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Doing city*

Other urbanities and the negotiation of city in everyday practices

Abstract: Urban studies (in European Ethnology) are dominated by a persistent metrocentrism. Metrocentrism is characterized by a one-sided concentration on large cities and metropolises and is based on a normative conception of urbanity, which is closely linked with classic notions of modernity and does only consider certain (i. e. 'Western') milieus, situations and spaces. Cities and city life beyond this restriction are neglected and have become fields off the map, such as cities in the southern hemisphere and above all smaller towns. This contribution reflects the underlying hierarchization and presents a praxeological approach to studying the constructed nature, processuality and performativity of relations and categories of cities. Using the example of the cities of Wels in Upper Austria and Hildesheim in Lower Saxony, it demonstrates how practices of doing place, size and scale can be studied ethnographically.

Keywords: metrocentrism, urbanity, urban way of life, urban studies, praxeology of scale and size

Metrocentrism in (anthropological) urban studies and the problem with urbanity

The urban is enjoying an academic and social boom in the 21st century, brought about by a rate of urbanization never experienced previously. Matthias Horx, the trend researcher, even goes so far as to proclaim the "the city and urbanization as a megatrend" (Zukunftsinstitut 2016). Thomas Hengartner speaks of a second urbanization (Hengartner 2014) and geographers Tim Hall, Phil Hubbard and John Rennie Short write in their introduction to the *SAGE Companion to the City* that we are "in the midst of the Third Urban Revolution" (Hall, Hubbard, and Short 2008). Over half the world's population has been living in urban areas since 2007, and urban life has been declared ubiquitous, long since reaching rural regions, or at least flattening the differences between city and countryside.¹ Academic research has kept pace with

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1 Following Henri Lefebvre, numerous studies trace the purported trend towards global urbanization (e. g. Acebillo, Jacques, and Schmid 2013; Brenner 2014; Moravánszky, Schmid, and Stanek 2014). Peter Dirksmeier, the geographer, notes a ubiquitous urbanism in rural regions as well (Dirksmeier 2009).

this situation through a growing interdisciplinary focus on urban forms of life and environments. Urbanity as a specific form of life in the city is once again a central topic, as seen, not least, in new directions in urban planning studies regarding categories such as density and cultural mix.² However, a closer look reveals that *very particular* cities predominate in research, society and politics, and are viewed as paradigmatic examples of urban life. These are the big and very big cities of a presumed western modernity. It is particularly the metropolitan and cosmopolitan lived realities and, for some time now, the global and world cities that function as the nerve centers of global capitalism, as Saskia Sassen (1991) puts it, that have garnered attention, i. e. primarily cities such as New York, Tokyo and London.

Ideas about the city are, thus, largely connected to big and very big cities. By contrast, other cities – smaller or non-western cities or towns – barely feature as examples of urban life, tend to be viewed as deficient, less developed and less urban, and are less often the subject of research. The British geographer Jennifer Robinson has highlighted this remarkable disparity in the attention paid to different forms and sizes of cities and, in her well-regarded book *Ordinary Cities* (2006), calls for more studies of cities that are “off the map.” Taking up perspectives from postcolonial studies, she criticizes the centrism of the focus of urban studies on western cities in the northern hemisphere. Geographers Tim Bunnell and Anant Maringanti also fault this bias, which they term metrocentricity (2010), and attempt to break with it by looking towards Asian countries. Urban research being carried out in the global south has also put forward criticisms of urban Eurocentrism, for example, the work of AbdouMaliq Simone (2010) and Ananya Roy (2011). The British cultural geographers David Bell and Mark Jayne deliberately investigated “Small Cities” (2006a); in doing so, they focused on “overlooked” types of town or city, such as small and medium-sized towns and cities.

Metrocentrism was also frequently to be found in European Ethnology, once the discipline had identified the city as an object of study. The primary point of interest in the German-speaking tradition of *Volkskunde*, as is well known, was first and foremost the village and the community. These were ways of life conceived of as being on a smaller scale, where researchers were looking for social orders and collectives that had ostensibly been passed down and traditional lifestyles that had remained untouched by social change.

The number of studies of cities in European Ethnology started to increase in the 1980s along the lines of an anthropology of urban areas (Hannerz 1980), where the urban was decidedly equated with the city – as, for example, at the 24th Congress of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde* in 1983 in Berlin, which bore the title: “City. Aspects of Empirical Cultural Research” (Kohlmann and Bausinger 1985).

2 On the central role of the term urbanism in urban planning, cf. the work of Thomas Wüst on “the myth of urbanism” (Wüst 2004).

Research questions were sought specifically in the everyday life of large cities. Still today, it is predominantly the (symbolically) big cities that provide the locations for urban research, for example, Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Vienna, Graz, or Zurich. Smaller towns or cities, such as Marburg, Tübingen or Göttingen, are only seldom studied as having something to contribute to urban studies. Thus, with the shift from the village to the city as well as from tradition to modernity, a new imbalance regarding social reality crept into European Ethnology: ultimately, most people in Europe do not live in cities but in small and medium-sized towns and cities.³

With its transition to an empirical study of culture as European Ethnology, the discipline found itself in service to a city hype that would have been worth studying in and of itself. The seemingly exotic, iridescent and multicolored city, or specific spaces within it, was what attracted researchers and promised renown (Lindner 1990: 108; Schmidt-Lauber 2010). Once again, European Ethnology went along with the social bias towards cities as apparently paradigmatic urban centers. Not least, there was also an academic logic to this imbalance: If the most pronounced manifestations of urban life were to be found in the city, so ran the conjecture, then it was best studied there. Underlying this was a conception of qualitative research in which, in contrast to the earlier *Volkskunde*, the object of study was aligned around the 'new' or the 'modern'.

