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City Futures '09

Getting an explicit comparative perspective in urban studies is no longer optional

Cynthia Ghorra-Gobin

CGG holds a Ph.D. in urban planning (UCLA) and a doctorat d'Etat ès Lettres in geography (University of Panthéon-Sorbonne). She is affiliated with the CNRS (national scientific research Council) where she is director of research. She is professor at the Institute of Political Studies (Paris) and at the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne.

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 Théorie du "New Urbanism"* (Paris, Ministère Equipement, 2006) [The theory of New Urbanism in favor of smart and green growth]. She edited *Dictionnaire des mondialisations* (ed.) (Colin, 2006) [Dictionary of globalizations which is currently translated in Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese and English]. She co-edited *La ville insoutenable* (Paris, Belin, 2006) [The unsustainable city].

It is a great honour for me to be here as a key note speaker at 2009 European Urban Research Association (EURA) Conference which has been unique since it is a common project shared with the American Urban Affairs Association (AUAA).

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 is no longer optional".

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 such a perspective in social sciences. The concluding remarks will be about comparative research as a means for contributing to an efficient transnational dialogue in social sciences.

1- Introduction

I have always been in love with cities which I defined, after Fernand Braudel and Arnold Toynbee 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 in the department of Geography which was then run by 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 and networks, economic functions, spatial disparities, inhabitants' representations, commuting patterns and open spaces.

We were in the beginning of the 70s, in the industrial phase of the capitalist system -which after one century and a half 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 is also named by world historians the "cold war era" which at that time led a certain number of researchers to get a negative representation of the United States. The assumption then was that it was a nation which did not have a Welfare State and was dealing with a primitive form of capitalism. This of course was not correct. We European students were not offered first hand knowledge on American cities and on the way the State and public officials were dealing with cities with economic development and social costs. This is not a critical statement, it is just a statement. One should also remember that at that time, urban studies were mainly seen as a national or a local topic under the responsibility of the State. Researchers were then focusing on their national experiences. Before finishing -what we used to call a "doctorat 3ème cycle" in France-, I mentioned to my advisor 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. I was happy to meet her in the fall of 1975 and happy that she accepted 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 take an American city as an object of research, it was then up to me (1) to locate and find an American campus which would offer an urban studies or urban planning program and then (2) apply for admission while trying to get some funding. I spent more than one year learning about higher education in the United States, finding some books on American cities in Parisian libraries and defining more precisely my research project as a comparative one. Then I applied to an urban planning program not because I was disappointed with Geography (the discipline I belong to) but because I thought that -since the discipline was mainly concerned with interrelations among many elements of a given territory-, it would be wiser to learn about the concepts used by other disciplines such as sociology, economy, engineering and architecture and get a transdisciplinary perspective.

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 (GSAUP) at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) and that I was also a Fulbright recipient. You cannot imagine how excited I was but also how naïve for carrying a comparative research project without knowing about all the roadblocks of the process. How to conduct a comparative research project? Why is it becoming so important and should not be optional?

2- Defining a comparative research project

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

2.1- Learning about another other intellectual tradition and building a problematique

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.

First 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 mentioned by Theda Skocpol (a sociologist from Harvard largely involved in comparative analysis) who edited with Dietrich Rueschemeyer a book (that I strongly recommend). The central assumption of their research, *States, Social Knowledge and the origins of Modern Social Policies* is that social sciences are different from natural sciences, chemistry of physics because of their tight relationship with the State. According to Skocpol, 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 similar to 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 (Paris-Sorbonne) and another for the Ph.D. (UCLA). The French dissertation was about comparing Paris and Los Angeles while the Ph.D. dissertation had as a title, *Implementation as social learning*. For the Ph.D. dissertation I borrowed some American concepts in order to analyze the French mode of production of public policies while insisting on its specificity, a serious dichotomy between conception and implementation phases. After learning about

another intellectual tradition, building a comparative problematique requires then to deal with the issue of stressing similarities or differences.

