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Getting an explicit comparative perspective in urban studies

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Her research focuses on the “urban question” in terms of a spatial and material construction associated with social processes and cultural practices which are themselves inextricably linked to political dynamics. Her interest in the comparative approach stems, admittedly, not only from a university career that spans both France (Europe) and the United States but also an awareness of the comparative analysis as a methodology for generating knowledge in the social sciences at a time when the influence of cross-national socio-economic processes linked to the globalization of the economy is becoming paramount. As a geographer she is also interested in the politics of scale and since 2000, her publications deal with the leadership and political responsibilities of cities (through public policies) in addressing global issues with a sustainability perspective. Among her recent publications, *Les Etats-Unis entre local et mondial* (Paris, Presses de Sciences po, 2000) [The United States between local and global], *La ville insoutenable* (ed. with Augustin Berque) (Paris, Belin, 2006) [The unsustainable city], *La Théorie du “New Urbanism* (Paris, Ministère Equipement, 2006) [The theory of New Urbanism in favor of smart and green growth] and *Dictionnaire des mondialisations* (ed.) (Colin, 2006) [Dictionary of globalizations].

It is a great honour for me to be here at the end of the 2009 European Urban Research Association Conference which has been unique since it is a common project shared with the American Urban Affairs Association.

Let me also take the time to thank the organization board which has been extremely kind to invite me to spend a few days in Madrid.

The title of my presentation is “Getting an explicit comparative perspective in urban studies”.

As an introduction, let me quickly tell you why a comparative perspective matters so much to me. Then I shall take the time to define the purpose of a comparative research project before arguing in favour of this perspective in social sciences. The concluding remarks will be about comparative research as a means for building a transnational dialogue in social sciences.

1- Introduction

I have always been in love with cities which I defined, after Braudel as ‘engines of civilizations’ and I decided to become a geographer in order to contribute to their understanding and thus to their planning. I was brought up in the French intellectual tradition, spent a few years at the University of Toulouse (south of France) in the department of Geography which was then run by a well-known French geographer, Bernard Kayser, and where we studied Henri Lefebvre’s and Manuel Castells’ works along with theories of urban and regional developments. It was there that I understood that the task of geography is first to define a legitimate territory within a national context, identify its main actors in order then to explain its dynamic by looking at the relations or links among the various elements which constitute the territory: built environment, infrastructures, networks, economic functions, spatial disparities, commuting patterns, open spaces. Explaining spatial dynamics of a given urban territory is to some extent explaining how the mix of those elements contributes to give it an identity.

We were in the beginning of the 70s, still in the industrial phase of the capitalist system - which after one century and a half of struggle or two centuries of struggle-, has been defined as a “fordist period” since its social costs were then well contained by the Welfare State which was also giving the capitalist system some kind of direction. This era was named by historians the “cold war era” which led most researchers to get a negative attitude or posture towards the United States. The assumption then was that the United States did not have a Welfare State and that they were dealing with a primitive form of capitalism. This of course was not correct. We as students we were not informed about American cities or how the State and public officials were dealing with cities along with economic development. This is not a critical statement, it is just a statement. At that time, urban studies were seen as a national topic under the responsibility of the national State. Researchers in each Nation-State were then focusing on their own national experiences.

Before finishing what we used to call a “doctorat 3ème cycle”, I mentioned to Bernard Kayser that my next research project for a ‘doctorat d’Etat’ -a doctorat d’Etat was then a research project which would last around 10 or 15 years- would be focusing on comparing French and American cities. He was happy to hear that I had been able to formulate my next project and suggested me to move to Paris because at that time, the only French faculty member who had the legitimacy to be an advisor on American cities, was Mme Jacqueline Beaujeu-Garnier , professor at the University of Paris1. At the University of Paris1-Sorbonne in the Fall of 1975, when I met her in the Fall of 1975n I was happy to hear that she was happy to be my advisor.

