

# Radikalisierende **Räume**

## Gesprächsreihe “Radikalisierung und Raum “

Prof. Dr. George Galster von der Wayne State University Detroit ist einer der weltweit führenden Experten zu Kontexteffekten und Autor unzähliger Publikationen. Es geht ihm vor allem um die Erklärung, wie der Raum einen Effekt auf die Lebenschancen von Menschen hat. Das Gespräch wurde auf Englisch geführt.

Moderation: Armin Küchler

## Transkript zum Gespräch mit Prof. Dr. George Galster über Kontexteffekte

Herzlich Willkommen zur Gesprächsreihe Radikalisierung und Raum. Mein Name ist Armin Kuchler. Ich bin wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter an der Fachhochschule Münster und Promovierender an der Universität Bielefeld. Im Projekt Radikalisierende Räume bin ich zuständig für den quantitativen Methodenteil. Heute sind wir im Gespräch mit dem emeritierten Professor George Galster von der Wayne State University in Detroit. Als kleine Spoilerwarnung vorweg: Heute wird es nicht um Radikalisierungsanfälligkeit gehen, sondern um Nachbarschafts- und Kontexteffekte.

**Armin Kuchler:** I'm very honored to have a truly distinguished expert here today, George Galster. George you are an emeritus Clarence Hillberry Professor of Urban Affairs and a distinguished Professor at Wayne State University. You earned your Ph.D. in economics from the M.I.T. and since then, you were, I'm quoting here, recovering from economics by diving into various other disciplines with the goal to analyze how neighborhoods influence our lives. During your career, you worked on more than 160 articles and a number of books. And I really, really appreciate that you took the time today to share your knowledge with us. And to dive right into it George, a huge part of your work deals with questions that are trying to understand on which circumstances people choose their neighborhoods and how this affects not only them, but as well the society they are living in as a whole. And this tremendous work of yours resulted in your in 2019 published book "Making Our Neighborhoods, Making Ourselves". Now to start gently without jumping directly into the subject with definitions. What was your initial motivation for choosing neighborhoods as a research field?

**George Galster:** Terrific question. But before I answer, let me first of all say: Dankeschön, Armin. It was a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for the opportunity to speak at Bielefeld University. It's a famous university in my field of study because it has a long history of trying to understand social processes in urban areas. So it feels good for me to be in this place. The opportunity to speak with you is indeed a very personal one for me because I have been interested in this subject since I was a 20 year old. When I was an undergraduate student at my university in Cleveland, Ohio, I volunteered to work in a secondary school to teach students who are having problems with mathematics. And these students were coming from a very

disadvantaged neighborhood in Cleveland. They were all black students from poor families. And I had not in my life had previous experience with those kinds of students because, as you know, American cities are very segregated. So I went to an all white, all middle class school, and my neighborhood was all white and middle class. And so this segment of our society was unfamiliar to me. So for the first time, I had a chance to work one on one with students that were different from me and had different chances than I had in life. And as we worked through the mathematics, I realized that the challenge they were having in learning was not because they were not intelligent. But it was because of the neighborhood circumstances that they were finding themselves in. So, for example, one of my students said, I'm sorry, George, I couldn't get my practice problems in geometry done because I was taking care of my younger brothers and sisters in the evening when shots were fired through the walls of my house and I had to cover them up with my body to make sure they weren't shot. Then the rest of the evening I spent with my young brothers and sisters to make sure they were okay. Well, as a middle class white boy I had never had to do that growing up. And then I started to realize that that was part of the environment that was normal for them. More and more, as I got to know them, I got to know their relatives and the adults in their lives and very few adults in their lives gave them role models for what we would call success. So their parents did not go to college. Many in their social networks did not go to college. Too many in their social networks had engaged in criminal activities. So again, the neighborhood was painting a portrait of what the future was like for them. That was very different than the portrait that was painted for me as a child. And I came to realize that America prides itself on the myth of equal opportunity. That in America anybody can succeed if we just try hard enough. Well, these students were trying hard enough. They were smart enough, but the way we built our cities and our neighborhoods were conspiring to keep them in a disadvantage circumstance. And from that moment on, as a young adult, I committed my life and my intellectual activity to try to understand how this happens and to create policies, to hopefully unwind this situation and truly make America more of an equal opportunity society.

**Armin Küchler:** Speaking of neighborhoods, it seems to be some kind of unavoidable, of course, to get influenced by neighborhood since we all grew up and now live in a neighborhood. However, it is difficult to give a satisfying definition of such an apparent, ordinary thing as neighborhood. For example, very often in research papers, we have operationalization with a rather simple, dissent specification. But how are you conceptualizing the term neighborhoods in your work?

