

Introduction

The City. Polish and German Interpretations

In this book we present the outlines of a range of possible discussions between Polish and German researchers in the area of urban studies. The inspiration for approaching these issues and undertaking such a discussion was the sociological workshop “Declining Cities/Developing Cities”¹. The keynote of this meeting was the exchange of knowledge and experience, and the development of cooperation between young sociologists from Poland and Germany.

The idea of this workshop arose somewhere between the Institute of Sociology at Adam Mickiewicz University and the Institute for Western Affairs – both research institutions with long and pertinent traditions in the area of urban studies.

The crux of the idea was to invite researchers who are at a similar stage in their careers in order to facilitate discussion, and to enable the creation of a kind of network that might bring about further research cooperation. We abandoned the typical top-down procedure of establishing contact, and instead directly invited researchers. This is the best place to thank Dr. Jerzy Kaczmarek from the Institute of Sociology at Adam Mickiewicz University for his great help in inviting German speakers.

When sketching the broad scope of the workshop, we started from the simple statement that for many years urban sociology has been one of the main fields of interest among sociologists, and that this interest

¹ The “Declining Cities/Developing Cities” workshop took place in Poznań on November 16, 2007, and was coorganized by the Institute for Western Affairs, the Polish Sociological Association (Poznań Department), and the Institute of Sociology at Adam Mickiewicz University. It was cofunded by the Polish-German Cooperation Foundation and Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

was by no means casual. Rather, this attention has resulted from the conviction that contemporary cities act to focus most of the social processes connected with change in the contemporary world.

These processes have often been analysed in the context of urbanization understood as social modernization, as a part of what we now call “globalization.” Here urbanization means something better, more open, and granting more chances, more freedom, and a higher quality of life. However this interpretation does not seem to be sufficient; it is one-sided, too general and above all too ideological to elucidate the phenomenon that it attempts to describe. In many cases it fails to explain numerous processes that, for example, have transformed urban centres that until recently flourished into places that are now stigmatized by the degradation and devalorization of the social, economic, and geographical environment, affected by – in Piotr Sztompka’s words – a kind of “transformational trauma.”

The description of these changes found in, for example, Saskia Sassen’s books, as changes strongly correlated with macrosocial and economic processes – also results from the influence of immanent factors such as the level of infrastructural development, cultural conditions, and the character of resources like the wealth of citizens and their qualifications. This last component would seem to be extremely important, especially when we perceive the city as a kind of social platform where innovations are generated. Points of view such as those developed *inter alia* by social geography, give a basis on which grasp the relations between space and social structure, between the informational infrastructure and changes of management and consumption models.

In our opinion those changes which clearly are not linear challenge the modernistic point of view in a certain way. Irregularities of development express themselves in contrasts: in the miserable condition of some roads, contrasted with the width and convenient of others; in the range of communication networks; in the number of freely available nurseries, libraries, and so on in some of cities, contrasted with the limited life possibilities of residents in other cities. Such “systemic conditions” may give access to many resources, but at the same time they may bring sets of disadvantageous conditions. This may result in the “brain drain” and “wallet drain” of worse locations, because it is worth living in those

places where everybody appears to have easy access to information, and – most significantly – where the decisions are being made. These processes are particularly important outside of continental centres, where we can simultaneously observe the signs of development and the symptoms of the “development of underdevelopment.”

The possibilities of the urban development – and of the decline – of cities are also connected to the use of the cities’ position within the world-system; which is usually, but not always, related to the central location within the region or country. Sociologists’ interpretations generally lean in two directions. The first considers the economic position of the city within the region, the country, and in some cases the whole planet. The second approach is based on the subjective feeling of want: where we want to live, where it is worth living, and where we should live in order not to be marginalized.

When we discuss the first interpretation using the concept of Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system, it becomes very difficult or almost impossible to imagine how to improve the position of the city, especially in the short- or mid-term.

With the second interpretation, it seems that more and more processes depend on the subjective valorization of space. What we can suggest is that there is a link between (hard) economic factors and the subjective interpretation which affect people’s behaviour. This impression of course refers to the Thomas theorem, and to the valorization notion of Florian Znaniecki, who worked in Poznań in the 1920s. This view is closely connected to a phenomenon which – from our point of view – can be described as one of the two major areas of interest: the revitalization of the city.

Revitalization is understood here as a “complex of actions” which aims to eliminate the negative consequences of the breakdown caused by modern industry, the deindustrialization of the 1990s, the selective growth of the industrial sector, and changing of a dominant industry into another.

In the traditional context of “social forces,”² revitalization has two faces. The first and more obvious is brought to bear from above by local

² In the 1930s, Florian Znaniecki wrote an article on the *Social forces in the Wielkopolska region* (2002, *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny*, no. 3), in which he analysed the roles of local institutions and the local authorities in improving the quality of life in Wielkopolska.

government or other agents. The second is created from the bottom up – by social activity which aims to change the social environment of its subjects. That is why we ask the rather fundamental question about the condition of urban social activity. Although the answer to the question, “Social activity in the city: is it awakening, stagnating, or falling?” is of course complex, we may try to search for conditions such as the mode of participation, or the requirements of efficiency in decision making, which would help civil society to develop freely.