The term urbanity harbors multiple constraints. On the one hand, like the term city, it is a well-established concept in everyday speech and a formalized term in academic usage for urban lifestyles, one closely connected to classical ideas about modernity and which includes only certain milieus, situations and spaces (namely 'western' ones) (Amin and Graham 1997; Bell and Jayne 2006a; Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2009; Robinson 2006). At the same time, it is so vague that it can be used in a variety of situations (Wüst 2004). Within the concept of urbanism, 'the city' is generally equated with the big city or only with certain spaces within it. As a result of this normative understanding, lived realities in other towns or certain areas of the city are not considered to be urban. Hence, Thomas Hengartner is among those who criticize the exclusion of other forms of urban life and the one-sided bias of the terms urbanity and urbanism towards a "fair weather urbanism," as if this were to be found "only in a dense crowd, in temperate climates and when the sun is shining" (Hengartner 2014: 17).

In everyday usage, urbanity and urbanism often arise in commercialized contexts, and their use to lend emotional weight or as a value judgement is striking,

3 Given the different definitions of towns and cities in relation to their population and function, categories of cities and their share of the total population vary between countries. As a result, figures available for the EU are estimates, according to information provided by the Europe office of the *Deutschen Städte- und Gemeindebund* (June 25, 2014). However, all the estimates that differentiate by city type conclude that most inhabitants live in medium-sized and small towns.

usually with positive connotations when, for example, estate agents, the media or travel guides describe certain districts or streets as 'urban,' implying not only vitality, variety and good infrastructure, but also the visibility of aesthetic or new consumer trends. Places with 'urban' qualities appear livable; following today's dominant, culturalized understanding of what a city is, this often translates as the staging of cultural diversity (Grube and Welz 2014). For some time now, the practice of new urbanism in town planning has also been reorienting itself around the concept of urban life (Sonne 2014) and striving to make it something that can be planned, while the model of the overdeveloped, car-friendly city has had its day (Othengrafen et al. 2016). Remarkably, this means that even the small town has now come to serve as a guide in new urbanism.

Based on this kind of normative, structural definition of what constitutes urbanity, urban studies can offer the possibility of researching and 'measuring' characteristics, such as the density, size or heterogeneity of a city. However, it is our opinion that it also makes – perhaps greater – sense to rethink the normative constraints of the term urbanity and to open it up to explore the plurality of urban life beyond the metropolis, expanding Louis Wirth's "ways of life" to "different ways of urban life" (Wirth 1938); it is in this sense that the title of this article speaks of 'other urbanities.' This means searching for other ways of describing and evaluating urban life and avoiding the unthinking perpetuation of an overt hierarchization of cities.

In the following article, we seek to reflect critically on the metrocentrism – of which European Ethnology is also guilty – and on the normative limitation of the terms city and urbanity to modern, western cities, and to break with this by focusing on case studies involving towns and forms of urban life that do not correspond to the conventional understanding of the city, but which we, nevertheless, deliberately investigate as cities and conceive as urban ways of life. In doing so, the text joins the growing body of work focusing on non-metropolitan (often non-western) cities described above and explores the specific contribution made by European Ethnology to this trend. In comparison with urban studies, with its basis broadly in the social sciences and geography, empirical culture studies have hitherto contributed only very little to the discussion, or only very recently.⁴ However, as we hope to show, the

4 Based on a research project on urban life in Göttingen (Schmidt-Lauber and Baerwolf 2009), we held an interdisciplinary conference at the University of Göttingen in 2009 on the topic of "Medium-sized towns. Urban life beyond the metropolis," which concentrated on case studies that did not involve large towns or cities. In October 2015, an international, interdisciplinary conference took place at the University of Vienna titled "We have never been urban. From metrocentrism to the plurality of the urban," which looked explicitly at other forms of urbanity outside of its normative understanding.

discipline's microanalytical, historical and socially contextualizing approach⁵ opens up the potential to trace the complexity of social processes and lifeworlds, as well as to decode the dynamics of city hierarchies in everyday contexts without restricting or reducing them to their structural or material premises. To do this, we investigate the role of 'big' concepts like city and urbanity in everyday situations and show the different meanings that 'the city' can have. This also allows us to highlight both the interplay between material and symbolic practices in the production of urban positions and hierarchies and the contingent nature of urban models.

