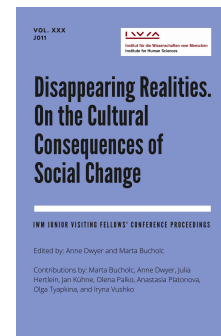


Small Towns as a Phenomenon of Historical Urbanization from a Western European Methodological Perspective

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Abstract: *One of the main questions of urban history in Russia is the theoretical understanding of the small town phenomenon. In this paper I analyze the main methodological concepts of historical urban development in Europe. I begin with Karl Marx and continue through modern trends in the humanities and historical studies which examine cities from different perspectives. The object of this article is to answer the question of when and how small towns have become the subject of scientific research in the West. It implies comparing these theories and applying them to the Russian and Siberian models of urbanization with a view to elaborate a new approach in the studies of historical urban development in Siberia.*

The humanities and historical studies in the west have undergone significant structural changes over the last two centuries. If in the mid-nineteenth century Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) declared history to be the foremost science within the humanities, starting in the 1970s the appearance of postmodernist intellectual movements has cast doubt on history's ability to explain social phenomena and synthesize historical processes. In Russia, history as a discipline has found itself at a crossroads since Marxist ideology lost its predominance in the 1990s and a range of new methodological approaches began to diversify Russian scholarship. Nonetheless, exactly which distinctive theoretical modes might best be applied to studying topics of Russian and world history still remains an ongoing question.

Such methodological concerns are highly relevant to the study of Russian urban history, though it is too early to speak of a cohesive methodology of urban history in general or small town history in particular. Historians today operate with a wide range of concepts; while such methodological pluralism creates space for intellectual tricks, it minimizes the chance of developing a general approach for understanding the capitalist city and

urbanization in Russia. This article offers an overview of major trends in western methodological approaches to urban history from the second half of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth. It also explores when and how small towns have become the object of study and what approaches have been taken.

These questions are of real significance for Russian urban studies. Theoretical issues concerning the development of cities from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries are relatively unexplored compared, for example, to history of feudal cities. This situation is conditioned in large part by the predominance of Marxist theory in Russian science, which did not allow for a full conceptualization of the development of the capitalist city.

The appearance of so-called social history, with its slogan of “history without politics,” heralded a new stage in Russian scholarship. The city has become one of its primary and constant objects of study and has accompanied social history as it establishes itself as an independent discipline. This process has been marked by a number of shifts in the interpretation of its object of study and the formulation of central questions and analytical methods.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) was one of the first thinkers to pay attention to contemporary processes of urbanization. Since his aim was to study the emergence of the bourgeoisie, his investigations into the city focused first and foremost on the development of large urban centers where capitalist relations first became most strikingly apparent.

In principle Marx may be considered an early social historian. On the one hand his economic theories challenged the predominance of political history. On the other, he presented a vision of the city as a unified organism and launched the systematic study of urban history.

Without reducing the significance of Marx’s insights into regularities of historical development, we must acknowledge that Marxist historians did not develop a finished conception of how to study cities and processes of urbanization. Among the particularities of Marxist approaches to urban history, we can identify the following. First, an overriding interest in the socioeconomic and political economic base in the genesis and development of cities. Second, these questions were treated primarily from the point of view of the emergence and development of bourgeois formations. Urban material, thirdly, was used primarily to justify and give concrete examples of more general ideas. Finally, Marxist historians focused attention on the contrast between city and country in their emphasis on large cities in the era of capitalism.

To summarize, Marx understood the city to be a historical category conditioned by the socioeconomic structure of society. The city’s appearance was grasped as an inevitable occurrence in the progress of society determined by the division of labor, the growth of exchange and private property, etc. At the core of Marxist theory lies economic determinism. The city was of interest primarily due to its concentration of productive forces.

In the early twentieth century, Marx was followed by historians and sociologists who formulated theoretical problems of urban development, notably Werner Sombart (1863-1941), Max Weber (1864-1920), and Georg Simmel (1858-1918).

