

From:

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Spaces of the Poor

Perspectives of Cultural Sciences on Urban Slum Areas
and Their Inhabitants

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What do we know about the urban impoverished areas of the world and the living environment of its inhabitants? How did the urban poor cope with their surroundings? How did they interpret and adopt urban space in order to fight against their position at the periphery of society? This volume takes up these questions and investigates how far approaches of cultural sciences can contribute to overcome the »exotification of the ghetto« (Loïc Wacquant) and instead to look at the heterogeneity and individuality behind the facades. It opens new perspectives for the research of poverty and inequalities that do not stop at collective categories.

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Contents

Introduction

HANS-CHRISTIAN PETERSEN | 7

A Janus-Faced Institution of Ethnoracial Closure

A Sociological Specification of the Ghetto

LOÏC WACQUANT | 15

The Subalterns Speak Out

Urban Plebeian Society in Late Imperial Russia

ILYA V. GERASIMOV | 47

“... not intended for the Rich”

Public Places as Points of Identification for the Urban Poor –
St. Petersburg (1850-1914)

HANS-CHRISTIAN PETERSEN | 71

Blood in the Air

Everyday Violence in the Experience of the Petersburg Poor,
1905-1917

MARK D. STEINBERG | 97

Outcast Vienna 1900

The Politics of Transgression

WOLFGANG MADERTHANER | 121

Revisiting Campbell Bunk

JERRY WHITE | 135

Creating the City of Delhi

Stories of Strong Women and Weak Walls

SONJA WENGOBORSKI/JASPAL NAVEEL SINGH | 147

Urban Meeting Locations of Nicaraguan Migrants in Costa Rica's Metropolitan Area and the Spatial Effects on their Social Support Networks

HAUKE JAN ROLF | 169

Urban Poverty and Gentrification

A Comparative View on Different Areas in Hamburg

INGRID BRECKNER | 193

Europe's only Megacity

Urban Growth, Migration and Gentrification in 21st Century Moscow

JULIA RÖTTJER/JAN KUSBER | 209

Contributors | 237

Introduction

HANS-CHRISTIAN PETERSEN

What do we know about the urban impoverished areas of the world and the people living in them? When looking at research reports available so far, the answer to this question is relatively sobering. Still, one narration is dominating according to which the habitats of the urban poor were solely places of dull backwardness, characterised by spatial and mental narrowness. The world of the people at the bottom rung of society appears to be widely homogeneous and is drawn in grey and black colours. Queries beyond this are rarely found so that Markus Schroer correctly speaks of “a reproduction of always the same images”¹ in respect of ghettos, favelas and banlieues.

When applying this perspective, the question of what these ‘narrow habitats’ meant for their inhabitants, is ignored. The view from the outside is blind to the perspective from the inside. This starts already with the language and the terms in which we describe the world surrounding us. The word *slum*, mentioned in the subtitle of this volume, has never been an absolute and neutral term since its emergence in the first half of the 19th century, but conveyed stigmatising associations from the very beginning. *Slums* were not only places of urban blight and utmost poverty, but at the same time ‘conglomerations’ of the ‘outcasts’ of society, of the ‘undeserving poor’ who stood outside of society and who could not expect any help from it.² This is why Alan Gilbert has pointed out that language matters,³ especially when we are talking about poverty and the people struck by it. Terms such as *slum* are predestined for political instrumentalisation – to mention only the so called ‘slum clearances’ as a wrongly perceived ‘solution’ to the

1 SCHROER, 2006, p. 250.

2 Cf. amongst others: DYOS, 1967; JONES, 1971; GASKELL, 1990; GREEN, 1995; LINDNER, 2004; KOVEN, 2006.

3 Cf. GILBERT, 2007.

problem, be it in Victorian London of the 19th century⁴ or in current-day Rio de Janeiro, where the favelas are ‘cleaned’ by the forces of police and military for the FIFA World Cup 2014 as well as the Olympic Games 2016.

If the term gets used in this volume despite its problematic etymology, it is due to the circumstance that it is de facto the common description for an urban spatial concentration of poverty. This is true historically as well as today and is not limited to the English-speaking world, as is demonstrated by the contributions to this volume. This is not designed to advocate a perpetuation of the associations inherent to the term, but quite the contrary, these are taken by the authors as the starting point for critical reflections and looks behind the allegedly unambiguous facade of the slums.

The volume at hand is the outcome of a conference which was organised by the Research Unit *Historical Cultural Sciences* (Historische Kulturwissenschaften, HKW) of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz from March 30th until April 1st 2012.⁵ Almost all of the speakers have prepared their papers for publication. Additionally, there are three articles by authors who were contacted for the conference, but were unable to attend due to scheduled obligations and by those who decided to write a contribution after having taken part in the conference (Loïc Wacquant, Sonja Wengoborski and Jaspal Naveel Singh, Julia Röttjer and Jan Kusber). The main concern of the conference was an interdisciplinary dialogue on the topic as to how far approaches of cultural sciences can contribute to overcome the “exotification”⁶ of the urban poor and to look at heterogeneities and individuality instead of alleged unambiguousness. The concept follows pioneering studies by Pierre Bourdieu⁷, Loïc Wacquant⁸ and others, who perceived the inhabitants of slum districts as individuals, as actively engaged people who shape the precarious social conditions around them themselves in a process of purposeful adoption.

