

Ralph Richter

(MA, Institut für Soziologie, Universität Leipzig; Germany)

The powerful imagination of proper life

Without any doubt metropolises are important knots in the global economic system and in the flow of information (Sassen 1991; Castells 1996). Beside this their success is also rooted in powerful imaginations of proper life (such as success, importance, future-orientation, urbanity), which is embodied by them and which influences identity-formation and mobility. In my lecture I want to develop the thesis, that cities may not have much power to change their economic position in the global network but options to manifest requirements and imaginations of proper life. This I want to illustrate by empiric examples.

The city system in Germany can be seen as a paragon of the asynchronicity of European cities in general: In Western Germany we have knots of global economic activities (e.g. Frankfurt, München, Hamburg, Stuttgart) and particularly in the eastern part cities which seem to be situated in the backyards of global flows (e.g. Halle, Chemnitz, Magdeburg but even Leipzig or Dresden). This will be empirically illustrated for the two decades since the fall of the wall. Why do we observe such a persistence of disparity over twenty years by now? To answer this question I want to provide an alternative interpretation to the hegemonial economic discourse. It will be assumed that significant cities offer – beside others – imaginations of proper life which are very influential to people. Cities embodies models of life which, following the identification theory of Carl Friedrich Graumann (1983), has consequences for identity-formation of their residents and for geographical mobility of inhabitants and potential inhabitants. To think about cities as quasi emergent artefacts with an intrinsic logic (Berking and Löw 2008) offers alternative interpretations to theories of globalisation in which settlements below the first hierarchical level are seen as somehow insufficient. I suggest that cities have more endogenous means to develop requirements and imaginations of proper life than to reach higher positions in the economic field. Thus they may not proceed to become big economic player but places of satisfaction and cynosures of closer or wider surroundings. This will be finally exemplified in the case of the East German city of Leipzig.

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