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## Weber and the European City in the 21st century: Still reality or just a concept?

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### Abstract

Max Weber has left a 100-page long text that played a main role in his argumentation on the particular development of Europe in contrast to especially Asia. Main difference, according to Weber, is the development of a ‘local society’ where freedom and the association of free citizens laid the ground for a democratic society. In the reception of this text, a critical view on main assumptions on the ‘European city’ has been dominant. In particular, the notions of conflict and inequality have not been integrated into his argumentation. Nevertheless, some sociologists even today, see Weber and his text as a kind of starting point to understand the social and political construction of urban societies in Europe. Firstly, a critical introduction into the core ideas of Weber on the city will be presented. Subsequently, the article discusses whether the ‘European city’ can still be regarded as a meaningful term to explain the process of urban restructuring taking place today. Although not rejecting the Weberian notion of the city, it will be highlighted that his understanding of ‘urban society’ leaves out recent processes of the post-Fordist restructuring of space.

**Keywords:** Max Weber; city; urban sociology; post-Fordism; conflict; European city

## 1 Introduction

The future of the city appears today again as the key to achieving social goals and for the vitality of democracy. The United Nations have declared the city’s sustainability as one of twenty ‘Social Development Goals’ and the issue of climate change adaptation is seen as an important challenge for urban planning. Confronted with such demanding issues, the question of possible role models and concepts arises. In many discussions, the model of the European city has therefore been making a comeback since the 2000s, as this type of city that has grown over the centuries is expected to withstand the storms of the future.

However, is there such a thing as a European city at all and how would you define it? On closer inspection, it turns out to be difficult to name cities that can be considered ‘typically’ European. Of course, this has to do with the difficulty that the definition of ‘Europe’ is also not without problems and has historically varied greatly, and the diversity

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of European societies may be greater than what they have in common. The same applies to the cities. Gelsenkirchen (Eckardt & Voregger, 2023) for example, as an industrial city of the 19th century in the Ruhr area and today part of the economic periphery, may have more in common with the Rustbelt cities of the USA, while the metropolises like Frankfurt or London are more like those that are becoming centralized everywhere in the context of globalization where global flows of goods, services and people compete.

This raises the question of whether the ‘European city’, as Max Weber prominently introduced it into the discourse about the city, still reflects today’s social development of cities or whether it is only understood as a normative, orientation-providing concept that can serve as a starting point for urban sociology and that describes a desirable state of local socialization.

The topicality of Weber’s thinking about the city is discussed again and again in urban sociology. While critical analyses (Kemper, 2012; Eckardt, 2004) often come to a rather negative conclusion on the relevance of Max Weber’s text on the city and which highlight the empirical weaknesses of the Weberian perspective, sociologists such as Patrick Le Galès (2002) and Walter Siebel (2004; 2012) however have tried to explain the current development of cities in Europe with Weber’s basic concepts. Other authors have tried to emphasize that general aspects of Weber’s understanding of the city, such as urban autonomy, might still be important. (Smiley & Emerson, 2020; Stasavage, 2014).

Max Weber’s concept of cities is usually linked to a 100-page text (Weber, 1921), which Weber originally wanted to integrate into his main work ‘Economy and Society’ (1922/1980). The most important aspects of this text will therefore initially be recaptured to work out the essence of Weber’s approach (section 2) and to relate it to the author’s further sociological work (section 3). With reference to Le Galès and Siebel, two updates of the Weberian text shall be introduced and critically discussed (section 4). It should then be reflected on whether, in the light on the current post-Fordist geography with its tendency to polarize into peripheral and central spaces, still allows a critical analysis of the city within the Weberian tradition (section 5).