Sombart was the first to define the city as an independent object of study in an economic and politico-administrative sense. In his work Sombart shaped the concepts of *Städtegründer* and *Städtefüller*, which in 1933 were translated by American economic historian Frederick Nussbaum as “town builders” and “town fillers.” Within this economic model, town builders leverage a town’s prosperity by the means of trade; whereas town fillers provide the goods and services that are locally demanded.[1]

Weber, in a study of several Western European ancient and medieval cities, formulated a number of theoretical hypotheses that are important to understanding the nature of the city: its definition, stages of its development, as well as the particularities of western and eastern cities. He distinguished between the economic and politico-administrative concepts of the city. From his perspective, certain places which may not be cities according to their economical significance may nonetheless be considered cities in a politico-administrative sense.

In his writings on public processes Weber combined concrete historical comparative-typological and ideal-typical methods. He also emphasized the discrepancy between sociological concepts and historical reality, acknowledging the conditional character of theoretical construction. It was Weber, however, who began sociological research of the city and created the independent discipline of “urban sociology,” which developed in Chicago in the mid-1920s spearheaded by Robert E. Park (1864-1944).

Sombart’s and Weber’s main achievements thus lie in their move away from an understanding of the city as something frozen and unchanging. Instead they underscored the dynamism of the city and drew attention to the interrelationship between changes in its economic life and larger social and economic developments.

In “The Metropolis and Mental Life” Georg Simmel for the first time distinguished between physiological principles of activity among inhabitants of large cities vs. small towns.[2] According to Simmel, spiritual life in large cities was characterized by excessive pragmatism, calculation, and intellectual actions. Small towns were distinguished by the slow and even rhythm of spiritual and intellectual life, relationships based on feelings, personal everyday contacts, and limited movement both inside and outside, a self-preserved *modus vivendi* of its inhabitants.

In western historiography the study of small towns as a special subject first developed among medievalists who strove to understand the particularities of the medieval city. But in later historical periods (marked by the rise of capitalism and rapid urbanization), small towns remain overshadowed by large industrial centers, which attract more attention not only from scholars, but also from policy makers and other public figures.

The journal *Annales d'Histoire Economique et Sociale* founded by Lucien Febvre (1878-1956) and Marc Bloch (1886-1944) in Strasbourg in 1929, put an end to traditional historical studies and gave its name to the French historical school that influenced world historiography. Peter Burke credits it with having produced a remarkable amount of the most innovative, the most memorable, and the most significant historical writing of the twentieth century.[3] At its center was the perception of history as a social science or an all-embracing “human science.”

It was Fernand Braudel (1902-1985), the leader of the *Annales* School for many years, who first advocated for the study of history as *histoire totale*. He turned emphatically away from narration to a concern with the fundamental structures that define history and in addition insisted that different historical settings require different understandings of time.[4]

Following Marx, Braudel considered the city to be a complex social organism that stands in a close relationship to its surrounding territory. In his multidisciplinary approach, Braudel paid particular attention to the ways geographical location influences urban development: “Every town grows up in a given place, becomes wedded to it and, with very few exceptions, never leaves it. The original site may or may not be a wise choice.”[5] He also concluded that in every country cities and towns together form urban networks and develop something akin to a “city hierarchy,” in which small towns perform functions determined by the economic, political, and cultural conditions of the larger territory. According to François Bedarida, we must give full credit to the *Annales* School for the “urban awakening” among historians, though the editors of *Annales* were admittedly most concerned with the middle ages and the early modern period and directed less research towards contemporary towns.[6]

The mid-twentieth century saw the birth of the “new social history,” marking a qualitative change in social history that influenced the humanities more broadly. This analytical and interdisciplinary field borrowed theoretical models and research methods from the social sciences and distanced itself from traditional views of history as more narrowly humanitarian knowledge.

One area of convergence for history and sociology was the urban history of the 1960s and 70s. The city as a whole, being an ideal object for complex interdisciplinary research, for the first time turned from a stage platform, a place of social activities into a distinct scholarly object of study in the context of “new urban history.” Asa Briggs first called on historians to borrow concepts from urban sociology in their study of urban history. In *Victorian Cities* (1963), Briggs noted that town histories had to grapple with broad themes, and that, conversely, generalizations about suburban growth, mass politics and municipal government only made sense when investigated through the prism of the distinctive local community with its own structures and relationships.[7]

“The new urban history and sociology” moved away from traditional approaches (biographic, typological, autonomous and local) toward a contextual approach that presented a new understanding of the place and role of cities and urbanization in human

history. The city appeared before the scholar as a complex object which united multiple functions in itself but was also a part of a larger whole. The city became a spatial incarnation of its social connections and cultural specificities.[8]

