore a need for sociologists. Urban planning was “a means of social control or urban order”, and accordingly Ledrut devoted himself to helping to develop cities in an enlightened fashion. The city had to be a place of social integration, and urban sociology would study the conditions necessary to ensure the cohesion of the units that make up the urban space: their internal cohesion – neighbourhoods needed to be “authentic” – and the cohesion of everything that makes up an urban area.

To back up this project, Ledrut made use of the extensive literature produced in the United States since the early 20th century: municipal reformers, urban planners and architects, modernizing politicians, and social workers – and sociologists, too – were transformed, through the magic of the footnote, into the “authors” of an emerging urban science. The recruitment of these precursors was a means not just of validating a scientific territory but also of eliminating the competition: Ledrut’s textbook completely ignores Chombart de Lauwe and Lefebvre, with the American references cited making it possible to overlook the most recent past in France. Regardless, Ledrut followed in Chombart’s footsteps and clearly defined an urban sociology that deliberately positioned itself in such a way as to ensure better-informed planning on a more human scale.

The second text that marked the French context at this time was a critical analysis published in first issue of 1968 of *Sociologie du travail*, one of the main journals in French sociology, under the patronage of Alain Touraine, a professor at Nanterre and director of studies at the EPHE. The title was provocative: “Y a-t-il une sociologie urbaine ?” (“Is there an urban sociology?”) (Castells 1968). Its author, Manuel Castells, was 26, a lecturer at Nanterre and a member of Touraine’s Laboratoire de Sociologie Industrielle (“Laboratory of Industrial Sociology”). As we might imagine, his response to this question was, “No.” While it was true that there was a social demand and a sociological fashion for it, it was also the subject of a scientific crisis: this discipline, for fundamental reasons, was in search of a “lost object”. Presenting the city as an explanatory variable is something of a cheat, as what we call “urban culture” is simply the culture of all developed industrial societies and nothing has been explained. And if the city is presented as a dependent variable, that is to say as the product of history and society, it is then necessary to explain how this society produced the city. As long as the type of causality had not been defined, urban sociology or urban ecology was doomed to being nothing more than the description of forms. The article was built on a detailed knowledge of the most recent American literature, made an indulgent analysis of French works, and concluded with this passage: “Perhaps a last major research project for urban sociology would be one in which the impossibility of its having any scientific autonomy [was] empirically demonstrated.” It is elegant and definitive – Castells’s opinions, even when they change, are always definitive.

The following year, the public administrations responsible for urban planning and development launched their first large-scale invitation to tender aimed at the social sciences, on the theme of “participation in urban power”. Castells and many others responded. Funding for “urban research”

benefited from a sharp upward trend, rising fivefold between 1969 and 1976. Partners changed, on both sides. Those who managed programmes in ministries formed specialist teams. Their relations with the operational urban-development bodies were distant; by contrast, they maintained close relations with the senior civil servants of the Gaullist central government, who were concerned by the social shock waves and difficulties that their modernizing project were coming up against. At the same time, the managers of the research programmes developed a close working relationship with a milieu of researchers that they had created and which was entirely dependent upon them.

The contracts financed the surveys and salaries of young graduates of the mass university, recruited directly from outside the allegiances of the leading figures of the discipline. Established university researchers resisted the sirens' call: in 1971, Ledrut organized a symposium called "L'analyse pluridisciplinaire de la croissance urbaine" ("The pluridisciplinary analysis of urban growth") to promote their collaboration with urban-planning bodies. There were around 40 attendees, but only four sociologists (Ledrut 1972). The new generation of researchers would therefore find themselves working outside the ordinary contexts of the university and the CNRS (French National Centre for Scientific Research). They were politically radicalized and, for the most part, had studied in the diverse variants of Marxism and structuralism.

This surprising combination of young academics who were critical of power and a technocracy whose certainties were shaken to the core would give birth to a critical urban sociology that had a new agenda: it was no longer a question of adapting urban planning to the needs of city dwellers but rather one of analysing the capitalist production of the city, the urban policies of central government, and the social movements that contested these policies. The number of projects grew, combining strong theoretical claims and field studies; more and more research reports were produced, a very small proportion of which would ultimately lead to visible forms of publication. These included the journal *Espaces et Sociétés*, launched in 1970 and initially directed by Lefebvre, and the "La Recherche urbaine" series of publications, coordinated by Castells at EPHE, which published 14 titles between 1972 and 1978 (for example: Lojkine 1972; Topalov 1974; Castells and Godard 1975).