It took me then some time to discover that Mme Beaujeu-Garnier had certainly the legitimacy to be my advisor, but that there was no formal or institutional relationship between the Sorbonne and any American university. If I wanted to study an American city, it was then up to me to locate and find American campus which would have a nice urban studies or urban planning department or program, and then to apply and at the same time try to get some funding. I spent more than one year working on this project and trying to find American books on cities in libraries, learning about higher education in the United States (different from the French one) and defining more precisely my research project as a comparative one. I decided to apply to an urban planning program not because I was disappointed with Geography but since the discipline was mainly concerned with interrelations among many elements of a territory, it would be wiser to learn about the concepts used by other disciplines

such as sociology, economy, engineering and architecture in order to explain those interrelationships.

In the spring of 1978, I was happy to learn that I have been accepted in the Ph.D. program of the Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning at UCLA and that I was also a Fulbright recipient. You cannot imagine how happy I was..... but also how naïve I was then about conducting a comparative research project.

What does it actually mean “dealing with a comparative research project”?

2- Defining a comparative research project

Being a Ph.D. student at UCLA turned out to be tough because (1) faculty members there were extremely demanding (2) because I had to get adjusted to the American way of life as well as to the city of Los Angeles (3) because I had to think and write in English and, (4) because I had to learn and become familiar with another intellectual tradition. Dealing with a comparative research project mean first learning another intellectual tradition.

2.1- Learning about another other intellectual tradition

Comparing Paris and Los Angeles became suddenly a huge task because not only did I have to deal with two cities, but I had to deal first with two different and strong intellectual traditions. Comparing Paris and Los Angeles meant much more than dealing with two different urban territories which obviously had a different history.

I had to become familiar with the American intellectual tradition which was not an easy task not for linguistic reasons but because of its specific history and its state of mind. Difficult to translate into French, simple words such as ‘neighbourhood’, ‘community’, urban redistricting and redlining. The difficulty of this task has been studied by Theda Skocpol (a sociologist from Harvard who has been largely involved in comparative analysis) who edited with Dietrich Rueschemeyer a book that I strongly recommend, *States, Social Knowledge and the origins of Modern Social Policies*. Social sciences are different from natural sciences, chemistry of physics, and she has been the first researcher who articulated the close relationship between any intellectual tradition and the State. According to her, social sciences are shaping the State and its public policies but the State is also shaping social sciences. The history of the State in the United States is not the history of the State in France, United Kingdom, or Germany. Dealing with two different intellectual traditions does not imply that you cannot transfer concepts and ideas from one national context to another, but it requires some additional work. Concepts and ideas have first to be contextualized within the history of the State and then reworked and reshaped in order to be adjusted to another one.

Given the complexity of the task, I decided to write two dissertations, one for the doctorat d’Etat (for the Sorbonne) and another for the Ph.D. dissertation (UCLA). The French dissertation is about comparing Paris and Los Angeles and the Ph.D. dissertation had as a

title, *Implementation as social learning*. I used some American concepts in order to study the French mode of production of public policies while insisting on its specificity.

After learning about another intellectual tradition, building a comparative problematique requires to answering the question about stressing similarities or differences.

2.2- Building a problematique

Along with building a problematique, a comparative research starts with a contextualization analysis in order to present some of the main differences. Paris and Los Angeles were different because of their history (LA is two centuries old and is thus a recent urban phenomenon), natural site and environment (LA is a vast plain surrounded by the coast and the mountains while Paris is in the center of a rich agricultural region along the Seine River) and the ideology of centrality (LA is lacking such a tradition while it is extremely powerful in Paris which is the national capital of a centralized State).

Two issues were raised in my doctorat d'Etat:

- How to explain the structure of a city or a city-region:
- How to understand coherence and contradictions of its institutional framework?

As concerning the first issue, the question was: Are modes of transportations or the nature of the transportation infrastructures and networks determinant in the shaping of a city? Today most of us assume that modes of transportation are shaping a city which is then shaping its modes of transportation. Is then technology coming first?

As concerning the second question, the question was: Is there any institutional or political framework which is better than the other for dealing with urban complexity? In other words should we think in terms of transferring ideal models of management or should we limit ourselves to be inspired by foreign examples?

2.3- Stressing differences or similarities?

