

Katedra Geografii Miast i Turyzmu Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego
Komisja Geografii Osadnictwa i Ludności PTG
Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe

XIII

KONWERSATORIUM WIEDZY O MIEŚCIE

**MIASTO POSTSOCJALISTYCZNE
ORGANIZACJA PRZESTRZENI MIEJSKIEJ
I JEJ PRZEMIANY**



Łódź 2000

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POST-COMMUNIST CITY

Former socialist cities have not been quickly and fully transformed into capitalist cities. Their development after the fall of communism exhibits many specific features. They are cities in transition. I argue that we can justify the use of a specific term – post-communist cities. In the paper, I also suggest how to conceptualise the transitional post-communist city and discuss what should be in the centre of their research.

1. IS THERE A POST-COMMUNIST CITY?

What is the meaning of terms post-socialist or post-communist city? Why do we use them? Are there any concepts behind them or are they just loose attempts to designate something we are not very certain about how to grasp it. The prefix 'post' tell us that we want to distinguish new from old, present from past. We relatively know the old socialist or communist cities. But what is the new? How to conceptualise present cities, which as we intuitively feel are not socialist or communist anymore?

What constitutes a particular kind of city? For geographers, there are two basic characteristics, which describe a specific sort of cities, such as socialist cities. The geographic model of a city includes: (1) characteristics of spatial structure or spatial pattern and (2) principles and mechanisms of formation and change of their spatial structures.

The socialist cities have been described using both of these characteristics. Most geographic literature about socialist cities contains rather descriptive accounts of spatial patterns of various individual phenomena within urban areas. The general descriptions of complex urban spatial structure of the

socialist city are rare. The most explicit model presented Hamilton in the well-known book *The Socialist City*. There is also a vast literature, which discusses how the mechanisms of the centrally planned system of allocation of resources influenced the production of spatial structures in socialist cities. However, the two above outlined characteristics (i.e. spatial structures and principles and mechanisms of their production) have only rarely been tied together for the explanation of the overall complex urban pattern of socialist cities.

What about post-communist cities? Do their spatial patterns exhibit important distinguishable features, which would legitimise a specific category in our taxonomy of cities? The change of the built environment, the redistribution of land-use functions and transformations in urban socio-spatial structure are usually very lengthy processes. Despite radical changes in basic parameters of political and economic systems in post-communist countries, the geography of former socialist cities has not been quickly reshaped. While the political change and the core institutional transformations of economic system were accomplished within a few years, the change of settlement structures will take many decades. The principles of production of the urban environment can be changed quickly, but the pace of changes in spatial patterns is much slower.

The principles and mechanisms of the production of urban spatial structures has already been largely changed in post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The rules of the game are now based on the market allocation of resources. Our cities now develop in the context of a capitalist society. Their growth, decline and restructuring is conditioned by market principles and regulations based on democratic policy-making. Therefore, if we consider solely the current principles that form our cities and we must admit that these principles are capitalist, shall we claim that our cities are already capitalist cities? We can then avoid the use of the term post-communist. As an urban geographer, I can not agree with such suggestion, because the second from above outlined characteristic that specify a certain type of city is not fulfilled. The spatial structure of post-communist cities has not been substantially changed yet. While some of us will point to new urban landscapes, which emerged under capitalist conditions, for others our urban places still resemble rather socialist cities. I guess that most of us will agree that there have been important changes, which occurred during the last decade of the 20th century. However, they have not fundamentally altered the pre-existing spatial patterns yet.

What will be the former socialist cities like, when major expected transformations of their spatial patterns will be accomplished? I mean those

changes, which are caused by the adaptation of urban environment to new conditions given by the political, economic and cultural transition to market society. Would not they be capitalist cities? Of course, their urban landscapes will incorporate many urban elements from the communist period, such as the residential estates with prefabricated blocks of flats. Their inner spatial zones will also include pre-communist areas. Most cities have long histories and their urban environment exhibits features of various cities formed under different circumstances. The post-communist developments bring the re-emergence of some pre-communist patterns, transformations in some areas from communist times and creation of new post-communist urban landscapes. When such transformations are accomplished, our urban places will not look like communist cities anymore. I expect that they will rather resemble a capitalist city.

2. THE CONCEPT OF POST-COMMUNIST CITY

What are the post-communist cities? They are not socialist anymore. They are now changing under the rules of market to become capitalist cities, but this is still a long way to go. How shall we conceptualise post-communist cities? Post-communist cities are cities in transition. Their specificity is given by the difference in the time-span of two transformations. First is the transformation of principles, which produce spatial patterns. These have been quickly changed and the transition from socialist to capitalist city already started. Second is the transformation of urban spatial structure itself. When accomplished, the transition from socialist to capitalist city will be achieved. However, this is a tricky issue. How shall we judge that former socialist and present post-communist cities possess spatial structures, which we can consider as compatible with our perception of a capitalist city?