We believe that the above-outlined assumptions of the workshop have been reflected in both the discussion that occurred during the workshop itself, and in the selection of papers that we are presenting here.

The most general perspective is presented by Bastian Lange who – using the example of Leipzig – analyses the methods employed to position European cities on the “Declining City – Developing City” continuum. He puts emphasis on the production of knowledge, but this refers not only to knowledge as a resource necessary for further development, but also “knowledge about the city,” used as a tool to garner more resources, and to develop the conditions for being competitive alongside other European cities.

Knowledge is a key concept of another text presented here, by Heidi Fichter-Wolf and Thomas Knorr-Siedow, who analyse the Collegium Polonicum in the Polish-German twin towns of Słubice and Frankfurt an den Oder as an example of international university collaboration, with all the opportunities and risks it presents. Their research shows that creating a European knowledge space is a difficult goal which cannot be achieved only by actions undertaken by the state and supranational institutions, but also – and perhaps more importantly – by the process of negotiation between diverse open cultures.

A city outside of the globalized centre, indeed, an “ordinary city” is a term that could easily be applied to Guben/Gubin, here described by Jörg Dürrschmidt. The question of whether opportunities to develop exist for a city located outside of the centre, is in this case given a positive answer. “Nested urbanism” – a concept which describes deeper relations connecting cities with the global, regional, and local

zones – might here prove helpful in showing a third way between metropolis-like development and decline.

A similar problem has been approached, although from a broader perspective, by Katrin Großmann, Annegret Haase, Dieter Rink, and Annett Steinführer who attempt to describe the changes affecting eastern central-European cities, using the concept of “urban shrinkage,” instead of more conventional patterns of development. The term “urban shrinkage” was initially employed to describe the process of massive population loss in the cities of East Germany after unification due to job migration and low population growth. The authors expand the applicability of this concept to other postcommunist societies.

The issue of revitalization as part of a region-wide restructuring is the focus of the article by Jarosław Mikołajec. He describes the vicissitudes suffered by the Katowice conurbation during the sequence of massive changes that have affected this industrial area. Deindustrialization seem to be most important challenge for local administration.

Konrad Miciukiewicz also describes the processes of revitalization, but from a different point of view. He sees the transition of Półwiejska Street in Poznań as a metaphor of two interconnected but somehow contradictory processes – revitalization and gentrification. His analysis shows the existence of a kind of hidden social conflict between those excluded from and those included in the mainstream of contemporary urban consumer life.

A more extreme example of revitalization is portrayed by Marcin Tujdowski. He describes the phenomenon of “regained cities” – postgarrison towns in western and northern Poland. The development of new settlements is a unique chance to observe forgotten truths. On one hand, it reminds us how vital and enthusiastic new settlers can be; on other, it illuminates what kind of adversity they can often run into.

The success of the revitalization process depends not only on the efficiency of the administration, but also on the social activity of the residents. For this reason, the final section of the book concerns this issue.

Marek Nowak places this question within the broader perspective of changes affecting civil society in central Europe. Using the concept of “social non-movement” – a crisis of cooperation and a dominance of individual strategies – he attempts to describe social activism in urban contexts. Research conducted in Poznań provides a basis for his analysis.

Social activation as a tool for social inclusion is the focus of Michał Nowosielski's article, which points out that Polish inclusion and revitalization programs seem to be one-dimensional, and for that reason lack efficiency. After analysing several examples of such programs, the author comes to the conclusion that only by taking into consideration the problem of social activation can more positive effects be produced.

Sandra Huning in her article calls up the concept of public space and its political use. The changing role of urban space, used as a particular setting for political deliberation and cultural representation, seems to be an intellectual challenge for those urban researchers who long ago declared the end of place.

Finally it is worth asking the questions, "What are the Polish and German perspectives on the city?" and, "Are there any significant differences between Polish and German urban sociology?" Of course, the volume we are presenting is not intended to be representative, but it may be to some extent symptomatic. It seems to us that the perspective of analysis assumed by our German colleagues is a bit broader, or rather a bit more universal. This suggests that they tend to see the problems and phenomena they are describing, not only in the local, regional, and national contexts, but above all globally. The Polish authors who prepared papers for this book seem to pay more attention to locality, and not only as the subject of their texts (which is natural in urban sociology), but also as a scope of applicability of their ideas and concepts.

This contrast of universality with particularity – which should not be seen as a difference in quality or expertise – may come from different research experience, different engagement in international research networks, and above all different sociological traditions. The question, "To what point may different perspectives facilitate or impede further co-operation?" remains open. We hope that the "Declining cities/Developing cities" project will contribute to bringing Polish and German perspectives closer together, and to establishing robust relations between scholars and research institutions.

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