

## BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

### NEW GERMAN URBAN SOCIOLOGY: PECULIARITIES OF CITIES

Berking, Helmuth and Martina Löw (eds): *Die Eigenlogik der Städte. Neue Wege für die Stadtforschung* (Interdisziplinäre Stadtforschung 1), Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus, 2008, 334 pp., €34.90, ISBN 978-3-593-38725-3

Kemper, Jan and Anne Vogelpohl (eds): *Lokalistische Stadtforschung, Kulturalisierte Städte. Zur Kritik einer 'Eigenlogik der Städte'*, Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2011, 234 pp., €24.90, ISBN 978-3-89691-882-6

Löw, Martina and Georgios Terizakis (eds): *Städte und ihre Eigenlogik. Ein Handbuch für Stadtplanung und Stadtentwicklung* (Interdisziplinäre Stadtforschung 11), Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus, 2011, 255 pp., €24.90, ISBN 978-3-593-39534-0

Urban research makes up one significant interdisciplinary research theme at the *Technische Universität Darmstadt*. Promoted by the state of Hessen, an excellence programme – under the heading *Eigenlogik der Städte* – has been conducted there for five years, ending in June 2013 led by the professors Helmuth Berking and Martina Löw. A lot of publications have been brought out from the programme; the series *Interdisziplinäre Stadtforschung* by date comprises no less than 16 publications. With a few exceptions, most of them have been published in German. If largely unrecognized outside the German-speaking world, the reception of the programme seems to have generated a heated debate within urban studies in Germany.

Given the volume of the output, it would be too ambitious to try to survey this in any comprehensive manner. In this review essay, I will nevertheless try to make a critical appraisal of the programme and its critics. Leaving out most of the empirical work of the *Eigenlogik* programme, this can at best serve as an orientation.

The controversy of the programme stems directly from its ambition to open new paths for urban research, for the investigation of cities. The key to this is the so-called *Eigenlogik* approach. *Eigenlogik* is normally, and by those using the approach, rendered as *intrinsic logic* in English. This rendering, however, risks losing some of the connotation of the concept

since what is *Eigen* is both autonomous *and* peculiar. In other words, the *Eigenlogik* approach asks for what is peculiar for a certain city – thus the interest of cities in the plural – and wants to explain that intrinsically.

The volume edited by Hemuth Berking and Martina Löw aims at grounding this new approach. In the Introduction, they contrast the new approach to the new urban sociology that emanated in the late 1970s; they want to research cities as such, not making research in the city, using the city as a laboratory of contemporary problems and processes. They ask both about what is specific for the city as a social form *and* about what is specific with this city (8–9). So there is a singularizing interest formulated here, yet coupled to the notoriously difficult, though more general, question of what the city, or why not the urban, is all about. There is also a will here (9–10) to explain the city and what is going on there – more or less – at the level of the city, and neither by the individuals who live there, nor by the actions by the state or globally; the *Eigenlogik* is proposed to operate at precisely this level.

Moreover, the *Eigenlogik* is conceived *as a practice*. Turning to the cultural turn, questions about ‘the cumulative structures of local cultures and their sedimentation into the materiality of cities’ and ‘the city as collective memory’ are opened. Thus, they propose to research the differences between cities in terms of local structures of feeling, city habitus and the like. Unsurprisingly, to accomplish this, comparative methods are proposed (11–12).

The approach is discussed in no less than 11 chapters, which does not facilitate a comprehensive overview. A long empirical, or perhaps better, historical, chapter by Marianne Rodenstein, comparing Frankfurt am Main and Hamburg, effectively demonstrates how different two cities can be, both in terms of mainly economy and politics, and the relevance of the comparative method to delineate this. Unfortunately, she uses the *Eigenlogik* approach rather heuristically, as a perspective, never really explaining the elements constituting the logic of each city and the functioning of respective logic.

