

Everything is global or at least is turning into America - or not? Two approaches to critical comparative urban analysis.

Loic Wacquant: "Das Janusgesicht des Ghettos" Birkhaeser Verlag fuer Architektur. Reihe Bauwelt Fundamente # 134
Johannes Fiedler: "Urbanisierung, Globale" bohrlau Verlag

Monu is founded as a cross-Atlantic and international platform that collects and publishes critical analysis and viewpoints on a certain topic from authors about cities around the world. Critical comparisons of urban dynamics, compiled from a variety of conceptual and geographical vantage points, can make a key contribution to develop an understanding of our contemporary urban condition.

The two books we present in this issue are very relevant to this interest as they each present a distinct approach to comparative critical urban thinking.

Johannes Fiedler's book "Urbanisierung – globale" is a dictionary of 18 different concepts named from "Abstraction" via "Brazilianization" and "Convergence" to "Vitality". (1) Each of these concepts is thought to reflect a process that affects cities around the globe similarly. Fascinating photographic and descriptive evidence from cities and urban regions around the world underline the global workings of the concepts that Fiedler distilled.

The implication of this presentation and the stated premise of the book is to describe how urban development is increasingly shaped by a set of trends that restructure urban space in similar ways. Fiedler thus posits that nation states and their policies are becoming increasingly irrelevant in determining the qualities of urban space and urban life.

The collection of essays by Loic Wacquant that are published for the first time in German (2) under the title "Das Janusgesicht des Ghettos" has a quite different message at its core. Different national or supranational social and political models like the European Union compared to the US create dramatically different conditions of urban life - especially in marginalized areas, the topic that Wacquant's essays concentrate on.

Notably after the unrest in the French banlieues there was a tendency among politicians and journalists in Europe to haphazardly draw parallels between the dynamics of exclusion as they play out in the American ghetto and the situation in the immigrant neighborhoods and banlieues of Europe. However, as Wacquant clearly points out, this comparison is not borne out by the facts: The American ghetto is much more brutal than any European immigrant neighborhood. For example in some of the toughest neighborhoods of Chicago, child mortality rates are 30(!) times the national average and hospitals sometimes lack even the most elementary medical supplies.

A statistic that one would be hard pressed to find in any European city. Behind these developments in the US Wacquant argues is a systematic withdrawal of the state. In Europe the state is still substantially present even in the most marginalized of quarters. The central essay which gives the book its title is also its key conceptual contribution. In the chapter "Das Janusgesicht des Ghettos" Wacquant develops a detailed historical and theoretically founded concept of the Ghetto. Which he then applies in the rest of the book to offer a detailed empirical and theoretical analysis of the American ghetto and of the marginalized quarters of European cities.

As European urbanists and planners start thinking about the spatial dimension of exclusion and inequality, we should be well advised to build on the lessons and the thinking from the US. But as Wacquant's essays convincingly show, sweeping comparisons may obscure more than they reveal.

Bookreview by Thomas Soehl

(1) The chapter on 'dispersion' appeared in an English translation in Monu# 2

(2) All of the essays appeared before in English in a variety of journals. We will make a list of citations available on our website at www.monu.org.

