

Shrinkage, metropolisation and peripheralisation in East Germany

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Introduction

In the last decade or so, there has been extensive research about questions of shrinkage (*Schrumpfung*) and urban renewal (*Stadtumbau*) after a task force report for the German government revealed a number of 1,4 mln. vacant flats in East Germany (Bericht, 2000; Lang, 2010). There, most towns and cities have been labelled shrinking city (*schrumpfende Stadt*) since then, dealing with the consequences of demographic decline and low economic performance (cf. Bernt, 2009). In this context I understand shrinkage as related to a loss of density and intensity of use in demographic, economic and physical terms and being closely related to processes of urban decline (Noon et al., 2000: 63; Cheshire, Hay, 1989: 31f). Whereas from a planning perspective urban decline and urban decay are widely studied phenomena throughout the industrialised world, in particular the parallelity of economic and demographic discontinuities in the context of a structural breakdown after the fall of the Iron Curtain can be seen as a specific feature to East Germany urban and regional development after 1989 (Lang, 2010; Brandstetter, Lang, Pfeifer, 2005; Großmann, 2007: 25ff). Hence, the term 'shrinkage' entered the scientific discourse. A bunch of literature around this term meanwhile pictures a coherent sketch of the phenomenon in Germany (cf. Lang, 2010) with international links and a discussion of similar developments in other countries (e.g. Oswalt, 2005; Couch et al., 2007; Grossmann et al., 2008; Pallagst, 2010; Reckien, Martinez-Fernandez, 2011).

Nearly totally neglected in this discourse is the impact of political debates and normative considerations linked to the strong metropolitan centres in Germany and the declining (mainly Eastern German) regions. The paper highlights the role of political-normative ideas of metropolisation and societal relations within this complex process elaborating on the concept of peripheralisation. The paper is based on a number of research projects dealing with urban renewal and urban development in East Germany as well as theoretical contributions to the newly established research cluster "The production of space in the context of polarisation and peripheralisation" at the Leibniz-Institute for Regional Geography in Leipzig, Germany.

From Kohl's 'blühende Landschaften' to pro-active dealing with shrinkage

It took about ten years until inhabitants, planners and decision makers realised that chancellor Kohl's promise of blossoming landscapes (*blühende Landschaften*) for East Germany to be achieved soon after reunification was far from reality. Economic recovery took much longer than expected, unemployment stagnated far above average for years and emigration to the prospering regions in West Germany led to a brain drain of young and well educated people. Low birth rates were furthering the loss of population and in many urban areas a mere

downward spiral of decline became a real challenge. Maintaining unrealistic ideas of growth were hindering proactive strategies in managing decline (see also Reckien, Martinez-Fernandez, 2011: 1376). Hence, it must be seen as a success that nowadays talking about shrinkage is part of political business and normality in urban management processes in Germany. East German cities are even often seen as trailblazers for dealing with processes which are expected to affect more and more areas all over Germany, Europe and worldwide (e.g. Engler, 2002; Links, Volke, 2009).

Over twenty years after the monetary union in 1990, which set off a crude economic breakdown already in the final months of the GDR's existence, I suggest to look at urban and regional development in East Germany applying concepts of centralisation and peripheralisation instead of sticking too much to theories of post-socialist transformation and demographic change in order to understand persistent challenges. The term shrinkage is still widely discussed in German media – oscillating between doom (e.g. „Wittenberge stirbt“ – TAZ, 6 June 2010) and innovation („Der Letzte macht das Licht an“ – Süddeutsche Zeitung, 8 April 2010) – but became a mere buzzword in scientific debates with little overlaps to potentially more interesting theoretical debates. Thereby the whole discussion is framed by a dominant East-West discourse stating one-sided dependencies and being based on mutual misunderstandings.

After more than ten years of decline, some scholars started discussing if East Germany or parts of it were going to become periphery (e.g. Bürkner, 2005; Schmidt, 2005; Kollmorgen, 2005). Following Norbert Elias (1970), Karl-Dieter Keim called for looking at spatially relevant processes but not at statically defined spaces (Keim, 2001, 2006) – introducing the term peripheralisation into the debate. Indeed, the concept of peripheralisation helps to understand the phenomenon of shrinkage analytically and places it in a wider global-spatial, scalar and discursive context (cf. also McCann, 2004: 2317). Further, also peripheries must be seen as socially produced relating to negative internal and external images of East Germany as a total and in its parts. I suggest perceiving the continuous shrinkage of East German regions as a form of peripheralisation. And peripheralisation can be seen as a socio-spatial process which cannot be imagined without processes of centralisation (cf. Eriksson, 2008).

