SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY OF HISTORICAL CITY CENTRES IN CENTRAL EUROPE – AN INTRODUCTION

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1 Introduction

The spectacular growth of cities of our age has been accompanied by several socio-economic processes. The worldwide network of metropolises has merged into a global system, and this system constitutes the command centre of global economy. Therefore research on large cities and metropolises has become very important: the future development of our planet is decided in the nodal points of this global urban network. Global cities possess all those institutions, political and economic power, as well as knowledge, by which our future can be formed. However, these seemingly successful cities also suffer from serious social conflicts. Social inequalities have been increasing, just like the number of socially excluded people, the urban tissue has become fragmented and urban crime has been growing. These are not completely new phenomena; the attention towards them on behalf of social sciences has also been permanently present. However, these processes have become vitally important strategically by now. In the global competition the social sustainability of cities has become the dominant factor of competitiveness: industrial traditions, a favourable geopolitical location, or an excellent supply of labour force have little relevance without security and a liveable social environment.

One of the main sources of social conflicts in large cities is the transformation of inner-city residential neighbourhoods. This transformation is often accompanied by a sharp population change, when the original, lower-class residents are replaced by younger and better-off strata, in a process called *gentrification*. This paper investigates the most important conflicts and phenomena deriving from the social transformation of inner-city neighbourhoods on the example of Central Europe; hence it serves as an introduction to the present volume, which is devoted to this issue.

First of all we would like to provide definitions for some of the most frequently used terms in this book. Under *historical city centre* we understand the densely built-up residential zone surrounding the core of towns, which evolved

mainly at the end of the 19th century in Central Europe. The attribute 'historical' does not have any qualitative implication, and is not connected to historical monuments; one should simply think of the inner residential zone of cities. *Social sustainability* could be defined as the kind of urban development that entails the harmonic development of the local society, shapes an environment that ensures the co-existence of different social groups, enhances social integration and improves the living conditions of all groups of citizens. As a consequence of socially sustainable urban development, social inequalities, as well as the level of segregation and exclusion are decreasing. The term *segregation* is used for the geographical separation of different social groups, whereas *gentrification* refers to the process of neighbourhood upgrading, when – due to urban regeneration – relatively affluent upper-middle class groups move into poorer inner-city neighbourhoods, displace local lower-income groups and transform the identity of these neighbourhoods. This type of displacement is an extremely visible process that plays a key role in the physical and social transformation of contemporary cities.

This paper can be divided into three sections. First, we give an overview about the mechanisms, forms and geographical peculiarities of the current transformation of historical city centres, then the social consequences of the transformation and the possible methods of their treatments are discussed, and finally we make an attempt to highlight the most important features of urbanisation in Central Europe.

2 Transformation of historical city centres

The very centre of the town has always played a distinguished role in urban life: this is the geometric centre of the city (easily accessible from all directions) and simultaneously the centre of power, due to different political, religious and economic institutions, whose influence reaches far beyond the city boundaries. Neighbourhoods adjacent to this core have always provided housing for the political and economic *élite* and the service class. This classic pattern of European city is continuously transforming, the building stock is declining or upgrading, new functions are appearing, the structure of local society is permanently changing.

The transformation of cities in the more developed world was first induced by the relative deconcentration of population, which is called *suburbanisation*. In spite of the highly similar determining factors, suburbanisation and the transformation of the city centres differs in Europe and North America to a large extent. The European type of suburbanisation meant first of all the gradual transformation of the rural surrounding of cities: first daily commuting from the

neighbouring villages to the industrialising city set into motion, then some part of the long-distance migrants moving to the city settled down in the suburban belt, due to lower living costs and cheaper housing. This early phase of suburbanisation did not affect the inner residential quarters, the first suburban settlements were typically working-class colonies. It was only at the beginning of the 1930s when members of the middle-class started to discover the suburban belt and migrated in large numbers to these environmentally attractive settlements, normally well-developed small towns. The disadvantages of the city centre, the outdated housing stock and declining residential environment increased further after World War II, and they became serious push-factors in the migration processes, especially during the economic boom of the 1960s. From this period of time the out-migration of the middle-class from the historical city centre accelerated, and it was replaced by poorer strata, especially ethnic minorities.

