The Mid-Sized City:
a New Scale for Urban Thought

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Translated by Eva-Marie Kehrer

Small or medium-sized cities are conceptually a blind spot in urban experience, they lie somewhere between town and country, and yet they are considered - at least in Germany – as a province. This essay is a plea for the specific quality of life of this in-between place, in which freedom and restriction mutually permeate and relativize each other, avoiding both homogeneity and that accumulation of differences which creates disentangled silos. A certain form of urbanity seems to be possible here, which is in danger of being lost in the metropolises: a creative space for different people that is potentially present in the metropolises but can only be activated with increasing difficulties.

Philosophy World Democracy, FEB 202 , Volume 2 Number 2, 40-50

I

City and country are abstractly opposed to one another. On the one hand, there is the notion of the narrow-mindedness of rural life, which Marx and Engels described as the "idiocy of country life" ("Idiotie des Landlebens"). Nevertheless, country life, in its simplicity, seems to allow for a life of modest happiness that suits our finite existence. On the other hand, it is said that the city air sets us free: the anonymity of city life disentangles us from limiting origins and the tiresome obligations of narrow living spaces and relationships; the diversity of possible experiences makes us aware of the potential of our own existence that we might otherwise perhaps not perceive. In this way, city life makes us freer in thought and action. However, this freedom certainly has its price: it can lead to emotional distress, stress and ultimately to what Kierkegaard called the "despair of possibility," the self as pure potentiality: "This Self becomes an abstract possibility. It struggles wearily with this possibility and yet remains immobile. However, what the Self needs is actually to be in one place – to move while remaining on the spot… Only then, as if in an instant, is something revealed as possible, a new possibility appears; these phantasmagorias follow one another so quickly that it seems as if anything is possible. It is precisely at that moment that the individual becomes a mirage."

The contrast between city and country is not only schematic, it is also very specific. It is constituted by extremes: by rural existence on the one hand and life in big metropolises on the other. There are, however, lifestyles that include both the desolation of the country and the agitation of the city: city dwellers who own a house in the country where they spend their weekends are an example of this. Oscillating between different, *very different* life rhythms, this hybrid way of life is an attempt to integrate the possibilities of non-urban existence into urban life. Non-urban existence is thus acquired as an extra asset, and in some cases the relations with the rural way of life remain so loose that their disadvantages can be largely ignored.

What this scheme does not provide for are mid-sized cities. For a long time, these cities were considered the epitome of urban life (1); metropolises like London, which became a city of millions at the beginning of the nineteenth century, were rather an exception, following

their own rules and producing their own standards. Today, cities like London are the benchmark. Small or mid-sized cities like Karlsruhe, Mönchengladbach or Rostock in Germany, even though a very large part of the population still lives in them, form something of a conceptual blind spot. They are considered as something between cities – a real city! – and country; not infrequently they are disrespectfully referred to as provinces. Mid-sized cities in Germany, for instance, usually have a theater with various programming sectors and a concert hall that covers a wide range of performances, from classical music to folk music and drumming Japanese monks. Most of them also have a small club scene, one or two arthouse cinemas and alternative theaters, a few galleries and a city museum. Province means that much of what big cities can offer is represented, but on a somewhat smaller scale. You can decide whether you want to go to a vernissage or go to the theater, but you may not be able to choose between conceptually different theaters. It is also very likely that there will only be one exhibition opening to choose from, if at all. The middle-sized city is something between the city and country, and it is precisely this in-between status that seems to elicit greater unease than the extremes themselves, which one might assume invite stronger feelings, projections and idealizations in all directions.

II

In this essay, I would like to argue for the specific quality of life in this *in-betweeness* of the mid-sized city, where freedom and restriction interpenetrate and relativize one another. It seems to me that a certain form of urbanity is possible here that is likely to be lost in the metropolises – a vital diversity which is certainly also present in the metropolises, but I believe that it is only activated there with increasing difficulty. This view is of course based on my own life experiences. These life experiences are not an accessory to my theoretical work but rather constitute its foundation. I believe that in order to make a theoretical draft plausible, it is necessary to reveal this foundation.