## 2 ‘The City’ (1921)

The form of the text and the history of the edition of ‘Die Stadt’ (The city, 1921/2000), to which most of Max Weber’s interpretations and his understanding of the European city refer, represent difficult conditions in many regards. It is not at all obvious, what the status of this text was and what meaning it had for Weber, as it has not been included formally into the ‘Economy and Society’ (Weber 1922/1980) and its classification as a key text for an (urban) sociological research agenda has not been proposed by the author himself. The posthumously published text is considered unfinished, and it can be questioned whether it can even be seen as a coherent text in its handed down form (Bruhns & Nippel, 2000). The probable period of origin might be estimated as the years between 1911 and 1914. It was first published in 1921 as an essay entitled ‘The city: A sociological investigation’ (‘Die Stadt. Eine soziologische Untersuchung’) in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. The following year, the text was included as a chapter in *Economy and Society* (1922/1980).

In terms of content, ‘the city’ was initially assigned to the section ‘Types of communalization and socialization’, but in later editions it was included as a chapter in its own

right with the title ‘The non-legitimate rule (typology of cities)’. It seemed important to Weber, also in terms of his idea of ‘Idealtypus’ (ideal types), to think of cities in categories. This is in line with his typology of cities which he worked out as occidental, patrician, plebeian, and ancient versus medieval democratic cities. A large part of the discussion on his understanding of the city therefore revolves around the question of whether the categories he conceived of – in particular the European city – are still adequate for the description of different cities. It is mainly discussed how important these differences are. It is questioned whether the European city should be distinguished from cities of other cultural traditions or whether this would in fact overemphasize the differences in comparison, for example, to the cities of Russia (Murvar, 1967) or China (Zhao, 2015). It should be borne in mind that Max Weber was mainly able to draw on European sources in his conception of the city and that he was able to use significantly less knowledge with regard to non-European cities (Monnet, 2005). All in all, his reflection is mainly limited to historical sources only (Schott, 1996), whereby he primarily takes medieval towns into account. This is striking since Max Weber lived at a time, when Germany was experiencing a massive surge in urbanization (Reulecke, 1985), which, due to the belated industrialization, was affecting cities like Berlin, where Max Weber spent most of his younger years. He could have observed that the population had not only changed massively, but also that the social coexistence of the people in the overcrowded neighbourhoods took on a different quality. While his contemporary Georg Simmel vividly described and analysed this in his famous essay on ‘The Big Cities and Spiritual Life’ (1903), the current events that were taking place before Max Weber’s eyes had no significant influence on his reflections on the city, despite the fact that he was deeply impressed by his visits to New York and Chicago.

Nevertheless, there is a thematic overlap with Simmel because, like Weber, he reflects intensively on the process of rationalization. This is conveyed via an analysis of the economic transformation of society, in which the role of money as an anonymous form of exchange plays a central role for both sociologists. Closely related to this anonymity, the possibility of entering into impersonal relationships in urban life is generated, and thus a rationalization of the social world for Simmel and Weber is intrinsically linked to the city. This rationalization means an increase in freedom and individuality (Pohlmann, 1987). But unlike Simmel, who recognized these connections on his walks in contemporary Berlin, Weber saw the process of rationalization already coincide with the emergence of the medieval city (Boone, 2012).

It is crucial for Weber not to see the city as a territorial entity that can be defined by size, density or other statistical measures. Instead, his sociological understanding of the subject is based on a universal historical definition of the city as the connection of the central local market and power functions. It is therefore also essential for his understanding of the city that the city is to be conceived as a ‘municipal community’.

