

# Placing Urban Anthropology: The Production of Empirically- based Knowledge and its Significance to Society

Diogenes

2022, Vol. 63(3–4) 3–8

Copyright © ICPHS 2018

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0392192117740022

journals.sagepub.com/home/dio

**Italo Pardo**

University of Kent, UK

**Giuliana B. Prato**

University of Kent, UK

**Wolfgang Kaltenbacher**

Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, Naples, Italy

Anthropological research in urban settings – often referred to as ‘urban anthropology’, for short – and its attendant ethnographically-based findings are attracting increasing attention from non-anthropologists and from professionals and decision-, law- and policy-makers. Recent publications (Pardo & Prato, 2012b; Prato & Pardo, 2013) have stimulated a robust debate. Since 2013, the journal *Urbanities* has carried a Forum on ‘Urban Anthropology’ (2013; 2014) including contributions by a growing number of scholars, which is likely to continue for some time to come. An edited volume intended as a substantial contribution to making this debate available to a wider audience was recently published (Pardo & Prato, 2017).

This Special Issue of *Diogenes* is an integral part of this ongoing process. Its genesis traces back to a round-table discussion stimulated by the then just published volume *Anthropology in the City: Methodology and Theory* (Pardo & Prato, 2012b) that took place in Naples in 2012 during the international interdisciplinary conference on ‘Issues of legitimacy: entrepreneurial culture, corporate responsibility and urban development’. Together with the editors of this Special Issue, that discussion involved several anthropologists and other social scientists from across the world, leading to the view that further reflection was needed on the place of ‘urban anthropological research’ in the future of anthropology and of research in the humanities and social sciences more generally.

So, in September 2013 a round-table Conference on ‘Placing Urban Anthropology: Synchronic and Diachronic Reflections’ was held at the University of Fribourg. This conference was convened by Wolfgang Kaltenbacher, Italo Pardo, and Giuliana B. Prato and was organized by the

---

**Corresponding author:**

Italo Pardo, School of Anthropology &amp; Conservation, University of Kent, Canterbury CT2 7NZ, UK.

Email: [i.pardo@kent.ac.uk](mailto:i.pardo@kent.ac.uk)

Department of Social Anthropology of the University of Fribourg with the financial support of the Swiss National Foundation and the Rectorate of the University of Fribourg. Thirteen participants, including three discussants – Andrea Boscoboinik, Edward Conte, and Helen Hertz – debated the state of the art of urban ethnographic research, diachronically and comparatively, and the potential for methodological and theoretical development in the shared awareness of the unique contribution that ethnography offers for a better theoretical as well as practical grasp of our rapidly changing and increasingly complex cities. Ten structured contributions were produced by a strong field including seven anthropologists (Vytis Čiubrinskas, Christian Giordano, Andrea Friedli, Italo Pardo, Giuliana B. Prato, Michel Rautenberg, and Francois Ruegg), two sociologists (Paola De Vivo and Jerome Krase), and a philosopher (Wolfgang Kaltenbacher). The intense discussions that took place over those two days offered an opportunity to develop a detailed examination of the significance of the anthropological paradigm in urban research, its centrality both to mainstream academic debates and to society more broadly, and the potential for development of this field of research. This Special Issue of *Diogenes* brings together revised versions of the ten papers presented at the conference and two additional articles by Janaki Abraham and Matsuda Motoji that address key issues in this field. These contributions incorporate central aspects of the round-table discussions and the attendant epistemological reflections on the state of the art of urban ethnographic research, on the prospective impact of urban anthropology and on its relations with other disciplines and with the broader society.

Today half of humanity is living in urban settings and that proportion is expected to increase in the coming decades. While, as Prato notes in her essay, the definition of city is varied and culturally and politically specific, urban conglomerations are widely identified as hubs of cultural and ethnic interaction as well as challenging settings for future sustainable development. Clearly, studying urban settings and the attendant complex dynamics is timely and of great importance. Field research in anthropology is an ‘art of the possible’, and in cities there are many possibilities. Combined with specific research objectives, the application of ethnographic methodology leads to a great variety of approaches and to new paradigmatic challenges.