In the 1960s small towns began to attract historians' attention, with the focus again drawing scholars to the middle ages. At question were definitions and criteria of small towns, features of economic life, distinctions between large and small urban settlements, and regional and typological analysis. Empirical data led to important methodological guidelines for further research:

1. Definitions according to size. The limits of where a small town "begins" depend on the differentiation of urban populations in a larger region during a particular chronological period.
2. Economically underdeveloped towns are especially numerous among those that were "intentionally founded" primarily for defensive or strategic purposes.
3. When we speak of the agricultural orientation of the economic life of small towns, we must consider that this orientation may be determined by specific local natural conditions as well as by demands of the economic development in the entire region. We must understand for every concrete setting the degree and form in which agricultural production entered market circulation.
4. The relatively small scale of economic life in small towns does not preclude their intensity and diversity.
5. Similarities and differences between large and small towns of a region are conditioned by the general economic direction of a given region, as well as by the region's type and level of urbanization.
6. Small towns fulfilled the role of go-between between large cities and their rural surroundings and served as an intermediary stage in the urbanization of peasants moving to larger cities.

During this period of scholarship historians arrived at the understanding that small towns form an integral part of the urban system as a whole. They offer keys to the concrete historical development of territories, regions, and countries. They illuminate larger economic changes as well as socio-cultural, demographic, and political processes.[9]

The "methodological revolution" of the 1960s and 70s brought about cardinal shifts in the development of social history, characterized by the overcoming of old dogmas and the significant expansion of its subject, agenda, and research methods. In spite of the call to develop interdisciplinary history, however, this movement has led rather to greater disciplinary differentiation and the emergence of new fields of research. The more traditional disciplines of political, economic, and legal history met such fields as historical anthropology, historical geography, and historical ecology. Many of these hybrid disciplines were born from an alliance with applied sociology: one such example is urban history. At a theoretical level, these disciplinary formations involve a shift from an objective to subjective conception of science, from positivism to hermeneutics, from quantitative to qualitative methods.

These methodological shifts have led to related approaches within distinct national schools of historiography. In Germany we find *Alltagsgeschichte*, or the history of everyday life; micro-history in Italy, France, Austria; local history in England. These trends all share several salient features, as they move from political to social history, from global history to a history of everyday life, from an emphasis on world leaders to ordinary participants of the historical process. More generally, we can say that they move from a conception of history as a whole made up of general and repeating processes to the study of private and unique ones. They differ, however, in their specific object of investigation and source base.

The main subject of *Alltagsgeschichte*, the “history from below,” is the everyday life of common people. Historians track changes in individual lives as well as in the broader community over time. Research on small communities, such as a parish, a village, a town, or a city quarter reveals patterns of “daily occurrence.” Within this movement, there is a trend toward representing the subjective aspect of history, with historians approaching their objects of research—be they people or sources—as co-authors. “Oral history” methods, i.e. interviews and oral stories, offer the opportunity for amateurs to participate in the writing of the history of everyday life.

In Italy historians gathered around the journal *Quaderni Storici* do not focus on macro-processes covering extensive territories, significant periods of time, or broad masses of people. Rather, they enter the field “armed not with a telescope, but a microscope” and consider individual facts, groups of facts, or local events as if under a magnifying glass. Though microhistory generates new knowledge about the individual and the particular, even its supporters admit its limitations. Micro-history does not, by and large, aid in comprehending the larger picture, or promote the synthesis of individual and supra-individual concepts.

The 1980s witnessed a boom in urban history. There were new trends in methodological approaches, as well as geographical, temporal and subject perspectives. In terms of methodology one sees a distinct shift away from analysis of towns through case-studies of individual communities towards thematic studies often looking at a range of towns.

In this period we also see increased attention to city history and urbanization in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Small towns, however, still remained on the scholarly periphery. Thus, Jan de Vries’s seminal 1984 study of European modernization in the early modern period follows demographic trends of cities of more than 10,000 inhabitants.[10] In their valuable study *The Making of Urban Europe* (1985) Paul Hohenberg and Lyn Lees recognize the importance of small towns as a part of a central place system of traditional towns closely identified with regional hinterlands and rural economies, in contrast to the outward-looking international trade networks of major cities.[11]

The Centre for Urban History at Leicester University has played a particularly important role in developing the “new local history” in initiating the complex history of small towns in western Europe. The center’s director Peter Clark edited an important collection on small towns in early modern Europe in 1995.[12] His was the first comparative overview

of European small towns from the fifteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, examining their position in the urban hierarchy, demographic structure, economic trends, relations with the countryside, and political and cultural developments. Those case studies discuss networks in all major European countries, as well as looking at the distinctive world of small towns in the more “peripheral” countries of Scandinavia and central Europe.