**George Galster:** Neighborhoods are one of these things where everyone thinks they understand what you're talking about because it's a common word. But if you ask someone to define it, it's virtually impossible to define. Everyone has a different definition, as you suggested. What I think the problem is when you're defining neighborhood is that there are actually multiple neighborhoods that affect us and that are in our consciousness. So, for example, when you ask some people about their neighborhood, they're thinking of the immediate surroundings of their house. It could be their own apartment building, if it's a large enough structure. It could be just the street and the building's facing the street, where they see people regularly and see their neighbors regularly. That could be their neighborhood. But then in other circumstances, the city has defined by a name, a larger geographic area that has something in common, they think. And so other people think, well, this larger district with this name is my neighborhood and they're all right, they're all correct. Nothing is wrong. So. What I would first say is that there is no one correct spatial definition of a neighborhood where you could draw it on a map because people perceived those boundaries differently. Secondly, I would say that each level of the neighborhood that is the very small scale neighborhood, the medium scale neighborhood, the large scale neighborhood is relevant because each of those levels can affect us in a variety of ways. Our social interactions might be most affected by the close, small neighborhood. And so our role models and local norms that we might be affected by probably operate at that scale. But at the intermediate scale, we might be concerned about crime and our feelings of safety as we walk about this space, even if we don't know the people there, if it's perceived as dangerous, that affects us. At the larger scale neighborhood we also could be affected if that is close to the catchment area of a school. And so we're talking about what kinds of students will go to school with your child. Or it could be an area that has similar levels of air pollution. And so no matter where we walk in that big space, we're inhaling toxic chemicals into our body. So each level of neighborhood has a different effect on us. And so when I think of neighborhood, I like to use the metaphor of a now politically incorrect term called "Russian dolls". You know, these little nested dolls. You have a small one, inside a bigger one, inside a bigger one, inside a bigger one. I think that's how neighborhood can be thought of as well. Each one of these scales moving from smallest to biggest, have a reality for people. Each scale affects our satisfaction with life, our health, our psychological and physical well-being. Our norms and values, and ultimately it affects how we have our life chances. So I'm not surprised that no one can really define neighborhood because there's multiple things called neighborhoods and they all matter in different ways.

**Armin Küchler:** You already tapped into it, but one general mechanism that you have to understand, are neighborhood effects or a little bit broader the contextual effects, or context

effects. Based on the research you've done, can you first give us, and since we only have a limited amount of time, give a quick walkthrough again on how you would frame contextual effects? And secondly, maybe just give us a descriptive example of these effects?

**George Galster:** Sure. The way that neighborhood at whatever spatial scale will affect us, I think could be categorized in four different groups. So one are effects that come through social processes. And social processes, to illustrate, would be things such as role models. If Armin, you are my close neighbor, a few houses down and I view your life is very successful because of the way you carry yourself, the clothes you wear, the car you drive. I will perhaps try to emulate you the way you speak. What level of education you have and so forth. That kind of social process of role modeling is one way that my neighbors can affect me. Also, we have another category of things that we could call geography. Pure location. Not the people who live there, but just where you are on the map. So some kind of geography could be close to economic opportunities. Other types of geography could be extremely isolated from economic opportunities. Not near any tramlines or rail lines. Very difficult to move from in and out. Another geographic place could be stigmatized by the population. Oh, you're from there? Thus, by implication, you are dangerous. You are not worthy to be hired, etc., etc.. Another category of neighborhood effect mechanisms could be thought of as environmental. Air pollution. Lead poisoning in the soil. Noise pollution or public safety. All of those environmental aspects we know can shape our psychological health and our physical health. And last category of neighborhood mechanisms could be called institutional. How does the institutional world operate to provide things or not provide things to a certain neighborhood? Has the local public sector provided good quality parks? Do they maintain the public spaces? Do they provide good police protection? Do they provide good schools? How about nonpublic institutions such as nonprofit associations that might provide assistance to residents of the neighborhood and in training, in finding jobs, etc. are those present in the neighborhood? And finally, the local profit sector is important because it shows shopping opportunities in the neighborhood and what quality and variety is represented there. So these various categories of neighborhood effects, there is social process, there's geographic, there's environmental, and there's institutional. Neighborhood works through a variety of different paths. It's not a simple: Oh, here's the one cause, here is the one effect. No. Neighborhoods have multiple causes operating at multiple spatial scales that produce a variety of effects on people. And to complicate it even more these forces don't affect everybody equally. We know that depending, for example, on what age a young child is, certain kinds of effects work powerfully and other and other effects don't work at all. So in illustration, a very young child we know can be affected by lead poisoning in this environment, and they can have permanent brain damage that lives with them for the rest of their life.