Medium-sized towns as ordinary cities

The question of everyday urban life in ordinary cities will be directed in what follows towards a specific example: Namely, what are known as medium-sized towns. These are towns that, according to official typology, are neither cities nor small towns. 'Medium-sized town' is not a common category either in everyday speech or in academic urban research. However, it is one of the common categories used for classifying municipal areas for German government administrations and is based on a numerical definition calculated according to the number of inhabitants. Remarkably, the authorities still use the numerical definition taken from the German Imperial Statistics (*Deutsche Reichsstatistik*) of 1871. According to this, towns with 20,000 to 100,000 residents are medium-sized towns, whereas towns with over 100,000 residents are cities – and this in spite of the fact that urban life has undoubtedly changed dramatically since the late 19th century. Suggestions for different boundaries when categorizing by size have, therefore, been made by those working in the

- 5 Approaches from urban studies and the study of culture have become much more differentiated within European Ethnology in recent years in terms of both theory and method. Sustained efforts to determine the specificity and singularity of individual cities through a description of the habitus of a city (Lindner 2003; Lindner and Moser 2006) have entered the research field alongside diagnoses of the social trends of a particular time (Färber 2014; Färber and Otto 2016) or normative questions of communal life ("Urban Ethics" research group at the Ludwig Maximilian University Munich). New impulses can be seen particularly in terms of methodology (Schwanhäußner 2010, 2015) and textuality in the wake of the critical reading of the tendency to parcel up towns into closed entities and describe urban cultures holistically in the same way as villages or islands (see, e.g. Kokot, Hengartner, and Wildner 2000). Conceptual programs put forward recently by, above all, Alexa Färber (2010), Jörg Niewöhner (2014) and Ignacio Fariás (Fariás and Bender 2010) suggest adapting the assemblage approach and utilizing ANT for urban studies, seeking to counter the dematerialization of space through a plurality of actors. The much cited thesis of the culturalization of urban life along the lines of a general estheticization of society (Reckwitz 2009, 2012) has been taken up recently by Nils Grube and Gisela Welz (2014), who provide concrete empirical examples that highlight the use of multiculturalism as a resource in city branding initiatives and the economic and symbolic upgrading of cities. In their own way, all these examples show the potential of detailed, multidimensional case studies in European Ethnology for studying everyday life, which we also follow.

study of space and place, for example, a population bracket of 50,000 to 250,000 inhabitants for medium-sized towns (Adam 2005: 496). However, a growing number of voices consider, justifiably, that defining city types according to statistical size is meaningless given that there are critical differences between cities in terms of their significance and configuration at a national and global level and in different historical periods, and even between cities of the same size – regarding their functions, structure and role within a network of settlements, and regarding everyday life and experience.⁶ It is precisely here that European Ethnology is capable of making a key contribution, namely, the qualitative study of medium-sized towns in terms of their lifeworlds and lived everyday practices within the context of their history and sociospatial configuration.

If we are to study medium-sized towns, and, in doing so, proclaim the pluralization instead of the hierarchization of the urban, this means moving away from trying to define different types of ‘city’ and codify criteria for assessing urbanity. The case for retaining the medium-sized town as a type in its own right outside of government categorization is difficult to maintain: The social, economic and historical background to each town is too diverse, not to mention the variety of living situations and ways of life within the towns (Baumgart and Rüdiger 2010: 254; Rauter 2011: 4; Schmidt-Lauber 2010: 18–19). Consequently, the towns are not investigated as ‘medium-sized towns,’ but, following Jennifer Robinson, as ordinary towns, where ‘ordinariness’ is understood not as averageness, but in the sense of non-deficient. We also trace how town size is produced in these towns:

“Rather than categorising and labelling cities as, for example, Western, Third World, developed, developing, world or global, I propose that we think about a world of ordinary cities, which are all dynamic and diverse, if conflicted, arenas for social and economic life.” (Robinson 2006: 1)

We understand town size as a category that requires explanation and cannot simply be assumed implicitly. With this in mind, we trace the logics of urban life and draw attention to the fact that ‘the city’ and ‘urban life,’ or how they are understood, embrace a more diverse range of meanings than simply the nightlife in Berlin Mitte or Neukölln, the consumer world of Vienna’s Neubau district or Graben shopping street, or the spheres of the cultural economy in London or New York.

The impetus for this topic came – as so often in European Ethnology – from our own experiences. Working in the empirical study of culture and lived experience, European ethnologists are practiced in drawing on their own experience and using it as source material. When I (Brigitta Schmidt-Lauber) was appointed to the Georg-August University in Göttingen in 2006, I found myself living in a town with

6 Adam 2005: 495–496; Flacke 2004: 27; Hannemann 2002: 268–270; on the diversity of small and medium-sized towns, cf. Kunzmann 2004.

fewer than 240,000 inhabitants for the first time in my life – until then Kiel was the smallest city I had lived in – and I quickly realized that my previous experiences and routines were hardly suitable for navigating everyday life in Göttingen and that, in any case, my habitus and outlook, shaped by ‘city life’ and formed in places like Hamburg, Vienna and Cologne within particular social and political milieus, appeared out of place here. Just the shop and restaurant opening times represented an example of the town’s different qualities of experience as distinct from my lifestyle in the city, when I think of my futile attempts to find a proper meal in Göttingen having finished work at 10 pm, although even the understanding of a ‘proper meal’ is based on social and habitual influences. While in some milieus, the choice of restaurants available in a medium-sized town fails to meet with habitualized tastes, for other consumers, any difference to the city in this respect is irrelevant or goes unheeded. In addition, the culinary range on offer points to the town’s position in a gastronomic field that is part of a cultural economy.⁷

