

Communities and Urban Life:

In Conversation with Talja Blokland



Romit Chowdhury

Professor Talja Blokland is Chair of Urban and Regional Sociology at Humboldt-University in Berlin. She studied sociology at the Erasmus University Rotterdam and the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, The Netherlands, receiving her Ph.D. from the latter institution. Her first book – *Urban Bonds* – published by Polity Press in 2003 is an ethnographic examination of the relationship between neighbourhood ties and experiences of community in cities. After her Ph.D., Talja was awarded a fellowship from the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, which enabled her visiting scholar positions at Yale University and University of Manchester. This laid the foundation of her later collaboration with Mike Savage, with whom she published the edited volume *Networked Urbanism* (Ashgate 2008), a plea for spatialising social networks and connecting the sociology of inequality through forms of capital and networks (back) to urban studies. Subsequently, she was senior researcher and program director at the OTB Institute for Urban, Housing and Mobility Studies at the Delft University of Technology in The Netherlands and a Gradus Hendriks professor in community development at Erasmus University Rotterdam, a period in which she was actively engaged in more local political and policy discussions on urban cohesion and integration, up to her move to Berlin in 2009. Talja's published work has engaged centrally with social and relational theory and urban sociology. The concern with social inequalities – especially as they relate to place-making, neighbourhood cohesion, and urban change – binds her wide-ranging scholarship as a sociologist, reflected recently in a book she edited with some of her students, *Creating the Unequal City*

(Ashgate 2016). Her latest book, *Community as Urban Practice* (Polity 2017) sets out to conceptually enrich the idea of community, which though frequently invoked in urban studies, often remains inadequately theorised. She is the newly elected President Research Committee RC21 Urban and Regional Development of the International Sociological Association.

Romit Chowdhury (RC): Thank you very much, Talja, for sparing time for this interview. I thought we could begin on a somewhat personal vein. What are some of your favourite cities to live in? What about them attracts you?

Talja Blokland (TB): What we consider to be our favourite cities has so much to do with our personal biographies, our sense of what is good in life. Some people might prefer the quietness of the country, to hear the sound of birdsong. I like pace and social heterogeneity, I like to make sense of complexities. Sociologically, however, that doesn't make much sense because complexity is not always observable on the surface. I have lived in various cities: in New York, New Haven, Rotterdam, Manchester, Amsterdam. Now I live in Berlin. If I had to pick one city from a personal perspective, I would say Berlin. It has an excellent mixture of green enclaves, quiet spaces, a lively energy, and an excellent public transport system. So maybe that is the answer. I love Sao Paolo, but I would not want to be stuck in traffic for two hours every day. I like the fact that in Berlin the logistics work, which is especially important for me raising 3 children as a single parent.

RC: What drew you to cities intellectually, as a sociologist?

TB: I work in Germany now. And here there is a strict understanding that there is urban sociology and other sub-fields such as family sociology; an understanding that was new to me. I began studying cities really out of my strong interest in social inequality. I understand that to be the main concern of Sociology. The connection between the spatial expression of inequalities and the social practices of everyday life is most visible in cities. That's why I became an urban sociologist. Part of it was also accidental, however. My first study was *Urban Bonds* in 2003 and it grew out of my Ph.D. dissertation. There my concern wasn't so much cities but the relationship between community and place. To study that connection I had to ask how important place is for communities and what place does to our sense of community. That fascination itself had to do with the political climate of Rotterdam at the time, where I was living. There was a strong attempt from the local government there to combat social disadvantage by enhancing social cohesion. The idea was that if people would get together more, interact more, create self-help groups, they would pull each other up. Later this became standard neoliberal thinking in Great Britain and parts of the U.S., maybe even in some of the social policies developed in Brazil. The assumption was that community cohesion at the neighborhood level needed to be increased. I wasn't sure that that is what was happening on the ground.

RC: This is one of the arguments which you put forward in your new book *Community as Urban Practice* that it is not at all necessary that the more we get to know one another the more we begin to care.

