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URBAN THEORIES IN A POST-SOCIALIST CONTEXT

Abstract: Since the collapse of the socialist system, cities in Central Eastern European countries have undergone dynamic transformation processes. Those processes have attracted noteworthy scientific attention, particularly in local academic circles, causing revived interest in urban studies in the region. However, the academic interest in former socialist cities has become the centre of discussion itself. This interest is mostly related to the validity of theories and methodologies born in the West to the study of former socialist cities. On one side, there is a cohort of academics who have uncritically embraced Western urban knowledge, a priori assuming its universal applicability. This research position is commonly related to the developmental and convergence theories, which take “correction” of the post-socialist cities and their eventual assimilation to the Western city as their model. On the opposite side of the spectrum, the post-colonial approach has developed as a stand which criticizes the alleged scientific hegemonism of the West and insists on a more cosmopolitan urban science that would take into account the experiences of cities worldwide. Simultaneously, this approach advocates for considering urban particularities and complexities, and thus this research treats post-socialist cities as distinctive, in many instances, from the cities of the West, as well as from each other. However, as both contemporary academic stands have their limits and flaws, the debate on adequate research of former socialist cities as well as on the future positions of urban science in general, is far from conclusive.

Key words: urban theory, Western knowledge, post-socialist city, post-colonial approach

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Introduction

The countries that introduced the socialist system implemented radical political and economic reforms, the results of which were reflected in almost all parts of society. Thus, urban regions, previously shaped under the influence of more or less developed capitalism, began to transform under the influence of socialist ideologies, by adopting a planned economy and centralized urban planning. The collapse of socialism, in addition to other circumstances, has introduced a period of indisputably fast-paced urban restructuring in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries¹. This urban dynamic has initiated renewed interest in urban studies locally and has also attracted attention in wider academic circles from all over the globe as well² (Ouředníček, 2016).

However, the way in which studies of former socialist cities has been developing has become the subject of academic discussion itself. This discussion has mainly centred on the validity of Western-born theories and concepts for the post-socialist context. In general, two major and opposed positions have developed regarding the studies of the former socialist cities. On the one side, large cohorts of scholars have promptly and uncritically embraced Western urban knowledge, claiming its universality, and applying it in the study of CEE cities. They mainly presume the transition of the post-socialist cities to the Western model and the eventual assimilation of those cities to that model. On the other side, the post-colonial approach, which has been established as a significantly influential and productive stream in urban science, criticizes Western knowledge for its alleged hegemony and calls for more inclusive urban science based on the experiences of cities worldwide (Sjöberg, 2014). At the same time, it acknowledges urban particularities and complexities that should not be erased by excessive theoretical generalisation. Thus, it advocates treating CEE cities as distinctive from their Western counterparts, as well as from each other.

The main questions raised from the opposite scientific side regarding the research on CEE cities can be summarized as follows: Are theories developed in the West appropriate for cities in CEE or are new theories needed? What is the role of studies on cities in CEE – are they merely importers of Western knowledge or can they actively generate knowledge relevant for global urban theory? Is it possible to alter centre - periphery relations in urban science? Is there something such as the “post-socialist city” which is substantially different from “other”, mainly “Western” cities? Is the term “post-socialist city” relevant at all, 30 years after the crumbling of socialism? How can one use the term “post-socialist” in an inclusive and not boundary-building manner when conceptualizing “others”?

Western Theories as Universal

The perspective of considering Western theories to be universally valid found fertile soil in studies on the former socialist cities in CEE, particularly during the 1990s. In general, the local urban specifics were not considered as indicators of potential limitations in the applicability of the Western theories to the post-socialist environment. Rather, they were recognized as mostly undesired deviations from Western city attributes. Thus, giving Western

¹ This term includes former socialist countries, both those that were members of the Eastern Bloc, and those in the Balkans, namely Yugoslavia, i.e. its successor countries, and Albania.

² Over the years, research mostly covers case studies from CEE capitals such as Berlin, Prague and Budapest (Kubeš, 2013).

theories academic supremacy inevitably positioned the Western city as the model toward which the development of former socialist cities should be directed.

