The struggle to belong
Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.

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Patterns and pathways of global urbanization in Mexico City, Kolkata and Paris: Steps toward comparative analysis

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The process of urbanization has changed fundamentally in recent years: Existing urban forms are dissolving, and polymorphous urban regions are taking shape. Extremely heterogeneous in structure, they include old city centers as well as once peripheral areas. In this process, new urban configurations are constantly evolving. Therefore, it is c
rucial to analyze not only urban forms, but to focus on the urbanization processes, that are shaping today's urban areas. As a result of global urbanization, urban areas are not becoming more homogeneous, as many scholars are postulating. On the contrary: differences between urban spaces are increasing. A great variety of urban cultures are developing, resulting in different models of urbanization. It is decisive to understand their origins, their patterns and pathways of development, and their possible impacts, in order to detect and explore the specific urban potentials that they contain.

This contribution aims at outlining some elements of a possible framework for the comparative analysis of urbanization processes. The problem faced today is that cities no longer constitute units that can be delimited; they are highly dynamic, multifaceted, and complex. A dual approach is required in order to grasp these factors: On the one hand, a "horizontal", synchronical analysis of the patterns of urbanization is needed. It starts from the current situation of the territory, determines the expansion and interweaving of urban regions, and reveals variations in the processes of urbanization. On the base of the horizontal analysis, a "vertical", historical analysis of the pathways of urbanization should follow. It descends into the past to identify the decisive moments that have inscribed themselves into the terrain and the collective memory. Subsequently, the analysis must ascend again in order to attempt to reconstruct the main lines of development and the most important fields of conflict. This analysis does not simply aim at reconstructing the history of a city, but wants to detect the ways in which history remains present in the contemporary situation and influences the future trajectory.

The paper presents first results of a research project on the comparative analysis of urbanization processes in Mexico City, Paris and Kolkata. The main focus will be on three areas located "outside" the core cities and the respective municipalities: Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl in Mexico City is an informal settlement built in the 1960ies and constantly developed and consolidated since then. The Banlieue Nord in Paris is marked by the mass production of social housing in the 1960ies and suffering a considerable downgrading. Howrah in Kolkata is an old industrial suburb turning into a slum in the last decades. All three examples can be understood as specific forms of suburbanization, evolving since decades, and following their own trajectories and logic of development. The aim of the presentation is to discuss further possible steps towards a comparative analysis of urbanization processes.