In 1970, this current converged with its British and North American counterparts at the VII World Congress of the International Sociological Association, held at Varna in Bulgaria, where a research committee on urban and regional development was created; from 1977 onwards, this committee would publish the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. Researchers from Paris brought monographs in various languages, and in 1976 Chris Pickvance published a collection of critical essays written by French researchers (Pickvance 1976). It is within this somewhat nebulous context that the "French school of Marxist urban sociology" came into being: the fact that it was referred to in this way by its English-speaking allies, as well as in Latin America and continental Europe later on, represented an important resource in symbolic terms – although this designation was significantly longer-lived abroad than in France. In its home nation, this new form of sociology was seen as intriguing as a result of its pretensions and vitality, but its origins made it illegitimate in the eyes of university authorities: historians and geographers in particular would deny its very existence.

In any case, those who promoted a form of sociology as a partner of urban planning (like Chombart and Ledrut) were temporarily marginalized. Critical currents that did not identify with Marx developed in parallel, and also enjoyed the support of ministries – for example, disciples of Michel Foucault with the journal *Recherches* (e.g. Murard and Zylberman 1976, 1977; Joseph 1977), young engineers from the *École Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées*, and architects who challenged functionalist urban planning. Researchers who were angry at the hegemony of the various forms of Marxism began to arm themselves intellectually with a view to putting an end to this situation – in particular by travelling to Chicago, where they sought the legitimation of a fieldwork-based sociology that was attentive to everyday life and had dispensed with all-embracing theories (Grafmeyer and Joseph 1979).

The abandonment of Marxist urban sociology was brutal: the whole intellectual and political landscape changed. Two major figures disappeared, as if to symbolize this change: Nicos Poulantzas took his own life in 1978 and Louis Althusser was committed to a psychiatric hospital in 1980. Furthermore, 1978 was also the year when the Union de la Gauche collapsed, followed by a haemorrhaging of intellectuals away from the French Communist Party. From 1976 onwards, untenured researchers, employed on fixed-term research contracts, were gradually integrated into the CNRS, where they subsequently found themselves required to comply more and more with ordinary academic constraints. Urban policies were also subject to change, as became particularly obvious following the election of centre-right Valéry Giscard d'Estaing to the French presidency in 1974: the “burning need” for “the Plan”,³ so keenly advocated by De Gaulle and the triumphant corps of engineers of the *École Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées*, cooled down, the powers and convictions of public planners and developers weakened, and financial resources for urban research began to dwindle – by 1980, funding had fallen back to 1969 levels. By the time the coffers began to swell again, from 1984 onwards, the resources in question were earmarked for different programmes and different researchers: “lifestyles” were now being studied, and the teams working on this subject were all based at universities (as opposed to the elite *grandes écoles*). Links with fundamental disciplines were reinforced and very few fields claimed any links with “urban sociology”. This sidelining of the discipline would last for almost 20 years.

Looking back from 2013: the rise of new evidence

If we now jump forward to 2013, the landscape has changed radically: in France, “urban sociology” has been enjoying a new lease of life, as reflected by the publication of a series of short textbooks from the mid-1990s onwards, as befits a discipline now taught in universities (Grafmeyer 1994; Fijalkow 2002; Stébé and Marchal 2007). Previously, none existed in French, aside from Ledrut’s work, last reprinted in 1979.

In parallel, the term “urban anthropology” (Raulin 2001) has started to be used to refer to a discipline that has gradually acquired “little sister” status within the anthropology “family”. Of course, while “exotic societies” remain the discipline’s “noble material”, this domain has been affected by decolonization: with anthropologists turning their focus once more to mainland France and the criticism of colonial ethnology, the notion of “anthropology at home” has become a reality. This has been accompanied by renewed interest in the work of Chombart de Lauwe, who was no longer described as a “sociologist” but as an “anthropologist”, and considered a precursor, as reflected by the volume of interviews that was published in 1996, shortly before his death (Chombart de Lauwe 1996).