As the Western city has been established as modern and developed, cities of the global East gained the opposite role as underdeveloped and lagging behind. While socialist development has been considered as a temporary phase of anomaly, a harmful deviation from the “true European city”, its eventual end enabled cities’ return to “normality” (Ouředníček, 2016; Ferenčuhová & Gentile, 2016), with neoliberal capitalism propagated as the only possible reality. This sense of developmentalism and catching-up are concepts that prevailed in studies on CEE cities (Ferenčuhová, 2012).

Returning to the development trajectory path that has been developed by Western societies and cities is commonly termed “transitioning”, both in academic circles and everyday discourses. It became an important focus of urban studies in the context of the post-socialist development of the CEE cities. The introduction of the notion of transition in urban studies inevitably presumes an eventual end of the process, and the finalization of adjustments and changes aimed to achieve the predefined goal of becoming a fully developed capitalist city that is not substantially different from the Western role models. Thus, transition, imagined as an enclosed rather than open-ended process (Tuvikene, 2016; Gentile, 2018), defines a post-socialist city as different from both socialist and capitalist cities and as an ephemeral urban form (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008). Even introducing multi-dimensionality in the concept of urban transition by defining its institutional, social and urban dimensions (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012), which change at different paces, set these changes on a single path to the final destination, i.e. the Western archetype.

The concept of transition and the end of the post-socialist city are closely related to the convergency theories advocating for narrowing the differences between cities worldwide (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008; Wiest, 2012). However, “convergency” mainly implies deep-rooted changes through the marketization and democratisation of the former socialist cities, i.e. the East, with little adaptive changes being projected for the Western cities other than mildly reconsidering the role of state intervention. Thus, in reality, convergency is mostly identified with the Westernisation of the former socialist cities (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008).

What tangible physical and functional changes appear in the post-socialist cities that may be labelled “Westernisation”? Traits that are frequently named as distinct attributes of socialist cities include the compactness of a city, the grand scale of its public projects, the dominance of public transport, an oversupply of industrial space and an undersupply of commercial space, and absence of forms typical of a capitalist city such as elite suburbanisation, etc. (Hirt, 2013). It is fair to say that all of these distinctive traits have been substantially reduced after the collapse of socialism. Processes and phenomena such as urban sprawl, housing privatization, shrinkage of open public space through urban densification, massive increase in car ownership rates, deindustrialization and commercialization with a so-called retail revolution, gated suburban communities, all invaded former socialist cities. Opposed to the egalitarian ideology of the socialist state, socio-economic polarization in the post-socialist city has been rapidly rising (Tsenkova, 2006). While these undoubtedly made former socialist cities more similar to the capitalist cities, does it imply the approaching end of the post-socialist city as such (Hirt, 2013)? Does the inflow of capitalist processes and structures in the former socialist city mean its transition to the fully developed capitalist city? This is one of the potential weaknesses and points of debates related to the concepts of developmentalism and the return to “normality”.

Criticizers of universalisation of Western urban knowledge, and of approaches which epitomise the Western city as the foundational model, on the one side, and underdevelopment and backwardness of non-Western cities, on the other, stress that these are actually fortifying the centre – periphery relations in the academic realm. It is a common facet of discourse that the centre can learn little from the periphery and that knowledge generated in the periphery is only of local importance and thus insignificant for the centre (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008). With universal transferability and the applicability of Western-born knowledge, the West has been established as the global scientific exporter, while the East got the role of mere importer.

Confidence in the explanatory and predictive values of Western theories in the CEE context, as argued by many critics, has led to an overaccentuated comparativism in studies dealing with post-socialist cities. It became common among scholars to look for gentrification, urban sprawl, segregation and other concepts developed in the West, and to compare the observed development process with those prescribed standards (Ouředníček, 2016). It is argued that comparison with the subservient position as lagging behind and with the Western city set as the prototype has limited urban science and the comparative approach to one of simple empirical verification or empiricism (Ouředníček, 2016; McFarlane, 2010). The East has thus accepted the role of the scientific periphery—that is, the role of performing empirical studies based on Western theories with the aim of mere validation. Urban research became mostly limited to isolated case studies of the main question of how a certain case relates to the theoretical prototype (Wiest, 2012).