Three chapters by Berking, Löw and Petra Gehring are, however, all devoted to more theoretical aspects of the approach. Berking brings us an outline to the city as a sociological subject, spatially grounded. Thus, he discusses the general question: what is a city? And the answer is found in the ‘spatial form, or more precise, a very specific spatial structural principle’ (18–19). This principle implies inclusion and density. Moreover, this form operates in affinity with a characteristic *doxa*, making the city a significant place (25). Together density and *doxa* open for the peculiarity of cities, Berking argues (28–29). Density and *doxa*, then, are

fundamental elements of the *Eigenlogik*, however abstractly formulated. Löw's contribution searches for what makes cities specific, that is, their *Eigenlogik*. This is not to be found in image campaigns or localization advantages (34–35). It is rather to be found in local structures of feeling. The concept structures of feeling, coined by Raymond Williams to point at deep differences between generations, was spatialized by Ian Taylor, Karen Evans and Penny Fraser in a study contrasting Manchester and Sheffield, in many ways similar cities, yet with very different developments (36–37). Herein Löw finds something that seems to penetrate almost all aspects of respective city. Such structures indicate an *Eigenlogik*. Out of this, Löw develops a working hypothesis regarding the distinctive development of any city; it is to be understood as locally specific (39–44). However, this specificity must be understood relationally, in relation to other scale levels and to other cities (46–48). It can be noticed here that Löw develops her argument more fully in *Soziologie der Städte*, also published in 2008 (see, in particular, Chapter II).

This may seem contradictory, particularly since Löw does not discuss how the intrinsic logic is to be seen relationally, yet the intrinsic logic could, for example, be seen to emanate from a specific articulation, and fixation, of the relations – at the level of the city. In other words, it seems reasonable to draw parallels between the *Eigenlogik* approach and research about *path dependence* (cf. Pierson 2004: Chapter 1); that the latter has been devoted mostly to political subjects at the national level should be no hindrance. Indeed, Karsten Zimmerman's chapter on a political science view of the *Eigenlogik* approach in the Berking–Löw volume points in that direction. Together with Rodenstein's comparison of Frankfurt and Hamburg, this also points to the relevance of an historical analysis to find out how the *Eigenlogik* is being constituted and works. In *Soziologie der Städte*, Martina Löw recognizes this parallel, yet posits the simultaneous web of relations also constituting the *Eigenlogik* as crucial; she concludes, 'to think a complex *Gebilde* like the city in terms of only one path is under complex' (94–95). My impression, however, is that the historical comparisons best demonstrate what the *Eigenlogik* – the differences – is about, at least empirically.

In her contribution, Petra Gehring asks the direct question: 'What is *Eigenlogik*?' Her aim is more than developing new approaches for studying cities – a paradigm change. For her, what is *Eigen* means singular, neither less nor more, which turns *Eigenlogik* into something paradoxical. Yet, it seems as if she wants to stick to this paradox, proposing that the very specificities with a city are a challenge for the evolutionist as for the historian. Thus there is an intrinsic logic, she tells; it is to be explicated neither through the history of the city, nor through any path development.

At this point in the argument she raises two questions: one about what constitutes the urban (*Stadt*), the answer to which she finds in terms of density, and another about the city (*die Stadt*), the singularization of which she answers with its name. To research this, also Gehring recommends a comparative approach, looking at the city under interest among other cities. We have to look for both the individual and the differentiating aspects, she recommends. In a way, Gehring's will, radically to conceive the *Eigenlogik*, stressing the singular, does not bring us closer to the empirical analysis of how it is constituted and functions.

Indeed, this seems to be the touchstone for the whole research programme. At least the handbook for urban planning and development edited by Löw and Terizakis, *Städte und ihre Eigenlogik*, does not bring us closer to a solution here. In all, it comprises no less than 23 contributions, all of them quite short. Now, if *Eigenlogik* is about how different phenomena and relations are being interrelated in specific ways in a city, seen in a larger relational web, the composition of this book makes some wonder. Being divided into four parts, dealing successively with the city as economic space, as cultural space, as built up space and finally as political space, it misses how these different spaces are thrown together (cf. Massey 2005: 140f), their spacing, in the cities discussed or, how they work together. Of course, as a handbook, being practical to those engaged in different arenas of the city may be the more central question.