The contributions to the volume at hand do not apply a uniform approach, but represent just that multiperspectivity which was intended. This is not synonymous with arbitrariness, but results from the consideration that a broad discussion of different theories and methods is the best way to achieve a picture of the urban poor as multifaceted as possible. However, all texts have in common a

4 Cf. YELLING, 1986; ALLEN, 2008.

5 Cf. the conference report by PAUL FRIEDL, in: H-Soz-u-Kult, 27.06.2012: <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=4281>, 07.05.2013.

6 WACQUANT, 1998, p. 203.

7 BOURDIEU et al., 1993.

8 WACQUANT, 2004.

concurrent examination of structures and individual agency. Processes of social polarisation and displacement are linked with the question of what we can say about those who are struck by this development. With this in mind, the volume is also an appeal for a return of the social question as it has been discussed in the English-speaking debate since the middle of the 1990s – for a “New Social History”, which preserves the critical impetus of social history without abandoning the cultural-historical progresses of knowledge gained in the last decades.⁹

The chronological frame of the contributions ranges from the 19th to the 21st century. As well as a number of historical analyses, there are also articles focusing on present-day developments. Geographically, case studies of North and Latin American, European as well as Indian cities are included, which naturally covers only a part of a global theme. Hopefully, the publication of the volume may be an incitement for further research in the future.

At the beginning of the volume stands a text of LOÏC WACQUANT, in which the already mentioned question of terminology is examined in detail. Wacquant develops an analytical concept of the ghetto as a spatially based implement of ethno-racial closure. At the same time, he strongly argues against an intermixture of the terms *ghetto* und *slum* by emphasising “that not all ghettos are poor and not all poor areas are (inside) ghettos”. In this context he advises against an indiscriminate transfer of concepts and terms, originating from the US American debate on other - for instance European - societies in order not to dilute the analytical categories. Looking at the *ghetto*, Wacquant makes an argument for a perspective which sees the ghetto simultaneously as a sword (in the sense of an instrument of isolating certain groups of the population) as well as a shield (in the sense of a potential place of mutual support for its inhabitants).

The following texts are investigating further the possibilities and limits of writing about the urban poor. On the basis of examples from early 20th century Russian cities Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Vilnius and Odessa, ILYA V. GERASIMOV opposes applying discourse-analytical methods on the main sources (i.e. newspaper reports, police and court documents) for the social history of the urban poor. Referring to the concept of *subalternity*, he argues that since lower strata did not use discourse, the method of discourse analysis would produce misinterpretations. Instead, one would have to go beyond the texts to see actual (non-discursive or non-verbal) social practices and their users in a wider con-

9 Cf. amongst others: ELEY, 2005, as well as the correspondent discussion of his theses in the forum of the AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW, 2008. As a brilliant German-speaking, combative representative is to be named: MADERTHANER/MUSNER, 2007.

text. Since these practices, the “body talk” of the subalterns as he calls it, also carry meanings, and since the historian can learn to understand them, they too are open to interpretation.

My contribution is shedding light on another Russian example: St. Petersburg, the capital of late imperial Russia. Looking at two types of sources that are quite different at first sight (on one hand a series of articles from a Petersburg newspaper and on the other several petitions submitted by ‘itinerant peddlers’ from Petersburg’s Haymarket), the epistemic possibilities and limitations are discussed to discover the urban poor of former times by documents we find in the archives today. The method suggested in the article is a spatial approach, by looking at concrete places. Beyond stylistic devices, both types of sources provide us with information about places which were important to their inhabitants and which they regarded as ‘their own’.

MARK D. STEINBERG is also dealing with St. Petersburg, namely with a phenomenon which was characterised by Petersburg’s newspapers at the beginning of the 20th century as a “traumatic epidemic of blood and violence”. On the basis of a rich collection of contemporary articles, he demonstrates to which extent everyday violence shaped the life of the inhabitants, particularly in the poor districts of the city, how this development was perceived at that time and which explanations can be found from today’s point of view. According to Steinberg, the violence can be understood best as a blocked agency, resulting from the extensive exclusion of the poor from the urban discourse. At the same time he is rather sceptical in reading too much into the violence from a retrospective viewpoint, concerning, for example, the political dimension of such an agency.

WOLFGANG MADERTHANER takes the well-known picture of *Fin de Siècle Vienna* as a place gathering central cultural innovations of modernity as a starting point for shedding light on the ‘other’, the poor Vienna. He makes an argument for reading the metropolis as a social text in order to develop an understanding of the mass culture of the city. According to Maderthaner, descriptions of Vienna can be found especially in the new genre of urban reportage, developed by figures such as Emil Kläger or Max Winter, which draw another picture of the city than the myth produced by elitist discourses and the tourism industry. At the same time, reports about these phenomena reflect changes in political culture, e.g. when the poor masses, which first showed up only as chaotic hordes in hunger revolts, became the grass roots of figures such as Franz Schuhmeier and Karl Lueger, who, although with quite diverging purposes, now made politics with the support of the masses.