I was particularly struck by the spatial and social manageability and familiarity, the small-scale urban fabric of Göttingen. My experience of distance in the city meant I usually allowed too much time when planning routes. I also found it irritating that social networks frequently and almost inevitably intersected, despite being dispersed across the entire town. Unplanned encounters often occurred, or I met acquaintances in places where I believed myself safe in my anonymity, such as the supermarket, swimming pool and, inevitably, time and again at the railway station – a noteworthy hub in medium-sized towns, and especially in university towns. I also became aware of the surprisingly high degree of visibility accorded my own academic activities. This was familiar from my research in Namibia, where my master’s thesis about German-speaking Namibians was declared introductory reading for diplomats by the German embassy and I, as a doctoral student, received an invitation to a state reception in Bonn. My admission to this illustrious circle of statesmen (in this case only) was certainly not the result of any form of brilliance on my part, but was rather the product of shorter social pathways in a compact milieu, the result of scant competition and an associated boost in importance in comparison with the much-cited anonymity found in large cities.⁸ These characteristics should not, however, be conceived as genuine features of medium-sized towns; instead, they are the outcome of a performative production of familiarity. They point to the negotiation of one of the town’s specific roles.

While today’s Göttingen, with its 116,650 inhabitants, is officially categorized as a city (and sits in 65th place in the ranking of German cities; as of 05.01.2016),

7 See, for example, the distribution of Michelin Stars in Europe: Eupedia. 2017. “Ranking of Michelin-starred restaurants by city in Europe.” Accessed July 5, 2017. Available at: http://www.eupedia.com/europe/michelin_stars_by_city.shtml.

8 See “Small Countries” (Gingrich and Hannerz 2017).

this does not correspond with the attitude towards life or the self-image of most of the people who live there. Yet hardly anyone categorized the place as a small town either; rather, it was somewhere in between – it was felt to be a ‘medium-sized town.’ Locally, being positioned between city and village, being ‘in-between’ or ‘both the one and the other,’ was an important feature. A town such as Göttingen boasts characteristics of the city *and* features of the small town, as well as the countryside through its proximity to nature, I heard over and over again. The basis for this might well be the its role as an important university town and tourist destination, which demonstrates that town size is dependent on context. Thus, the town’s position within these academic and tourist domains renders it ‘larger’ than the number of inhabitants would suggest. Town size – this indicates – is, thus, a relational category produced by a number of different means.

Research on medium-sized towns or doing place, size and scale in Wels and Hildesheim

In the research project “Middletown Urbanities,”⁹ we follow a praxeological approach in the sense of ‘doing city,’ studying towns as relational cultural, material and social structures and identifying the ongoing production of the city, or categories of cities, in various fields of practice. Here, a central role is played by practices that ascribe significance and positioning to a place, which we bring together under the terms ‘doing place,’ ‘doing size’ and ‘doing scale.’ We render the towns of Wels and Hildesheim visible as the *result* of place-making practices. City and place are understood not as fixed entities; instead, the research focuses on the processes by which they are produced performatively over and over again and appropriated in the sense of Doreen Massey’s concept of multiple place identities (Massey 1991). There is no fixed meaning (derived from town size, for example) that ‘resides’ in a place; rather, relational processes lend it position and meaning: “In this interpretation, what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” (Massey 1991: 28). With Ignacio Fariás; we understand city and place “as a multiplicity of processes of becoming” (Fariás 2010:

9 In preparation, we initiated a research project that ran over two semesters at the University of Göttingen about everyday life in the town (Schmidt-Lauber and Baerwolf 2009), which was associated with an interdisciplinary conference involving social scientists and historians (Schmidt-Lauber 2010). Even after the project leader had transferred to the University of Vienna in 2009, continuing to break with the metrocentric bias of the cultural focus on cities remained important. Therefore, from our location in Vienna and running parallel to research on the city, we consciously initiated the FWF-funded research project “Middletown Urbanities – Ethnographic Urban Studies in Wels and Hildesheim” (<http://www.univie.ac.at/middletownurbanities/>), which ran from 2011 to 2016 and the aims and initial findings of which we present in the following. This article also draws on existing publications arising from the various projects on medium-sized towns.

2). An ethnological approach in urban studies foregrounds what people do and asks how, through these actions and in various ways, the city is produced, perceived and appropriated (Färber 2010; Hengartner 2000; Hengartner, Kokot, and Wildner 2000). At the same time, our work is founded on a broad understanding of practices and actors that includes the work of politics, urban planning and marketing, architecture, media and other fields of work, but also and above all, the everyday practices of the towns' inhabitants.

However, we are not only interested in how the two towns become places and take on meaning, but particularly how this also produces relations between towns. Ultimately, the importance given to and hierarchies between towns are not the logical result of objective facts and numbers. Rather, one town's position in comparison to another is reproduced repeatedly and in manifold ways. Accordingly, in our research, we do not describe medium-sized towns primarily by means of numerical size, but above all with reference to the concrete practices that produce place and city. In our view, the term size encompasses a symbolic dimension in addition to physical characteristics pertaining to expanse in space. Ayşe Çağlar, the social anthropologist, and Nina Glick Schiller, the sociologist, (2009) use the term scale in a similar way. We attempt to forge a productive relationship between the terms size and scale without collapsing one into the other.¹⁰ To do so, we suggest understanding a town's material setting as a dimension of size and, analogous to scale, as produced through practice. While, in line with Ayşe Çağlar and Nina Glick Schiller and their use of Pierre Bourdieu, we understand scale as the positions a town occupies within different fields (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2009: 188); we understand size as a resource deployed in relation to these positions, or, as Mark Jayne and David Bell put it: "It's not size, it's what you do with it" (Bell and Jayne 2006b: 5). Drawing on Levitt and Glick Schiller, we understand social fields as a "set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed" (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1009). Taking a range of fields – such as everyday life, administration and economics – we identify how and in what ways towns are classified, how meaning is ascribed to a town, and what forms of the production and naming of 'size' become visible.