Excluding temporary stays like my civil service tenure in the Lüneburg Heath [Lüneburger Heide] and a year of study in Paris (because it was clear from the beginning that I would not stay permanently), I have so far lived in four cities: Bielefeld, Berlin, Freiburg and Chemnitz. Three of these four cities are of medium size, although very different from one another. I lived in Berlin for ten years, and later on for another one and a half years (I will come back to that). All in all, that is now no more than a fifth of my life. This quantitative ratio already indicates that for a long time and without being aware of it, I instinctively settled in places that can be categorized as being between metropolis and country. In the following, I would like to explain where this tendency may have come from.

In the 1970s, the old workers' city of Bielefeld was a province. A friend of mine, who came to Bielefeld from Berlin in 1972 because her husband had

been offered a job at the university, shared her very vivid memory of her move to the quiet East Westphalia. It was a radical change compared to the post-1968 turmoil in Berlin, which she remembers for throwing leaflets from various left-wing factions in the trash every evening. In Bielefeld, the only banner on the Teacher Training College was an announcement of the evening service in the Protestant student church. The newly founded university in Westphalia was located on the outskirts of the city and hardly anyone knew about the later famous professors Luhmann and Bohrer, who taught there at that time. There was a theater that played music mostly for visitors with a paid subscription. And that was exactly what made Bielefeld look so provincial – the small cultural scene, which seemed to serve as a ritual of self-affirmation for the bourgeoisie. Like many other West German cities, Bielefeld also had this hideous pedestrian zone in which the devastation of the war and the associated question of German guilt was paved. What was left appeared as architecturally sealed repression.

'We,' that is, me and my generational comrades, found this city horrible. The maxim was to get away from there as quickly as possible. The city was embarrassing, just like our parents and the musty post-war atmosphere, which – so it seemed to us – lasted much longer there than elsewhere. After almost all of us had left, we missed the peculiar metamorphosis of this city, which today (or so it seems to me) has little to do with what it was in the seventies. After almost 20 years, university life gradually seeped into the city, and it became more colorful, lively and diverse. Bielefeld now seems to be somewhat worth living in. But perhaps this is not only due to the metamorphosis of the city itself, but also because I have grown older and my needs have changed. The aversion to an urban region of a certain size, which I carry around with me as a matrix of experience, as is becoming increasingly clear to me, has lost its significance.

After Bielefeld I lived in Berlin from 1987 to 1997. At that time, the city was not very big compared to today's Berlin. After 1968, West Berlin became a place of promise, where it was possible to live cheaply and try out alternative ways of living. In a peculiar way, one was relentlessly away from home, and "the other, foreign Germany" was a protective wall between my dated tiled-oven apartment and the parents' middle-class home. One felt protected by low rents, special Berlin extra pay and exemption from the otherwise customary compulsory military service. And perhaps also a little bit by the wall, which prevented a view into the surrounding area and gave the city the character of a secluded large village. Thanks to the unique post-war situation, Berlin felt like an urban paradise.

One the one hand, I enjoyed what for me today still represents the epitome of urbanity during my years of study: the coexistence of different, even incompatible things. In the neighborhood where I lived, social worlds collided, or rather, they ran through each other in a jumble. There were the old and the new 'Berliners': workers and students like me and

employees of the nearby hospital, who were sometimes seen during their lunch break coming out from the 19th-century brothel in my street. The huge upper middle-class apartments overlooking the canal, were located just two streets away. The nightlife was a jumble of corner pubs, heavy metal shops, flourishing bar scene and various restaurants. I do not want to glorify this, but it seemed to me that what I saw was, on the whole, a picture of society. Not necessarily beautiful, but highly interesting. Of course, the bourgeois districts in Berlin already existed. Of course, there were the suburbs with their houses and allotment gardens. I knew them, but they did not interest me. There were small towns on the outskirts of the city like Frohnau and Heiligensee, there was Zehlendorf and there was still Spandau. But none of that interested me.

