

# Conceptualizing Urban Shrinkage in East Germany: Understanding Regional Peripheralization in the Light of Discursive Forms of Region Building<sup>1</sup>

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## 1 Introduction

Questions of shrinkage (*Schrumpfung*) and urban renewal (*Stadtumbau*) have played a major role in urban development and policy debates in Germany after a task force report for the national government revealed a number of 1.4 Million vacant flats in East Germany towards the end of the 1990s (Kommission, 2000). Nearly all eastern towns and cities have been labelled shrinking city (*schrumpfende Stadt*) since then, struggling with the consequences of demographic decline and low economic performance (cf. Bernt, 2009). In this context I suggest shrinkage relates to a loss of density and intensity of use in demographic, economic and physical terms and parallels processes of urban decline. Whereas from a planning perspective urban decline and urban decay are widely studied phenomena throughout the industrialised world (Noon et al., 2000: 63; Beauregard, 1993; Cheshire/Hay, 1989; Medhurst/Lewis, 1969), in particular the simultaneity of large-scale economic and demographic decline in the context of a structural breakdown and societal re-orientation after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) can be seen as a specific feature to East German urban and regional development after 1989 (Lang, 2010; Brandstetter et al., 2005; Großmann, 2007: 25ff.). Hence, the term “shrinkage” entered the scientific discourse. A bunch of literature around this term meanwhile pictures a coherent description of the phenomenon in Germany (cf. Lang, 2010) including a discussion of similar developments in other countries (e.g. Oswalt, 2005; Couch et al., 2007; Pallagst, 2010; Reckien/Martinez-Fernandez, 2011).

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A broader theoretical discussion of concepts which could help to better understand the persistence of shrinkage such as theories of urban and economic development, institutional change or (post-socialist) transformation as well as constructivist approaches to shrinkage remained vague, however (Grossmann et al., 2008; Lang, 2010). In particular the impact of discursive factors such as internal and external images or (political) debates and normative considerations linked to dynamic and strong, mainly West German, metropolitan regions and shrinking, mainly East German, regions plays a minor role in the scholarly discussion to date.

Further elaborating on a theorization of shrinkage, the paper highlights such discursive aspects of region building, underlying societal relations within this complex process, for a further elaborating on the notion of (regional) peripheralization. To do so, I start with a brief sketch of the East German shrinkage debate in chapter two, selectively highlighting discursive aspects which I believe to be under-researched. In chapter three I introduce some basic ideas of regional peripheralization and suggest understanding the continuous shrinkage of some cities and regions as being linked to a process of peripheralization. In part this process is driven by particular forms of discourse about these cities and regions and about general imaginations of core-periphery relations, within which metropolitan regions represent “core” and shrinking regions “peripheral” identities. To illustrate the role of such discursive aspects, chapter four is about the current paradigm of metropolization, further polarizing regional development in Germany, and about the role of collective images in shrinking regions. To go further, in chapter five I present initial ideas for a conceptual framework to analyze such aspects by utilizing some basic positions from post-colonial thought before summing up the central insights of my paper for future research on shrinkage issues in chapter six.

The paper is based on a number of research projects I was involved in, which deal with urban renewal and urban development in East Germany (Lang, 2008; Fritsche/Lang, 2007; Lang et al., 2005; Brombach et al., 2005; Brandstetter et al., 2005) as well as theoretical contributions to the newly established research cluster “The production of space in the context of polarization and peripheralization” at the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography in Leipzig, Germany (IfL, 2012, Lang, 2010).

## **2 From Kohl’s “blossoming landscapes” to pro-active dealing with shrinkage**

I want to illustrate the role of images and unbalanced power relations for the development of East Germany by citing an early quote of the then chancellor Helmut Kohl:

“Through joint efforts we will soon succeed to transform Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Saxony-Anhalt, Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia into blossoming landscapes (*blühende Landschaften*), in which it is worthwhile to live and work“ (Kohl, 1990).<sup>2</sup>

After Kohl’s metaphorical promise of *blühende Landschaften* to be achieved in East Germany soon after reunification, it took years until urban and regional planners as well as decision makers realized how unrealistic this was within a short time span. Economic restructuring has taken much longer than expected, unemployment remained far above German average for over twenty years and persisting emigration to the prospering regions in West Germany led to a constant brain drain of young and well-educated people whereas immigration remained low. 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 was hindering proactive strategies in managing shrinkage (see also Reckien/Martinez-Fernandez, 2011: 1376). Nowadays, talking about shrinkage is part of political business and normality in urban management processes in Germany. East German cities are even sometimes 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).

