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From national to transnational and global approaches. The contribution of the EAUH conferences

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1. Introduction

The second half of the 1980s was decisive for the development and growth of urban history research in Europe.¹ There was a burgeoning interest in the field and the volume of research increased in many countries, but the research was fragmented and often carried out by relatively isolated research groups. Very little comparative or transnational work was done on cities, and research was often markedly conditioned by national and local agendas. The European Association for Urban History (EAUH) was founded in 1989 specifically to remedy these shortcomings: To increase connectivity, build networks and encourage multidisciplinary and comparative research.²

Today – 30 years later – this challenge persists to a degree, not least because of the current pressure in many parts of Europe and the wider world to “rena-tionalise” historical research, to emphasise national perspectives on the past. However, one might argue with equal justification that much has been achieved during the last three decades. This short article will begin by providing a brief overview of the early years of the EAUH in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The second part will discuss the role of the EAUH in integrating multidisciplinary, comparative and transnational approaches into urban history research. The final part of the article will focus on the ways in which the EAUH has, on the one hand, enhanced our understanding of the diversity of urban development and urban experience within and beyond Europe and, on the other hand, integrated these different developments and experiences into scholarship.

2. Interplay of national and European initiatives

The late 1980s and early 1990s were a propitious time for the establishment of scholarly associations with the aim of building new European networks. The

¹ I am grateful to Peter Clark for his helpful comments.

² Cf. Peter Clark, Early years of the European Association for Urban History, in: Helsinki Quarterly 2/2016, p. 88-93.

end of the Cold War broke up the patterns of international cooperation or at least changed them significantly: Many old connections ceased to carry much weight and new connections were in the making. In particular, this period was characterised by enthusiasm for European integration and a strong sense of optimism about the opportunities offered by closer European cooperation in research and higher education.³ In the field of urban history, too, the interest in European collaboration grew significantly in the late 1980s and 1990s, and this period took cooperation to an entirely new level in terms of the number of participants and geographical reach.⁴

European collaboration in the field of urban history developed in close interaction with activities at the national level. New efforts and initiatives in northwestern European countries were instrumental in laying the foundations for closer and more comprehensive European cooperation in the 1980s. In Britain, the Leicester Centre for Urban History and the Centre for Metropolitan History were established in 1985. In France, Belgium and the Netherlands urban history also made its presence felt in publications, conferences and universities as a new, distinctive historical sub-discipline. At the same time, it was recognised that more could be done to advance the field. Finally, in 1989 the collaboration of the early groups on both sides of the English Channel, in particular those of Peter Clark (Leicester), Herman Diederiks (Leiden) and Bernard Lepetit (Paris), led to the establishment of a multinational European platform, the EAUH. Three years later, in 1992, the first EAUH conference was organised in Amsterdam.⁵

The foundation of the EAUH in turn gave a fresh impetus to activities in many countries throughout Europe. New national urban history societies were founded, for example in France (1998), Finland (1999), Germany (2000) and Italy (2001). New forums for research and discussion were established: A monograph series, *Historical Urban Studies*, was launched by Ashgate Publishing, and another series, *Studies in European Urban History (1100–1800)*, by Brepols. The *Urban History Yearbook* was relaunched as *Urban History in Britain* in 1992,

³ Cf., for example, Per Nyborg, *The Roots of the European University Association*, Brussels 2014, p. 18–21; Richard C. Eichenberg/Russel J. Dalton, *Post-Maastricht blues. The transformation of citizen support for European integration, 1973–2004*, in: *Acta Politica* 42, 2007, p. 128–152.

⁴ There were important earlier efforts to promote international collaboration in the field: Commission International pour l'Histoire des Villes / International Commission for the History of Towns had held small annual meetings since its establishment in 1955. Groupe International d'Histoire Urbaine had organised international colloquia since the late 1970s. Cf. Clark, p. 90.

⁵ Cf. Pim Kooij, *Urban history in the Netherlands*, in: *Helsinki Quarterly* 3/2002, p. 18–24; Clark, p. 89–92.

Lidé města / Urban People was founded in the Czech Republic in 1999, Urbaine Histoire in France in 2000, the Dutch-Flemish review *Stadsgeschiedenis* in 2006, *Città e Storia* in Italy in 2006, and *Informationen zur Modernen Stadtgeschichte* was further developed in the 2000s.⁶

Throughout its history, the main aim of the EAUH has been to encourage and promote the study of urban history in Europe and beyond, from the earliest origins of towns and cities to the present day. The Association has accomplished its purpose by organising biennial international conferences, where new directions in the field are discussed and where old contacts are maintained and new ones created.⁷ By 2020, fourteen conferences have been organised, with the next one scheduled for September 2021 (the EAUH 2020 Antwerp conference was postponed to 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic).