This emphasizes that a city is understood in its social function as an association of ‘urban citizens’ and in its ‘associative character’. The city as a social structure can thus also be analysed in terms of the sociology of action and with the individual social groups being identifiable in their social structure and dynamics. For Weber, the ‘municipal community’ and not ‘the city’ is his actual theme. The historical development of the bourgeoisie, as the carrier of modern capitalism, and the modern, rational and bureaucratic state that developed from it, as well as going further: European democracy, are placed in a causal relationship to one another (Ringer, 1994). For Weber, this connection arises with the me-

dieval city, in which a specific legal order with the corporate citizenship law results in a levelling of corporate differences between the citizens, which in turn enables the rationalization of legal relationships among them (Domingues, 2000). This rationalization institutionalizes itself in a new social order in which an administrative staff of the 'city association' (Weber, 2000, p. 26) receives legitimacy and enables continuity of the established urban rule. This also requires a normative safeguard, which Weber sees emerging through a mental community of urban citizens. This ties in with the tradition of Christian conjurations, which enabled solidarity among citizens. In particular, the self-organizing merchants and craftsmen illustrate the transition from a feudal to a rational and modern urban society for Weber. They set up bourgeois rule against the established, feudal ruling powers, dominate the decision-making processes in the institutions of civic self-government and determine municipal policy towards the non-civic estates or classes inside and outside the cities. For Weber, six factors are characteristic of the European city: Political autonomy, autonomous legislation, its own judiciary and its own administrative apparatus, tax power over the citizens, the right and ability to conduct their own economic policy and the means to control inclusion and exclusion in the 'city association' (Weber 2000, p. 72).

In the sense of Weber's sociology of social action (cf. Sprondel, 1981), social order is based on the perpetuation of social interactions and accordingly the dynamics that result from the encounters of people in the city are decisive for the emergence of the municipal community. For Weber, urbanity begins with strangers sitting down together at a table, which results in long-term relationships that then turn out to be a 'communal sworn relationships brotherhood' (*conjuraciones*) which then continues and perpetuates its rules. Equality before the law and acts of consent are based on these relationships, which translate into power and can function as a 'revolutionary usurpation' (Weber 2000, p. 26) of the previously legitimate city order. Weber does not claim that this development can necessarily be observed everywhere, since it depends on the respective local actors and on a number of other conditions. Strong territorial powers, administrations and military inferiority can stand in the way of this. Usurpations have more chance when they occur in a competitive field of different powers. Following Weber's views on spiritual and mental forces, such as religions or caste systems, he ultimately also sees the normative level of social orders as crucial for a rationalization of the municipality. This is the main reason why he regards the European city as the place for the emergence of modern society, because only here, through the assertion of Christianity, already an agreement for the encounter of people who were not related to family members was established: 'It was decisive for the development of the medieval city [...] that the citizens at a time when their economic interests pushed towards institutional socialization were not prevented by magical or religious barriers on the one hand and that on the other hand there was no rational administration of a political association above them' (Weber, 2000, p. 26).

### 3 'The City' in the sociological reception

In the introductory and overview literature on urban sociology, Max Weber has meanwhile taken on the role of a 'classic', in which, however, the text mentioned above is almost exclusively taken up (cf. e.g. Eckardt, 2004, pp. 11–14; Häußermann & Siebel, 2004, pp. 92–93). In order to actually make the meaning of Weber's approach fruitful for an analysis

of contemporary society, it is necessary to classify this text in the theoretically oriented discussion about Max Weber as a classic of sociology in general. As mentioned, his theoretical focus on 'social action', his methodical construction of ideal types and his overall approach to the *verstehende Soziologie* ('understanding sociology') with which the process of rationalization is to be analysed must be taken into account. In terms of the history of ideas, Weber can be classified in such a way that his political opposition to feudal dominance and the socialist labour movement is not lost sight of as an important driving force in his work (Lichtblau, 2020). It is controversial whether a kind of all-pervading 'Weber paradigm' (Albert, 2009) can be identified with which the text 'The City' must also be read. In any case, it must be critically stated that such a historical and socio-political contextualization does not usually occur in the discussions about the relevance and correctness of Weber's statements about the city.