In Europe the decline of historical city centres drew the attention of politicians and planners to the problem very early. Subsequently, urban policy and planning tried to intervene and slow down the out-migration of people. Not least because city centres have very important symbolic meanings in Europe, they are normally part of the local and national historical identity. Therefore it is easy to understand that revitalisation and the social upgrading of city centres became a strong priority and an aspiration of urban policy in all parts of the continent, though the method of realisation and its effects differed considerably not only between East and West, but also between North and South.

In North America the above-mentioned processes followed a somewhat different path. First of all, the symbolic value of city centres – with some exceptions – is rather low, the architectural value of the inner residential quarters is negligible. Secondly, suburbanisation advanced in a much faster way. Due to a rapid motorisation from the 1930s onwards, the middle-class left the city centres abruptly and settled in the newly developed garden cities. Under these circumstances urban policy and planning had very limited chance to intervene. On the other hand, within the context of American urban development, non-market-based (i.e. public) interventions can hardly remedy the outcomes of market-led urban processes. This also holds for the urban revitalisation and gentrification of the city centres. In North American cities both revitalisation and the replacement of local society took a much faster speed and were more profound than in Europe. In this respect we think differences between Europe and North America are more marked, as opposed to Neil Smith's idea, who considered regional differences within Europe and the US more important than differences between the two continents (*Smith,* 1991 p. 60).[1]

[1] Smith, N. (1991) On gaps in our knowledge of gentrification. In: Van Weesep, J. and Musterd, S. (eds) Urban Housing for the Better-Off: Gentrification in Europe. Utrecht: Stedelijke Netwerken. pp. 52–62.

One important aspect of the transformation of city centres is the growing diversity of urban functions, the strengthening of economic control functions (with high-ranking financial, legal, headquarter and retail services) and the expansion of business activities from the centre to the neighbouring residential areas. In this process the main reasons are the growing importance of large cities in the global economy and the increasing concentration of high-quality services within the global urban network.

Another important characteristic of the transformation of city centres is the rapid social change and the reversal of social decline. It cannot be denied that the renewal of the city centre has a positive impact on the development of the whole city; therefore it became one of the priorities of urban policy very early. As it is noted in the literature, social conflicts in cities evolve mainly as a consequence of urban renewal. Therefore it has become a primary question in urban revitalisation processes whether gentrification gets a green light and the original population is completely replaced, or the renewal advances in a peaceful way, in the spirit of social solidarity (the so-called *soft renewal*). Most of the authors refer to the process of the renewal of city centres and the concomitant social change as the *re-urbanisation* phase of global urbanisation. However, we cannot share this idea, since physical renewal does not contribute to the actual population growth of the inner-city and the return of suburban population cannot be observed. Those who move in the renovated city centres are predominantly single professionals (typical yuppies) or middle-aged better-off households, whose children are already grown up, and for whom the maintenance of a large single-family home at a suburban location means a huge burden. On the other hand, social change also means a growing demand for larger housing units on the market and the expansion of services (i.e. leisure), thus the residential function of the city centres does not really increase.

The third characteristic is that as a consequence of the transformation, the built environment also goes through substantial changes, buildings get renovated, streets become pedestrianised, new shops and services appear according to the taste of the new residents, local transport routes are reorganised, green spaces are improved etc. The direction and extent of renewal depends on the physical conditions of the neighbourhood before upgrading, and to some extent on the actors initiating and executing the renewal (investors, local government, civil organisations etc.) and the co-operation among them.

Large cities of Europe are in different phases of the above-mentioned transformation of city centres, but transformation definitely dominates the urbanisation process everywhere. Therefore we can expect similar problems all around Europe where an urban revitalisation of city centres is in progress.

3 Social consequences of the transformation of city centres

The social consequences of the revitalisation of city centres became one of the targets of social research some decades ago, mainly because they have very negative effects on the quality of life in cities. One of the main contradictions of modern urban development is the growing concentration of social tensions in the most dynamic, economically and culturally most attractive elements of the global urban network. It has become an important goal of urban policy in the more advanced (mostly European) countries to combat and ease these tensions.