Building a problematique embedded in a comparative research project requires first some kind of contextualization analysis in order to state some of the main differences. Paris and Los Angeles were different mainly because of (1) their history (LA is two centuries old and is qualified as a recent urban phenomenon while Paris goes back to the Roman era) (2) natural sites and environments (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 (3) the ideology of centrality (LA is lacking such a tradition while it is extremely powerful in Paris, the national capital of a centralized State). Two issues were then raised in the 'doctorat d'Etat':

- How to explain the spatial structure of a city or a city-region:
- How to understand coherences, contradictions and changes of its institutions?

Explaining the spatial structure of a city means answering the following question: to what extent are modes of transportations or the nature of transportation infrastructures and networks determinant in the shaping of a city? Today like in the 70s most researchers assume that modes of transportation are shaping a city and tend to think that technology comes first. Comparing Paris and Los Angeles as a spatial structure raises then the following question: Is there any institutional or political framework which is better than the other for dealing with urban complexity? Should researchers think and work in terms of transferring "ideal models of management" or should their analysis deal with explaining the specificity of institutions given the historical context and the ideological framework. Opting for such a posture indicates then that the issue is no longer about transferring models but about being inspired by foreign examples in order to bring change in the system.

2.2- Stressing differences and similarities within a problematique

The two questions of the problematique of the 'thèse d'Etat': -Is technology the determinant element for explaining an urban spatial structure? –To what extent are institutions able to deal with economic development, social inequalities and cultural diversity within a democratic context?

2.2.1- Spatial structure and transportation technology

Stressing similarities between Paris and Los Angeles led to answer the role of technology in the shaping of an urban region. 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) and even before the arrival of the subway (metro).

Hausmann and Napoleon III in the late 1850s included first the *faubourgs* (suburbs) in order to enlarge the territory of the city, and then decided about the layout of avenues and boulevards for providing 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 Paris' inhabitants while providing security.

In the case of LA everyone assumed 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 LA urban structure. Building a comparative perspective led me to raise the following question: -why is it that Paris' urban morphology is not shaped by transportation technology while it is in LA? I was not completely convinced by Banham's argument since I was not impressed by the use of the car and the freeway system. However being impressed by an urban fabric organized around houses and gardens led me to take other variables into consideration, such as the ideal image of the domestic sphere.

In order to explain the specificity of the urban structure of LA, I had then to include three other themes of research:

- 1) Flows of immigration getting to LA (once it became an American city)
- 2) People's representations and personal motivations behind their move to LA (instead of Chicago which was then a booming city)
- 3) Public debates and referendums of the 1920s, thanks to a suggestion from professor Martin Wachs (UCLA), my advisor. The 1920s decade was crucial about the future of the transit system (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 big 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 have to move first to Chicago where things were actually happening. In the 1920s -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 serious disinvestment.

22.2- The institutional framework of an urban territory

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. I am referring to the late 70s' and beginning 80s – today French society is slowly changing its opinion about democracy of participation.

Institutions in Paris and LA were different mainly because of their differences in their representations of democracy. Difficult to translate in French “redistricting” and “incorporation” without referring to the American intellectual tradition and its conception of democracy.

‘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. In France and in 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 its 15 city councilmen each representing a ward, while the mayor is elected at large. However the city did not count any Hispanic person among its city council members. During the 80, an important fight occurred during the redistricting process and finally the city succeeded in getting a second Latino councilperson. In 2005, Los Angeles elected a Latino mayor and in 2009, Antonio Villaraigosa 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 since it also allows for getting a land-use plan. Thus a large number of suburban municipalities which went through the incorporation process, voted in favour of planning documents preventing for instance 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 also found in LA.

Stressing similarities between Paris and Los Angeles helped me to explain that a spatial urban structure is based on two variables: a shared vision of what constitutes the dwelling unit (a single-family house or a flat) and on transportation technology. Analyzing differences between urban institutions while dealing with French and American intellectual traditions led to explain the specificity of local politics in each urban context and difficulty to think in terms of models. French local politics were much easier to understand because it is entrenched in partisan politics. In LA (like in most cities located in Midwestern and Western States), partisan politics are insignificant, hence the use of the concept of “urban regimes” by American researchers in order to grasp the complexity of the game. However “Urban regime” is not a concept which could be applied in the French context.