The currents of research that have contributed to this renewal of interest are quite varied, and I shall consequently restrict myself here to talking only about what I consider to be essential. Works on the socio-economics of urban production have practically disappeared: sociologists, who previously fought over this territory with economists, have now abandoned it. The field of economics, for its part, tends to focus on increasingly abstract formalizations, and those economists who are attentive to institutions and forms of production have been marginalized within their own discipline. Consequently, there is barely any research under way in France today into the production of the city – fortunately, historians have taken up the baton, including for the 20th century.

Most sociologists have also moved away from works on the urban policies of the French state. But political scientists have taken over research in this domain: in France, political science is a dynamic discipline that aims to be a sociology of practices and the political field. It takes a particular interest in the genesis and transformation of public policies from a constructivist standpoint: how are public problems defined? What forms of language and what cognitive tools are

³ In fact, a succession of four- and five-year plans for the economic development of France, defined by the Commissariat Général du Plan, or “General Plan Commission”.

used? How do coalitions of actors and stakeholders form around these problems? This has led to some fascinating studies of street-level bureaucracy in France, which enable us to gain a better knowledge and understanding of interactions between public administrations and populations, the effects of domination, and the ruses and forms of resistance mobilized by those that are dominated (Dubois 1999). From this perspective, sociologists have also started to take an interest in urban policies; however, their work is not clearly identified as “urban sociology”.

Indeed, we could say that the central object of urban sociology in France today is the “problem of the *banlieues*”. Among the countless works that have given form to this problem, particular mention should be made in the academic realm of those of Dubet (1987), Lapeyronnie (2008) and Kokoreff (2008). This already represents two generations of almost continuous scholarly production. Journalists and politicians, as well as certain sociologists, are convinced that this is “the new social issue”.

This statement expresses a profound reorganization of scholarly representations of French society. Once again, a social question has been transformed into a spatial or urban question, and relationships between social groups have been redefined as relationships between groups and spaces. This is not, of course, the first time this has happened: 19th-century Europe had to deal with the “problem of slums”, the US of the 1950s and 1960s had “the inner-city problem”, and Latin America has been faced with the “theory of marginality”, which was initially a representation of large metropolitan areas.

My aim is not to criticize this transmutation, but rather to highlight some of the processes that have been implemented along the way and the role that urban sociology has played in France in this connection.

Language has a key role in establishing common meanings and shared truisms. The new forms and formats discussed here are above all a stream, an avalanche, a tidal wave of words. The recognition and formulation of a “problem of the *banlieues*” began to take form around 1985, achieving a stable definition from 1990 onwards. A number of studies focusing on the origins of what is known in France as “*la politique de la ville*” (urban policy) explain with considerable precision how this consensus came about – among them Sylvie Tissot’s PhD thesis, defended at EHESS (Tissot 2007).

A now mandatory lexical network has developed around the words “*banlieue*”, ([poor] suburbs), “*quartiers*” ([disadvantaged] neighbourhoods) and “*cités*” ([social-housing] estates/projects). Consider the headline of the 23 March 1986 edition of *Le Monde*, which read “L’agglomération lyonnaise est malade de ses banlieues” – “Lyon’s suburbs are sick”. It was precisely around this time that the word “*banlieues*” (typically used in the plural in order to refer to specific “problem” suburbs, whereas in French the singular is traditionally employed to refer to the suburbs in general) began to be systematically associated, in expert and scholarly language, in the press, and in political discourse, with society’s ills.

At this juncture, it is interesting to point out the contrast between the ways in which newspapers reported two quite similar events in 1981 and 1990: in both cases, they involved disturbances that took place in the working-class suburbs of Lyon in south-east France. Joyriding in the Minguettes district in July 1981 was described as a local issue. On the occasions when such acts were associated with wider-ranging problems, it was typically those of “problem estates”, already a subject of debate over the previous two decades: high concentrations of population, teenagers, architecture based on towers and slabs, a lack of social amenities, female isolation, boredom. In 1981, though, there was not yet any established vocabulary to describe what was still a new phenomenon at that time. By October 1990, however, riots in Vaulx-en-Velin following the death of a young motorcyclist caused by police action were straight away interpreted as the symptom of a new and profound ill that now had a name: the “problem of the *banlieues*”. Cue a sigh of relief on the symbolic front: cars may have been burning, but we now knew how to talk about it.