In the Introduction, Terizakis presents the *Eigenlogik* approach. Writing three years after *Die Eigenlogik der Städte*, he mainly repeats what is being said in the earlier volume. Indeed, the contributions to this volume have little to say about the constitution and function of the *Eigenlogik*. They rather presuppose its existence, that is, identifying what seems to be the salient differences between cities in terms of different logics. Terizakis's argument for the practical relevance of the approach is however interesting, particularly given the *doxical* nature of the *Eigenlogik*. This approach, he says, gives cities a possibility to discover their respective strong and weak sides.

In an era where cities have to compete with each other – so it is said – and ready-made policies/solutions circulate globally, this possibility could be decisive; building upon own strengths, for example, seems to be a more realistic option than breeding global policies; also, however speculative the latter are, they rather bring more of the same to the city adopting them than making a difference; moreover, grounding development policies in own strengths rather than imported solutions may have democratic advantages. That the marketing of cities is given relatively great attention to by the *Eigenlogik* approach is somewhat ambiguous though. Sybille Frank discusses it in this volume, and Martina Löw devotes several

chapters of *Soziologie der Städte* to it. Of course, since city marketing is all about distinguishing the city in a favourable way to attract investments, well-to-do people and tourists, what is *Eigen* with a city can be a possibility to exploit, particularly if it really makes a difference. But if there is some affinity between city marketing and the *Eigenlogik* approach, they also bifurcate in important respects. Frank and Löw are eager to clarify this. For Frank, there is an important difference between what is locally specific to a city and what is brought to the city through 'recipe knowledge' (p. 39). Recipe knowledge can be both risky and costly. Frank demonstrates this by failures in making Dortmund a creative city.

To understand this attention, we have to recognize the importance of the cultural turn for this new approach to urban studies. Also to be recognized is that the new urban sociology, which the new approach wants to challenge, focused and focuses more on political economy than on the cultural, though this was more pronounced some decades ago. For example, Löw devotes a chapter of *Soziologie der Städte* to city pictures (*Städtebilder*), and the chapter on Berlin and Munich compares all kinds of representations of the two cities.

Returning to the handbook, its practical relevance remains an open question. For me, the reward for reading it stems from several good comparisons. Fashion in Munich is not what it is in Frankfurt, in terms of the local and the global, the glamorous and the restrained, Kristina Siekermann explains. Replanning the inner city central axis of Karlsruhe and Mannheim is very different things, as Annette Rudolph-Cleff demonstrates and explains; in Karlsruhe, order is priority one, in Mannheim, it is bringing the differences together. Julian Wékel's chapter comparing planning, its goals and how it is organized in Munich and Frankfurt can also demonstrate pertinent differences. More examples could be given.

In a way, all these comparisons strengthen the *Eigenlogik* approach by establishing differences between cities and showing that they have to do with how those cities work. But how this work is done more concretely and how this practice is accomplished are not being analysed; rather, it is being proposed, read off from the evidence more intuitively. For example, if Munich and Frankfurt have different practical logics making both *Eigen*, we could expect a homology between fashion and urban planning. Figuring that homology out would bring us closer to the elements and functioning of the *Eigenlogik*.

Another contribution points in such direction. As a social and cultural historian, Lutz Musner's (2009) interests are more synthetical than analytical, and in his intriguing study of Vienna, *Der Geschmack von Wien* (The taste of Vienna), he really tries to pin down the culture and habitus of Vienna. Not explicitly aimed at reconstructing Vienna's

*Eigenlogik*, he nevertheless comes very close to such a reconstruction, digging deep into the culture of the city. He understands habitus as an intrinsic generative formula that regenerates itself historically, yet noticing also continuity here. Musner's book is too rich to be easily summarized, but succeeds in identifying many homologies at work in Vienna. His perspective is fairly long, encompassing the latest two centuries, and sensitive to the social divisions and tensions within the city – particularly how they are being displayed. His work is interesting also because it is not comparative, treating just one case, though he of course has to recognize how the city is being opposed to Berlin (Spree Chicago).