Here it will be useful to summarize key aspects in the development of this sub-discipline.<sup>1</sup> With a few exceptions (see, for example, Dumont, 1951; Firth, 1956; Redfield & Singer, 1954), until the 1970s established academic disciplinary distinctions had led anthropologists to focus on tribal societies, or village communities, while staying generally away from the urban setting as a field of research. One reason for such a choice was rooted in late-nineteenth century disciplinary divisions, whereby cities, especially in Western industrial societies, were the designated realm of sociological enquiry. Thus, until the mid-1980s, urban research in Western industrial societies continued to be left out of the mainstream disciplinary agenda. This applied, in particular, to mainstream British anthropology. Nevertheless, since the first half of the twentieth century historical events and geo-political changes stimulated some anthropologists to address processes of urbanization in developing countries, especially in Africa and Latin America. Such research did not significantly contribute to the development of urban anthropology. Only in the late 1960s did the anthropological establishment, especially in the US, cautiously begin to acknowledge the relevance of such research focusing on ‘problem-centred’ studies, poverty, minorities – including ethnic minorities – and, urban adaptation (see, for example, Hannerz, 1969). The 1970s saw the publication of several books and articles debating the conceptual and theoretical definition of ‘urban’ and the extent to which ‘urban’ anthropology differed from ‘traditional’ anthropology. Some endeavoured to define the city as a specific ‘social institution’ with its dynamics and social, economic, and political relations, thus maintaining that urban anthropology is anthropology *of* the city. For others, urban anthropology was ‘simply’ (more or less classical) anthropological research carried out *in* urban areas. Anthropologists have strongly endorsed this second point of view, in line with the

epistemological stance that, since the 1990s, motivates most anthropologists to define their field of study as *anthropological research in urban settings*, rather than *urban anthropology* (see contributions in Pardo & Prato, 2012a). This stance reflects a shift in focus from the community studies inspired by the ‘urban ecology’ model of the Chicago School and the processes of urbanization in post-colonial societies to political economy, city planning, the legitimacy of grassroots action and of governance, the relationship between the local and the supra-local, and their significance to urban dynamics.

As anthropological research in urban areas started to grow, concern among the disciplinary establishment engendered a paradoxical situation. While sociologists became increasingly interested in the ethnographic method, some senior British anthropologists working in cities openly questioned the applicability of participant observation in urban areas, which eventually translated into an advocacy for new methods and for an ‘anthropology by proxy’. For a while, such a methodological stance played the perverse role of justifying the objection that (classic) anthropology could not be done *in* the Western Industrial city. So, for a while, the danger of this subfield being dismissed altogether was clear and present. However, in the mid-1980s a new generation of British-trained anthropologists convincingly proved that not only was participant observation possible, but that its combination with new techniques in the construction of case studies produced good results in urban Europe. Such pioneering work emphasized that the application of the tried and tested anthropological paradigm in Western urban settings produced findings that had broad theoretical relevance, pointing to the key fact that a holistic analysis and attention to the relationship between micro- and macro-processes raise no question on the validity of traditional fieldwork (Pardo, 1996).

During the 1990s, new developments in urban anthropology led to the investigation of the relationship between ordinary people and the ruling élite and the legitimacy of governance, as well as social space, marginalization, crime, violence and conflict, and movements of resistance. In the early twenty-first-century situation marked by the re-emergence of localism, transnationalism, and the project of multiculturalism, this trend addresses the urgent need to understand the city as a crucial arena in which citizenship, democracy, and, by extension, belonging are critically negotiated and the morality of law and politics are increasingly questioned and scrutinized (Pardo & Prato, 2012a; Prato & Pardo, 2013). These issues are increasingly relevant in Western and non-Western societies. There is a growing interest in ethnographically-based analyses on urban change in Africa, Latin America, and post-socialist countries; mega urbanization in India and China; and urban conflict in the Middle-East and South-East Asia.

Anthropology has come a long way since the days when the only legitimate ethnographic research was to take place in exotic, rural locales. Today an increasing number of anthropologists carry out research in cities, including Western cities. Contemporary urban anthropology is intrinsically trans-disciplinary, and it often gets very close to or draws from related disciplines such as sociology, history, geography, and communications (to name a few), which need not be cause for concern. Unlike much work produced under the rubric of ‘urban studies’ – most of which focuses on physical space as a central paradigm – anthropology is based on rich and detailed empirically-based ethnographic analyses. As Pardo stresses in his essay, anthropologists and their methodological apparatus are uniquely positioned to cast light on the evolution of our urban world and its political, economic, and cultural dynamics. The editors of this Special Issue maintain the need to honour the anthropological commitment to ethnography even as it promotes fruitful contaminations; hence, this project is likely to encourage cutting edge research with a broad scholarly appeal even as it guarantees ethnographic soundness. While it is, of course, true that too rigid boundaries between disciplines do not reflect reality, it would be misleading to erase all boundaries.