The most important contextualization of Max Weber's study of the city has to be made in terms of its focus and reduction to the Middle Ages. The decisive factor here is that this restriction is justified by a demarcation from the ancient polis and in a cultural comparison from the city in 'Asia' and as an epochal transition from traditional to modern society. The text is therefore by no means representing what Weber would have intended by his statement that sociology needs to be a *Wirklichkeitswissenschaft* ('reality science') and regarding sociology a discipline of empirical research. The reconstruction of social reality is not the aim of his study, but Weber is concerned with a historically arguing genesis of occidental rationalism and why it first developed in the 'Occident' (Müller 2007, pp. 241–247). Consequently, urban sociologists in particular who are committed to empirically oriented research on the city, especially in current contexts of social development, found little use in Max Weber's study, so far. This critical perspective on the lack of connectivity to an empirically oriented urban sociology is also confirmed by historical reviews on Max Weber's considerations on the city (Bruhns & Nippel, 2000).

Nevertheless, Max Weber's city study remained and remains a reference for interpretation and orientation in the field of urban sociology. Above all, an interest in urban sociology seems to be expressed here, in order to be able to conceptually grasp a certain urban lifestyle and to be able to describe 'urban' living conditions. Core elements of this discussion about 'urbanity' (Wüst, 2004) include assumptions about opportunities for individual freedom and the solidary community. Such a reading is based on the fact that Weber understands the medieval European city as a unit of political sovereignty, religious morality and a money-based barter economy, which overall results in a stable social structure. By establishing an urban lifestyle, a kind of reconciliation between the political and religious order with the commercial and economic innovations that have put trade and crafts on an equal footing. The city becomes the place where political agreement coincides harmoniously with private economic interests and which is allowing for a political definition of citizenship (Schwartz, 1985).

With the assertion that political emancipation, political self-organization and economic prosperity occurred historically at the same time and that a causal relationship can therefore be assumed, Weber has probably created a figure of thought that has been largely detached from his text and that has a life of its own in the debates about the city of the future. The work by Bastian Lange, Gottfried Prasenc and Harald Saiko, 'Local Drafts: Urbanity in the 21st Century; Urbanity in the 21st Century' (2013) might give an example for this. The figurative urbanity is vividly described in their view of today's and tomorrow's cities:

Urban places are the dynamic and contested terrain of the urbanized 21st century. Public space, from Tahrir Square in Cairo to Zuccotti Park in New York, has advanced to become a culmination point for new social designs; in 'New Downtowns', for example in HafenCity Hamburg, new functional mixes are being tested; the boom in assemblies and similar forms of participation expresses citizens' aspirations to actually help shape their living space; Temporary cultural and district projects such as the annual Lendwirbel Festival in Graz are efforts by self-organized initiatives to temporarily reprogramme urban space into a zone of cultural interventions and thereby help new practices of cultural production and city life to become visible. Using exemplary geographies of urban places, this book analyses the new formations of urbanity in the 21st century under completely new social, political, cultural and economic conditions. (Lange et al., 2013, p. 4)

With the terminology of urbanity, the definition of the city referring to places which represent the cooperative dimensions of socialization and thereby rejects theoretical concepts of city highlighting conflicts and above all Marxist city theories, which are based above all on the work of Friedrich Engels on the situation of the English working class prominently established in urban sociology (May, 2008). In the discourse on urbanity, the topic of the contradictions between individual and general interests is defused and channelled as citizens' willingness to participate. A resolution of this contradiction is possible through participation and the urban society presents itself as a politically collectively acting social organization.