Implicitly or explicitly, references to and comparisons with other towns play a role in these kinds of characterization and positioning. Towns can only be understood and described – in both academic and everyday situations – in reference to other towns, i. e. relationally. A term we use in this context is the 'landscape of urbanity' in which a town is embedded and in relation to which its inhabitants make sense of it. By this, we mean specific spatial contexts against which the normative image

10 Thus, for example, in some cases, residents linked the lack of anonymity with the 'provincial' status of the towns studied (scale) and in others, with the small-scale of the city center (size).

of the urban is understood, and within which a town is characterized and placed in relation to other spatial entities. Landscapes of urbanity function as guides for what appears self-evident, such as what a 'town' is and means, or the form taken by the relationship between town and countryside, each of which communicates certain ideas and expectations about urban life. The idea of a town in central Europe hardly corresponds to the reality in China, for example, where megacities create administrative units and spaces organized in a completely different way. Within Europe too, what is considered self-evident and what is considered relevant varies greatly. This is clear even just from a comparison of our case studies: Hildesheim has around 100,000 inhabitants, making it only the seventh largest town in Lower Saxony, a federal state in which there are several other medium-sized towns. Wels, by contrast, with just under 60,000 inhabitants, is, nevertheless, the eighth largest town in Austria. 'Medium-sized urbanity' is, therefore, produced within its own regional and national frame, and is more likely to be measured against such conventions than by numerical analysis. This makes it imperative that cultural urban studies look at a town's historical and geographical contexts.

Towns do not all have the same importance or carry the same weight, and instead have different relevance and reach depending on the underlying criteria or context.¹¹ Even we were rarely able to ignore the hierarchy between towns or the unequal power relations. A town such as Hildesheim or Wels has a distinct and, in many contexts, much smaller amount of symbolic capital than a city such as Vienna or Berlin. Geographer Peter Dirksmeier (2009) writes aptly in this regard of "residential capital," meaning the local effects and spatial profits which towns and cities have available to them to varying degrees. This residential capital is actively created and continually renegotiated, meaning that the generation of symbolic capital takes place in a number of ways, through different actors and on different levels. Towns today increasingly find themselves in national and global competition with one another and compete for different sorts of capital. Intertown competitions and city rankings on a whole variety of themes and initiated by a range of organizations use different criteria to rank all sorts of towns, forming hierarchies of importance by topic. This itself reflects the growing focus on competition and a culture of evaluation in general (Tauschek 2013). Which town comes out at the top of these symbolic city rankings and can offer the most residential capital can vary historically and depends on the field and methodology involved. Even the attractiveness of city life *per se* is subject to changing cycles, with criticism of the city and urban outmigration, or urban hype and booms around particular districts playing a role.

11 Here, a similarity can be seen to postcolonial studies and its critical reflections on the logic of the hierarchization of people and spaces and its implications – in this regard, it is possible to perceive a relationship between the center and those regions deemed peripheral that appears almost colonial.

The investigation of 'doing city' in this research project encompasses different dimensions. In concrete terms, we trace practices of doing place, size and scale on symbolic, material and social levels.¹² On a *symbolic* level, we are interested in the discursive practices around the classification of places and towns. One particularly powerful practice of classification can be seen in the established administrative convention of categorizing towns by town size, and here we submit the status of 'medium-sized town' itself to a critical reflection and historicization. Local, regional and national administrations create and materialize hierarchies between towns. By using numerical and functional criteria, such as population, administrative status and infrastructural and/or economic function, they categorize municipalities as cities, medium-sized towns or small towns, allocate them a status as a local or regional center (Adam 2004), allot them different resources and tasks and, by doing so, turn them into a region's 'second city' or 'first city.' Urban planning, the social sciences, history and culture studies have now also, having long neglected them, hesitantly started to (re)discover urban spaces beyond the metropolises and, consequently, have opened up new positions for the category. Today, researchers and planners are interested in medium-sized towns particularly from the point of view of sustainability, the compact city and mixed-use development, ascribing to them a specific quality of life. Medium-sized towns will become increasingly significant in Europe, as predicted by the political scientist Carl Böhret as early as 1991 (Böhret 1991: 1). The rankings mentioned above, as symbolic practices of relation in the context of the logics of competition and the culture of evaluation, also enact a system of classification (Tauschek 2012: 196–197). A further major contribution to how a city is positioned and labelled is made by city marketing. Utilized by medium-sized towns as well, it is a way of professionally marketing and showcasing a town in an era of competition between towns. Maps are another very obvious and clear way of producing positions – and, therefore, hierarchies – whilst appearing to objectivize them. Maps are based on a practice of ordering that makes differences in importance visible and produces them. By using differently sized, colored or shaped markings, maps produce and visualize the ostensible value of individual towns, giving them different weighting or creating hierarchies between them, and contributing to a town's visibility or its positioning 'off the map.' At a local level, the image and size of a town are formed by street maps, which reproduce administrative units and take shape in everyday life as mental and habitual geographies, as we see on city walks or in mental maps.