JERRY WHITE presents Campbell Bunk, a street in the North London district Islington, which became one of the poorest slums of 19th century London.

White, having worked himself as a public health inspector in Islington in the 1970s, some 15 years after Campbell Bunk had been demolished, brings in a special perspective. Starting his job, he soon realised that the reputation of the former slum was hardly less vivid than it had been. He kept on hearing stories about it, and in 1986 he published a fascinating study on Campbell Bunk between the wars based on interviews he conducted with the local inhabitants. His contribution to the volume at hand can be characterised as a reappraisal after 25 years – from the viewpoint of the ‘practitioner’, the historian as well as the people living in Campbell Road today.

The article by SONJA WENGOBORSKI and JASPAL NAVEEL SINGH also covers the gamut up to the present. They examine the development of the Indian metropolis Delhi from two different perspectives: In the first part of the article, Wengoborski and Singh are drawing on official documents of city planning and academic or journalistic writings to characterise the city’s management of urban poverty. In the second part, this viewpoint is contrasted with insights of modern Hindi literature, which emphasise the lived experiences of the individual social actors in the poor milieus of Delhi. In this way, the important role women play in keeping families and communities functioning becomes clear – an important corrective as against the dominating narrative of official city planners, politicians and other ‘strong men.’

HAUKE JAN ROLF addresses the issue of the spatial organisation of Nicaraguan immigrants in Costa Rica’s metropolitan area. Based on interviews he conducted with the local inhabitants during his many years of research, he offers an intriguing insider perspective on the social networks of the immigrants and the importance of certain places for their solidarity. Using the examples of a suburban squat, a baseball stadium in San José as well as an inner-city park, Rolf is able to demonstrate how Nicaraguan immigrants shape the respective quarters and the different functions these places hold. Among others, he identifies *transnationalised places* – evidence that opens new perspectives for future research.

The two concluding articles are focusing on urban socio-spatial developments at the beginning of the 21st century and particularly on gentrification processes. INGRID BRECKNER presents three Hamburg city districts as examples of a polarised urban development that is in different stages of gentrification. Ottensen experienced urban renewal since the 1970s and gentrification from inside as well as from outside. The same process is much younger in St. Pauli, where gentrification started after the closing of a huge brewery, which created space for new construction process. Something similar is expected or feared to happen in Wilhelmsburg – up to now the ‘district of outcasts’ – where two big international exhibitions have opened this year. At the same time the examples

of Ottensen and St. Pauli make it clear that resolute and enduring protest is not without influence and that it can at least partially change the direction of the development of city districts.

JULIA RÖTTJER and JAN KUSBER are dealing with similar developments in 21st Century Moscow, the only Megacity in the European context. Looking at urban growth, migration and gentrification, they manage to successfully combine historical perspectives with those of the social sciences and to shed light on processes that make a currently lacking comparison with Western Europe on these topics look promising. The final assessment of Röttjer and Kusber, namely that the development of today's Moscow can serve as "an example of neoliberal growth and the absence of comprehensive urban planning", is appropriate for other cities as well. The same can be said for their appraisal that the article is at the same time an appeal for a closer collaboration of historical and social sciences mainly dealing with the phenomena in question.

Three further contributions, by Johannes Niedbalski (Berlin) on "Funfairs and Amusement Parks. A Social Topography of Pleasure in Early 20th Century Berlin", by Monika Murzyn-Kupisz (Cracow) on urban development and gentrification processes in today's Poland and by Yury Basilov (St. Petersburg) on 21st century St. Petersburg could not be realized for personal reasons, respectively just due to lack of time. As regrettable as this may be for the volume at hand, it is at the same time absolutely understandable. Maybe these yet unwritten texts can serve as stimulation for further research and collaboration.

Concluding, I would like to express my gratitude to the Research Unit *Historical Cultural Sciences* (HKW) of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. The financing of the conference as well as the admission of this volume in the series "Mainz Historical Cultural Sciences" (Mainzer Historische Kulturwissenschaften) were the indispensable basis for the publication at hand. The two colleagues working in the Research Unit's Office, Kristina Müller-Bongard and Cathleen Sarti, were at all times very kind and competent advisors – thanks a lot to both of you for the wonderful collaboration! Furthermore I would like to thank the head of the Department for East European History at the Historical Institute of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Jan Kusber, for his valuable support in developing and realising the project. I am grateful to my colleague Christof Schimsheimer for the assistance during the conference and to Diana and Helga Weilepp for their patient and very competent replies to quite a few questions from my side during the translation of my text. The Department for Research and Technology Transfer of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz offered the opportunity to proof read the contributions to this volume – a process highly appreciated by all authors. And last but not least I am grateful to all au-

thors who – despite so many other obligations – found the time and the energy to revise their presentations for publication. It would be great if this would prove to be a beginning for future collaboration.

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