Formulated primarily by Richard Sennett (1990; 1994), the reception of Max Weber's text moves from an interpretation that is sociological in the strict sense and rather seeks connection with the sociological theory in a more philosophical direction. For Sennett, the ideal type of the medieval European city seems particularly suitable as a comparative image, in order to hold up a mirror image of contemporary society and the city. Accordingly, his texts, especially on the city (Eckardt, 2021), can be understood as a kind of narrative in which the loss of order and the endangerment of individual socio-political commitment are the main concerns. Material prosperity, socio-political passivity, statism, paternalism and conformism are the results of a modern city in which the characteristics of an urban society (emphasized by Weber), its ability to exchange, to agree and to reconcile individual with general interests, can no longer be found. Sennett (2008) also states that today, with capitalism becoming more flexible, people are deeply unsettled that the certainties (and constraints) described by Weber no longer function. Weber remains interesting for Sennett because his European city shows how 'economic individualism and community can be combined' (Sennett, 2008, p. 202). As he emphasizes, especially in his later works, the city dweller is now faced with the task of taking care of his immediate surroundings himself. However, as T. J. Jackson (1985) analysed, Sennett's first books deal with a basic narrative of 'disorder' and 'decline' in the city, in which individual strength of character then matters. In this way, Sennett reproduces an American imagination that he cannot prove empirically and which, as with Weber, does not derive on the basis of a sociological reconstruction of social reality.

Rather, the anarchy of American cities described in 'The Uses of Disorder' (Sennett, 1970) ties in with a constant perception of cities by the white middle class, which is omnipresent in US culture and cultivates the natural fear of Afro-Americans (Row, 2019). The

fact that Sennett here follows a narrative that seemed to be particularly topical due to the civil rights movement and the riots at the end of the 1960s should therefore not be seen in retrospect as his individual and empirically confirmed assessment. Sennett's first books on the city 'revealed more about the author's attitude than about their subjects' (Jackson, 1985, p. 85). They are an expression of a new conservatism that was emerging at the time, which Kevin M. Kruse (2007) was able to convincingly reconstruct in his analysis of White Flight using extensive studies on Atlanta. According to Kruse, the conservatism of those years occupied topoi such as the perception of a decline in the city and society in general and the moral return to the individual and his glorification.

#### 4 Updating Weber: Walter Siebel and Patrick Le Galès

In German as well as in parts of European urban sociology, the preoccupation with the 'European city' has increasingly shifted to a comparison with the American instead of the Asian city since the 1990s. This includes the assumption that European cities have become more similar to the cities of the United States in terms of urban planning and social life. In particular, the German urban sociologist Walter Siebel (2004; 2012) has pointed out that this is accompanied by a loss that affects the settlement and social type of European cities. As a result, comparisons were made that deal with urban phenomena such as suburbanization, gentrification and segregation. The basic idea of urbanity, which represents the special feature of the European city, is recapitulated in constant adaptation. The core idea is the synergetic combination of economy, lifestyle and political self-determination. Accordingly, the city of Europe provides the social and spatial basis for conflicts of interest to be negotiated and for social and cultural differences to be reconciled with one another, so that social 'integration without denial of difference' (Siebel, 2004, p. 15) can be reached. For Siebel, the European city is a historical reality that can also be considered as a normative model for the present and the future, on which current urban politics and planning in Europe should be based. This is the only way to ensure that Europe as a whole and at the local level has a systemic and socially integrative effect and remains politically capable of acting.

In Siebel's reading, Max Weber's focus on the emerging urban bourgeoisie is particularly emphasized. For Siebel, therefore, Weber's 'Die Stadt' is a story of emancipation (Siebel, 2004, p. 13). In this way, Siebel adopts Max Weber's claim that the independence of citizens created the basis for people to behave in solidarity with others, since they no longer felt like dependent subjects and could now behave responsibly. Siebel does not deepen into the ongoing process of rationalization and the associated bureaucratic need for charismatic leadership, which is addressed by Weber in later works. It becomes clear that the connection with Weber's more far-reaching socio-political ideas is not addressed. Instead, Weber's argument is followed that the European city is a specific form of urban society that can be characterized as a special social relationship and in which the integration into supra-local processes and structures is not decisive. At the centre of this interpretation of Siebel is the aspect of local independence emphasized by Weber and the specific effects that occur as a result in relation to urban society. In essence, Weber offers

Siebel a socio-political perspective in which Americanization is threatening the European city to be determined from outside. Siebel underlines the potential of local action, which has an impact on the ethos (and the alleged reality) of bourgeois behaviour – in solidarity and democracy (cf. Giersig, 2008).