Relying on Western knowledge made it difficult to recognize the limitations of that knowledge in different urban contexts; this might seem to imply an urgency in the development of alternative theories and concepts. The developmental approach, with the concepts of linear catch-up and transition, is commonly considered as the theoretical peak regarding interpretation of the transformation in CEE cities, as seen from this perspective.

Western Theories as Parochial

On the opposite side from the developmentalism and assimilation of the post-socialist cities have developed approaches that put forward the idea of post-socialist cities as distinctive (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008). The post-colonial approach is one of the most influential approaches in this direction which has become important in recent urban studies. Scholars of this orientation primarily question the transferability, global reach and uniqueness of urban theory, arguing against the alleged hegemony of Western urban knowledge and its one-way transfer to the rest of the world.

They also criticize the developmental and modernist biases of Western urban theory as defining the cities of the East as underdeveloped and backward, as well as for postulating an evolutionary linear “catch-up” trajectory for those cities, thus disproving the treatment of globalising neoliberalism and the Western city as paradigmatic (Sjöberg, 2014).

From this perspective, it is stated that, as being developed in a limited number of cities, Western urban theories and concepts are intellectually narrow-minded, without potential for universal validity, and are proven false in numerous examples (Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2011; Peck, 2015). Since this urban knowledge does not recognize the experience of the East, causing it to have some significant blind spots, a post-colonial approach appeals to the development of a more inclusive sense of urban studies. The post-colonial approach argues for moving the focus of the theories away from the West by introducing a more cosmopolitan

perspective. Insisting on a more cosmopolitan urban theory which takes into account cities out of the realm of the privileged West is commonly referred to as the “worlding” of the cities (Parnell & Robinson, 2012; Robinson, 2011, 2016; Roy, 2009; Roy & Ong, 2011).

Besides the efforts to bring more cities into the research focus through the “worlding” of cities, the post-colonial approach sees the potential for overcoming the limits of Western urban studies, particularly the centre - periphery relations, by insisting on the particularities, complexity and empirical differences of cities. This is in line with the notion of the “ordinary city” developed by Amin and Graham (1997), meaning that cities are equally important, context-dependent and distinctive, and thus no city can be delegated as the archetype of the others.

Comparative urbanism, from the post-colonial perspective, should be recentred from the East-West relations which have traditionally been the focus of urban analysis. Namely, having East-West relations as overrepresented or treated as the only research focus induces at least three side effects. First, it reinforces the fortification of the Western city as the desired norm toward which post-socialist cities should evolve. Second, it contributes diminished research attention to the East or post-socialist cities themselves. Third, it underlines the imagined homogenisation of the opposed parties in both the West and the East. This comparison should not be done only with the West but should also include other contexts worldwide. The inner diversity of post-socialism is worth comparative attention as well.

Pluralism is essential for the post-colonial approach. Accordingly, the term “Western city” is oversimplified, just as is the case with the “post-socialist city” (Wiest, 2012). Thus, there is no singular Western city which might be set as the model for post-socialist cities’ evolution. Also, there are multiple developmental trajectories taken by the post-socialist cities, and there are multiple post-socialisms as well (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008; Wiest, 2012). Stressing the common distinctive attributes of post-socialisms³ should be performed cautiously since, otherwise, it may cause many features shared with Western and other cities to go unrecognized (Hann et al., 2002). In step with this are the tendencies of marketization and democratization. These two trends were supposed to re-modernize the once socialist cities and include them in the neoliberal hemisphere. However, in the complex environment of the post-socialist transition, these processes did not work the same way everywhere. Although marketization and democratization are formally ongoing, these processes are rigged in many post-socialist environments, sometimes under the strong influence of corrupt elements and sometimes under the influence of authoritative establishments. In short, the goal of the post-colonial approach is to overcome East-West divisions to achieve a more cosmopolitan approach and to preserve the uniqueness of cities at the same time.

It is worth mentioning that, despite having different origins, the post-colonial approach shares some common grounds with assemblage theory, particularly through the concept of the “ordinary” city as insisting on the particularity, difference and empirical complexity of relations (Robinson, 2004; Sassen, 2008; McFarlane, 2010). Being eclectic in nature, the assemblage theory has developed by avoiding a priori theorising and providing elaborate descriptions of innumerable horizontal relations as resulting in the complexity and uniqueness of territorial images, i.e. in recognition of the particularism of cities (Scott & Storper, 2015; Storper & Scott, 2016).

