

**New Methods to City's Otherness:
Ethical Substance, Relational Metrics and Scale of Sociality**

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Beyond Urbanization

In 1970—forty-three year ago—French philosopher Henri Lefebvre began his book *La révolution urbaine* by making the hypothesis that “Society has been completely urbanized¹. This hypothesis implies a definition: An *urban society* is a society that results from a process of complete urbanization. This urbanization is virtual² today, but will become real in the future” (2010, p. 589 [1970]). During the four following decades, the ‘post-industrial society’ has kept evolving and the urban state of societies—hypothetically ‘completed’—is still renewing the object of the city (Lévy, 2010, p. xiii). The transformation of individuals’ relationship with the city has surely been largely triggered by a series of socio-economic evolutions that have accompanied the urbanization process (Chauvel, 2006). Following the deconstruction of modernity, lifestyles got increasingly diversified resulting today in a larger spectrum of living practices and residential preferences (Thomas & Pattaroni, 2012, p. 112). Through this phenomenon—fostered by an increase of international mobility of capital, goods, people and ideas; the development of new means of telecommunication; novel practices of work and cohabitation; and the substitution of traditional normativity—the fluctuating diversity and proximity of objects, activities, bodies and thoughts reconfigure the virtual city foreseen by Lefebvre.

In this paper, I argue that the diversification of lifestyles as illustrated by spatial practices redefines the virtual city—the various spatial potentialities of the urban phenomenon—by promoting new *scales*, *metrics* and *substances*³. The novel resulting combinations foster an epistemological evolution of the city that asks for new tools and methods to assess the epitomic form of the urban phenomenon. To deal with these changes, I suggest re-investigating the analysis of socio-environmental relationships by studying spaces of sociality as more or less explicitly suggested by George Simmel (2002

¹ Lefebvre specifies that use of the term “urban society” as substitute to “the society that results from industrialization [...] a term that refers to the tendencies, orientations and virtualities, rather than any preordained reality”. (Lefebvre, 2010, p. 590)

² Just like Lévy and Lefebvre, I use the word ‘virtual’ as not equivalent to ‘immateriality’ or ‘simulated’, but I rather use it in the ‘actual/virtual’ dichotomy. (Cf. Lévy, 2003a)

³ In the geography of Lévy and Lussault (2003), space is characterized by three attributes: 1) scale, which defines a relation of size between objects (pp. 284-288); 2) metric, which is the mean by which distance is measured and treated (pp. 607-609); and 3) substance, which is the non-spatial component of spatial configuration (pp. 280-281).

[1903]) and Henri Lefebvre (2001 [1970], 2010[1970]) during the two ‘urban revolutions’ of the Twentieth-century⁴. I pose that the current spatial turn as heralded by critical geographer Jacques Lévy (1999) forms the fertile ground to re-address the role of physical and spatial proxemics in the constitution of the virtual city. To do so, I make use of external disciplinary methods and tools offered by critical moral anthropology and evolutionary moral psychology to conduct a socio-spatial analysis of relational ethical reasoning. The article presented here is derived from a fieldwork conducted in Geneva in the summer of 2013 during which I investigated—through a series of interviews—the spatial and relational practices of an extended social network of young adults. With a specific focus on how individuals engage with social and spatial otherness, this fieldwork forms the first of two. The study will conclude in a comparative analysis on urban relational ethics in Geneva and Singapore. In this research, my aim is to unveil the ethical *substance* of the city as a social option. I use a relational approach to ethics as developed in the current scholarship of moral anthropology and psychology.

The City, Renewing the Spatial Option

Space constitutes today a federating notion within various disciplines in sciences and the humanities. The “spatial turn” heralded by critical social geographers (Lévy, 1999; Soja, 1989) forms today the departing point of a set of interdisciplinary researches that range from the social to the cognitive production of space (Pasqualini, Llobera, & Blanke, 2013). This interdisciplinary focus lies on a current paradigm shift: space is to be recognized as a dimension through which sciences can address together societies and their productions. To do so, social geographers Jacques Lévy and Michel Lussault (2003) have developed the necessary conceptual tools to foster new research fields that hold a strong spatial dimension⁵. The concept of city as a spatial option they advocate—far from the classical

⁴ An important traditional literature in regional sciences has addresses the spatial dimension of these living practices as largely tributary from the strategic articulation of personal aspirations and contextual constrains as individuals define a series of co-contingent conditions within the limits of their cognitive capacities (Alonso, 1977) a tradition usually rejected in contemporary critical geography but that I wish to embrace for this insight. For a rich point of view on spatial economics and the contemporary relevance of its contribution, see (Davezies, 2000, 2003).