In his book about ‘European Cities: Social Conflicts and Governance’ (2002), the French sociologist Patrick Le Galès follows Siebel’s interpretation of Weber in many respects. For Le Galès, however, the most important issue is that the European cities, which once emancipated themselves from feudal power and personal dependency, now have to deal with the challenges and economic constraints of the world market and globalization.

For Le Galès, this poses the problem that these processes do not necessarily have a direct impact on the cities, but are also mediated through the restructuring of the state, through a new form of government. The starting point of his analysis is the transformation of the economy by the establishment of the free world market, which has prevailed globally since the 1970s and is inscribed in the local economic structure as a consequence of national deregulation. Following research on the ‘global city’ (cf. Murray, 2020), which states social polarization and the dissolution of the middle class, Le Galès also sees an increase in social conflicts in the cities of Europe as likely. For him, however, the establishment of a social consensus and state-organized solidarity are based far more on the achievements of the welfare state than on bourgeois solidarity. For this reason, Le Galès also problematizes the transformation of state power that accompanies globalization, in which ‘governance gives the state indirect possibilities of control in addition to the classic means of control such as law and finance’ (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004). These instruments have an effect on the social modes of socialization and lead to intra-urban competition also occurring between the individual cities through systems of support and incentives and through regional and local support. In this way, Le Galès distances himself from a purely local and urban possibility of shaping society politically and does not follow the emphasis on the citizen-based model of Weber and Siebel. This is also made clear by the fact that Le Galès is rather sceptical about the distinction between public and private, which is so important for both authors and for which the constitution of the socio-spatial order of the city is regarded to be decisive. Rather, with reference to the work of Michel Foucault, Le Galès problematizes the logic of governance with which such a distinction is rudimentarily abolished. In doing so, he follows a critical discourse about rationality that pursues a political-logical analysis of the *régime de rationalité* (Foucault, 1994, p. 30). The political practice of governing (*gouverner*) enters into a semantic symbiosis with the political and paradigmatic discourses (*mentalité*), which produces power-knowledge complexes. In Foucault’s sense, a genealogical discourse analysis needs to be carried out (Foucault, 2000), in which political rationalities are not to be understood as a discrepancy between reality and plan, but as already necessarily fragile and contradictory in the respective discourse politics. In this regard, Le Galès shows that he is well aware that also the discourse on the ‘European city’ is a product of power-knowledge complex that comes to new life under political circumstances where governance also needs the soft instruments of steering by for example influencing understandings of the city as a place of active participation.

## 5 The European city in the post-Fordist geography

The update of Max Weber's study by Patrick Le Galès makes it possible to maintain the emphasis on local peculiarities with regard to the social and political design of the European city, without ignoring the current developments that take place beyond local processes. This includes not only economic developments such as globalization, but also the effects of the corona pandemic and its effects on social inequalities (Eckardt, 2020). The pandemic has changed the multiple processes that make up the social order of cities. They and the associated state interventions have further deepened the dynamics of social divisions in European societies. Since the 1980s, it has been observed that the social mix in many urban districts is decreasing and the segregation between the various social groups is increasing (Häußermann & Kapphan, 2000).