23.1- Is technology coming first?

In order to answer this question, I had to stress similarities between Paris and Los Angeles.

In the case of Paris, it was not difficult to find out that the city has been organized around a network of avenues, boulevards, and streets long before the arrival of the car as we know it today and before the subway (metro). Haussmann and Napoleon III in the late 1850s decided first to include the *faubourgs* (suburbs) in the territory of the city, and then decided the layout of avenues and boulevards in order to provide inhabitants with optimal conditions for moving goods and people while creating nice public spaces and side-walks along with an aesthetic perspective. Nobody is naïve: The plan has also been conceived as a means for controlling human beings while providing security.

In the case of LA, it was then assumed by everyone that the shape and structure of the city was related to the use of the private car. The argument was based on an excellent book written by the architect Reynar Banham who mentioned the car, the freeway and the railway, - in other words transportation infrastructures- in order to explain the specificity of the urban structure in LA. I raised the following question: -why is it that Paris' urban morphology is not shaped by modes of transportation while it is in LA? I was not completely convinced by Banham's argument and decided to take other variables into consideration. I was not convinced because I was not impressed by the use of the car and the freeway system while I have been impressed by an urban fabric organized around houses and gardens.

In order to answer the question, I had to study:

- 1) Flows of immigration getting to LA, once it became an American city
- 2) People's representations and personal motivations behind the move to LA (Why did they choose LA instead of Chicago which was then a booming city?)
- 3) Public debate and referendums of the 1920s (thanks to a suggestion from Martin Wachs, professor at UCLA) about modernizing the transit system which included railways and streetcars. .

Los Angeles by the end of the 19th century and until the middle of the 20th century went through a period of demographic and economic growth thanks to domestic migrations (contrary to other main cities). Americans coming from the East coast and later the Midwest had a certain education and were concerned with living in a house surrounded by a garden. According to historians, if people wanted to make money, they would have to go first to Chicago where things were actually happening. In the 1920s -which turned out to be an important decade for the future of the city- LA's inhabitants decided through several referendums not to municipalize the transit system (contrary to what they did for water and power) and not to get any investment (public and or private) in the transit system. They were mainly concerned about maintaining a landscape of houses and gardens and avoiding density. They thought the car was the best tool to maintain their urban landscape and way of life. Once the city got its freeway system thanks to the federal State in the second half of the 1950s, transit was then ready to disappear after four decades of disinvestment.

Thanks to a comparative analysis, it was possible to argue that transportation technology is not an independent variable which may explain the structure of a city. Even though Paris and Los Angeles looked different, they were based on a certain vision of an ideal city shared by its inhabitants and public officials. LA could not then be understood as simple product or outcome of the freeway and the railway. The comparative perspective also led me to come up with two ideal-types: the Public and the Private city. It does not mean that one is shaped by the public sector and the other by the private sector. Los Angeles was conceptualized as a city of homes while in Paris the configuration of public spaces along with sanitary engineering, aesthetics and social control could be seen as the founding element of the city. All American cities are not similar to LA: Manhattan is not based on the same principle. A city which could be seen as a private one may slowly becoming a public one: Los Angeles is moving away from its founding principle as a city of homes and seems to be slowly defining public spaces.

23.2- Is there one best way to manage an urban territory while dealing with economic development, social inequalities and cultural diversity?

Dealing with legal and political institutions requires a serious understanding of social and cultural representations of the Federal State, local democracy and political accountability. In the American tradition, democracy lies in the space between powers and counter powers (mainly through civic associations and grassroots movements) as observed by Tocqueville in the beginning of the 19th century while in the French tradition, democracy of participation does not carry such a positive connotation as in the US. I am referring to the late 70s' and beginning 80s whereas today French society is slowly changing its opinion about democracy of participation.

Besides their representations of democracy, Los Angeles and Paris have different urban and political institutions. Among the differences, two of them are difficult to translate: "redistricting" and "incorporation".