The word “*banlieue*” was not the only new arrival. From the late 1980s onwards, the French national press would talk about “*les jeunes des quartiers*” (literally “young people from the neighbourhoods”) as well as just “*les quartiers*” (“the neighbourhoods”) – as in, for example, “*les quartiers se sont embrasés hier soir*” (“the neighbourhoods erupted last night”) or even “*les quartiers sont descendus en ville*” (“the neighbourhoods descended upon the city centre”). This has its origins in Marseille: when people there say “*les quartiers*”, everyone understands “*les Quartiers Nord*” (the city’s poor northern suburbs, home to many social-housing estates) by synecdoche – a local oddity that has found its way into the national vocabulary.

Why has this semantic shift taken place? Since the late 1970s, urban policy in France has targeted working-class “problem” neighbourhoods, using resources centred on social supervision measures? In official terminology, the areas concerned are referred to by various euphemistic denominations, such as “*quartiers de développement social*” (“social development neighbourhoods”) or “*quartiers sensibles*” (“sensitive neighbourhoods”). In the language of the press, however, they remain “*les quartiers*”. Once the ailment has been named in this way, its causes are presumed to be known immediately. From this point on, mention is rarely made of unemployment, the lack of job security, low wages, racism, police violence and denial of justice, failing schools, or the impossibility of starting up a business: all these means of presenting the problem would have been possible, and indeed are sometimes cited as concomitant to the “problem of the *banlieues*”, but they never manage to oust the latter. On the other hand, the media has no problem using other terms: ghetto, inhuman architecture, relegation to the urban fringes, exclusion from society; and, more recently: immigration, ethnicity, Islam.

“Exclusion” is a key term: it emerged in the early 1990s and started to become associated with the vocabulary of the “*banlieues*”, forming a whole lexical network that would gradually spread and become firmly established. These are scholarly creations: sociologists contributed significantly to the development of such terms, in the course of intense dialogue with urban policy officers, brought together under the aegis of the literary magazine *Esprit*. For the most part, this involved disciples of Alain Touraine, concerned with making sociology useful. During one of the founding meetings of this new consensus, in December 1990, Touraine himself proclaimed, “The problem today is not exploitation but exclusion” (Touraine 1991), a sentiment that would be echoed by two of his acolytes in a sociological essay titled *Les Quartiers d’exil*: “Segregation has replaced exploitation” (Dubet and Lapeyronnie 1992).

Not all sociologists agree with this notion. Robert Castel, for instance, offers a detailed criticism in *Les Métamorphoses de la question sociale* (Castel 1995), instead proposing the concept of “disaffiliation”, whereby the labour society, organized through stable work contracts and social rights linked to these contracts, is being gradually dismantled, producing situations of precarity of varying severity, with diverse and ever larger populations being distanced from the main body of the workforce; at the end of this continuum, and this process, can be found those who are wrongly designated as “the excluded”. Indeed, the notion of “exclusion” has the dual effect of isolating those who are excluded from the overall dynamic of society and essentially reducing their situation to a form of spatial segregation. It leads to transformations in the world of work being neglected, and to a focus on an “urban sociology” that is defined as the study of spatial exclusion.

This raises an interesting question: how are the “problems of analysis” that Reissman talked about defined? How is the validity, the descriptive relevance and the explanatory power of a scholarly concept decided? Through methodical experimentation in accordance with the rules of the profession, or through free debate among researchers? Or does it instead depend on the success that our scholarly jargon enjoys among opinion-makers? In any case, it is clear that new shared meanings play an essential role in defining research projects deemed to be relevant and, first and foremost, those that deserve to be funded.

A comparison of contexts

To finish, I would like to compare the two contexts described above: the context of the 1970s and that of the 1990s. We can fairly safely say that Marxism has lost out overall, and that the concepts of social class and state power have been ousted by notions of poverty and exclusion, and even ethnic and religious categories. I believe that this formulation is altogether inadequate, as it is based on the premise that all this is a simple matter of ideas.