12 These three levels in the study of space correspond to the concept of place put forward by Anne Vogelpohl (2014). For a general discussion on the different dimensions of space, see the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991) and studies inspired by him, particularly in European Ethnology, those by Johanna Rolshoven (2003, 2012).

From the perspective of European Ethnology, we are especially interested in everyday practices of classification, i. e. in the question of how towns are negotiated and the moments in which they are compared or weighed against one another. We are also interested in how the residents come to embed themselves narratively in these comparisons and relations, in how they classify themselves and the links they make to their own self-image, in who calls a town big or small and when, and in who connects it to which other spaces. Symbolic classifications are by no means always immaterial and can certainly have serious material consequences. We need only think, for instance, of the many material effects linked to a new classification as a national or regional capital, as illustrated by Berlin or the example of St. Pölten in Austria.

A second level of interest for us is, therefore, constituted by the *material* relationships that are associated with different classificatory practices, i. e. how the position of a town is produced materially. Human geographers Don Slater and Tomás Ariztía use the apt term “scaling devices” for artefacts that objectivize scales (Slater and Ariztía 2010). For our purposes, this includes not only things such as infrastructure – local transport networks or transport links to other places – but also a town’s physical composition – the built environment or prestige buildings. We are again interested in how actors relate to these materialities, and how they use and employ them. A frequent topic is the extent to which certain buildings in the towns under study are considered ‘fitting’ in terms of their dimensions or, instead, as ‘too big’ or ‘too small.’ And if nothing else, town planning operates on the level of the material. It typically broadly aspires in medium-sized towns to imitate or follow a “blueprint” of the city (Baumgart et al. 2004) and is, thus, guided by the normative understanding of urbanity outlined above, even if principles such as the ‘compact city’ or ‘human scale’ are increasingly making an appearance.

Finally, we are interested at the level of the *social* in the practices associated with classifications and materialities, where practices also have a bodily dimension. Pierre Bourdieu has shown how relations become embodied through processes of socialization and habituation and, thus, become part of human schemes of perception, thought and action (Bourdieu 1982, 1987). This shifts the focus not only to questions of the embodiment, socialization and habituation of relations, but also of how relations take shape performatively, i. e. the enactment of these relations in social situations, such as a person’s moment of embarrassment about or justification of where they live, or in the internalized notion of how to behave in public space. Relations here are not simply performed in the sense of repetition, but are rather constituted, strengthened or contested through practice. In concrete terms, we might examine the extent of social networks or the existence of particular scenes as practices of producing bigness or smallness. We are also interested in the rhythms and everyday routines of shopping for groceries or of work and leisure, in

spheres of action, in how space is appropriated and in social milieus. Using examples such as these, we reveal how actors experience and produce their specific town in their everyday lives.

An ethnography of negotiating place, size and scale in Wels and Hildesheim

The tool and the lens we used to carry out an empirical investigation of urban life and the interweaving of symbolic, material and social levels in everyday worlds was ethnography. This required relocating to the town in question for several months and living there full time, which led to the participation in events and discussion groups, and included things such as reading the local paper daily, attending a yoga course or going to an Irish pub, chatting with neighbors, shopping at the weekly market, going to the theatre or cinema and much more. Ultimately, ethnography means carrying out as many of the tasks of daily life as possible in the research location, knowing that constituting the research field is already part of 'doing place.'

Project researchers Georg Wolfmayr (Wels) and Anna Eckert, and, before her, Wiebke Reinert (Hildesheim), each undertook two periods of ethnographic fieldwork lasting several months and totaling one year. Brigitta Schmidt-Lauber joined them in each location for shorter stays. During this time, we conducted numerous informal, everyday conversations as well as qualitative, ethnographic interviews, researched written sources, such as historical, statistical, administrative and media reports, and made a variety of social contacts with as diverse a range of people as possible. In addition, by asking people to "show me *your* town," we were taken on walking tours of the towns by different inhabitants – an informative method in the style of "go-alongs" (Kusenbach 2008; Lee and Ingold 2006; Schwanhäüßer 2015) or "perceptual" walks (Lynch 1960), and forming part of a sensory ethnography (Arantes and Rieger 2014; Bendix 2006; Pink 2009). Residents chose both routine journeys and favorite places or ones associated with a specific memory. At first, we were taken typically less to personal and instead to prestigious sites in the towns, such as those normally included in an official town tour – Hildesheim Cathedral or the Wels Trade Fair Centre – and only a repeated enquiry about the participants' daily life in the town elicited the inclusion of other stops on the tour. Often the concreteness of the sites visited served to contextualize comparisons: References to other towns helped to characterize what gave this particular town its specificity. The walking tours were, therefore, a method which revealed the dimensions of everyday practice and drew out moments where memories and urban imaginaries had condensed, and through which the relationship between the built environment, the appropriation of space and the use of space, as well as symbolic positioning, became visible. We also asked people to give us a history of where they had lived and analyzed how they described the different places and reflected on or justified their decision to move town.