The term shrinkage is still widely discussed in German media – oscillating between doom (e.g. “Wittenberge is dying”<sup>3</sup>) and innovation (“The last one turns out the lights”<sup>4</sup>) – but became a mere buzzword in scientific debates still lacking theorization. Thereby the whole discussion is framed by a dominant East-West discourse stating one-sided dependencies and being based on mutual preconceptions. The impact of this discourse on the labelling of regions has not yet gained much interest in the scientific shrinkage literature and is yet to explore. 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 notions of centralization and peripheralization in order to understand why shrinkage has remained.

### **3. Understanding shrinkage as a process of regional peripheralization**

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<sup>2</sup> “Durch eine gemeinsame Anstrengung wird es uns gelingen, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern und Sachsen-Anhalt, Brandenburg; Sachsen und Thüringen schon bald wieder in blühende Landschaften zu verwandeln, in denen es sich zu leben und zu arbeiten lohnt.”

<sup>3</sup> “Wittenberge stirbt.” In: die tageszeitung, 6 June 2010.

<sup>4</sup> “Der letzte macht das Licht aus.” In: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 8 April 2010.

After more than ten years of decline, some scholars started discussing East Germany or parts of it as periphery (e.g. Bürkner, 2005; Schmidt, 2005; Kollmorgen, 2005). Following Norbert Elias (1970), Karl-Dieter Keim introduced the term peripheralization into the debate calling for looking at spatially relevant processes but not at statically defined spaces (Keim 2001, 2006). With its processual approach the notion of peripheralization helps to understand the phenomenon of shrinkage analytically by placing shrinkage in a wider temporal, global-spatial, multi-scalar and discursive context (cf. also McCann 2004: 2317). Blowers and Leroy defined peripheral spaces as “geographically remote, economically marginal, politically powerless and socially inhomogeneous” and they stress the simultaneousity of these features: “Peripheral communities, in our definition, encompass each of these characteristics in a lesser or greater degree” (Blowers/Leroy, 1994: 203). Such definitions of periphery (either implicitly or explicitly) imply the relation to a core combined with particular social characteristics constituting the peripheral. Hence peripheries should be seen as being socially produced. I suggest understanding the continuous shrinkage of many East German regions as a form of peripheralization.

The notion of regional peripheralization 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 the context of urban shrinkage and decline (e.g. Nuissl et al., 2007). In these discourses, the viewpoint on urban and regional development often is reduced to processes within particular spatial boundaries without adequately recognizing supra regional developments and their discursive construction. Hence, most research dealing with shrinkage is about symptoms rather than causes. Having a view on spatially relevant processes of a social construction of space (rather than structural conditions) makes it easier to broach issues of discursive (political) attribution respectively the relation between societal normative orientations and “real” developments (cf. also Beetz, 2008; Blowers/Leroy. 1994). This helps to better understand the emergence of socio-spatial disparities and uneven development, the response of decision makers as well as the room for manoeuvre which shapes these decisions. Starting point for my considerations around the notion of peripheralization is the multidimensionality of shrinkage as well as the overlapping character of a number of spatially relevant processes in this context.

Currently, the population in Germany concentrates in a diminishing number of prosperous regions opposing a growing number of regions being characterised by population decline and lower economic dynamics (Deutscher Bundestag, 2012: 59; BBSR, 2012: 81). 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 have experienced 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 to the disadvantage of shrinking regions. More recent (neoliberal) positions have lead regional policy to a focus on larger and prospering centres and metropolitan regions furthering socio-spatial polarization (cf. e.g. Weichhart, 2008) and thereby indirectly devaluing other (shrinking) regions.

Infrastructures are being more and more centralized (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 changes in accessibility (Barlösius, 2006).

As the relation of centre and periphery is immanent, also peripheralization implies processes of centralization (Eriksson, 2008). The logic and dynamic of spatial centralization determines the peripheralization of other spaces by attracting population, economic productivity and infrastructural functions to the disadvantage of other regions (Keim, 2006: 3). The dynamic of population numbers and functional density cannot be seen as sufficient to constitute peripheries. Existence and relation of centres and peripheries can be seen as a system-immanent part of the capital economic system. For example, Komlosy (1988: 1) defines regional peripheralization as growing dependence of disadvantaged regions on the centre and challenges (economic) theories of polarisation (Myrdal, 1957; Hirschman, 1958; Krugman, 1991) which lead to a perception of uneven development as a “natural” element of modern economies (see also Hudson, 2007).

Due to the negotiation of spatial categories, spatial structures and land use, space becomes normatively charged (and in part negatively or positively labelled). High rates of emigration do not constitute negative images of depopulating areas alone but the stigmatisation in public discourse and in relation to other spaces. Beetz (2008) depicts the order of centre and periphery in the context of the dominance of the centres in societal discourse where the centres are constantly portrayed as “core” spaces of modernity and progress. Consequently, it is symbolically of highest importance for urban or regional actors to portray “their” city, town or region as part of corporate mainstream (Beetz 2008: 14).