Because on the other hand, there was the enormous ignorance with which I moved through this city, which I claimed for myself without really knowing it. Looking back, I am amazed and astonished at how little I saw of it. One might think I would get to know the part of the city in which I was staying and which I knew was not much bigger than Bielefeld.

I was by no means alone in this. But there was something about this ignorance that I increasingly disliked over the years. The districts of Berlin are characterized by a neighborhood mentality known as Kiez. 'Kiez' is an expression for the old, Wendish fishing villages that came together to form Berlin. It seems as if they are still competing for the biggest clubhouse today. In fact, this survival of the old village structures, which can be observed better in Berlin than in other German metropolises, also has its charming side, and I can appreciate them better today than in the past. At the time, this form of neighborly identification seemed ridiculous to me. I interpreted it as a form of provinciality in itself: an inability to let anything different stand out as such, a compulsion to judge everything. The metropolis seemed to me to be an oversized, overstimulated agglomeration of Gallic villages. This became more and more exhausting for me and I asked myself: Is this the ultimate way of life?

III

Heiner Müller once said that if you want to know more about the state of society, you should go to the provinces. But how come? Why should the provinces offer a higher quality of representation of social conflicts than the capital, where Müller, when he formulated this, probably already lived? Why should the countryside, that is said to always be lagging behind, be more typical than the lifestyle in the city that historically shaped the avantgarde?

I can think of at least one reason. In the ideal-typical province, the scenes in which something like a cultural identity is formed are so small that one scene cannot completely isolate itself from the other. Consequently, they are not so differentiated, and the formation of conventicles – the filter

bubbles in which one moves around without even realizing that elsewhere in the world is different – is somewhat less likely. You constantly run into each other, for better or worse.

In the 1980s and 1990s, I went to free jazz concerts in Berlin frequently for a while. Later, in Freiburg – with its music academy – they were concerts with new music. But at some point, I became bored of always meeting more or less the same figures there, who knew each other, greeted each other, confirmed each other's avant-garde status and exchanged ideas about the scene. They were so pleased with themselves and knew each other almost like the bourgeois opera audience. Except for the loge, the experience was similar.

In a city like Chemnitz, on the other hand, you have to form alliances with different-minded people if you want to be part of the culture scene. And this is possible and, in some respects, easier: the boundaries between all areas are more fluid, and you always meet people in contexts where you would not have expected them. I have experienced new music concerts here, where the audience is much more heterogeneous than in Berlin and Freiburg. These concerts satisfy me because I have the feeling that they correspond at least a little more to art's claim to reach everyone – in contrast to events where artists and audience form a homogeneous group and nothing unexpected ever happens.

There is, of course, something else to it. What became evident just a few months after having moved here is that this city, like so many other cities in the East, is brimming with history. Chemnitz is so different to the West German cities I know that are of the same format. It appears to me that since the economic miracle and the cultural revolution of 1968, people have made themselves comfortable in the West. Time seems to stand still. All decisive battles seemed to have been fought when parties like SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) and CDU (Christian Democratic Union of Germany) started to consider the nuclear phase-out. Twenty years ago, it looked as if all we had to do was make cosmetic corrections to the existing situation.

And then the East! In Chemnitz I was suddenly surrounded by people who were ahead of me regarding an important experience. They had brought down a social system in a revolutionary way and they had seen everything collapse – from the ideology that had underpinned the state, to the working conditions that had determined their lives, to the most natural everyday routines that at first glance had little to do with politics. There were some who fell into depression from which they have not recovered to this day. For others, life in the city in the years after 1989 meant living in the frenzy of an almost lawless space and a bureaucracy of the shortest paths. Biographies were shredded, lost and put together anew. Of course, one generation largely fled to the West. Some of those who stayed behind managed to keep the promise of an East German economic miracle. Others despaired and became embittered.