The research was divided into three phases. During an initial fact-finding tour, we examined the history, self-presentation and image of the town using mainly written materials and analyzed basic statistical data. During the second phase, researchers were stationed for four or seven months in the towns for fieldwork. This was used to gain insights into different dimensions and aspects of town life and make contact with a wide range of people. Finally, the third phase consisted of another research stay in Wels or Hildesheim lasting several months, during which time an ethnography of a sector – a particular field serving as a case study for the town – and what might be termed ‘deep drilling’ was carried out. Given our disciplinary interest, which is concentrated on everyday activity, we sought to use these different methods to understand what it means to live in Wels or Hildesheim, how the residents organize their everyday lives and how they negotiate their town.

In the following, some of the insights gained from our materials will illustrate the fields of research and the three levels of ‘doing city’ we have explored.

In *Wels*, size is negotiated above all against the backdrop of the town’s stigmatization and marginalization within a general culturalization of towns. Having enjoyed an upturn and a sense of euphoria in the 1960s and 1970s founded on the ideal of urban modernity (skyscrapers, motorways, industry and trade), a narrative of decline now dominates in Wels. The 1970s saw the construction of the centrally located Maria Theresa Tower in Wels, which, in its day, proudly adorned postcards as a kind of proof of its own modernity; today, however, the media and residents judge it to be ‘out of proportion’ for a town such as Wels. While the town is not experiencing an economic or financial crisis, it has symbolically lost relevance over recent decades. Developments linked to postindustrial production, which has been typical for many metropolises which became the centers of cultural and symbolic economies, were not successfully realized in Wels. The symbols of status that used to signify upturn have vanished today, as seen from the many empty shops in the town center, or have lost their value, as the negative discourses around the high-rise housing developments of the 1960s and 1970s show. By contrast, new markers and signs in the symbolic economy are largely lacking or did not bring about the desired effect. Thus, the Welios Science Centre – Wels’ attempt to evoke the Bilbao Effect¹³ and proof that medium-sized towns are also attempting to embrace the culturalization of towns through flagship projects and creative industries (Florida 2005; Landry 2000; Reckwitz 2012) – disappointed the hopes of the symbolic appeal placed in it and was considered to be ‘too big.’ With this in mind, broad-based discussions are now taking place about what kind of town Wels could be and, above all, how urban Wels should be.

13 In the sense of using architecture to add value, as was the case with the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

The tableau of urban symbolism and representation opened up by *Hildesheim* is a completely different one. The town is part of the Hannover-Braunschweig-Göttingen-Wolfsburg metropolitan region, while, at the same time, it possesses some individuality as an important town in the region in terms of the economy and infrastructure. The town had close links to the wider area as a location for education, living, business and retail well before the municipal reforms of the 1970s and these still exist today. In addition, Hildesheim is a university and college town with a total of around 10,000 students. Town marketing emphasizes 'tradition' and history and makes use of popular images of medium-sized towns. The significance of 'old Hildesheim' finds expression in a contentious culture of memory negotiated around religious sites, such as Hildesheim Cathedral, or the Second World War, as well as in urban building projects, such as the reconstruction of the historical market square at the end of the 1980s. This also includes the comprehensive renovation of individual buildings listed as UNESCO world heritage sites. It is precisely these attributions which allow the town to score points in the competition between cities and deck itself out with unique selling points. It aims to profile itself as a "global province" (*Weltprovinz* – Interview with Lothar Meyer-Mertel, the Director of Hildesheim Marketing).

At a *symbolic level*, the continual positioning of both towns in contrast to other towns and the extent to which this was considered relevant or taken for granted became clear to us through the strikingly evaluative descriptions and reactions we met with time and again during ethnographic research, which told of the different symbolic weight accorded each town. In many cases, references to and comparisons with the city created a descriptive foil for the hallmarks of life in Wels or Hildesheim. In comparison to a city, there was 'nothing going on' in Wels, the town was empty or dead or 'neither one thing nor the other.' As well as these rebukes, of course, we also met satisfied residents who valued the manageability and ease with which everyday life was organized in the 'compact city.' The classification always expresses something about the outlook and standpoint of the person doing the classifying and, thus, it was noticeable that young people tended to describe the towns under study as 'boring' or 'unsatisfactory' and claimed to be striving to move away to the city, in contrast to families, or at least those with young children, who placed positive emphasis on the practicability of life in Hildesheim or Wels (Schmidt-Lauber and Wolfmayr 2016). These and other judgements characterized the local media, the interviews and everyday conversations. On various occasions, the fact that we came from a capital city also formed a point of reference, shown in the surprise expressed as to why we would be interested in this town of all places, in narratives justifying why people were still living here, or in apologies that suggested the town was not as bad as its reputation. Remarkably, we found that the strategy pursued by the

marketing boards for the two towns was to try to emulate the city (Eckert, Schmidt-Lauber, and Wolfmayr 2014).¹⁴

We observed the creation of this kind of evaluative discourse in our own perceptions and actions as well. On repeated occasions, we felt obliged to justify our research object and to describe it as just as exciting and relevant as, for example, a district in Istanbul or Oslo. In contrast to these places, an ethnography of Wels or Hildesheim seemed to attract less renown. Consequently, we felt impelled to apologize for the small or medium-sized and became veritable advocates of non-metropolitan towns.