³ In addition to economic and political changes, we should not ignore the nationalist aspirations in urban planning and the creation of a new identity of the city (Diener & Hagen, 2013).

Discussion

One of the main questions raised here is why should we treat the post-socialist city (or cities) as distinct? The simple answer would be because of the prolonged relevance of the socialist legacy as embodied in structural persistence and contemporary processes. For example, the socialist mode of suburbanisation, with grand housing estates, on one side, and informality as a by-product of housing policy, on the other, left imprints that are incomparable to those in the West (Ouředníček, 2016; Ratkaj et al., 2022). In addition, the socialist strategy of the socioeconomic mix at the level of the neighbourhood, accompanied with low levels of residential mobility due to the housing shortage and high ownership rates as a result of privatisation, actually hide segregation as such is defined and measured according to the Western theoretical and methodological models (Ouředníček, 2016). Thus, lasting socialist structures may require alternative research approaches and limit the import of urban knowledge originating from the West. In addition, socialism influences contemporary processes, not only as providing remnants of or continuity with the past (such as the enduring reiteration of informality in construction and development practice, non-transparency in project and city governance, etc.), but also as actively shaping processes that are initiated and developed as contrary to socialism. One noticeable example of such is the development of neoliberal capitalism in CEE, which is sometimes thought to be severer and “more capitalist” than anywhere else in Europe and designed as specifically anti-socialist, feeding on the fear of “zombie socialism” (Chelcea & Druță, 2016). Similar is the rapid increase in car ownership, which flourished as opposition to the dominance of public transportation in socialism, or the construction of gated communities (Hirt, 2012; Hirt & Petrović, 2011) in opposition to socialism’s public-oriented housing.

However, there are authors who indicate that the very use of the term “post-socialist” inevitably has negative effects, arguing for its complete abandonment (Gentile, 2018). Usually, critics point out that the use of this term puts limits on the comparative potential of the former socialist cities and consequently pushes post-socialist urban research to the periphery of urban knowledge. It is additionally stated that it reproduces mostly misguided, imagined and overstated differences in comparison to the Western idealized city. Even if some studies stress the differences amongst the post-socialist cities, the term “post-socialist” per se implies the assumption that these cities have more in common than they do with cities outside of that category. In other words, it stresses the internal commonalities and differences with the “others” (Gentile, 2018).

In his recent study, Tuvikene (2016) tries to overcome these critiques through the de-territorialisation of post-socialism. The most common use of the term “post-socialist” is as a spatial-temporal container, referring to the particular region of the former socialist bloc, and the particular historical moment of the period after 1989/91. This way of using the expression “post-socialist” (as well as regional attributes, such as CEE), which are sometimes labelled as “empty post-socialism” (Gentile, 2018), puts boundaries separating socialist from outside cities, i.e. it stresses the commonalities that former socialist cities share in their distinctiveness in comparison to the others (Hann et al., 2002). In addition, post-socialist cities are primarily defined as the mere successors to the obsolete socialist cities.

A more advanced approach which addresses some of these critiques is the perception of post-socialism as a condition. This perception stresses hybridity as the result of historical and spatial relations, while focusing on the present-day condition. As such, by acknowledging

temporal continuity, the city is the result of both pre-socialism and socialism (Stenning & Hör-schelmann, 2008), but also of horizontal relations, meaning that the city is the result of processes and phenomena on both the local and larger scales (Tuvikene, 2016). However, in order to avoid post-socialism as a permanent condition, an alternative understanding is needed.

Thus, perceiving post-socialism as a de-territorialised concept offers unrestricted potential for comparative urbanism without falling into the trap of developmentalism or of diminishing the distinctiveness of the cities by grouping them into overly abstract containers. The core of this perception is to apply “post-socialist” not to territorial units but to some of their aspects (Tuvikene, 2016). This means that “post-socialist” is too simplified a qualification that cannot be applied to the cities as a whole but only to some processes and phenomena. For this approach, it is essential to consider all cities as “ordinary” (Robinson, 2006; 2013) and to embrace their multidimensionality and complexity (Tuvikene, 2016). This further means that we should use the term “post-socialist” not for something that happened in the “post-socialist cities”, but for the processes and phenomena that are carriers of the meaning of the concept of post-socialism.