⁵ While my research lies at the cross roads of critical political geography, urban anthropology and moral psychology, it is mainly through their axiomatic geography that I approach the geographicity of the social fact; borrowing their definition of space as one of the dimensions of society that corresponds to all the

micro-economical scheme—makes the relationship to distance explicitly ‘proactive’. It is in resume an instantiation of the utopia of the urban model that underlies the role of each individual in the constitution of the built environment (Lévy, 2003b). Following Lévy and Lussault, I argue that the city as an option implies a set of ethological models that have to be reinvestigated in the frame of current social, technic, economical and political transformations occurring across scales of society.

In human geography, the ethical inquiry can be attached to various genealogies (Cf. Proctor & Smith, 1999; Proctor, 1997; Smith, 1998). The principal approaches to flourish in the last forty years have belong to the ‘*justice, right and equity*’⁶ tradition (Gervais-Lambony, 2009; Harvey, 2009 [1973]; Lévy, 1994; Lussault, 2009; Soja, 2010), explicitly following Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* (1999 [1971]). The weakness of these geographies thus relate to the prescriptive stance of this theory on which they sit, and which has been largely criticized and empirically invalidated by inductive researches on ethical reasoning (Cf. Haidt, 2010). As a counterpart, a second genealogy has followed the relational approaches developed in feminist ethics (Gilligan, Ward, Taylor, & Bardige, 1990; Gilligan, 1993; Held, 2006; Tronto, 1993). Mainly concerned with questioning current spatial specificities of globalization, these geographies have produced, on the other hand, insightful inquiries using mostly non-normative relational stances such as questioning the role of distance in care, concern and global policy making (Corbridge, 1998; Cottingham, 2000; Silk, 1998). These scholarships hold closer to a generalizing trend of research among disciplines mostly concerned with the scientific study of ethics and moralities.

Using the epistemological frame the *theory of justification* of French pragmatic sociology (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991), critical moral anthropologies offer new methodological and conceptual insights to the study of the ethical substance of the city. Moral anthropologist Didier Fassin has recently embraced the spatial turn to both global (2010) and urban (2013) scales while using inductive methods concerned with individual reasoning such as discourse analysis. Exploring the ethical reasoning through its political (Fassin, Memmi, & Collectif, 2004; Fassin, 2010, 2012) and economical (Fassin &

relationships establish through distance between various realities and a social object defined by its spatial dimension (p. 325).

⁶ Terminology employed by philosopher Michael Slote (2007) to regroup certain universalist approaches. Slote oppose this tradition to the relational one of the ethics of care, concern and empathy.

Eideliman, 2012) transversals, these anthropologies fail however to fully render the strength of the spatial dimension of their objects as their geographicity remains solely implicitly discussed.

While critical moral anthropology derives from a long tradition of inquiry on social normativity and moral relativism, in the Anglo-Saxon scholarship, moral anthropology stands closer to the evolutionary trend occurring in moral psychology. In this literature, intuition constitutes the leading mechanism in individual ethical reasoning (Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Haidt, 2001, 2010), while moral is mostly driven by long-term survival and biological functioning. In-group/out-group references (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Graham & Haidt, 2010; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Keltner & Haidt, 1999) and relational favoritism (Curry & Dunbar, 2011; Curry, Roberts, & Dunbar, 2013)—which hold strong spatial dimensions—form a second set of methodological and conceptual tools to address ethical reasoning in urban interpersonal relationships.

The strength of a relational approach to the ethical substance of the city is thus twofold. First, it offers an insightful alternative to the traditional Universalist genealogy cultivated until now in urban sciences. It renews our comprehension of classic spatial objects and puts in perspective relationships of inter-spatiality. Second, it opens new fields of inquiry such as the role of distance in the construction of international policies and humanitarian aid, and creates connections to other disciplines, which have been perceived until then as unrelated to urban studies. Second, it permits empirical concordance with extra-disciplinary work found in critical moral anthropology and evolutionary and cognitive moral psychology—inductive methods that have already disproved many Universalist's normative stances—, and foster the production of an harmonious interdisciplinary vocabulary. The relational approach also bridges with the foundations of urban sciences and the works of Simmel and Weber, up to Lefebvre. It thus fallows us to revisit potential relations between these works and contemporary urban phenomena.

Relational Metrics. Measuring the City Through Practices of Sociality

The assessment of urbanites' relational ethics through sociality practices is not so far off from one of George Simmel's first inquiries in *Metropolis and the Mental Life* in which he described the constituting role of the socio-constructed environment—or model of

urbanity—in individual relational ethics (2002 [1903]). In this work, Simmel makes of interpersonal interactions the central phenomenon that defines urbanity as an individual/societal state fostered by the city; a stance that has shaped Wirth (1938, p. 11) view's in laying out the foundations of contemporary urban sciences. The assessment of sociality practices as specific entry point to the city has in fact been largely shared by a first generation of urban scientists (Park & Burgess, 1984 [1925]; Weber, 1978 [1922]), but the enterprise faded as the development of urbanism demanded a more pragmatic, not to say functional, focus.