3. Multidisciplinary, comparative and transnational urban history

A more specific objective, which has profoundly influenced the content of the EAUH conferences, has been to promote both multidisciplinary and comparative research on towns and cities. There have been four key reasons for promoting multidisciplinary. The first has to do with the history of the sub-discipline: Urban history evolved in the twentieth century precisely by drawing on a variety of disciplinary perspectives from humanities and social sciences. The second reason is interrelated to the first one and concerns the complexity of the research subject: In recent decades, it has become increasingly clear that the in-depth study of towns and cities requires the integration of skills and knowledge bases from different disciplines. Third, by strengthening the multidisciplinary nature of the conferences, EAUH has sought to counteract the trends towards fragmentation within the field. A conscious effort has been made to strengthen the interconnections and to bring together historians, art and architectural historians, geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, planners and other scholars working on various aspects of urban history at regular intervals.⁸ Fourth, multidisciplinary has helped to link historical studies to contemporary research problems and policy issues. For example, urban historians have contributed to the multidisciplinary field of migration studies by providing a historical perspective on current migration issues, such as the

⁶ Cf. Shane Ewen, *What is Urban History?* Cambridge 2016, p. 27; Barry M. Doyle, A decade of urban history. Ashgate's Historical Urban Studies series, in: *Urban History* 36:3, 2009, p. 498-512.

⁷ The statutes of the EAUH, cf. <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/centres/eahu/about-the-eauh-top/eauh-statutes/> (29.10.2020).

⁸ Cf., for example, Ewen, p. 2 and p. 27.

global influx into cities and the surge of refugee arrivals in European cities in 2015. Migration has been an increasingly important theme at the EAUH conferences throughout the 2010s and it is one of the key concepts in the programme of the 2021 Antwerp conference. In the conference strand “Migration” nine panels will discuss the phenomenon from multidisciplinary perspectives.

It is difficult to estimate exactly how effective the EAUH has been in maintaining and strengthening multi- and interdisciplinarity in the field. There is not enough information available, for example about the disciplinary background of the conference participants or the multidisciplinary projects and publications that have emerged from the EAUH conferences. However, as the EAUH conferences have grown from relatively small meetings of 150-300 participants in the 1990s to large conferences of around 700 participants in the 2010s, the range of disciplinary perspectives is likely to have broadened as well.⁹ Moreover, although only few conference sessions have specifically concentrated on discussing the challenges and opportunities of multidisciplinaryity, the integration of diverse forms of knowledge about cities has led to innovative research avenues and viewpoints in many sessions.¹⁰

The EAUH efforts to promote comparative research have been even more systematic than those encouraging multidisciplinary approaches. With a few exceptions, the word “comparative” has appeared in the titles of all the conferences organised in the 2000s and 2010s. For example, in 2004 in Athens the EAUH conference was organised under the title “European city in comparative perspective”, and fourteen years later (2018) in Rome the theme was “Urban renewal and resilience. Cities in comparative perspective”. In selecting the sessions for the conference programmes, the international board of the EAUH has continuously emphasised the importance of comparative approaches. It has been mandatory that every conference session includes at least two organisers and that they should come from different countries or at least from different universities. This arrangement was intended to encourage conference panels to move beyond descriptive narratives of single cities and to discuss wider urban processes by comparing the development and experience of different places.

Comparative approaches help urban historians to explore both the commonalities and the uniqueness of different urban places. Whether the main emphasis of comparison should be on the search for similarities or the identification of specificities is a question that has long divided comparative historians.

⁹ Cf. Clark, p. 92-93.

¹⁰ Cf. For example, both interdisciplinary and comparative approaches were discussed in the final round table “Urban History. A New Research Agenda” at the Lisbon 2014 conference.

Most of them do both, but with different accentuation: Some are particularly interested in identifying and analysing general patterns, while for others comparative history is primarily concerned with causation and with explaining differences.¹¹ In the plenary sessions and round tables of the EAUH conferences, the objectives, advantages and limitations of comparative urban history have been a pervasive theme, and in other sessions comparative approaches have been applied in various ways and for different purposes. In some sessions, comparisons have only emerged implicitly, while in others the exploration of commonalities and differences have played a key role and enabled the participants to analyse the interaction of large global or regional processes and routines of everyday urban life in a profound way.