The first 'redistricting' refers to the legal process that a city like LA or any other large American city or State have to go through in order to redefine its ward limits after the census in order to comply with the principle of demographic equivalence among wards or districts, whether they are Municipal, State or Congress elections. The process is difficult and extremely political. For Paris, demographic equivalence between wards is not seen as an issue. Every ten years LA had to go through redistricting and since the 1982 national legislation, redefining boundaries also require to take into consideration the percentage of demographic growth of each racial and ethnic category. Los Angeles by the end of the 70, was seen as a very progressive city, it was the first large American city to have a Black mayor while the percentage of its Black population was limited to 13%. The city had 3 African-Americans among the 15 city councilmen each representing a ward (while the mayor is elected at large). However the city did not have any Hispanic person in its city council. During the 80, an important fight occurred during the redistricting process and the city succeeded in getting a second Latino councilperson. In 2005, Los Angeles elected a Latino mayor and in 2009 he has been re-elected this year.

Incorporation is a process which allows an unincorporated area to become incorporated and thus get a city council instead of depending on the county level. In LA County which is the largest and the more populated county of the United States, several incorporations happened in the middle of the 20th century thanks to grassroots mobilization and in some cases thanks to the help of private developers, like in the rest of the country. Inhabitants of housing tracts, subdivisions and planned-unit developments were able to get organized and get their municipalities. Getting a municipality is perceived as a serious political task which would allow then getting a land-use plan. A large number of suburban municipalities created planning documents preventing the construction of housing buildings for tenants. They wanted to attract households ready to invest and live in a house surrounded by a garden. The sad story of foreclosures in a large number of American exurban territories is a good illustration of this ideal vision of the American dream which is found in LA.

While stressing differences between Paris and Los Angeles in terms of institutional setting and local politics, I found out that French local politics seem much easier to understand since its link with partisan politics. In LA like in most cities located in Midwestern and Western States, partisan politics are insignificant which allows then the use of the concept of "urban regimes" by American researchers in order to grasp the complexity of the game. "Urban regime" is not a concept which could be applied in the French context.

Stressing similarities and differences between two urban contexts is a choice made along with the construction of the problematique or the issues one want to raise in the research. Paris and Los Angeles had different urban forms and spatial structures which cannot be only explained through transportation technology but require social and cultural representations of a flat as compared to a house. They are in a sense similar but they differ when it comes to institutional setting and local politics. Stressing the differences between Paris and Los Angeles required dealing with two different intellectual traditions and hence different concepts.

3- Why getting an explicit comparative perspective in urban studies seem so important in the Global Age?

We all agree that we are in a new urban context which is currently defined as ‘cities in a globalizing world’. Half of the world population is living in cities as mentioned by United Nations researchers and most of us are living in countries which are facing the global phase of the capitalist system. In spite of all the publications on the global Age, our knowledge is rather limited. Difficult to find semantic and conceptual categories which would allow us to define economic, social and, environmental costs associated with this Global Age in order to regulate the capitalist system. One way of overcoming this task is to build a comparative framework.

3.1- First let us recognize the contribution of American researchers

In this new context, we as European researchers need to be humble and acknowledge that in the field of social sciences and urban studies more precisely, American researchers are ahead of us in their analysis of the current phase of the capitalist system. This is not because they are brighter, because they work harder, or because they get more funding than we do in European research centres but because they were the first to feel the impacts of the drastic changes. They were the first to talk about dual cities, world cities and global cities. They are the first to talk about exurban foreclosures. It is correct to say that environmental and social costs are less obvious in cities of our Continental Europe. We definitely need to be aware of the American production in urban studies.

3.2- Let us also recognize the contribution of non-American researchers for understanding our Global Age

After recognizing the competitive advantage of our American colleagues, we should think more seriously about our contribution as European researchers for understanding this Urban Global Age (UGA). Instead of limiting ourselves to use American concepts and apply them in our context because we want to please our American colleagues or because we enjoy using ‘buzz word’, we should start thinking about our contribution in terms of dialogue and

negotiation processes. Let me illustrate the idea of contribution based on my own experience as a researcher.