For a long time discontinued, the analysis of the tension between the ethics of sociality practices and the urban form was taken over by philosopher Henri Lefebvre in a call made to explore the social relationships of economical order in defining the urban society (2010 [1970]). As noted by Lévy (2010) “Lefebvre admitted that the urban link, that is the kind of social interaction cities generate is, from an economic or political point of view, a weak link. Nevertheless, this weak link is presented as a key force in the shaping of societies. Architects and political utopians have found difficult to reconcile this apparent antinomy. [...] Urban links are weak just as ‘weak interactions’ in physics are weak: less dramatic, but more decisive” (pp. xvii-xviii)⁷.

Sociality practices have formed an important focus of the urban inquiry at two decisive turns: the domination of the urban on the rural as illustrated by Simmel; and the extension of the industrial society to the Western world as described by Lefebvre. Now that the urban phenomenon extends to the World, the relational ethics described by sociality practices re-emerge as a decisive metric to measure the formation and transformation of the global urban space.

Sociality Scale. Intermediary entry point.

While Lefebvre advocated for the analysis of social relationships of economical order, I find more relevant today to question the process and dynamics of broader kinds of sociality practices that engage more specifically with relational ethics. The study of friendship

⁷ A good example of an analysis on the relation between relational ethics, (economic) social relationships, economic model of production, the political context and the urban form can be found in Lefebvre's reading of rural landscape evolution in Tuscany (2001 [1970]).

relations is a relatively new field in social geography, which conceptualization allows to enter the substance of ethics and the metrics of social relationships from a meso-scale analysis deeply embedded in the spatial practices of contemporary social structures (Bunel, Yea, Peake, Skelton, & Smith, 2011). Kinship and organizational processes have formed the backbone of a long research tradition in social sciences, however it is only in the past few years that the affective role of non-familial and functional bounds has emerged as an object of study (Coakley, 2002; Crow, 1994; Dowler, 2001; Skelton, 2000; Thrift, 2005). By reconfiguring the ways and the means by which we interact with others, the emergence of immaterial spaces of communication and socialization such as Facebook and Google+ deeply modify practices of sociality (Beaude, 2012; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). The role and the status of the city—and the spaces comprised in it—cannot remain unchanged as the practices of telecommunication—as a mode to manage distance—directly influence practices of mobility and co-presence, which sums up the city as a spatial option (Lévy, 2003b)⁸.

Spaces of sociality such as friendship spaces, but also families or working groups, imply a geographicity of the social bound that was not discussed by Lefebvre in his analysis of social relationships. They offer moreover a specific median entry point to the urban spatiality that allows the articulation of the ethnographic induction of moral anthropology to the empirical deductivism of geography. Spaces of sociality extend beyond the traditional dialectic of material/ immaterial, and local/global. They offer insights on the new spatial paradigm of the multitude, transcalar spaces and the central role played by ‘weak links’ in the urban phenomenon.

The City of Individuals: The Presence of Others

If the city is made of individuals, and made by individuals, its image—individual’s relationship to it—is largely related to the relationship with other individuals. While works in urban sciences often tend to focus on the ‘markers’ instead of the ‘makers’, I wish to bring the role of the former forward as already advocated by Simmel, Lefebvre and Lévy.

⁸ Jacques Lévy identifies three modes to manage distance in: 1) copresence; 2) mobility; and 3) telecommunication. (Lévy & Lussault, 2003). For Lévy (2010), the three modes are in “co-opetition, that is to say a compound of co-operation + competition”, while “the city is a way of generating a whole society thanks to the principle of co-presence” (pp. xviii-xix).

The three have in that sense greatly discussed the figure of *the other* in individuals' relationship with the city. From the 'stranger' in Simmel's discussion of the urbanite, to 'otherness' in Lévy's theory of publicity of space, the figure of *the other* is not coincidentally central to numerous normative treaties of ethics (Jankélévitch, 1989; Jonas, 1998; Levinas, 2006). This central position held by 'otherness' in urban theory surely points out to the necessary linkage to establish between the city as a spatial phenomenon and relational ethics, a study mostly concerned with the ghostly presence of others in individual reasoning. The new ethical substance to the city can only be assessed however through a complementary epistemological and methodological repositioning. The metric of practices of sociality, which offers to re-investigate the constituting role of individuals in the making of the city; and the scale of friendship spaces, which allows to grasp both the metric and the substance in relation to spatial practices and the geographicity of the urban phenomenon; promote the use of necessary tools that can be derived from inductive approaches to ethics such as critical moral anthropology, and evolutionary and cognitive moral psychology.

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