#### **4. Discursive constructions of “core” and “periphery”**

A good example of the dominance of the bigger centres to the disadvantage of other areas is the debate about metropolitan regions in Germany (cf. Schmitt, 2007).<sup>5</sup> 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 eleven 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).<sup>6</sup> 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 core 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 official 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.). However, there is no explicit discussion about the relevance and selection of indicators as well as the thresholds used to distinguish central from peripheral areas. It remains for example unclear according to whose standards distances are defined within which centres and central functions are seen as accessible. Moreover, the de facto accessibility of functions and services is often unrelated to geographical distance anyway and also the judgements about which distances are acceptable and which not vary in different spatial contexts.

Despite such considerations, the definition of metropolitan, non-metropolitan or peripheral areas has a huge impact on imaginations of space. The above considerations about the metropolization process in Germany demonstrate that peripheralization also depends on

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<sup>5</sup> This parallels similar political discourses in other EU countries such as Hungary, the UK, Poland or Romania (e.g. Domanski, 2011; Komornicki/Czapiewski, 2006; Parysek, 2007). There has been an ongoing re-orientation of regional policy in the UK (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010) and Hungary where there have been trends towards centralisation since 1998 and especially after recent national elections (Pálné Kovács, 2010; Perger, 2010) whereas Poland has seen struggles with metropolitan regional strategies (Kaczmarek/Mikula, 2009; Smętkowski et al., 2009) provoking debates relating to core/periphery dualities. In Poland, this debate has become more vigorous recently raising serious concerns in the context of the new National Strategy of Regional Development 2010-2020 and the emerging Conception of Poland's Spatial Organization (Grochowski, 2009; Domanski, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the German planning system see e.g. BBR, 2000, Turowski, 2002.

dominant normative interpretations of “core” and “periphery”. Centre and periphery are not constituted structurally but emerge discursively. Thereby processes of centralization could refer to rural or geographically remote areas and processes of peripheralization could refer to agglomerations or vice versa.

Questions of power as well as internal and external regional images become central features of peripheries. The focus is not so much on the power of individual actors but rather on a sort of collective power in the overall societal discourse within which peripheries are or become meaningless. Often, actors representing peripheries are not involved 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. “Periphery means not being able (anymore) to oppose being disadvantaged” (Neu, 2006: 13)<sup>7</sup>. Such forms of “powerlessness” can be seen as a 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.).

For example, (collective) self-images in peripheralized regions often lead to mental lock-ins promoting and re-producing negative regional imaginations. Such dominant self-identities have been recognized for the town Guben and Hoyerswerda as collective resignation (“And on top of that these depressed, disillusioned and anyway alienated people get their town torn down”<sup>8</sup>), for the German-Polish border region as “peripheralization in one’s mind”<sup>9</sup>, for Weißwasser and for Johanngeorgenstadt as “self-granted label of a dying or already dead city”<sup>10</sup>. Here, consequently emigration appears as escape or at least as discursively constituted *modus agendi*. If such representations become for a period of time dominant, regions tend to appear hostile to new forms of development furthering processes of decline.<sup>11</sup>

## 5 Regional peripheralization, core-periphery relations and internal others

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<sup>7</sup> “Sich nicht (mehr) gegen Benachteiligungen wehren zu können, das bedeutet Peripherie”.

<sup>8</sup> “und diesen deprimierten, desillusionierten und ohnehin verunsicherten Leuten reißen sie jetzt auch noch die Stadt ab.” In: Kil, 2001: 81. See also Bürkner, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> “Peripherisierung im Kopfe.” In: Matthiesen, 2002: 3.

<sup>10</sup> “Selbstetikett einer sterbenden oder schon toten Stadt.” In: Kabisch et al, 2004; Steinführer/Kabisch, 2007: 120.

<sup>11</sup> For Hoyerswerda, Kil noticed ten years later that there has been a re-orientation in local policy and self-identities so that the town can no longer be perceived as a negative example (“Hoyerswerda ist kein Negativbeispiel mehr.” In: Lausitzer Rundschau, 26 May 2010).

Both examples in chapter four – the current process of metropolisation in Germany and the role of collective images for shrinking towns and cities – illustrate the relevance of discourse in core-periphery relations to the persistence and reproduction of shrinkage. To better understand this relation on a regional or national level and to develop a conceptual framework for future research, it seems worthwhile exploring postcolonial concepts of difference and otherness. Although applied on a supranational level, this helps to understand how the “peripheral” is represented by social and economic “core” regions, and the impacts that this has on the construction of “core” identities. Being discussed on a supranational level in a post-colonial context (Said, 2003; Todorova, 1997; Bhabha, 1990) or European context (Kuus, 2004; Carey/Raciborski, 2004), these concepts enable insights into the processes and material effects of socio-economic discourses between “core” and “peripheral” areas on a regional or national level, too (cf. Willett, 2010; Eriksson, 2008; Jansson, 2005).