To understand similarities and differences, it is also important to study connections. In recent decades, connections that span national or other boundaries have become an increasingly popular research topic in many fields. Intensifying global connectedness and the crisis of the nation-state have inspired a growing interest in both current and past connections and have contributed, for example, to the emergence and success of the approach of transnational history. The exact definition of this approach remains controversial, but, broadly speaking, transnational history strives to challenge nation-centred history, and many transnational historians study, as Sebastian Conrad has put it, “societies in the context of the entanglements that have shaped them, and to which they have contributed in turn.”¹²

Transnational history emerged in the 1990s, first in the United States, and then spread to other parts of the world. In the EAUH conference programmes, the concept “transnational” first appeared as late as in 2008 in the Lyons conference, where a round table on “Transnational Urbanism in the Americas” was organised. Although the concept was slow to gain widespread acceptance, it has had an important impact on the field of urban history. At the EAUH conferences organised in the 2010s, especially the conferences in Prague 2012, Lis-

¹¹ Cf. Deborah Cohen/Maura O'Connor, Introduction. Comparative history, cross-national history, transnational history – definitions, in: Deborah Cohen/Maura O'Connor (Eds.), *Comparison and History. Europe in Cross-National Perspective*, New York 2004, p. ix-xxiv; Nancy L. Green, *Forms of Comparison*, in: Deborah Cohen/Maura O'Connor (Eds.), *Comparison and History. European Cross-National Perspective*, New York 2004, p. 41-56; Jürgen Kocka/Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, *Comparison and beyond. Traditions, scope, and perspectives of comparative history*, in: Jürgen Kocka/Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (Eds.), *Comparative and Transnational History. Central European Approaches and New Perspectives*, New York/Oxford 2009, p. 1-30.

¹² Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?*, Princeton/New Jersey 2016, p. 44; cf. Kiran Klaus Patel, *Transnational History*, in: EGO European History Online <http://www.ieg-ego.eu> (29.10.2020).

bon 2014 and Helsinki 2016, numerous sessions were inspired by the transnational history approach, focusing on different connections – such as routes of commerce, flows of migrants and settlers, networks of experts and the circulation of ideas – and the impact of these connections on the evolution of different cities. Furthermore, it is also important to point out that lines of research opened by transnational history were not entirely unprecedented among urban historians. For example, since the first EAUH conferences in the 1990s, many conference panels have problematised national and other borders and looked at the ways in which cities have shaped and been shaped by different cross-border flows of people, goods and capital. Hence, in the field of urban history, as in many other areas, much of transnational history could be also seen as a corollary to earlier work.

Comparative and transnational history are sometimes seen as two irreconcilable concepts. Over the years however, both approaches have moved closer to each other.¹³ At the EAUH conferences, many sessions have demonstrated that comparative and transnational history are complementary in the analysis of urban development and urban life. The ways in which the approaches can complement each other were discussed, for example, at the round table “Comparative, transnational and globalised perspectives on urban history” at the Prague conference in 2012, but also in many other sessions.¹⁴ Many of the challenges cities are facing have been transnational or global in nature, and consequently the responses to these challenges cannot be fully understood from a purely national or local perspective. To understand how particular transnational or global processes intersect with local urban contexts and how the processes manifest differently in specific cities and towns requires both transnational history and comparative analyses.

4. Diversity of urban experience in Europe and beyond

Through promoting multidisciplinary and comparative research, the EAUH has sought to enhance our understanding of the diversity of European urban development and urban experience. In the field of urban history, as in many other areas, there has been a marked Anglo-American and Western European dominance in publishing.¹⁵ Examples of this preponderance range from the editorial

¹³ Cf. Hartmut Kaelble, Comparative and transnational history, in: *Ricerche di storia politica*, 10/2017, p. 15-24.

¹⁴ Cf. Nicolas Kenny/Rebecca Madgin (Eds.), *Cities Beyond Borders. Comparative and Transnational Approaches to Urban History*, London 2015.

¹⁵ Cf. Anssi Paasi, Globalisation, Academic capitalism, and the uneven geographies of international journal publishing spaces, in: *Environment and Planning A. Economy and Space*,

and advisory boards of leading journals to publications which claim to deal with “European” urban history but focus almost exclusively on Western Europe. Consequently, Western European urban experiences have often been generalised to the rest of the continent, and this trend has shown no signs of weakening in recent decades.¹⁶ In some ways, this trend may even have intensified.