What if the transition is not from socialist to capitalist but from socialist to other kind of city, including a possibility of emergence of a new evolutionary urban type? Notwithstanding, post-communist cities as transitory cities are not here forever. The transition must be once accomplished. The post-communist city is a temporary phenomenon. For how long there will be post-communist cities? As I have already stressed, principles of urban spatial structure formation have quickly changed but the transformation of spatial patterns takes ages. Therefore, this is a question for future and we can hardly make accurate predictions at present.

Currently we are facing an important research task concerning post-communist cities. We have a unique opportunity to study urban transition,

which is reshaping our cities. In my view, post-communist cities are characterised by relatively rapid and radical transformations, at least in comparison with other cities around the World that are currently in various kinds of transitions. It is our historical task to map, conceptualise and interpret this post-communist urban transition.

What should be in the centre of our investigation? Post-communist cities are characterised by the transformations in their spatial structures. Therefore, their research must focus on studying the processes of change rather than on the sole description of static spatial patterns. This is a quite distinct research task from the traditional view of urban models building. The model of a transitional post-communist city can not be based on a set of static parameters leading to an equilibrium-like final state of urban spatial structure. On contrary, it must be a dynamic model that reflects processes of change from one equilibrium-like state to the consequent one. The model of the post-communist city must be a model of change. The key focus must be on processes of change in spatial structures, their description and explanation.

The geographic model of the post-communist city must involve three basic levels:

- 1) the description of changes in spatial structures (spatial organisation, spatial system, spatial distribution, spatial form);
- 2) the description of mechanisms of changes in spatial structures through the restructuring of existing and the production of new elements;
- 3) the explanation of changes in spatial structures, i.e. answering questions „Why it change in the way it does?“, What are the main casual relations behind observed changes?“

The model must include both, the description and explanation of urban spatial change. The description of major changes in the internal urban spatial structure must incorporate (1) patterns of build up environment (physical spatial structure), (2) land use functions (functional spatial structure) and (3) social structures (social spatial structure). The next step should focus on the identification of major complex processes of urban change, that combine changes in physical, functional and social aspects of the urban spatial structure, such as commercialisation, gentrification or suburbanisation. Finally, areas shall be identified in post-communist cities according to the nature and dynamics of territorial restructuring, such as commercialised districts, gentrified neighbourhoods, declined industrial zones, ghettoised tenement areas, declining zones in housing estates, new suburban residential districts, new suburban retail, distribution or warehousing districts, new greenfield industrial zones, etc.

The explanation of identified spatial changes in post-communist cities must reflect (1) the character of the pre-existing urban environment of former communist city (including pre-communist features); (2) the impact of government-directed transformations, such as institutional deregulation, privatisation and price and rent liberalisation; (3) the urban consequences of general processes of social and economic change shaped by the transition to contemporary capitalist society.

The core of the explanatory concept of urban spatial changes must be organised around the issue of a confrontation of newly introduced mechanisms of market allocation of resources with the existing historically formed urban environment. The new principles and mechanisms of production of spatial structures are created through a double transition. It includes (1) the local (Central and East European) transition to market economy and democratic policy-making including the openness to world economy; and (2) the global transition (common for cities around the World) caused by economic globalisation and its influence on local political, economic, social and cultural restructuring. This double transition is a key feature of post-communist cities, which distinguish them from other types of urban transitions.

The double transition creates a similar context for urban change in post-communist cities. Can we expect similar spatial outcomes in our cities? Already superficial observations of downtown Prague and Warsaw shows striking differences in newly emerged physical landscapes. Why are the outcomes so remarkably different, when the context of general conditions given by the two transitions is similar?

First, there were marked differences in the pre-existing urban fabric. Second, while the destination of transition to market economy and democratic society was the same, the concrete trajectories of government-directed transformations differed in individual countries (for instance the role of property restitution). Third, while the globalisation of capitalist economy embraces the whole planet it often brings different local outcomes. Therefore, the crucial question for the geography of post-communist city is to place specific local features (of urban environment, institutional regulations, cultural features) within the generally similar context in the space of (1) transitional countries and (2) globalising World.¹

¹ This paper has been elaborated within a project „Transformation of Spatial Intra-Urban Structures and their Reflection in Perception: A Comparative Study of Prague, Bratislava, Olomouc and Presov”, which is supported by Research Support Scheme of the Open Society Support Foundation (RSS/OSSF), no. 2176/308/1999.