A research framework for the analysis of regional peripheralization could be based on the assumption that “knowledge” about a particular region is constructed through formations of power, which is replicated through discourse by individuals, organizations and institutions. These affect how a place is perceived by others, placing limitations (or expectations) on what people and organisations are imagined being capable of (Eriksson, 2008; Said, 2003). This is an “othering” process whereby one region is presented as qualitatively “different” to another. On a regional level, one could argue that from a core perspective periphery is not only defined as different but also as bearing features which help to maintain the core identity, e.g. the periphery as “rural idyll” and as “lagging behind” with a “slow pace of life” vs. the core as “modern”, “globally networked” and “highly innovative” space (see also Willett, 2010).

This kind of theoretical framework within studies of regional development originated with Hechter’s (1975) “internal colonialism” (see also Walls, 1976; Jansson, 2003, 2005), providing a narrative of how peripheries are constructed by the “core”, thereby maintaining existing power relationships. Here, the authors introduced the term “internal others” because the lines of difference are drawn not between but within nation states. However, Hechter (and also Said, 2003; Eriksson, 2008; Willett, 2010) use a perspective on power, whereby one party is the weaker body and the other the stronger, denying agency to the “weaker” body.

Researching such internal othering processes, however, should include a two-way perspective of core-periphery relations and should explore the multi-dimensional aspects of power as discussed by Foucault or Deleuze. Representations of place within core and peripheral identities could be explored through mechanisms such as hegemony. Following Laclau and Mouffe (1985), through networks and cooperation the “powerless” may propagate

alternative forms of knowledge, challenging dominant representations. This indicates that the “knowledge” within representations of place may be temporary and undergo processes of change and rearticulation. Here, peripheral actors should not be seen as passive recipients of damaging “backward” and “stagnant” types of representation, since they play an active role in the discursive process – as shown above in the examples of collective self-identities. This further allows questions about peripheral “strategies of resistance as a response to imposed identities” (Eriksson, 2008), it challenges the notion of “powerlessness” as a characteristic feature of peripheral identity and opens possibilities for a multi-scale conception of centrality and peripherality (Hudson, 2005; McCann, 2004; Sellers, 2002).

Such a multi-scale conception is important as the dynamic process of differentiation in “cores” and “peripheries” overlaps at different spatial scales (local, regional, national, European and global) and calls for an approach to analyse sub-national core/periphery relations incorporating discursive references to global and European forms of polarisation (e.g. Timar, 2004; Hörschelmann/Stenning, 2008). This opens up research perspectives which incorporate forms of polarisation and peripheralization on European and global scales such as the uneven distribution of power between Western and Eastern Europe or the inclusion in global networks in various fields.

## **6. Conclusions**

In the last decade, there has been an intensified discussion in German urban research about shrinking towns and cities. Nowadays, the discussion is variegated and has evolved into a self-contained field of urban research in Germany. However, there are still many open questions calling for further theoretical interlinking, in particular when it comes to core-periphery relations on different scales.

A way to conduct further research about the continuous shrinkage of many East German cities and regions is to perceive shrinkage as a form of peripheralization. Shrinkage is reinforced through processes of metropolisation making it difficult for non-metropolitan regions to find their place in regional competition and to be perceived as attractive places for economic activity. Defining “core” identities is part of societal discourses. Within such processes, 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 – and to this date

supports the metropolitan region model in Germany. The discourse around this order, however, is only implicit. Usually the definition of centre and periphery is based on structural indicators making us believe that this follows a kind of natural order. Hence, to challenge this order should be a concern of urban research in the context of shrinkage.

Future research on shrinking towns and cities in Germany and other parts of the industrialized 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 depopulation which constitute shrinking cities and regions. It is also the labelling and adding of values to these structuralist constructions of regions. One way to operationalise this for future research could be to further develop approaches building on ideas of internal othering and internal colonialism. A research design applying these concepts could help to answer a number of challenging questions for further urban and regional research on urban development in East Germany and beyond. It is for example 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? What are the logics of regional development in peripheralized regions under these conditions and are there any strategies to oppose the dominant metropolitan development model?

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 shrinkage and decline. These processes, however, should be seen in a wider relational and dynamic multi-scalar context under political and discursive regulation. Applying some basic notions interlinked with regional peripheralization, can thus be one way to supplement current shrinkage research.

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