The global turn in historical studies has opened up many important avenues of inquiry. The criticism of Eurocentrism and the increasing interest in providing global perspectives have given urban historians a strong incentive to explore connections and experiences shared by European cities and those in other parts of the world. However, when Europe is included in studies exploring global processes and connections related to them, the focus is often on Western European cities. These cities have been key agents in many processes of global transformation and therefore their connections with the rest of the world have been extensive. In consequence, the increasingly global approach to urban history has, at least to some extent, served to strengthen the perception of Western Europe as the “real” Europe. Furthermore, as the interest in global perspectives has increased, exploring the diversity of European urban experiences and connections within Europe seems to have lost some of its appeal. Has urban history within Europe become less Eurocentric, but more Western-centric?

In recent years, “Europe” has disappeared from the titles of the EAUH conferences, while many panels have discussed urban development, experiences and connections in a more globally encompassing manner. The EAUH conferences and the contacts made at them have also contributed directly or indirectly to the establishment of a forum, Global Urban History Project (GUHP), and to the publishing of many books that address issues at the crossroads of urban history and global history.¹⁷ Furthermore, an increasing number of the conferences’ participants come from outside Europe. At the Stockholm conference in 2006, 14 per cent of the conference participants were from non-European countries, and the vast majority of them came from three countries, the USA, Canada and Turkey. At the Helsinki conference ten years later (2016), 22 per cent of the participants came from outside Europe, and in addition to the three countries mentioned above, there was a considerable number of participants from Australia, Brazil, Israel and Japan.

Despite the new global approach, studying the diversity of the European urban experience has remained one of the central aims of the EAUH. Through-

1/2005, p. 769–789

¹⁶ Cf. also the contribution by Rainer Liedtke in this issue.

¹⁷ Cf., for example, Peter Clark (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History*, Oxford 2013.

out its history, the Association has played an important role in mitigating the international asymmetries in terms of resources, agenda setting and the definition of priorities in the urban history community. The Association was founded in Western Europe and the first two conferences were held there (Amsterdam 1992, Strasbourg 1994), but the third conference in 1996 was organised in Budapest despite the severe financial and practical challenges. Since the mid-1990s, the conferences have been held in rotation in different regions of Europe. As the conferences have travelled across Europe – from west to east and from north to south – different approaches and themes have emerged and come into focus. For example, the theme of the Edinburgh conference in 2002, “Power, Knowledge and Society in the City”, was chosen to celebrate the fact that Edinburgh was home to some of the most innovative thinking of the Enlightenment in the 18th century. At the Lisbon conference in 2014, the theme “Cities in Europe, Cities in the World” emphasised the importance of inter- and extra-European contacts of the Portuguese capital.

Europe is not a monolith. Although European countries and regions are often grouped together, there is much variation between and within them. The story of the EAUH has been a story of integrating different (for example Western, Southern, Eastern and Northern European) urban experiences into scholarship. This principle is also explicitly stated in the new statutes of the EAUH, which were approved in 2014. The International Board consists of 15-23 members, most of whom are to be chosen from European countries. Furthermore, members of the Board should come from as wide a range of countries as possible.¹⁸

5. Conclusion

Reaching the milestone of 30 years has stimulated the EAUH community to reflect on its own past and that of the field. The history of the Association and its role in promoting research on urban history has already been addressed in a few publications. The development, achievements and challenges of the field will be under discussion, for example, in two round tables at the EAUH Antwerp conference in 2021. The round table “How European is European urban history? Urban history in Europe in the recent past” will discuss the issue of cohesion: To what extent has urban history in Europe developed into a field in which particular research trends and methodological approaches are shared throughout the continent, and to what extent do national and regional traditions remain important? The round table “The urban history of Europe – Revis-

¹⁸ Cf. the statutes of the EAUH.

ited” will focus on a three-volume Cambridge Urban History of Europe (to be published in 2023-2024), which is to be a showcase of the achievements of several decades of research on European urban history.

Research in urban history has gained a solid foothold in Europe and elsewhere. During the last three decades, it has gradually shifted from a marginal position to the mainstream of research in many countries. The shift is partly due to the efforts of urban historians themselves, but urban history has also profited from the more general trend for cities to regain the focus of public debate. Cities are now home to over half of the world's population and many of them have an important role to play – at local, national, regional or global level – in framing the major issues of the present and future. These changes have also challenged urban historians to reconsider how they think about cities and study them: New approaches such as transnational history and global history have been introduced in the field, and some of the traditional approaches already used in the 1980s – multidisciplinary and comparative perspectives – have been modified to meet the new challenges.