At a *material* level, the towns studied exhibited a distinctive town structure and topography with specific modes of use. Each has developed around a town center and, in this sense, both correspond to the image of a European city. For a long time, shopping malls on the edge of town drove the much lamented atrophy of town centers outside of the big cities, which are themselves increasingly turning into luxury retail districts of global consumption. Yet even so, as centers not only for getting supplies and of infrastructure, but also for housing and as the main place to go out, these town centers continue to play a large role in the everyday life and rhythm of the towns studied. Competition comes not from other districts, but mostly from malls.¹⁵

As well as the town center, the towns studied comprised districts that differed in terms of atmosphere, social structure and architecture, each with a basic infrastructure (e.g. bakery, newsagent, hairdresser, doctors' surgery) and their own image. An area typified as a 'migrant district,' as is often heard about in cities, can also be found to some extent in the towns studied, but it is less sharply delineated than in the metropolises – Hildesheim Nord, for example, which is also known locally as "Little Istanbul." Multiculturalism is typically rarely marketed as a colorful advertisement for the town, as it is in large cities (Grube and Welz 2014). An extensive public transport network connects the different parts of town by bus or tram, but this is only available at certain times (e.g. not at all or only running a reduced

14 It appears that local players are becoming increasingly aware of this imbalance. Max Rieder, an Austrian architect, recently took metrocentrism and its guiding effect on smaller towns as the starting point for a joint initiative with colleagues called *FORUM ZUKUNFT MITTELSTADT* (FORUM FUTURE MEDIUM-SIZED TOWN). This aims to initiate critical reflection on the city of Salzburg and seeks to not only engage critically with a 'cultural industry' that is oriented on the big city, but is taken as the norm for all towns. At their request, we are writing an opening post 'from the field' for the initiative's blog, meaning that we too are contributing to the negotiation of a city's positioning.

15 Here, we see a difference to urban development in numerous western cities since the 1960s/70s, which reflected the guiding principle, long valid in urban planning, of segregating spaces by function and the tendency towards a one-sided focus on consumption in the town center, and where a so-called "renaissance of the town center" has only become visible again in recent times (cf. Dittrich-Wesbuer, Knapp, and Osterhage 2010).

service in the evenings and at weekends). There is no underground system – a central feature of the city and paradigmatic for the experience of anonymity in a city whilst surrounded by a crowd of people (Lang 1994; Lindner and Letsch 1994). Especially the old and the young, pensioners and school pupils, or parents with small children travelled by bus or tram. It was also often clearly taken for granted that the geographical spread of activity was not limited to the town, but stretched to locations outside the town. Interview partners frequently spoke of trips to other places, especially provincial and federal capitals, to fulfil the need for culture or consumption – to the concert hall or to a bar in Linz, to the opera in Hannover or to the shops in Vienna or Berlin; a daily commute to work in a neighboring town also came up occasionally.¹⁶

On a *social level*, one particular social constellation represented a dominant and, in many contexts, tangible theme when it came to everyday life not only in Wels and Hildesheim, but also in Göttingen: manageability and familiarity, the small-scale urban fabric. In Wels, Georg Wolfmayr noticed that on walking through the town center, it would not often be long before someone greeted him, and in Hildesheim, Anna Eckert found it pleasant that on her second visit to a café she was greeted as a regular and given a warm welcome. We measure these kinds of experiences as signs of the social bond between people in their dealings with one another. Some interview partners stressed that they valued their town, had even moved there especially *because* they liked the ‘familiarity’ and ‘helpfulness’ of the people there, which conveyed a sense of ‘safety’: ‘people know each other.’ Others complained about precisely this lack of anonymity and social diversity. Familiarity guides behavior and interpretation in a wide variety of contexts. The dense social and spatial connections result in direct communication and strong control. Existing research suggests this leads to a high level of civic engagement in town issues (Wagner-Kyora 2010). Not least, familiarity manifests itself as knowledge about the social environment and an awareness of other people, in knowledge about places, people and events in the town – be this in relation to the history of family ownership of long-established shops or knowing the family situation of long-serving dignitaries. A walk through the town brings few surprises with it. This all conveys an attachment to the town beyond one’s own district, even if the familiarity and closeness evoked do not extend to all spaces. In the everyday actions, speech and perceptions of the residents, ‘doing size’ – as here in the example of the topic of manageability and familiarity as a performance of social and geographical small-scale urban fabric – is happening all the time.

16 It is possible that, in this regard, the everyday actions of our interview partners exhibit a specific geographical horizon, which, in contrast to the metropolitan mix of the global *and*, simultaneously, the self-sufficient, is part of the organization of daily life.

Outlook

The practices and fields described here, through which the towns of Wels and Hildesheim are positioned and given meaning, and in which everyday life takes concrete form, are just some examples among many. We wanted to use case studies to generate insights into an urban study that is ethnographical and praxeological and does not define and objectively measure what a town is in advance, but rather seeks to make it visible in its ongoing production – empirical urban study in the sense of ‘doing city’.

At the same time, one of our concerns was to free the term urbanity from its normative constraints as something that applies only to very specific spaces and forms of city (life) and to claim urbanities as ‘(different) ways of urban life.’ This underlines the relevance of towns considered ‘off the map’ for the investigation of everyday life in the empirical study of culture, which focuses not merely on the exceptional and the special, but also on the routines and norms in the everyday lives of broad sections of the population.

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