Indeed, several books in the programme publication series at Campus are, besides Vienna, devoted to one singular city: Berlin, Leipzig, Malaga, Warsaw and Darmstadt. The *Eigenlogik* approach, then, seems not to be dependent on a systematic comparative analysis. The choice of cases is interesting also in that it moves beyond model global cities as London, Los Angeles and New York. That is an important way to challenge contemporary urban research empirically.

The *Eigenlogik* research programme has fuelled a critical debate in Germany. Thus, in November 2010, a two-day conference in Berlin aimed at challenging its foundations took place. Next year, Jan Kemper and Anne Vogelpohl edited a critical volume with papers from the conference. In several ways, this is a very ambitious publication and most contributions are of a definite quality. Each contribution criticizes one particular aspect of the *Eigenlogik* approach; they come together in a critique of the approach as fundamentally flawed. Perhaps this can be summarized in there is no such thing as an *Eigenlogik* of cities. Few contributions, however, enter into a dialogue with the new approach, as if it is too cultural to satisfy rigorous social science criteria. This unwillingness is disappointing given the overall high quality of the contributions. Thus is also avoided a critical appraisal of the relevance of cultural sociology – and of historical sociology – to urban sociology. Further, the critique is directed primarily at the conceptual foundations of the approach, not at its empirical results.

Kemper and Vogelpohl give us not only an introduction to the volume but also a more comprehensive critique in a series of notes. First, the subject, the city, is not a subject of its own, but must be located in society, conceptualized as a kind of intervening variable, they argue. This argument is directed towards a common-sense understanding of the urban/the city (17). It has to be seen in relation to the notoriously difficult task of defining the urban/the city. Nevertheless, we need some criteria for at least a preliminary identification of our study subject. To see the city as a catalyst, filter or compressor of development in society does not give us any such criteria; it merely displaces the problem. Second, the

identification of the city with the local is problematic, they argue. It is based on a static conception of space. The inability analytically to separate representations, material urban experiences, rhetorical clichés, subjective imaginations and urban topography hinders the grasp of developmental mechanisms too (25). This critique is too categorical; those dimensions of the subject are normally not distinguished, but to talk of an inability to do so exaggerates the matter. However, such analytical distinctions may be important to identify not only mechanisms but also the *Eigenlogik* of peculiar cities. Third, the search for an encompassing *Eigenlogik* homogenizes the experiences of the city population (27). This critique also overstates its point; some common experience of a city does not preclude, for example, conflicts among its inhabitants; indeed, the common experience may fuel the conflict. Fourth, this homogenization becomes clear in the interpretation of the Manchester–Sheffield study, where the experienced worlds are decoupled from their social origins, making the respective *Eigen* logics seem natural (27–29). This point also exaggerates; this may be true for the interpretation of the British study, yet several of the empirical studies of the research programme recognize such origins (Rodenstein’s, for example). Fifth, that the approach has a tendency to see all situations in a city as purely local effects (30–31) also exaggerates. Of course, there is such a tendency – locality matters, and it has to be demonstrated – but if it is a tendency, it is not the whole story. Sixth, there is the culturalization of cities, that is, an imbalance between the focus on cultural forms and symbols and the ‘articulation of them relative other social fields’ (32). However true this point is, it misses that the *Eigenlogik* approach is aimed to correct what more political economic approaches misses, and thus it too misses the dialogue, and the possibility for a more balanced, or nuanced, urban sociology. There are, for example, interesting resemblances here with Jeffrey Alexander’s strong programme for a cultural sociology (Alexander 2003: 21–26).