TB: Yes, absolutely. Take an example like the film 'The War of the Roses': the divorcing couple knows each other well but in some circumstances the more you know someone you may actually grow to dislike them! Mario Small beautifully demonstrates in his new book *Someone to Talk to* that confiding in others, in contrast to common sense, does not increase simply by knowing people better. This later book is a fol-

low up to *Urban Bonds*. One of the things that was unsatisfactory in my earlier thinking was that I stuck to an understanding of urban infrastructure or urban fabric as something that is knitted in networks. I was thinking of the city as networked urbanism, as I did with the volume I co-edited with Mike Savage in 2008. I later felt that I was missing something there about our sense of belonging, but was also not happy with what others had written about belonging in recent years. Belonging doesn't always depend on who we know and how well we know them; it can also be that this place is familiar to me. Some of what I am saying is similar to what is being discussed as 'conviviality', even though I did not want to put it in those terms. There are brief encounters that we have in cities, or people we regularly see on the streets. Even though we may not talk to them, we may not get to know them, they still create a sense that this is my city, because it is the same person asking for money on the roadside corner, the same baker, or the same person at a subway station. This creates a sense of community, gives regularity to our interactions in the city. I call that public familiarity, vaguely connected to Claude Fisher's use of it, who I think coined the term. That's what the new book tries to do.

RC: I want to follow up on what you said about Sociology's abiding concern with social inequalities. What do you think a focus on cities and urbanisation does to the understanding of social inequalities?

TB: I don't think it always does contribute. There is a genre of writing on cities that does not concern itself very much with urban inequality. For instance, works which draw on visuality and soundscapes, or the figure of the urban flaneur, or a Simmelian understanding of urban life, all of which is legitimately urban sociology, but do not focus on social inequality. But one thing a focus on the urban does is that it asks: Is it about place or is it about social position? When Bourdieu writes about social positioning with respect to habitats and habitus, there is a sense that your social position is related to where you are in place. There is a lot to be said about what spatial arrangements do to social inequality. I mean inter-inequalities as well

as intra-inequalities, or in other words, inequalities within cities and inequalities between cities, or differences in the same social group located in different cities in a globalised context.

RC: If we may segue here into your role as a teacher. I am thinking of your co-authored textbook *Urban Theory: A Critical Introduction to Power, Cities and Urbanism in the 21st Century* (2014). Could you reflect on what went into the composition of this textbook, what industry norms you might have had to negotiate, as well as the pedagogical demands of producing an urban studies textbook?

TB: The initiative to write this textbook came from the political scientist and urban scholar Alan Harding who is the co-author of the book. What we wanted to do was to write a textbook that wasn't just sociologically oriented or one that had a strong Political Science slant, but was a thoroughly integrated textbook that was proper to urban studies. What goes into such a task is often endurance; you have to write on things which are sometimes self-evident, because you have been in the field for a while. So you are not developing many new ideas. I contributed to this because in all my years teaching urban theory I did not find a textbook that could fulfill my needs. There are lots of good readers, which have excerpts from important works in urban studies. But I felt the need for a textbook that looks explicitly at the connection between urbanism and inequality; that provided the primary basis for the book.

RC: I am glad that you brought up the question of disciplinary orientation. A question that has exercised me through my time as a doctoral student is: Are there any major methodological and/or conceptual differences between geographical and sociological approaches to cities? Of course, urban studies is a thoroughly interdisciplinary field, but disciplinary divides remain firmly entrenched in academia.

TB: There is a beautiful word in German. 'Yes' is 'ja' in German and 'no' is 'nein'. Then there is 'jein', which is 'yes and no'. I think there is a development

in critical urban studies that takes a lot from intersectional theory, postcolonial theory, gender theory, that is no longer just Sociology or Geography but has developed into a new form of urban studies. But I do think that the difference in the initial training that these disciplines offer means that sociologists and geographers approach research questions in different ways. I have not been trained in urban sociology; I became an urban sociologist over time. During my doctoral years I studied with people like Abram de Swaan and Kees Schuty, Dutch scholars influenced very much by Elias, Bourdieu and Peirce and Dewey, and Charles Tilly, so I have been trained to think relationally. In researching relations of inequality in space and place, geographers tend to start from the city as spatial formation itself. Some people have said to me, 'You don't study cities, you study things that happen in cities'. And I think to some extent that might be true. So to answer your question, I would say that no there is no difference in the sense that Geography and Sociology share a new form of urban studies that has emerged through critical theories. But there is a difference, which becomes clear when one works in interdisciplinary contexts – for instance in the editorial board meetings of the journal *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* – where geographers and sociologists have talked. There is also a difference in the question of methods. I have to choose my words carefully here. Let's say that those trained in especially statistical sociological methods tend to be slightly more concerned with the empirical basis of their works and there geographers might be more relaxed.