When I moved to Chemnitz, no one I knew there had adapted to the system now in place as naturally as I did. Anyone who has seen a state waver and fall will not submit to any other form of government without deep scrutiny. While for the people in the West – and I include myself here – capitalism is a part of their lives that receives very little critical reflection, like a natural skin, it was imposed on most people in the East. This happened in a fast, brutal and disturbing way. Moreover, capitalism has not kept its promises. Firstly, because it did not want to keep them at all (the activities of the privatization agency Treuhand cannot be interpreted in any other way), and secondly, because the takeover of a socialist command economy by the capitalist market economy coincided with the neoliberal paradigm shift within the capitalist economic system and thus also with the historical end of the social market economy. This was the second fall of the Berlin Wall, so to speak. What people wanted was so-called Rhenish capitalism, but what they got was "capitalism without bite inhibition" ("Kapitalismus ohne Beißhemmung," Oskar Negt). They not only experienced an asymmetric connection to the Federal Republic of Germany, but they were also forced to join a liberalizing and increasingly borderless world market. In the face of this, the public sector withdrew from all possible fields of action – a process that was and is overshadowed by a series of increasing financial and economic crises.

This keeps many people in a permanent emotional distance from the 'West,' even though they succeeded in achieving a certain degree of bourgeois prosperity after the fall of the Wall. The historical caesura and ruptures that are reflected in the city's architecture and urban planning are thus also reflected in people's attitudes. The questioning of the system as such has increased in recent years, especially within the political right wing. This is an important, observable and remarkable symptom. *It is not beautiful, but interesting*. It has captivated me for two decades and makes me productive.

In addition to the already mentioned characteristics of the mid-sized cities in the provinces, there is also the force of the historical conflicts that inscribe themselves in the cities. I suspect that these conflicts are more present in Chemnitz than in many East German municipalities. I think this is the case because what generally determined the capitalist social process in the second half of the twentieth century – the devaluation of the social role of the worker – happened here with shocking brutality. Since the industrial working elite was based in Chemnitz, the city was formerly called 'the secret capital of the German Democratic Republic.' There was self-confidence and much pride in the work. The three Saxon cities were equal to each other. This made the decline even more painful. The ideological transfiguration of the worker with his hand on the workbench and his fist in the air was followed by his devaluation as an uncomfortable remnant that the post-industrial, digital educational society still has to somehow drag along.

IV

Heiner Müller once said that he only believes in conflicts. I feel the same way. I don't believe in purity, harmony and homogeneity. I don't believe that they should be appreciated in either the private or in the political sphere. That is to say, I am aware that they exist but I regard them as a sign of inhumanity. Furthermore, I believe that this is the point where fascism begins, regardless of the political clothing it wears, whether its manifestation is political or whether it is visible in our private affairs, lifestyles and relationships. Fascism is, as Klaus Theweleit has always stressed, not an ideology, but a way of producing reality, a reality that knows no internal conflicts. If at all, conflicts are fought out between the inside and outside. In its perception there is – or there should be – unity, a single will, a single movement, a single attitude, a feeling within itself. Conflicts, ambiguities, compromises and alliances cannot be endured, but are externalized, shifted to the external borders of one's own person, nation, community or into the filter bubble. Wherever ambivalences are suppressed, wherever life forms are compulsively homogenized, fascism takes its beginning.

"The womb is still fertile, from which this crawled" are the closing words of the epilogue to Bertolt Brecht's parable piece *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. When I think of this passage, I ask myself whether we have not already come further and whether the potentiality of future fascism illustrated by these words is sufficient enough to grasp the present situation. We live in a time of total demarcation, which, in my opinion, stops at almost no social group. The new right is perhaps the vanguard, and in any case, it is the ugly face of this comprehensive process. This process distorts traditional political distinctions, and does so in a universal manner. After the events in Chemnitz, 8,000 angry people protested against the alleged killing of a German-Cuban by three refugees. These angry people had no problem taking to the streets together with right-wing thugs and neo-Nazis.

