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## *The City is alive - still!*

Comments on Bisserka Gaydarska

It is most commendable that Bisserka Gaydarska addresses a controversial and frequently discussed theme of great importance to the interdisciplinary debate on “what is a city?” Gaydarska is concerned with this issue from an archaeological perspective, and more particularly about how do we archaeologically recognize urban settlement in a global perspective without losing the regional and local variations in time and space?” These questions are pivotal to overarching questions about how urban communities have come to an existence, and how they have evolved from the very beginning until today’s urban metropolis.

Gaydarska’s approach is fresh and provocative, as she critically questions whether the terms “city” and ”urban” has any relevance anymore an analytical tools in order to define, and thus classify non-rural settlement structures as a “city” , “urban”, or not. According to Gaydarska they do not. This is due to the fact that the terms ”urban” and “city” have become so ”hollowed” by clarity and significance that they no longer act as definitional terms. Furthermore, they encompasses criteria which exclude the necessary degree of attention to “urban variations” in time and space/place. According to Gaydarskaya, the way these terms are applied in archaeological research as a classificatory tool, local or regional urban or urban-like settlement structures are in danger of being excluded from being recognized as a variant of an urban settlement structure or a city. Gaydarska highlights (proof/p 2) what she perceives as the main complications of this unsatisfactory definition practice in four statements: 1) ” 'Urban' has become an analytical construct without any serious theoretical challenge”, 2) “ 'urban' as a global concept has a limited

local relevance, 3) “we have failed to differentiate and explain the particularities that characterize the pioneering settlement forms that modern scholars call 'urban' ” and finally 4) “The employment of large coarse-grain data-sets is seriously under- theorized and much of the resulting patterning could be spurious.” From this Gaydarska conducts a simple deconstruction of the discourse that, according to her, has led to the definition practice within urban archaeology she is critical of. Based on this, she i.e. concludes that 1) the term “city” is no longer of analytical use due to the fact that there are criteria “wrapped up” in the term with modern connotations and 2) there is absolutely no agreement on what this term could convey in urban archaeological research practice. Her final statement is, that the aspirations for comparability through time and space “...has led to the adoption of a single word – “urban” or “city”- to convey the complexity of this form of occupation at the expense of more intimate and direct names, known in ethnographic and written sources” (proof/p 9). Gaydarska convincingly illustrates and argues for these important findings.

I do appreciate Gaydarska’s brave attempt to deconstruct the discourse in question and the practicing of these terms in on-going urban archaeological research. But the fact that the article does not end up in any clear recommendations or alternatives for future research practice, neither theoretically nor methodologically, is a severe shortage in Gaydarska’s article. At proof/p 7 she states that “...In my opinion, academic discourse around critical points is the most constructive way to move the debate forward and create alternative understandings...”. In my opinion all academic critical analysis of present practices should be followed by at least an attempt to rephrase the practice and thus create new possible trajectories, whether theoretical or methodological for future research. I cannot see that such attempts are clearly expressed in the article. Furthermore, the article in my opinion turns out open doors and leaves them open: Firstly, there is nothing new in stating the already well known fact that the terms “city” and “urban” are too broadly formulated to act as effective definitional tools because of the need for a set of criteria to encompass pre- and proto-urban settlement variations that have existed across a long time historical and an over-regional and global perspective. The overarching question of what constitutes a “town” or a “city” and relevant criteria to define and describe various types of organized and densely populated places has been discussed many times in recent literature (cfr. Ortman et al. 2014, Smith, M. 2014, Smith M.E. 2013, Monnet 2002, etc.). These

contributions present arguments, assessments and considerations crucial to the topic that is the focus of her article.