RC: I am asking this question because I recently taught an undergraduate module on urban sociology and this concern with disciplinary approaches came up repeatedly. I found myself relying on very textbook answers, that sociology has traditionally focused on 'communities', whereas for geographers 'space' has been foundational. But even though I offered this as a distinguishing factor, I wasn't entirely convinced by it myself.

TB: If you take the Los Angeles school in urban

studies, for example, which to my understanding is a very clearly geographical approach to explaining regional difference. Sociology, on the other hand, deals with the urban fabric as it is produced through sociality. The knitted fabric of the city is the network of ties and interactions through which people produce 'cityness', as Abdoumalig Simone, another scholar who inspires me, would say. Then there is the idea of weaving. The fabric exists, the threads of the cloth are touching but are not knitted together. And this is the domain of daily encounters and exchanges. This type of 'cityness' I don't think has been of much interest in traditional Geography. Rather it's a domain of sociological research on cities that moves closer to urban anthropology and farther away from Geography.

RC: This is perhaps a good moment to move closer to the work which you have done on cities. It seems to me that the idea of community has been central to much of your scholarship. What are some of the major intellectual traditions which you have both drawn on and reshaped as you have addressed the community question in urban studies?

TB: I see myself as a sociologist currently working on cities. But I can also imagine myself working more on social theory. My main interest as a master's student was in sociological theory. I wrote my master's thesis on whether we can use the theories of Marx, Weber and Durkheim to understand cohesion in contemporary societies. So I have very much been influenced by dead white old men! Then in the 1990s, when I was in the Amsterdam School of Social Science Research, we had two visiting scholars there. One was the political anthropologist James Scott and the other was Charles Tilly, a historical sociologist. Charles Tilly hosted me as a visiting graduate student at the New School and at Columbia University because he was moving schools. He has been a major influence on me. And this may not always be obvious in my work, in terms of who I cite, but my way of thinking about relationality, of not looking at people with intentions and motives as if they are, as Tilly would say, 'self-propelling essences' has been deeply influenced by his scholarship. The task of Sociology is not only to un-

derstand why individuals behave in certain ways, nor is it only about macro processes, but it is really about how relations produce outcomes. This understanding of Sociology is very basic for me, it is what has impacted me the most. Then, I have also been heavily influenced by Phillip Abrahams, also a historical sociologist. Early on in my Ph.D., something he said in one little piece he wrote on neighbours, I knew to be true, but could never find the words! It was such an eye opener for me. He says that the only thing that separates neighbors from friends, families or any other words that we use to describe such relations is that neighbours live close by. We tend to say 'friends, family, and neighbours' but it makes no sense sociologically. This I found fascinating. The other major figure has been James Scott. He has influenced me in some personal ways, in styles of doing academia, and through his thinking on state institutions and 'weapons of the weak'. This isn't a theme that I work on explicitly but it influences me deeply. *Seeing like a State* is a book that I regularly use in my teaching and is also important in a new line of research on urban citizenship and bureaucratic versus everyday logics, or city and cityness, that I am developing at the moment with colleagues from Sao Paulo. These are people who have heavily impacted me and there you see they are not your standard urban sociologists.

RC: I am struck by the phrase which you just used, 'styles of doing academia'. If I may follow up on that: What are some of these styles that you find worthy of emulation, and conversely what ways of doing academia give you cause for concern?

TB: When I took a class with Charles Tilly at Columbia on durable inequalities, we had to write statements on everything that we read for the class. And there was some great literature which we read for his course. Every week that we handed in these statements, he would return them with hand-written comments. I had never been in an educational context where this was the practice and I was greatly impressed by it. When I once mentioned this to Charles Tilly he said 'I don't want your compliments. But when you are in my position, I hope you will do the same'. Now being

a full professor this is something that I try to do, to not make students write things and just leave it at that, to really seek out a conversation with them. It is hardly possible with the teaching load at Humboldt, but I try. That way of supervising, of supporting students is something I learnt from Charles Tilly. From James Scott I learnt that thinking and developing ideas need informality. An informal sphere in the department in terms of meetings, parties, getting dinner together, this sort of sociability creates conversations which are very important for intellectual work. One idea which I literally stole from Charles Tilly is this 'Think and Drink' which I introduced here at our Georg Simmel Center for Metropolitan Studies at Humboldt. These are relatively informal talks where invited international scholars present their work in progress and we think and drink over it. This was new here because the German academic environment does not have this kind of informal space. For students, to have this opportunity to speak informally to just anyone can be very rewarding. So at its heart it is about a commitment to teaching, to taking students seriously. And it also touches the idea that there is no clear distinction between academia and life.