However, they are not alone – they are a symptom of a general tendency. After this incident I was full of anger and wrote: "People who are afraid of neighborhoods where the percentage of immigrants is high; people who do not live in high-rise buildings or do not shop at Lidl because of the beggars at the entrance; people who do not drive through East Germany because there are supposedly Nazis everywhere; people who hunt people who look different; people who buy a kind of tank – the famous Sports Urban Vehicle – instead of a car; people who want the Wall back; people who think Berlin is great, but only know Schöneberg and not Schöneweide; people who send their children to private schools; people who plead for a shooting order at the European borders. People who want to catapult cities like Chemnitz into the year 750 B.C. and who in the end do not care 'whether there is too much bread here and too little elsewhere' (F. J. Degenhardt): People hide from everything they are afraid of and what they think is a *failed state.*"

That is the tendency. Now, facing the anti-COVID demonstrations in Berlin, things do not look any better. It is depressing and the Left does not cut a good figure. You read slogans like: “Show a clear edge,” “Bleach out the right,” “Do not talk to Nazis,” or “Selfish Morons.” Or even: “Turn up the volume of the loudspeakers, make an announcement, and when the demonstrators then continue to walk on, give them a salvo with the MP.” And: “Democracy can only recover if it defines its limits.” Apart from the question of what such phrases would mean if they became reality beyond the online rhetoric, I am also concerned about the purity phantasms that lie within them. They seem to me to be a fear of contamination and contagion from touching the other side. It must be repeated over and over again: We don’t yet live in an authoritarian or fascist society, where armed struggle is maybe the only option. That is precisely why I am still able to talk to everyone. I do not want to be told by anyone whether this will to talk to others makes sense or not. Rituals of demarcation like those described here – and I am sorry to have to say this – pave the way for authoritarianism.

My plea for mid-sized cities arose from within this context. Metropolises, it seems to me, are gradually being lost as spaces for thinking about the conflictual behavior that allows different things to coexist. The diversity of the metropolises is certainly greater than the diversity found elsewhere. But the various filter bubbles no longer relate to each other. The social foundations of this process are known as gentrification and social and economic ghettoization. My briefly mentioned second stay in Berlin, where I was employed at the Free University from 2016-2018 and was able to live with practically no commuting, boils down to this experience. I noticed signs of a gigantic disentanglement process that had begun long before I arrived and in the course of which urbanity in the truest sense of the word, i.e. the vastness of life and thought, disintegrated. The city had grown and at the same time had become narrower and more provincial. Differentiation had become the exclusion of individual scenes from one another. It was a single, great disappointment.

No one can be impartial in this matter, and that includes me. In everything that concerns our own life decisions, we are at our own mercy, and what moves us can hardly become an issue, because it happens behind our backs. I would like to suggest, however, that the mid-sized cities which, due to geographical coincidences, I ultimately carry within me as the matrix of my well-being, cities of a size which, for lack of mass, are incapable of disentangling and separating ways of life, beliefs, habits and cultural practices, could, for a little longer, resist the processes of social division in which we have been living. We have to talk to each other, there is no other way. We cannot avoid each other, or at some point come to the conclusion that the others do not exist. Or that they exist so far beyond the horizon of our own circle of life that it is none of our business. It is our business. We have to talk to each other, in sports clubs, schools, vocational schools, in the allotment garden colony and in the parents’ associations. It's annoying, it's not nice, it's often exhausting,

but it's interesting, it makes you productive, and it helps you think. The medium-sized city is big enough to allow for diversity. At the same time, it is small enough to relate the different elements to each other. That seems to me to be the advantage of this living and thinking space in the current situation.

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NOTES

1. In scholarly literature, one occasionally finds the ‘mid-sized city.’ However, its reference is not always clearly demarcated. If a city’s population exceeds 100,000, one usually speaks of a big city. Yet the cities that are paradigmatically mentioned here have a population of around 200,000. The fact that they are not considered as big cities but are designated with the somewhat cumbersome term of a mid-sized city has mainly to do with their specific development. After reaching a population of half a million, large cities move in the direction of a metropolis, and this can currently be seen in the case of Leipzig. Once the million mark has been breached, it should no longer be called a large city, but a metropolis. Even though such definitions always have something arbitrary about them and ultimately can only be assessed qualitatively on a case-by-case basis, the number of inhabitants of the so-called mid-sized cities ranges between ranges between 100,000 and 300,000.