The dominant form of French urban sociology of the 1970s was born out of the initiative of contenders seeking entry into academia. They were supported by pro-reform engineers who, in the central urban-planning departments of the time, provided them with work; by the same token, the new arrivals could escape the constraints that ordinarily determined admission into the world of science, and in particular the obligation to comply with the wishes of university superiors. This unusual set-up meant that they ignored almost all the literature, but were also able to innovate.

They produced “urban” sociology because the research funding arrangements led them, without them realizing it, to working on issues related to the city. Their breed of sociology was intended to have an activist basis, and was linked to a social transformation project deemed plausible at the time by this generation that had become radicalized in a mass university that no longer guaranteed them the kinds of secure careers enjoyed by their predecessors.

The questions that they raised concerned the city from the standpoint of the policies implemented by ministries. This was nothing particularly new: the questions of Chombart or Ledrut were also forged through conversations with urban planners and developers, with the aim of improving things gradually. The questions of people like Castells, Lojkine and Topalov had their origins in a critical discussion of “capitalist” urban policies, with a view to changing things radically. They wanted to challenge the state, but, without realizing it, remained fascinated by the state at the same time. They adopted a state point of view, a government point of view, a bird’s-eye view of the social world – a point of view which, as always in the social sciences, made it possible to see certain things and impossible to see others. *Contre l’État, les sociologues* was the title of a fine study by Michel Amiot of French urban sociology at this time (Amiot 1986). This title (“Sociologists, Against the State”) is an ironic allusion to a (somewhat chauvinistic) quotation by Sacha Guitry: “*Je suis contre les femmes, tout contre*” (“I am against women, right up against them”).

Accordingly, I believe that the disappearance of French Marxist urban sociology from the 1980s onwards occurred for the same reasons as the (temporary) disappearance of their academic adversaries of the time. Urban sociologies that sought to further planning and those that sought to radically criticize it both found themselves cut off from the partners that had enabled them to exist, namely the planners. For this urban planning which, since the aftermath of the Second World War, had been relatively sure of itself under the direction of professionals who had a doctrine, know-how, legitimacy and significant public resources, had begun to collapse under the weight of doctrines and the forces of the neoliberal conservative revolution.

Once again, I would like to emphasize that what I am presenting here is a “French point of view”: the dismantling of ideologies and resources for the public planning of towns and cities was not a homogeneous phenomenon internationally. Certain countries experienced very different contexts – for example, Argentina after its “Great Depression”, Brazil, Mexico, and very probably China too. Sociologists there are thus no doubt faced with situations, questions and conversations that are very different from those that prevail in the United Kingdom since Thatcher and Blair, or in the United States since Reagan and Clinton, or in France since Mitterrand.

To return to the case of France, the taste for ethnography or urban anthropology, dense descriptions of lifestyles, and questions on the formation of identities have all been fruitful developments. This has resulted in new studies and very new results. But these trends cannot be separated from a new definition of what things it is relevant to study – a new definition where politics plays key role. However, this should not come as a surprise, as it has always been thus.

Finally, let us conclude with a more general hypothesis. Let us return to our starting point: “The city is what we [sociologists] choose to make it”. Not quite: it isn’t enough for an academic to simply make a decision for it to be convincing; it is also necessary for the object defined as “the city” to be backed up by sufficient evidence to convince the academic’s peers and contemporaries. This version of “the city” must not just be accepted as a reference by other academics, but also – and perhaps above all – by those who count in society, and upon whom social recognition and resources depend. It is for this reason that the cities of the social sciences took form in a context of negotiation – sometimes tacit, sometimes explicit – with public practitioners. The key figures of the practices in question in the 20th century were easily identifiable: municipal administrators, managers of dangerous populations, and rational developers of space. The periods during which forms of urban sociology develop would therefore appear to be those times when a cognitive agreement is established between academics and one of these public authorities, when their respective definitions of “the city” coincide sufficiently. The result is a scientific programme that has meaning outside the scientific world and which is able to give something back to science in the form of “social demand”. Conversely, when the “lay” partners of academics disappear or when agreements begin to break down, this typically means it is time to retreat and await a potential renaissance. This is why “urban sociology” is so fragile, so diverse, so unstable. It’s perhaps also what gives it its charm.

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