Being devoted to differences between cities, the *Eigenlogik* approach nevertheless tries to answer the general question: what is a city? In defining the city, the concept of density is central (together with inclusion). Nikolai Roskamm’s critique of the approach concentrates on this concept, and on the concept of space more generally, and its sociological usage from Durkheim and onwards. Roskamm recalls a human geographical discussion, coming to the conclusion that density does not give us any *a priori* solution to how the city is to be defined, yet questions about density can be a promising way forward for urban sociology. Another contribution by Peter Dirksmeier also resonates with a classic geographical conception of space, about its typification and individualization. This conception, abandoned within geography, is

reused, without reflection, by the *Eigenlogik* approach, Dirksmeier argues. This is an interesting article, yet in my view Dirksmeier makes the *Eigenlogik* a too imminent view: what is *Eigen* has to be seen relationally, horizontally and vertically, and thus not to be postulated. Dirksmeier's contribution can however be used to clarify the approach in important respects.

Other contributions are more negative, and thus less constructive. Boris Michel, for example, states that the so-called city rankings would be a task for urban sociology, and that the *Eigenlogik* approach tries to expedite its grounding. More generally, he finds that there is no space for politics within the approach, and that it 'spurs a problematic retraction of conflicts and inequalities' (133–134). The specific critique misses the point here: the *Eigenlogik* approach rather brings a subtle critique to the place marketing of cities for missing what is peculiar, rather than trying to support strivings to improve the city's ranking. The general critique seems more relevant, though the question is if questions of politics and social inequalities have so far been retracted or rather neglected. Also Stefan Höhne's critique is among the negative ones. Though acknowledging the importance of both diversity among cities and intrinsic forces as that which makes cities so fascinating a study, he dismisses the *Eigenlogik* approach for building upon an identity logic that in the end misses the differences. This poststructuralist critique however avoids the lesson of the empirical level: there will never be any last instance, and thus no final synthesis, but only a never-ending dialectic. Also Norbert Gestring points at the *Eigenlogik* approach as unable to conceptualize social cleavages and conflicts, criticizing particularly the understanding of Bourdieu's sociology. For Gestring, talking about the habitus of a city is impossible since habitus is class divided, while speaking about the *doxa* of a city as having to do with the city's specific mentalities is fundamentally flawed since *doxa* for Bourdieu refers to what is taken for granted and thus silenced (45ff, 50f). Now, while the concept of city habitus seems to be problematic and in need of further clarification (can it be transferred from social positions to a city?), Gestring misses what is really interesting with the *doxa* concept in relation to the notion of an *Eigenlogik*; for Bourdieu (1999: 100f), *doxa* is 'a set of cognitive and evaluative presuppositions whose acceptance is implied in membership itself' including 'the major obligatory pairs of opposites which, paradoxically, unite those whom they divide'. In other words, a dialogue seems possible between Bourdieu's sociological programme and the *Eigenlogik* approach, recognizing social cleavages and conflicts within the city.

Kemper and Vogelpohl's volume comprises more interesting material than is possible to appraise here. All of the contributions being more,



sometimes less, prone to a fundamental critique of the *Eigenlogik* approach; the sad thing is however that they seem to fail to open a discussion with their common adversary. This attitude in certain respects also devalues the otherwise high quality of this volume.

The *Eigenlogik* programme in Darmstadt has been a productive concern, the very volume of the material produced making a comprehensive and critical appraisal almost impossible. The merit of the approach lies in attracting attention to what is peculiar with a certain city. Urban research much relying on case studies, while we are looking for general urban patterns of a certain *duree*, there often remain interesting peculiarities of a case. Now, the *Eigenlogik* approach aims precisely at explaining the pattern of these particularities and to do this in terms of the specificities of the case. A critical question here is the balance between what is general and what is peculiar in the specific case. Another critical question has to do with delineating the logic – or why not the mechanism? – producing this peculiar outcome, including the elements and relations that are constituting the logic. In delineating the logic, identifying formative moments in terms of a specific timing, and spacing, of the relevant elements could be a fruitful test. My suggestion is that the further development of the approach has to engage with such questions, specifying the working of the *Eigenlogik*, plus finding out how this works – and together with other factors on higher-scale levels.

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