Undeniably, today anthropologists find it increasingly difficult to define their field of study, for global changes force them to take into account data that traditionally are academically ‘allocated’ to other social sciences and to the humanities; in particular, sociology, political science, economics, and history. The main concern is how to apply the traditional anthropological methodology to contemporary Western and non-Western societies and, where adaptations are needed, how to avoid losing disciplinary identity. Of course, like cultures, scientific disciplines are not static. They are dynamic entities, continuously changing and developing. They alter their identity, though they always do have an identity. Thus, new collaborations arise, widening the field of interdisciplinary research; and yet, as Kaltenbacher stresses, there is no interdisciplinarity without disciplinarity. In studying the complexity of the world in which we live, interdisciplinary work – in the sense of cooperation and exchange of research findings – is undoubtedly of critical importance in gaining an informed, adequately articulated understanding of human beings and society. The contributors to this volume engage with the argument that, although the complexity of life somehow compels anthropologists to specialize in a specific field, there is absolutely no need for such a complexity to translate into academic complication and disciplinary insecurity. Specifically, current urban ethnography carries recognizable stature and profile.

Alongside Prato’s empirically-inspired discussion of definitional problems and Kaltenbacher’s philosophical reflections on anthropological research in urban areas, what follows are ethnographically varied analyses that offer a cross-cultural view of contemporary urban dynamics that demonstrates Kaltenbacher’s point that respect for cultural differences is not in conflict with the theoretical requirements of comparative analysis if both aspects are based on an epistemological model that he calls ‘dialectical universalism’, which transcends relativism and abstract universalism. Prato addresses the problematic of incommensurability, arguing that this key issue in the philosophy of sciences has been central to how the debate on urban anthropology has developed and asking whether this problematic extends to cross-disciplinary debate among the contemporary humanities and social sciences and what relevance the resulting understanding of the city has outside the academia. Having carried out research in urban Europe, she goes on to offer an analysis of the city that encompasses at once the meaning of *urbs*, *polis*, and *civitas* and draws on her field research in Italy to develop a discussion of the epistemological significance of urban ethnography. Prato’s contribution tallies with Kaltenbacher’s and De Vivo’s. Kaltenbacher demonstrates how a detailed history of ideas can contribute to a better understanding of the complex relationship between urban anthropology and contiguous disciplines and sub-disciplines. De Vivo offers a contextualized reflection on the multidisciplinary approach that brings out key theoretical complexities raised by the empirical investigation of local governance, lending strength to her argument on the significance of the ethnographic approach to credible and efficient policy-making. In this sense, as Koenig notes: ‘While the strength of anthropology remains ethnographic analyses of individual cases, good policy depends on accurate generalization based on comparative analyses of urban experiences internationally, within and between developed and developing countries’ (2014: 86). The issue of local governance is an important part of Pardo’s analysis of a style of governance that has at once engendered and thrived on the blurring of the dividing line between what is legitimate and what is not legitimate in public life. Pardo focuses on powerful, tightly networked groups that, inspired by an elitist philosophy of power, have been hard at work to gain and maintain power, while losing trust and authority. The discussion builds towards an understanding of their implosion and of the corresponding erosion of trust in the relationship between citizenship and governance. A multidisciplinary approach is key to Kruse, who demonstrates how qualitative and quantitative research methods have always been symbiotic rather than disjointed. Instead of taking the usual defensive posture for ethnography, Kruse argues for the unique value of close-up research for a

deeper understanding of the social life of others. In his extensive historical excursion he reminds us of the paradigms and schools that dominated the debates in social sciences and that accompanied his own professional formation and academic career, from logical positivism to hermeneutics, from Znaniecki's version of analytic induction to Glaser and Strauss's 'grounded theory', from phenomenology and ethnomethodology to the debates on new and old urban sociology.