One serious obstacle to understanding and comparing European small towns stems from the problem of definition, as there are great variations in the structure and development of small towns as between different parts of Europe, regions and localities.[13]

As approaches to urban history multiply, historians are faced with the question of how to reconcile the study of the particular with the totality of history. What research strategies might correspond to the integrative character of the historical process? Though writing the total history of a society remains an unrealizable goal, in the practice of concrete historical research, it should remain present as a reference point.

In urban history, efforts toward such synthesis can be found in conceptions of the city as an ordered set of individual social positions within the interlacing contexts of formal and informal social groups. Interesting research is also being done into individual life cycles, where the biological cycles of an individual interact with systems of stratification and social processes of the city’s microstructures and the larger society. Thus the daily life of a city community is inextricably connected to macroprocesses in the demographic economic, social, and cultural spheres.

S.G. Checkland’s article “An urban history horoscope,” published in the early of 1980s, summarizes five approaches toward studying urban history.[14] First, one may attempt to comprehend the city as a product and manifestation of a larger system of total interaction, namely society as a whole.

The second approach is thematic: Scholars have discovered that certain urban functions demand special attention because they generate phenomena, both implementational and causal, that give them identity and particular appeal.

Third, there is what might be called the grand processes approach by which certain comprehensive qualitative changes in society are envisaged. The focus is on industrialization and urbanization, developments that must also be assimilated into a general view of the historical process. Such processes are captured by cyclical theory and its alternative—the linear stages theory.

In the fourth approach, the history of a town or city is closely observed and understood to be an organisms of interacting parts with its own form and degree of uniqueness.

Finally, the fifth approach would be to study a family of cities within a single society or group of societies. Their evolution is sufficiently similar to justify treating them as a single category embodying a common experience rooted in geography and history.

All five approaches are relevant to the study of small town history, but to my mind the principle of studying families of cities is most fruitful. The family notion lets us explore a range of cities formed and functioning under shared circumstances. It also creates conditions for comparing structures and performance against a common background.

It is precisely this approach that I used in my monograph devoted to the socioeconomic development of small towns in western Siberia in the second half of the nineteenth century. During this time period these towns come to belong to a particular family of cities, which can then be compared to larger urban centers and small towns in other parts of the country.[15] This approach allowed me to identify general traits and particularities in the development of small and large cities in the west Siberian region, as well as to identify typical traits in the development of small towns across Russia.

To sum up it is worth emphasizing that over the course of the past 150 years, Western European approaches to urban history have come a long way. Scholars have arrived at a point where they no longer consider small towns as stagnant and constant in their essence, but instead treat them as a set of individual life cycles and social positions embedded in demographic, economic, social and cultural macroprocesses. Western theories and methodologies offer much to Russian urban historians, who are now able to critically assess this theoretical experience and choose those methodological approaches that best correspond to their objects of study.

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Notes:

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3. Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2008), 257.

4. Iggers and Wang, *A Global History of Modern Historiography*, 258.

5. Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th – 18th Century*, vol. 1 of *The Structure of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 498, 501.

6. François Bedarida, “The Growth of Urban History in France: Some Methodological Trends,” in *The Study of Urban history: The proceedings of an international round-table conference of the Urban History Group at Gilbert Murray Hall, University of Leicester on 23-26 September 1966*, ed. Harold J. Dyos (London : Arnold, 1976), 55.

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8. L. P. Repina, “*Novaia istoricheskaia nauka*” i sotsial’naia istoriia (Moscow: Izd-vo LKI, 2009), 27.

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12. Peter Clark, ed., *Small Towns in Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

13. Ibid., xvii.

14. S.G. Checkland “An urban history horoscope,” in *The Pursuit of Urban History*, ed. Derek Fraser (London: Edward Arnold, 1983).

15. O. A. Tyapkina, *Malye goroda Zapadnoi Sibiri vo vtoroi polovine XIX veka: sotsial’no-ekonomicheskoe issledovanie* (Novosibirsk: Izd-vo Sova, 2008).

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