American researchers were the first to come up with the concept of 'world city' in the middle of the 80s (John Friedman) and in the 90s with the concept of 'global city' (Saskia Sassen). Thus American researchers are not making any distinction between world city and global city and they use them as synonymous. Researchers from Asian universities were the first to discuss and challenge the criteria used then by Anglo-American researchers in defining global and world cities in order to give a better position to their cities in the hierarchical World City Network.

For me those two words are extremely confusing and in my teaching seminars at Sciences Po and at the Sorbonne, I started differentiating a 'global city' from a 'world city'. A global city is defined as a city which has a role of command in the global economy and this role could be captured by numbers and percentages of jobs in highly specialized tasks requiring sophisticated technical and managerial skills in some sectors of the economy. The global economy is only a segment of the world economy which is then defined as the sum of all national economies. A world city could then be defined as a city which contributed to the history of humankind. A world city has nothing to do with demographic growth, number of inhabitants, economic growth or highly specialized jobs, it has to do with culture, cultural influence, and cultural contribution to the history of the world and it could be measured by its power of attraction for artists as well as for tourists from all over the world because of its contribution to the world history. In Brazil, Sao Paulo is a global city because of its powerful Stock Exchange (Bovespa) but Salvador de Bahia which is currently a secondary city (2,7 million inhabitants) in the State of Bahia could certainly be understood as a world city. In Europe, we have a large number of world cities (Venice, Florence in Italy) and maybe our task is to identify and study world cities in other parts of the world, in Asia, Africa and, Latin America in relation with foreign researchers.

3.3- The *Dictionary of Globalizations* as an example

The necessity of making a distinction between these two categories of cities (a distinction that researchers in American universities are not making) led me to think about the necessity to have our own dictionary of words (old and new) which are to describe and identify the current historical phase associated with the global phase of the capitalist system. I had a chance to edit a Dictionary of globalizations (with an s) which is currently under translation into three foreign languages (Arabic, Portuguese and Spanish). I made a distinction between 'mondialisation' referring to the European idea of discovering the world (Fernand Braudel) and globalization which is more about connectivity thanks to virtual space and Internet. People belonging to different countries have different views about positive and negative aspects of globalization which is far from being limited to financial aspects of the global economy it also deals with flows of immigration.

I asked each contributor to the dictionary (40 researchers) to include Anglo-American authors as well as French and European authors in their entry and then decide on their own whether there is a convergence between these two views or whether there is a conflict of interpretations. In my own entries which had to do with cities, this distinction was stressed while giving more space to historical dimensions. American universities have excellent researchers in history however their intellectual tradition in social sciences is rather weak

when it comes to take into consideration historical dimensions and to include non Angl-American visions of the world.

3.3- Getting a better understanding of the American intellectual tradition and find ways of negotiating the inclusion of other intellectual traditions

If European researchers are not ready to study and understand other intellectual traditions, we are then limited to understand the Urban Global Age (UGA) through the lenses of the American social sciences production. We then need to think what could be our role in this transnational age of social sciences while being ready to challenge our American friends.

Comparative research is no longer optional in this Urban Global Age, it is required for building a transnational dialogue in urban studies while learning seriously about other intellectual traditions

In this globalizing world, the issue we are facing as social scientists and as planners is to contribute to building a cosmopolitan state of mind (a word that I am using after the German sociologist Ulrich Beck) while maintaining and reinforcing traditions of rationality, argumentation along with the collection of some empirical evidence. If this is our goal, comparative research may be the best tool.

We (I mean researchers belonging to my generation) should help students -when they are willing- to include a comparative perspective in their dissertation and should urge them not only to deal with facts, figures and numbers but also be sensitive to concepts embedded in other intellectual traditions. In other words we should then prepare them for building a possible transnational (or global) perspective in social sciences not by ignoring the specificity of each intellectual tradition but by dealing with their specificities. In other words, we have the responsibility of preventing any kind of imperialistic view of in social sciences which are after all the product of a specific historical and national experience.

Then they would be ready to give some meaning and serious foundations to ‘urban citizenship’. Getting an explicit comparative perspective in urban studies while dealing with other intellectual traditions may lead us to invent ‘urban citizenship’.

Bibliography:

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