RC: Hearing you speak, it seems to me that sociability is important for you not only with respect to the community question but also in academic practice itself. If we could return to the theme of community in urban societies, I would like to ask what your impressions are of this popular notion that loneliness is increasing in cities. We routinely encounter articles in the media about loneliness being a major health hazard, about new initiatives like paying for cuddles from strangers. As a sociologist who has written extensively on urban bonds, what are your thoughts on loneliness and solitude in cities?

TB: My first reaction is to ask, is loneliness really increasing? I would like to see some strong empirical evidence of that claim and that cities are the cause of this loneliness. In the 1920s there were intense discussions in the media on deviance and criminal behaviour and that cities were the cause because the urban way of life was making communities disappear. Even then there

was a lot of commentary on increasing loneliness. I very much doubt that contemporary cities cause more loneliness. However, I don't doubt that very many standard forms of connectedness between people have been changing and new forms of connecting with others are not accessible to everyone in the same way. There are structural reasons for this, even if it is difficult to talk about this in global terms because of regional differences. The other part of that question is that you have to think very carefully about what loneliness and solitude really mean. Do we measure it by the number of social ties a person has? People can also feel tied down by commitments and ties that they cannot escape. I would want to look at the question through these sorts of concerns. Disappearance of strong knitted communities does not necessarily create loneliness, even though in the media it is often presented in this way. I also think that issues of loneliness need to be connected to material capabilities of people. One of the things that the media does is to suggest a mythology that people used to be nicer to one another in some earlier time. In my book *Urban Bonds* I talk about how in The Netherlands, in old working-class communities, just after the Second World War, people who did not have showers in their homes would go to their neighbours to take showers. And this was seen as 'Oh everyone cared for each other, there was so much solidarity between people'. But it was also the lack of material resources that created these dependencies.

RC: Much of your research uses ethnographic tools. Could you tell us a bit about the use of qualitative methods to produce knowledge about cities?

TB: I must say in response that how I work is I begin with a research question and that defines the methods I use. Even though a lot of my work is qualitative or even ethnographic, that was determined by what I was asking. I actually come from a quantitative tradition. For my master's degree I worked with statistical methods mainly. Since I am very much interested in mechanisms and processes, my concerns usually start where a lot of quantitative-oriented research stops. Quantitative research can only tell you what is, and at best

suggest, but never tell why it is, by which I mean 'how something comes about'. This forces me to work more qualitatively. Statistics can tell you that gender influences the way in which we move in public space – I know this is something that interests you – or that masculinity influences the labor market. But how does that happen? That question brings me to qualitative methods. One of my later projects is *Creating the Unequal City* (Ashgate 2016), which I put together with some of my students; they all wrote chapters and we edited it together. It deals with resourcefulness in cities and how people access these resources in the context of Berlin. These are all very qualitative studies, because from the statistics we already knew that different people access urban resources differently. How that happens is what we set out to study and that needed qualitative methods. So no, I don't think that cities necessarily need to be studied ethnographically, but I do think that ethnography and qualitative methods are better able to grasp the ways in which correlations occur in cities.

RC: It's great that you brought up the volume, because I did want to ask you about collaborative research as it relates to the urban field. Is there something about urban processes that demands that we study these collaboratively? What has collaboration meant to you in your career?