So at any age, lead poisoning can can crucially affect a child. But a young child is probably not being exposed to larger neighborhood, neighborhood social forces. They're not socializing with friends yet. So peer pressure is probably not going to be important for a two year old child. But a teenage child, ah, well, that's a different story. So different kinds of neighborhood mechanisms apply at different stages in a person's life. And then to complicate it still further every person, even at a certain age, doesn't have the same reaction to neighborhood effects as every other person. So, for example, if your parents try very hard to help you learn at home, work with you on homework, work with you on reading, that can blunt the effect of a very poor local school, for example. It could compensate for what otherwise would be a strong neighborhood effect, coming from an institution called your local school. Other parents who are out working all the time may not have the ability to buffer the effects of the neighborhood on their children. They may not be able to supervise their children as closely, and therefore peer effects can become more important. They get hooked into the wrong crowd. So neighborhood effects are incredibly complicated, and frankly, that's why I'm so fascinated with studying it for so long. Because you're never bored at studying neighborhood effects.

**Armin Küchler:** Great. In your very worth reading book, "Making our neighborhoods, making it ourselves", you discuss how neighborhoods shape the information we receive about the world and how we interpret, evaluate and respond to it. Can you outline just the key elements which are at work in this process?

**George Galster:** Well, a fundamental fan of a long standing sociological notion, that the world is how we perceive it. Perception is reality. And so how we perceive the world is going to be very important. So we should think about neighborhood as also affecting how we perceive the world. And so backing up a little bit, we ask: how do we get information about the world? Well, we experience it firsthand. That's one possible way. We use our senses directly to experience the environment in which we're sitting at this point. We also experience the world second hand through media, and the media can be another person. You can tell me about the world that you've experienced and share it with me so I can learn and get perceptions developed that way. I can get it through impersonal sources. A newspaper. My cell phone. The television. The radio. Okay. So lots of different ways that we get information about the world. So let's bring that concept into context of neighborhood. So sometimes we have our perceptions shaped by our neighbors. We're talking to our friend next door and she shares with me: did you know there was a murder three houses down last night? I didn't know about that. Oh, maybe I should change my perception about how safe this neighborhood is. That's a dramatic example. But

neighbors can convey information to you that you would not otherwise know. That also can happen these days. Not on face to face communication, but on local social networks. There are networks designed for neighbors to communicate with each other. In the United States "Next door" is the famous platform for doing that. But those of us who live in large apartment or condominium buildings also have websites that are run by our management company in which we can post messages about what's going on in our building. We can communicate with the manager, but we can also communicate with other residents. And so we're often posting things about events in our building. And so other people who read those websites get information from their neighbors electronically. So that's one way that the neighborhood can shape the information that we get. And we have to remember that all of these neighbors are not neutral processors of information. Whether they're speaking to us directly or whether they're speaking to us through their smartphone. They're not impartial. They're humans like us. They're filtering that information and telling us what they think is important to them, what they think might be important for us to hear, their political and social biases will probably color the way they transmit it. Either this is wonderful news or it's terrible news. But we're getting a very selective set of data from our neighbors. I'm not saying it's inaccurate. I'm simply saying it's not a complete sample of the kind of information that could be provided to us. It's curated, shall we say. And so in some sense, our perception of reality is being influenced not just by the television shows we watch, not just by the newspapers we read, not just by our firsthand experience of traveling through space, but by our neighbors. So neighborhoods in all of these different ways have have an important effect on our life. And I think to understand that gives us a much better sense of why we have to pay attention to neighborhoods as people who are socially concerned, as people who are interested in public policy. The neighborhood level of cities is an important framing that I think is so crucial for so many dimensions of our lives. And it's just often not considered by policymakers.

**Armin Küchler:** Coming to our last and final question, George. Can you point out an actual ideal neighborhood, that can work somewhat as a blueprint, maybe?