The loss of social cohesion is not only due to the consequences of market globalization and the neoliberalization of the state analysed by Le Galès, but also results from a long-lasting and sustainable restructuring of social space, which is hierarchically divided into central and peripheral spaces. Central spaces are the places of control that are important for the global order, the 'global cities', and the places of value-added production in the market-leading branches. Beyond this, a peripheralization can be observed, which is mainly concerned with pacifying the spaces that are not necessary for the global production chain. For this purpose, the so-called 'area-based approaches' were created, such as the German funding program 'Social City' and which are dedicated to districts with an above-average concentration of unemployed and poor residents. However, as studies from the 2010s (Helbig & Jähnen, 2018) show, the impoverishment processes have continued and only pacification of these peripheral spaces has been practiced without producing the solidarity among citizens that these programmes – in the spirit of Weber and the urbanity-theorem – promised. At the same time, there was a concentration of residential areas for wealthier citizens in citadels of prosperity. These are primarily found in central locations such as global cities. Nevertheless, the principle of centre and periphery has also inscribed itself in all other urban contexts, so that there are now rich quarters in formerly poor districts and disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the rich metropolises. It is to be expected that these social inequalities will continue to cement themselves as separate residential and living spaces in the social geography of cities due to the increase in poverty observed in times of pandemics, inflation, energy crises and scarcity of resources.

Since living space is scarce and land prices in better locations have become unaffordable for many from the middle class, residential islands are being created, which are furnished according to their own norms and values and are located next to structurally and socially disadvantaged residential areas. The vast majority of the poor in European cities do not live in ghettos based on the American model, but in streets in which predominantly people live who also receive below-average incomes or state transfers. The rich, on the other hand, have not built gated communities like in the US and elsewhere either, but have retreated to the streets, where 86 per cent of them keep to themselves (Goebel & Hoppe, 2018).

In cities where the growth industries are located, this works out as a process of displacement of the former working class (gentrification). The economic geography with its

focus on exportable high-end production produces a dual social landscape in the growth metropolises in which the economic added value has to be ensured by urban society and planning through a high degree of control and exclusivity. However, many places in this post-Fordist economic geography are losing their importance or are only integrated as parking lots for logistics companies. This economic peripheralization means a social de-classification, which is partly reflected in the emergence of dependent regions – in Germany for example especially the Ruhr area with a million poor residents – but also partly on a small scale through the juxtaposition of lighthouse cities like Jena in a shrinking eastern region of former East Germany.

However, social fragmentation and peripheralization have not only inscribed themselves spatially in the social, but also in the political culture of Germany. Repression, social disadvantage and poverty are only addressed incidentally and are not understood as a task for society as a whole. This is promoted by a media, party-political and institutional exclusivity of the elites, which is less and less concerned with the living conditions of the periphery (Hartmann, 2018). In peripheral areas not only the economic consequences of de-industrialization can be observed, but also the political economy of re-industrialization through low wages, the loss of union organization and skilled workers and the acceptance of a permanent precariat despite the availability of work. The rise of populist parties, right-wing protest and violence and a racist everyday culture that can be found in many places and can be understood as a reaction to this deliberate devaluation of work and workers. As the example of Gera (Schmalz et al., 2021), a former mining town, shows, the East German periphery is characterized by a social dynamic in which the demographic, political, cultural and economic processes mutually fuel the downward spiral because a social intervention with an overall strategy is missing and instead sectoral approaches, mostly without reference to the other areas of life, prevail.

The absence of a change in socio-political course is manifested politically not only in the strengthening of right-wing movements, but above all in the withdrawal to one's own living environment and accordingly in the abstinence from elections. The ten electoral districts with the lowest turnout in the 2021 federal election in Germany were all in eastern Germany and the Ruhr area, with Duisburg (63.3 per cent) at the top. The lack of social representation among the poorer electorate also reinforces the effect of the above-average voter turnout among the high-income milieus (Vehrkamp, 2013).

Empirically, it can be shown that the socio-spatial divergences are closely related to different resource endowments. This is about the provision of economic and social capital, understood as individual integration into networks. As Stefanie Lütters (2022) was able to show using in the two Cologne districts of Hahnwald and Chorweiler, which show considerable socio-structural inequalities, social and political ties converge in the respective individual socio-spatial environment, which forms the relevant frame of reference for social exchange and learning processes. This means that the interactions with people in the immediate environment can be more or less politically relevant depending on the situation. The social condition for political participation is therefore based on the extent to which individuals can acquire social resources that are relevant for political participation through integration into social networks. To put it bluntly, one could say that encounters and interactions with neighbours from a disadvantaged district cannot be converted into

political capital, while politically relevant social capital is produced in the places where higher status households live. 'In summary, people with more resources are embedded in more favourable network constellations that noticeably stimulate political activity, with informal relationships having a particular potential for politicization. Political participation is thus largely determined by individual social capital' (Lütters, 2022, p. 271).