TB: I need to say three things – about the International Sociological Association network, about comparative urbanism, and about shared scholarship between senior and junior scholars. I think it is most necessary if you write about city and cityness to communicate beyond the specific case study. For urbanists it is even more crucial, I think. In RC21 – which is one of the bigger networks in ISA – there is a very strong idea within the community that through direct dialogue across regions, our understanding of cities will evolve. Within our own academic circles we have our own doxa. We only get out of that doxa when the stranger, in the Simmelian sense, comes in and says 'Alright, that's all very well, but I see things very differently from how you are seeing'. This is not to say that what we have seen is not right, but to bring at-

tention to positionality. For this, international networks are very important. The second part of my response draws on what people like Jennifer Robinson have been writing about comparative approaches to urbanism. You don't have to compare cities all the time. A lot of junior scholars worry about this, it makes them think that they have to do two cases. But in Sociology we inevitably do comparison, it does not always have to be comparison of places. The idea of a 'comparative gesture' is important because it means that we can only see what we take for granted when someone else from another position points out our assumptions. One of my graduate students, he is from Ghana, we had been talking about neighborhood infrastructures in Berlin. After a while he said that neighbors mean something very different if you don't know that the fire brigade is going to come when you call them. We had been so much in our small village, global north kind of thinking that we had not thought about how little our conversation about states, urban infrastructure, and safety, matter elsewhere, in the biggest parts of the world. The globalisation of social sciences brings something very valuable to our understanding of the social. That is another reason why I feel collaboration is so important across global north-south boundaries. The third part of my response has to do with junior and senior colleagues collaborating on research. There was a time when professors had research assistants who were not seen as collaborators. Giving junior scholars due visibility is not only important but I feel that if it is not done then it is just plain wrong. The dream of a global sociology will not be achieved until we think about fair distribution of resources and acknowledgment.

RC: I would like to conclude our interaction by returning to the personal. You have not only researched different regions in the world, but also worked in a range of academic contexts: The Netherlands, the U.K., the U.S., and now Germany. What would you say are the differences and commonalities between these various academic milieus?

TB: Let me answer that by pointing to what I learnt in each of these places. What I learnt in The

Netherlands, when I was at the Technical University of Delft, had to do with the fact that so much of our research depended on state finances and sponsorship from non-profit organisations. There I learnt that there is a way of doing applied research that need not be flat. A lot of people who do critical urban studies with a capital 'C' are often dismissive of applied research. In The Netherlands I learnt that this difference between applied and theoretical research is not necessary, that it is possible to do good applied research, even critical applied research, though this is not always done. I learnt that being pragmatic and goal-oriented in designing research projects can produce outputs which matter. And that it is so important to do applied work to convince people who were not keen to accept your interpretation for political reasons. In Britain, in contrast to The Netherlands, the University of Manchester had a great system of collaborative teaching. There was a lot of talk about what you are teaching in class and how; there was a friendly peer-visiting system where you attended each other's classes and no one was afraid. I didn't experience any competition between lecturers. I learnt how to teach there. Also, they had a very systematic way of grading student papers which I found very useful. In the U.S. I learnt from professors who created a sort of intellectual environment that was very new to me, a kind of setting that provided stimulation for intellectual work. Graduate seminars were often followed by food and drinks where everyone got to know one another, got to connect with one another. This was totally new to me. This is something I have tried to create wher-

ever I have gone. In Germany, in the public university system, especially full professors cannot buy themselves out of teaching easily at all. Compared to other European education systems, it is very difficult to get a tenured position in Germany because you cannot get tenure, you have to apply for an existing tenured position and there are very few of such positions. If you get one of these positions, that allows you a great deal of intellectual freedom. There is an absence of the pressure to publish for full professors. That urban theory textbook and a book like *Community as Urban Practice*, these sorts of publications would not have gotten me enough points in the Dutch, British or American evaluation systems. I don't think I would have written a textbook if I was in a situation where I was dependent on such a system of assessing output. In that sense, in Germany there is still an awareness of what sociology is as an intellectual project, which other places might have forgotten – and I guess I am allowed to say this because I am not German!

RC: Talja, I know Charles Tilly told you that he is not interested in receiving compliments and that this is something that you agree with. But I do want to conclude our conversation by saying that I learnt a lot about how to do the work of theory as a sociologist from your book *Community as Urban Practice*.

TB: Thank you, that is good to hear!

RC: Thank you for speaking with me!

Romit Chowdhury recently completed his Ph.D. at the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore. He works in the fields of Urban Sociology and Masculinity Studies. He has written on masculinities in the contexts of men's rights movements, feminist methodology, caregiving, urban sociability, and sexual violence in India. A volume he has co-edited – *Men and Feminism in India* – was published by Routledge in March 2018..