3- An explicit comparative perspective for understanding the Globalizing Urban Age (GUA)

We all agree that we are in a new world context which is more urban and under flows of globalizing. Half of the world population is living in cities as mentioned by United Nations researchers and most of us are living in countries facing the global and financial phase of a capitalist system which is no longer regulated by States as it used to be during the Fordist era. In spite of many publications on globalization, our knowledge is still limited. Difficult to find semantic and conceptual categories which allows for defining precisely economic, social and, environmental costs associated with this Globalizing Urban Age (GUA) and for getting the legitimate political actor for regulating the capitalist system. One way of overcoming this theoretical task is to build an explicit comparative framework for urban research.

3.1- Recognizing the contribution of American researchers while including other intellectual traditions

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, work harder, get more funding than we do in European research centres but because they were the first to feel the impacts of drastic changes occurring within the capitalist system. They were the first to talk about dual cities, world cities, and global cities as well as to identify exurban foreclosures. We are definitely recognizing the importance of the American production in urban studies. However after recognizing the competitive advantage of our American colleagues, we should then think seriously about our contribution as European researchers for understanding this GUA. 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 this idea of contribution to the GUA with an example.

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 are then synonymous. Researchers from Asian universities started to discuss and challenge criteria used 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 expressions 'global city' and 'world city' 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'. I subscribe to Sassen's definition: A global city 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. However since the global economy is only a segment of the world economy which is defined as the sum of national economies, it is possible then to define a 'world city' 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 and 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 their researchers while conducting comparative research.

3.2- The *Dictionary of Globalizations* as an illustration

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 work on a French and European dictionary that includes words (old and new) describing and identifying current historical changes associated with the global phase of the capitalist system. I edited a *Dictionary of globalizations* (with an s) -currently under translation into three foreign languages (Arabic, Portuguese and Spanish) - which is based on comparative perspective. Based on a comparative perspective, the dictionary is making a distinction between 'mondialisation' referring to the discovery of the world by European kingdoms (Fernand Braudel) and 'globalization' which is more about the intensification of flows and connectivity thanks to virtual space and Internet. Besides referring to pre-modern cycles of mondialisations, the dictionary also includes an s, because it is assuming that people belonging to different countries and cultures may have different views about positive and negative aspects of globalization which is not limited to financial aspects but 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 between American and French and European perspectives. In my own entries which had to do with cities, the difference was mentioned while referring to the American intellectual tradition. 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 perspectives and to non Anglo-American visions of the world. A world city is a city which contributed to history of humankind while a global city is a city which has a role in global flows and networks.

European researchers should then be ready to study and understand other intellectual traditions if they want to contribute to understanding the Globalizing Urban Age (GUA) and not be limited to learn about it through the lenses of the American social sciences production. We need to think what could be our role in this transnational age of social sciences while being ready to challenge our American friends.

Conclusion:

Comparative research is no longer optional for building a transnational dialogue in urban research

In this globalizing world, we (European researchers and planners) -as people committed to understanding cities and their inhabitants while adopting a sustainable perspective for collective action- need to think about our contribution and role in the transnational dialogue of social sciences while maintaining and reinforcing traditions of rationality and argumentation along with the collection of empirical evidence. Building such a dialogue is part of our attempt in building a cosmopolitan state of mind -a word that I am using after the German sociologist Ulrich Beck- in this Globalizing Urban Age and thus requires dealing with comparative research.

Researchers belonging to my generation should then help students -when they are willing to - include an explicit comparative perspective in their dissertation as well as urge them not only to deal with facts, figures and numbers but also be sensitive to concepts embedded in other intellectual traditions. In a nutshell, we should prepare them to build a possible transnational perspective in social sciences. A transnational perspective does not mean ignoring the specificity of other intellectual traditions but learning to deal with their specificities. In other words, European researchers have the responsibility of preventing any kind of imperialistic views in social sciences which are after all the product of a historical and national experience as seen previously. Building a transnational dialogue based on comparative research may give some theoretical and political foundations to the invention of 'urban citizenship'. My feeling is that this should be the future task of EURA.