The transformation of cities worldwide has stressed the limited value of the concept of urbanism as a universal way of life. Rautenberg shows how urbanism is claimed as cultural heritage by politicians, urbanists, social scientists, and citizens, revealing as much about the self-representation conveyed by cultural heritage and collective memory as about the actual way of life. In the process of institutionalization of cultural heritage and the codification of collective memory in European cities, Rautenberg notes, we meet – again – the 'other'. The researcher, he therefore argues, is responsible for demonstrating that different temporalities and different memories can co-exist and that these differences form the basis of the cultural and social dynamism of the city. On the other hand, drawing on his extensive field research in Nairobi, Matsuda Motoji challengingly argues that in today's context of globalization urban settings are becoming radical and dynamic theatres of social change. Having asked what today is increasingly a key question – how can people construct communality transcending differences among them? – he goes on to develop an analysis of how, in a situation of conflict, people who were originally strangers generate a new social order and norm; of how, in the street, they construct and share a provisional communality. This links to Friedli's, Ruegg's, Giordano's, Čiubrinskas', Abraham's, and Channa's contributions. Friedli's analysis of her field material from the city of Kazan exemplifies how the city as a spatial concept can be understood as a political platform. She shows how key architectural projects in the city planning of Kazan cannot be understood only in the context of the architectural upgrading of the city centre or of historical memory. They are highly political acts at a time of post-socialist nation-building. Ruegg examines *nouveaux riches* in Eastern and Central Europe. Having briefly discussed the works of francophone scholars and researchers that can be seen to be part of the history of urban anthropology, Ruegg analyses the new rich in the former socialist countries; in particular the new rich gypsies and their spectacular, ostentatious architecture. In the greater context of urban transformations in the former socialist countries, emphasizes Ruegg in his conclusion, the palaces of the gypsies are an expression of global social movements that clearly exceed the narrow boundaries of ethnicity. Giordano explores the realities of multiculturalism in Southeast Asia drawing on his long-term fieldwork and on the extensive historical and socio-anthropological literature. Giordano uses a critical and articulated understanding of the notion of diaspora to develop an analysis of the social and cultural complexity of the Chinese community, which to this day still represents the majority of the population on the island of Penang. Čiubrinskas analyses the conundrum of Lithuanian immigrants in urban Chicago in order to address the relationship between the local and the supra-local as it becomes enacted by transnational processes and newly created ways of making a living in supra-local worlds, entailing strategies of mobile livelihood.

Linking to a classic theme in urban anthropology (see, e.g., Pardo, 1996), Abraham develops a detailed study of neighbours and neighbourhoods in two different Indian settings suggesting the significance of strong overlap of caste or religious or ethnic issues, which would be of particular interest to Indianists. She convincingly argues that neighbourhoods need to be taken seriously as a social formation crucial to social life and as important arenas of social and cultural influence. Channa argues that what it means to be urban in today's India must be understood in the context of pre-existing world-views, such as inclusive as opposed to exclusionary world-views, and of interpretations of rationality in 'moral' rather than in objective terms.

To put our ambition in a nutshell, we believe that the essays that follow exemplify the ruddy complexion of current research in urban settings, but we also hope that their collective reading

will help to demonstrate the epistemologically healthy state of the art and contribute to justify the view that this field promises to play an increasingly central role within and without the disciplinary boundaries. Urban ethnographically-based research, we suggest, may well be key to the future quality of urban life.

## Notes

1. For more expanded discussion, see Pardo & Prato, 2012a, Prato & Pardo, 2013, and the two Fora in *Urbanities* (2013; 2014).

## References

- Dumont L (1951) *La Tarasque : essai de description d'un fait local d'un point de vue ethnographique*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Firth R (1956) *Two Studies of Kinship in London*. London: Athlone.
- Forum on 'Urban Anthropology' (2013) *Urbanities*, 3(2): 79–132, anthrojournal-urbanities.com
- Forum on 'Urban Anthropology' (2014) *Urbanities*, 4(2): 84–103, anthrojournal-urbanities.com
- Hannerz U (1969) *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Koenig D (2014) Contribution to the Forum on 'Urban Anthropology', *Urbanities*, 4(2): 86–88, anthrojournal-urbanities.com
- Pardo I (1996) *Managing Existence in Naples: Morality, Action and Structure*. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Pardo I and Prato GB (2012a) Introduction: the contemporary significance of anthropology in the city. In: I Pardo and GB Prato (eds) *Anthropology in the City: Methodology and Theory*. Farnham: Ashgate (now published by Routledge), pp. 1–28.
- Pardo I and Prato GB, eds (2012b) *Anthropology in the City: Methodology and Theory*. Farnham: Ashgate (now published by Routledge).
- Pardo I and Prato GB, eds (2017) *The Palgrave Handbook of Urban Ethnography*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Prato GB and Pardo I (2013) 'Urban anthropology', *Urbanities*, 3(2): 80–110, anthrojournal-urbanities.com
- Redfield R and Singer M (1954) The cultural role of cities, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 3(1): 53–73.