Gaydarska's brief reference to the long-standing, on-going Scandinavian discussion on what is a town? and what are the criteria of an urban settlement? is referred to with an all too shallow insight into a relevant but far more complex and nuanced discourse than presented in the article (proof/p 5-6). This Scandinavian discussion encompasses in fact points of view and arguments that are close to the essence of Gaydarska's critical analysis (cf., Christophersen 1991, Gansum 2009, Andersson 2009, Holt 2009), This discussion could easily come to the same conclusion as Gaydarska, but this has been forfeited due to the fact that the Scandinavian discussion has never shown any ambitions at all of understanding urban development in a global perspective (cf. Christophersen 2015:109f).

Gaydarska's suggestion of using the original local names is of great interest. The author returns to this topic several times in the article in different contexts, but without any satisfactory discussion. In my opinion the suggestion raises some intriguing and interesting methodological questions about the use of terminology, and not solely about how terms and definitions operate and affect the aims and frames of research practices. Nothing is really achieved by replacing one word with another, as long as the past phenomenon of "town" and/or "city is still only a fragmentarily described and comprehended cultural category. As Dagfinn Skre correctly emphasizes, "when past categories and practices are too uncertain it may be better for scholars to agree on purely formal terminology" (Skre 2012:2). Gaydarska's reasoning about the use of local terminology raises, however, an interesting subject for discussion about what definitions are needed. The inevitable fact is that definitions, howsoever constructed, exclude respectively include the utilizing of relevant sources and data, and phenomenon of relevance and interest can be unintended hidden or marginalized. The use of local names on particular settlement structures is not simply a question of "replacing one word with another": basically it is about utilizing new categories of source material, which call upon multidisciplinary cooperation. This can, indeed, nourish new thoughts and reflections and thus bring the discussion further in new directions. But it certainly will not help remove the challenges of , "excluding terms" or "narrow definitions". On the contrary, it may add, as the Scandinavian discussion about the

old Norse term “kaupang” (trading place, emporia) has done, further questions and definitional possibilities to the overarching question “what is a town”? Which is good, but it has its methodological and empirical consequences, which I would have appreciated further reflection upon.

Secondly, Gaydarska calls for a more consistent and better grounded theoretical debate that can override the (pragmatically grounded) use of the “pick and mix” and the “check-list” approach in defining what settlement structures are cities or urban, or not within archaeology. This is, indeed, a relevant critique, but I find, to my surprise, very few attempts in the article to create a theoretical approach aiming at reaching beyond the author’s own provocative reference to this practice as “dressed up as a social evolution”. In that case, why so? I am likewise surprised, considering Gaydarska’s strong criticism of the lack of theoretical and methodological debate, that she has no references to some of the most influential urban theorists e.g., Georg Simmel, Louis Wirth, Claude Fischer and Herbert J. Gans, that all deal with essential problems within the field of urban theory. Thus, most of the article stands out as a collection of examples that aim to illustrate and underpin her initial statements in the four points on p 2. These statements are, indeed, interesting and thought provoking in themselves, but I would appreciate the opportunity to learn more about Gaydarska’s own theoretical points of departure, in order to better assess the theoretical framework for the deconstruction work she carries out but fails to refer to.

Gaydarska’s article addresses a very important issue regarding how settlement structures are being classified in such a way that local and regional variations of “cities” or “urban settlements” are reduced, or worse, excluded from the discussion of urban development in time and space, and thus are not capable of acting as important information in the overarching discussion of global urban development, from the past to the present day’s modern urban settlement phenomenon. This is an important point made by Gaydarska. Having said that, I call for a discussion of alternative ways of defining a city and “urban” settlement structures that cover local and regional variations of non-rural settlements in time and place, and a clarification of what theoretical and methodological approach the author aims at when she states that “we also need a much-improved theoretical and methodological basis for understanding and interpreting settlement differences in size,

permanence, durability and monumentality” (proof/p 9). Particularly, I would like Gaydarska to have elaborated more on her interesting suggestion of replacing the global terms “city” and “urban” with known local/regional original terms (when possible). This discussion will influence on how to methodologically approach the global phenomenon of “urbanization” on a local and regional level without being trapped in neo-evolutionism and barren classifications of “urban-like settlement structures” through time and space.

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