The post-colonial approach is, however, criticised for becoming parochial itself, despite arguing against the narrow-mindedness of Western knowledge (Storper & Scott, 2016). Namely, since Western-based theories are considered incapable of a more global reach, and as being based on a limited number of selected cities, many scholars of the post-colonial approach conclude that theories must inevitably be local (Sheppard, 2014; Leitner & Sheppard, 2016) and that this is the way to delegitimise the Western theoretical hegemony and universalisation. Research done from this scientific position may, it is stated, efficiently lead to the provincialisation of urban science at the expense of theoretical generalisation. Thus, there is a potential contradiction in the post-colonial approach in the inner conflict between particularism, the West-East division, and the provincialism of theory, on the one side, and the intention to build a cosmopolitan urban theory, on the other (Scott & Storper, 2015).

Related to this, it is argued that isolated case studies remained overrepresented in post-colonial studies. Cities are frequently studied in a kind of theoretical vacuum, neglecting Western theory and the wider world context. This methodological approach, associated with assemblage theory, is sometimes called “naive objectivism” (Storper & Scott, 2016), since it does not have theoretical support in distinguishing important relations from trivial ones. Sometimes, new methodological approaches in urban studies are considered as a “new particularism” (Scott & Storper, 2015) that is focused on urban singularity without the intention to theorise underlying phenomena and processes. In line with this is the critique of theoretically uninformed comparativism. Empirical particularism is not worthless, but its contribution to the global theory is very limited. The post-colonial approach, it is additionally argued, may cause scholars to intentionally stay in the comfortable zone of the post-socialist academic community or the community of the East, with little intention of actually contributing to global urban theory (Sjöberg, 2014). In summary, this means that bigger efforts must be made to overcome parochialism and empiricism in post-colonial work.

Conclusion

While the post-colonial approach may be right in criticising developmentalism, evolutionary linear models based on the Western prototype and concepts of universal modernity are potentially misleading. It is argued that there is a plethora of different trajectories of urban

development in the East, including in the former socialist space, as well as in the West. Additionally, it is rightly claimed that more attention is to be paid to the specificities of cities that have so far been neglected in urban theory. Otherwise, Western theories may be false or irrelevant in the post-socialist context. Although they initially offered a new and innovative approach, it turned out that they have significant limitations when being used to interpret post-socialist urban development (Pickvance, 2002).

On the other hand, the post-colonial approach may be wrong in insisting on the specificities of the post-socialist cities (and cities of the global East) as they are not so dissimilar to the West that some wider commonalities cannot be identified (Hann et al., 2002; Storper & Scott, 2016). It is argued that the post-colonial approach so far has not broken the spatio-temporal barrier around post-socialist cities and contributed to making urban studies be more cosmopolitan.

Furthermore, it should be insisted that comparisons that are theoretically informed are necessary in order to produce relevant scientific results which can overcome findings limited solely to particularism and empirical complexness. Meaningful categories of cities that are the result of scientific generalization (Storper & Scott, 2016) should not be eliminated from contemporary urban studies.

Theories are made to be transferable and they are the result of scientific generalisation, and they achieve this by focusing on what is essential. Generalisation and abstraction enable theories to be decontextualised and able to be applied out of their contextually bounded place of origin. However, in spatial sciences, there is an issue of theory being attached to the contexts of their place of origin and thus limiting their potential for generalizability and transferability. The main problem appears when contextually attached theories are applied as universal, thus leading to false conclusions (Maloutas, 2018).

The debate on the present and the future of Western-born theories and concepts in the post-socialist contexts is far from over. However, there is an increasing body of research trying to reconcile the extremes on both sides of the spectrum of urban science – the one that stubbornly and uncritically applies Western knowledge to contexts that are different and argues for a one and only universal truth in spatial urban science, and the other that argues for extreme scientific localism.

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