**George Galster:** Great question. And the answer is no. I'm sorry to be blunt, but I truly don't believe there is a uniquely perfect prototype for a neighborhood for everyone. It just doesn't exist. And the reason why is that everyone has a different need for neighborhood. So let me illustrate that notion. Let's imagine that we are recent immigrants into some economy. Now, both Germany and the United States have experienced a great deal of immigration in recent years, some of it economic migrants, some of it refugees, political fugitives, whatever. We

could imagine that these recent migrants would benefit as individuals and as people trying to get a foothold in their new home nation, if in that neighborhood into which they first moved, coming into Germany or the United States, there were more people like themselves who have had a few more years of experience. Who could both speak the home language and have a reasonable knowledge of the new host country language, cultures, norms, so that they, these veteran residents of the same ethnic background, national background, could help the newcomers move into this new cultural situation most smoothly. And so this port of entry neighborhood, if you will, the first stopping point for new migrants into a new country should have particular characteristics. It should have these veterans who are of the same ethnic background. It should have some local, nonprofit or public institutions who are designed to help these new immigrants learn language, get job placements, get housing, etc.. Obviously, it should have good recreational opportunities that would be fitting for the kinds of sports that the immigrants like to play. Yes, the football fields would probably do well for most groups, given the international nature of that, but lots of things like that. Perhaps cultural and religious institutions that would allow those kinds of activities from the former home country to proceed in the new home country and so forth. So that would be my prescription for an ideal blueprint for that particular set of people. For you and I, that probably doesn't matter as much. So the same could be said for the ideal neighborhood for younger children. That might be a little different than the ideal neighborhood for seniors like me. Young children probably need certain kinds of recreational activities in parks that I don't need. I haven't climbed on these jungle gyms for a long time now, but my grandson loves them. Similarly, a nice place for me to stroll is fine. Not so thrilling for the youngsters. Similarly, I value having a neighborhood with many shops and medical facilities within it. An easy walk. A young family with an automobile with more mobility, maybe doesn't need to worry quite as much about that aspect of things. But you get my point, that different kinds of people place different salience on certain aspects of neighborhoods, such that one neighborhood will not fit all. There's not one shoe that fits all people. Similarly, not all neighborhoods fit everyone the same way. So that means we need it to build and maintain and supply a wide variety of neighborhoods. In any given city. And of course, the balance of what kinds of neighborhoods we have will depend on the population and demographics of that city. There are certain kind of criteria, though, that we would have always, I would think, suggest that that would be universal parts of this blueprint. Certainly you'd want a neighborhood that is not heavily polluted. Certainly you would not want to have a neighborhood that is unsafe, that people are afraid to walk outside. Certainly you don't want to have a neighborhood that has no recreational facilities. You wouldn't want a neighborhood that is so isolated physically that it's hard to get to work or to shop or do recreation. And frankly, I think from a social standpoint, you don't want to have a neighborhood that's



homogeneous in its population. I don't want a neighborhood that's all seniors. And I think, frankly, families with children don't want a neighborhood with just families with children either. I think there's value in inter-generational socialization. I think there's value in having inter-class socialization in neighborhoods, inter-ethnic socialization in neighborhoods. So so I believe that there should be social mix in neighborhoods. Where that mix is, as complicated as you like to make it, mixed on multiple dimensions, age and economic status and ethnic background and all of that mix, I think is what makes for a potential to have a society where we can truly, truly say with a straight face that we are building an equal opportunity society. Because as soon as I think we have societies where neighborhoods get very segregated, especially segregated by ethnic background or race or economic background, that's when the market responds in ways to create inequalities. The housing stock gets different. The local shopping portrait gets different. Often the private, excuse me, the public sector services start to get different. And that's when the neighborhood effects start to get unequal. And therefore, the opportunities for economic and social success get unequal. And that's when our society starts to get polarized on a variety of dimensions. So having said that, there is no no single neighborhood that fits everyone, I would say that there are certain characteristics that I would like to see in every neighborhood. Safety, good environment, social mix, accessibility. Allowing a good deal of variety, of course, within that general blueprint.

**Armin Küchler:** George, thanks a lot for this gripping insights on how neighborhoods have an effect on us as human beings. I really encourage everyone to dig into your work, especially (incomprehensible) scholars as myself, and to transfer your knowledge into there specific research field. Thanks a lot.

**George Galster:** Thank you. My pleasure.

**Armin Küchler:** Ich hoffe, dass auch Sie den Vortrag von Professor Galster spannend fanden. Ich möchte an dieser Stelle auch nochmal ausdrücklich auf unsere Website [www.radikalisierende-raeume.de](http://www.radikalisierende-raeume.de) aufmerksam machen, sowie auf unsere unterschiedlichen Social Media Auftritte. Bis bald!

# Impressum

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