Understanding shrinkage as a process of peripheralisation

The concept of peripheralisation facilitates a broader, more discursive and relational understanding of the phenomenon of shrinkage and supplements structural approaches which are dominant in German and European planning discourses. In these discourses, the viewpoint on urban and regional development often is reduced to processes within particular spatial boundaries without adequately recognising supra regional developments. Hence, most research dealing with shrinkage is about symptoms rather than causes. Having a view on spatially relevant processes makes it easier to broach issues of discursive (political) attribution respectively the relation between societal normative orientations and “real” developments. Shrinking cities and regions – and peripheries in general – should rather be seen as the result of societal processes of peripheralisation and not as a structural condition of space (cf. also Beetz, 2008; Blowers, Leroy, 1994). Researching uneven spatial development and socio-spatial polarisation, the concept of peripheralisation suggests a focus on wider

processes in society. This helps to better understand the emergence of socio-spatial disparities, the response of decision makers as well as the room for manoeuvre which shapes these decisions.

Starting point for my considerations around the concept of peripheralisation is the multidimensionality of shrinkage as well as the overlapping character of a number of spatially relevant processes in this context:

- Currently, population in Germany concentrates in a diminishing number of prosperous regions opposing a growing number of regions being characterised by population decline;
- as a consequence of the decline of traditional industries, some areas have more and more problems to find their places within the world economy and experience a growing dependence on transfer payments, as a competitive economic base has not yet (re-)emerged; this often results not only in an economic but also in a one-sided political dependence with unbalanced power relations;
- more recent (neoliberal) positions lead regional policy to a focus on larger and prospering centres and metropolitan areas furthering socio-spatial polarisation (cf. e.g. Weichhart, 2008) whereas other areas lose importance;
- infrastructures are being more and more centralised (e.g. the restructuring of high-speed transport networks according to efficiency criteria alters the (relative) position of particular areas), and service provision is reduced in quality and quantity in remote spaces leading to a loss of functions and problems of accessibility (Barlösius, 2006).

In principle, the terms periphery or peripheralisation are neutral. However, due to the negotiation of spatial categories, spatial structures and land use, space becomes normatively charged (and in part negatively labelled). High rates of emigration do not constitute negative images of depopulation areas alone but the stigmatisation in public discourse and in relation to other spaces. Beetz depicts the order of centre and periphery in the context of the dominance of the centres in societal discourse. Herein the centres are constantly able to portray themselves as spaces of modernity and progress. Consequently it is symbolically of highest importance for spaces to be part of corporate mainstream (Beetz, 2008: 14).

A good example for this is the current debate about metropolitan regions in Germany (cf. e.g. Schmitt, 2007), which parallels similar political discourses in other EU-countries such as Poland or Rumania (e.g. Domanski, 2011; Komornicki, Czapiewski, 2006; Parysek, 2007). Metropolitan regions nowadays cover nearly the whole area of Germany and can be seen as a current paradigm of spatial planning. In 1995, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Spatial Development in Germany (MKRO) defined the first six metropolitan regions, in 1997 a seventh followed, and in 2005 finally 11 regions were defined as metropolitan regions. The MKRO's 2006 *Leitbild* (spatial development vision) "Growth and Innovation" demonstrates this clearly (MKRO, 2006, BMVBS/ BBR, 2007: 13). The *Leitbild* defines centres, inner and wider metropolitan functional zones (*metropolitaner Verflechtungsraum*) as well as transition zones (*Übergangszonen*). In particular at these fringes of metropolitan regions, there are political

conflicts along questions of regional enlargement – defining municipalities at the edge of the region either as belonging to the centre or as periphery. The *Leitbild* remains relatively vague when it comes to questions about these in-between-spaces. It also does not pick up trans-national relations such as in the case of Szczecin (Poland) which bears metropolitan functions for the Northeast of Germany. The 2010 *Raumtypen* (spatial analysis categories) distinguish between central and peripheral spaces using density and accessibility indicators of “central” functions such as infrastructure, services and employment opportunities (BBSR, 2012: 18f, 40f). I find it problematic to categorise space on the basis of structural distances. This is in particular problematic as there is no transparent discussion about the relevance and selection of indicators as well as thresholds. It remains for example unclear how and by whom distances are defined within which centres are seen as accessible. Moreover, the de facto accessibility of functions and services is often unrelated to geographical distance anyway.

Conceptualising peripheralisation

As the relation of centre and periphery is immanent, also peripheralisation implies processes of centralisation: The logic and dynamic of spatial centralisation determines the peripheralisation of other spaces by attracting population, economic productivity and infrastructural functions to the disadvantage of other regions (Keim, 2006: 3). Blowers and Leroy defined peripheral spaces already in the mid 1990s as “geographically remote, economically marginal, politically powerless and socially inhomogeneous” and they stress the simultaneity of these features: “Peripheral communities, in our definition, encompass each of these characteristics in a lesser or greater degree” (Blowers/Leroy, 1994: 203).

The dynamic process of differentiation in “winning” and “losing” regions even overlaps in different spatial scales (regional, national and global). The dynamic of population numbers and functional density hence cannot be seen as sufficient to constitute peripheries. However, existence and relation of centres and peripheries can be seen as a system immanent part of the capital economic system. E.g. Komlosy defines regional peripheralisation as growing dependence of disadvantaged regions from the centre (Komlosy 1988: 1) and thereby further elaborates more traditional theories of polarisation perceiving uneven development as a “natural” element of modern economies (see also Hudson, 2007).