It should also be stressed that the transformation of city centres has not only generated negative social consequences, and these negative consequences are not simply the outcome of the faults of urban policy, but ensue mainly from the functioning of the capitalist economy of our days. Therefore, these consequences are in harmony with the interests of certain social groups, and transformation as such cannot be forbidden. On the other hand, the transformation of the city centres has also had positive effects on the development of the whole city, and from this point of view we cannot expect a more serious intervention from the urban policy with regard to these processes. It is possible, however, that the negative impacts of the transformation and especially certain problems are actively handled by urban policy.

The social transformation of city centres is also subordinated to the main consequences of modern market economy, where the split within society according to social classes is diminishing, the middle class is widening and incorporating a great variety of social groups, but at the same time the gap between the lowest and the uppermost strata is steadily increasing. Segregation, gentrification and social exclusion are the symptoms of global urban change in the last decades. *Segregation* – the spatial separation of different social groups – is an old phenomenon and quite natural in a well-stratified society. Residents belonging to the same social group like to live close to each other, due to organically evolved civil ties and similar housing preferences. The rise of ethnically homogeneous neighbourhoods – that could be observed in European cities after the mass in-migration of foreigners – is not simply a ghettoisation process, either; these urban enclaves assist minorities in settling down in cities and in getting rooted in urban society. Obviously, social solidarity among people from the same language, religion or civilisation background is much stronger in an alien environment than otherwise. Segregation becomes a social problem only if it is exclusive and discriminates certain groups. The latter may occur quite frequently as an outcome of the revitalisation of city centres.

Gentrification – when higher-income and better-educated social groups move into the city centre and replace the original population – can also play a positive role in the functioning of the whole city. The city centre can regain its earlier

prestige and symbolic values, consequently the competitiveness of the city may improve. The main question in this respect is whether the invasion of new social groups leads to the complete displacement of the native population, or a healthy social blend arises in the area. Can the native population participate in the upgrading or they become the victims of transformation?

Social exclusion is an urban process that has no positive attributes. This phenomenon does not simply mean the lower-class status or poverty of citizens, but a 'sub-society' status, a complete exclusion from mainstream society. It refers to exclusion from the labour market and permanent unemployment, exclusion from the social care system, from health provision, from old-age pension, and finally, exclusion from the housing market and public housing sector: homelessness.

The growing size of the *underclass*[2] in the dynamic urban centres of advanced capitalist countries is not simply the question of social care, it challenges not only the sensitivity of local society and its social solidarity, but it is a key factor of the long-term development of cities, their competitiveness, attractiveness, liveability and security. The treatment of such a severe social problem is the most difficult task, as no short-term economic advantages can be drawn from it. On the other hand, long-term economic advantages are rarely in the focus of urban social policy.

4 Central European experiences of the transformation of city centres

The functional and social consequences of the transformation of city centres summarised in the previous chapters have certain peculiarities in the post-socialist countries of Central Europe. Papers included in this volume provide many examples of local characteristics; here we only want to sum up the most important general features of urban development in this corner of Europe, with special attention to the city centres. According to our view,

– traditional (market-based) mechanisms of the functioning of city centres did not completely disappear during the state-socialist period, but the pre-war patterns became frozen by the communist regime. After the political and economic changes of 1989 not entirely new urban processes started, but the old patterns revived; urbanisation in these countries showed a re-

[2] A term coined by Myrdal to describe the poor being forced to the margins or out of the labour market by post-industrial societies. Myrdal, G. (1962) Challenge to Affluence. New York: Pantheon.

turn to the European traditions.[3] Current trends of urbanisation in Central Europe are not simply a copy of the processes observed earlier in Western and Southern Europe, but the continuation of those endemic processes, which evolved before World War II and were broken by the communist system for a while. One of the main characteristics of post-socialist urban development is the dramatic speed of transformation. In these countries the different stages of urban development overlap in time and they are present simultaneously.