## 6 Discussion

Weber's urban study can serve to emphasize the attention of urban sociology for the connection between social situations, social orientations and processes of political power formation in urban development. It is however based on the medieval European city and thereby applies a perspective of investigation, with which the actor-bound orientations, the translation of social into political power as well as the institutionalization and legitimacy of political rule are emphasized. This requires a critical reconstruction of the historical relevance and correctness of the conception of the European city. It is striking that Weber underlined the importance of the consensual nature of cities and paid little attention to the processes and conflicts that stand in the way of such a perspective. Whether the cities of the Middle Ages were really shaped primarily by consensus and integration can still be doubted. There is much to suggest that social conflicts were more formative and that where they could be resolved, this was often at the expense of minorities. The expulsion of Jews from German cities for centuries is an important example that should be considered conceptually in the discussion on the European city. It is obvious that the 'success' of European city must be viewed much more critically today because the connection with racism and colonization is historically evident (Ha & Picker, 2022).

Whether it makes sense to retain the European city as a category remains questionable. In particular, because the different historical experiences after the Second World War are still having an impact today. The anti-bourgeois policies in the states of Eastern European socialism mark an important difference that is reflected in the socio-economic structure of the cities until today (Tammaru, 2016). If one assumes that globalization will have a levelling effect on the cities of Eastern Europe, one can object to this assumption of convergence that the transformation of the state can turn out differently. Significant differences in the financial crisis of the 2000s and the different application of austerity principles, particularly with regard to southern European countries such as Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal have also shown that cities in the north and south of Europe have to be framed differently (Eckardt & Sanchez, 2015). It remains to be seen whether, in view of these macro-societal differences between Eastern and Western, Northern and Southern European countries, this still can be fruitfully described with the social imagination of the 'European city'.

The updates to Weber's conception of the city can be summarized in two important interpretations. First, prominently represented by Walter Siebel, a consensus-oriented urbanity is asserted as a historical and normative essence that must be protected against non-local processes of destabilization. Above all, the urbanity paradigm is intended to establish a civic conception of politics generated by the vicinity of the city dwellers. Inher-

ent in this approach is a humanistic position which, in a broader sense, can certainly find a kindred spirit in Max Weber. The problem with this is that Weber's interpretation does not follow empirically based research about current urban development, but instead absolutizes the medieval city as a successful example of urban society.

This contrasts with a second reading, which is also represented above all by Patrick Le Galès, who uses the European city as a kind of analysis scheme – as an 'ideal type' – in order to be able to measure the existing social integration capacity of current cities in Europe. Although this analytical approach can be maintained by a historicizing concept of the European city in the context of globalization (Dilcher, 2015), it is conceptually open and therefore allows the inclusion of new observations of society, which are particularly affected by the emergence of new social conflicts and of the political changes that Le Galès addresses in the analysis of governance and in the context of neoliberalization. Twenty years after his update, it would be necessary to ask again how the question about the state of the European city is shaped today. In this article, the obvious processes of the new economic and social geography that bring about a centralization and peripheralization of society were taken up. The question of the urban lifestyle, which was emphasized by Weber and subsequently Siebel, and the idea of local understanding and cohesion that goes with it, was fundamentally questioned, as shown above. Since this socio-spatial transformation is taking place over a long period of time and has been deepened by the Corona crisis, the original idea of reconciling economy and politics through forms of civic socialization is difficult to support in the reality of present-day Europe.

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