But still, peripheralisation is not constituted absolutely and must be seen as a relational concept which also depends on dominant normative interpretations and/or theoretical viewpoints of the central and the peripheral. Centre and periphery are not constituted structurally but emerge discursively. Hence, processes of centralisation can take place in rural or geographically remote areas and processes of peripheralisation can occur in agglomerations. Questions of power as well as inside and outside regional images become central features constituting peripheries. It is not so much individual power but rather the power in the overall societal discourse within which peripheries are or become meaningless. Actors representing peripheries do not have a say in the overall (regional) policy discourse or do not get access to relevant decision taking processes (cf. Eriksson, 2008). When it comes to location decisions of firms, functions and infrastructures, other regions are served, structural problems of peripheral regions are not recognised from the outside or not seen as relevant. „*Sich nicht (mehr) gegen Benachteiligungen wehren zu können, das bedeutet Peripherie*“ (Neu,

2006: 13). Similarly, Blowers and Leroy see 'powerlessness' as a central feature of periphery which is strengthened by a 'culture of acceptance' being based on values "which predispose the community to inaction" (Blowers, Leroy 1994: 204f).

Defining centrality is part of societal discourses, political negotiation and medial orchestration (Beetz, 2008). Within this process, particular forms of life and work as well as images and paradigms of spatial development are seen as better, more reasonable or more significant than others. The relation of centre and periphery thus mirrors the societal construction of spatial order. The discourse around this order, however, is only implicit. Usually the definition of centre and periphery is based on structural indicators making us believe this follows a kind of natural order. To question this order should also be a concern of to date urban research in the context of *shrinkage*.

Further, (collective) self-images of actors in peripheralised regions are highly relevant and often lead to mental lock-ins setting off downward spirals of decline. Such negative collective self-identities have been recognised for the town Guben as collective resignation (Bürkner, 2002), for Hoyerswerda („und diesen deprimierten, desillusionierten und ohnehin verunsicherten Leuten reißen sie jetzt auch noch die Stadt ab“; Kil, 2001), for the German-Polish border region as „*Peripherisierung im Kopfe*“ (Matthiesen, 2002: 3), for Weißwasser (Kabisch, Bernt, Peter, 2004) and for Johanngeorgenstadt as "*Selbstetikett einer sterbenden oder schon toten Stadt*" (Steinführer, Kabisch, 2007: 120). Here, consequently emigration appears as escape or at least as discursively constituted *modus agendi*. If such cognitive developments become dominant, complete regions tend to be paralysed and appear hostile to innovation.

It has to be kept in mind that processes of peripheralisation are dynamic and revisable. E.g. for Hoyerswerda, Kil stated 10 years later a re-orientation in local policy and self-identities and does not perceive the town anymore as negative example („*Hoyerswerda ist kein Negativbeispiel mehr*“, Lausitzer Rundschau, 26 May 2010).

Conclusions

In the last decade, there has been an intensified discussion in German urban research about shrinking towns and cities. At first sight, the phenomenon appeared as a kind of East German particularity as a result of the special situation of socio-political transformation and the structural breakdown after the end of the GDR. Step by step, however, the 1980s debate (e.g. Häußermann, Siebel 1988) re-appeared in discourse and further links to other scientific debates were put up (Lang, 2010, Grossmann et al., 2008). Nowadays, the discussion is variegated and has evolved to a self-contained field in urban research in Germany. Nevertheless, there are still many open questions calling for further theoretical interlinking. The concept of peripheralisation helps to better understand the phenomenon of shrinkage and places it in a wider global-spatial, relational and discursive context. The emergence of peripheries is easier to understand when taking into account processes of globalisation and capital order as well as ideas of the social construction of space. Also peripheries must be seen as socially produced relating to negative internal and external images of East Germany as a total and in its parts. Hence, the continuous shrinkage of East German regions can be seen as a

form of peripheralisation. Peripheralisation, however, can be seen as a socio-spatial process which cannot be imagined without processes of centralisation.

Future research on shrinking towns and cities in Germany and other parts of the industrialised world should not only deal with structural conditions of particular areas but include multi-level perspectives and acknowledge processes of the social construction of space (Lefebvre 1991). It is not just the mere trends of emigration, job losses or de-population which constitutes shrinking cities and regions. It is also the labeling and adding of values to these structuralist processes and types of regions. Urban shrinkage should also be addressed within the context of these wider processes of peripheralisation and centralisation. It is unclear to what extent political and social normative imaginations limit the room for manoeuvre of local decision makers (e.g. in form of current discourses on metropolitan regions) and what constitutes re-orientations of such (internal and external) imaginations? These are only some of the challenging questions for further urban and regional research dealing with urban development in East Germany and beyond. The notion of shrinkage thereby is still crucial as most urban research concentrates on city and metropolitan development from a growth perspective while more and more urban areas in the Western world are characterized by processes of decline. These processes however, should be seen in a wider relational and dynamic multi-scalar context under political and discursive regulation. Applying the notion of peripheralisation can thus be one way to advance current shrinkage research.

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