– Inner-city quarters are traditionally the home of the bourgeois middle class. This segment of the population suffered serious losses during World War II and the subsequent decades of communism. In the cities of Central Europe a large part of the bourgeois middle class were of German or Jewish ethnic origin. The majority of Central European Jews became victims of the *holocaust*, and those who survived emigrated to the West or to Israel in great numbers. On the other hand, Germans were deported to Germany and their number also dramatically fell. Finally, remnants of the pre-war urban middle class were treated as enemies by the communist regime, and they were forced out from their inner-city homes, whereas poor, lower-class families were settled in the vacated dwellings. Thus, the social downgrading of the inner-city had a peculiar mechanism in Central Europe: the middle class did not leave voluntarily for the suburbs, but it gradually disappeared. The marginalisation of inner-city residents also followed a specific path; the reason was not so much the lowering status of the population but the ageing and the concomitant decrease of income.[4] Also, nowadays the main actors of the sporadically appearing gentrification are not so much the yuppies, but a newly evolving middle class.
– The function of city centres also changed during the state-socialist period. Financial, commercial and other business functions generally shrank, and state administrative functions (ministries, authorities etc.) expanded. As a consequence, CBDs (Central Business District) with a strong service sector according to western standards could not evolve. The communist power tried to create new symbolic spaces for its own purposes, in order to substitute the old bourgeois city centres, fortunately with little success.[5] Inner-city residential neighbourhoods, which suffered serious damages in many places of Central Europe, were neglected throughout the whole state-

[3] Enyedi, Gy. 1992: Urbanisation in East Central Europe: Social Processes and Societal Responses in the State Socialist System. *Urban Studies.* Vol. 29. No. 6. pp. 869–881.
[4] The real income of pensioners dramatically decreased in the region during the 1990s.
[5] Grime, K. – Kovács, Z. 2001: Changing urban landscapes in East Central Europe. In: Turnock, D. (ed): East Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union. Environment and Society. London, Arnold. pp. 130–139.

socialist period and started to decline irreversibly. Younger and more affluent families gradually moved out to the housing estates erected at the periphery of towns in the 1960s and 1970s.

– The transformation process that has been taking place in the city centres since the change of regime can be characterised by the following symptoms: i) the already mentioned dramatic speed of changes to which local residents could hardly adapt; ii) the mass-privatisation of the public housing stock (though with different methods in each country), which can be perceived as a compensation for the nationalisation programmes of the 1950s, and which resulted in the radical drop of the share of public rentals in the city centres, often meaning an obstacle for urban rehabilitation; iii) the rapid transformation of urban economies, an expansion of the service sector and the general decline of industry, with a strengthening role of high-tech production, which altogether resulted in a deindustrialization process similar to Western Europe some decades earlier.
– The functional change of city centres has accelerated. The boom of business services, the mushrooming of commercial banks and headquarters of transnational corporations has heavily transformed the built environment of city centres. City-functions have already infiltrated into the neighbouring inner-city residential quarters, providing new kinds of spaces of consumption. The transformation of the built environment has proceeded in a contradictory way. The restless urban landscape of post-socialism is dominated by steel and glass Western-type post-modern buildings, most often for the purpose of office, shopping and tourism. This process has reshaped the original skyline of many of the cities in Central Europe.
– The cooperation between different actors of urban development is weak, as well as the general role of urban planning. After the long years of state-socialist central planning, the notion of 'planning' became discredited in Central Europe, which was also fostered by the victory of neo-liberal economic policy in these countries. Market actors (real-estate developers, transnational corporations etc.) have a strong position in the cities of Central Europe, and they often neglect long-term planning concepts or local interests. The relation between local authorities and the civil sector can be characterised by mutual mistrust; local governments try to command civil organisations instead of negotiating; the civil sphere often concentrates its activities only for protest.
– And finally, one more feature that is typical for Central European cities: compared to Western Europe, ethnic segregation and ethnic conflicts play a rather limited role. This is easily understandable, since cities of Central Europe have become targets of international migration only recently. One important peculiarity is, however, the presence of Roma population in

certain inner-city neighbourhoods, which is often the cause of serious social conflicts. The level of education, the cultural traditions and life-style of Roma people differ considerably from those of mainstream society, therefore unemployment and poverty prevails among them and they are often subject to social exclusion.

The transformation of Central European cities is a completely unique circumstance in time and space, providing a good opportunity for social scientists to say something about the various dimensions of transformation. Authors writing about post-socialist urban transformation often imply that processes taking place in the region are fairly similar to the earlier experiences of Western Europe, and they can easily be fitted into a general theoretical framework. However, as papers of this volume reveal, despite the obvious similarities, urban transformation also bears many peculiarities in the region, due to the different historical legacies and the varying levels of economic and social development.