

**URBAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN CEE COUNTRIES – HARD TO FIND?**

*(extended abstract)*

**Jan Sládek (jan.sladek@ff.cuni.cz)**

*Dept. of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague*

To be presented at:

Second RC21-IJURR-FURS ‘Comparative Urban Studies’ School

Amsterdam School for Social Science Research

University of Amsterdam

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Twenty years of post-communist transformation is usually examined through the great reforms of economy, politics or macro-society. While it is clear that there have been changes on the local level, those were for a long time neglected both by scientists and people. After all the years dealing with great political problems, the people and social scientist start focusing on the local dimensions of development and social interaction.

This comes along with seeking ways of influencing the development process not only on a country level, but on a regional and mostly urban level. As in various other areas, the social scientists have searched the western discourse for appropriate theories and research to be able to explain the dynamics in their surroundings. One of the world-known powerful concept is the one of “urban social movemets”, developed mainly for the countries of advanced capitalism and recently being used is so called developing countries. This article reviews the history of the concept and tries to find out how much is it of use in explaining current trends in the Czech Republic.

## **II. THEORETICAL DISCUSSION**

### **II.A. The grand theoretical debate prior to the thoughts on urban social movements: Chicago Urban Sociology vs. New Urban Sociology and three aftermaths**

The Chicago school of urban sociology, despite its development of approaches, research methods and classical body of work has one significant drawback: It omits the ‘social’ in the ‘urban’, focusing predominantly on ‘natural’ (Zorbaugh, Park) and—later—cultural (e.g. Louis Wirth). In its criticism from the standpoint of (more or less) Marxist political economy, so called New Urban Sociology (Lefebvre, Castells), introduces urban world as a product (in opposition to “creation”; Lefebvre in Production of Space) of modern politico-economic power elites. Despite the strong rhetoric of ‘urban revolution’ and ‘right to the city’ (both Lefebvre), this school—if it can rightfully be called so due to the high level of intellectual individualism of authors—misses actually the social as well, mainly in favor of abstract (Althousser) structural explanations (identification of urban struggles with class struggles). It is true that both schools gave urban sociology basic concepts and paradigms leading to fruitful research (judging from the fact that both branches have respected followers, e.g. Peter Saunders, Sharon Zukin or Sassen), yet none of them came with a deeper notion of active citizenship.

Later, these rather general and abstract/schematic writings (see Castells self-criticism in the afterword to English translation of La Question Urbaine) were followed by more refined, middle ranged if you will, theories of urban development. Although not strictly disjunctive, three different approaches can be traced: (1) Urban ‘managerism’ (Pahl, Molotch); (2) urban struggle as a variation of class struggle; and (3) Impersonal (contingent) market mechanisms (Harvey).

#### **II.A.1. Whose city...or whose growth machine**

During the seventies, two approaches were developed to examine urban developments of that time (mainly suburbanization, land market and urban planning). Raymond Pahl (Whose city? From 1970; the context of Great Britain) focused on the role of planning, social geography (newcomers vs. original community) and local political representation. This understanding was—in Pahl’s

perspective—crucial to prevent the unintended consequences of “utopian” urban planning and a necessary part of coordination between market and social goals. For Pahl, as he dealt with English way of suburbanization, the notion and observation of local community and its internal conflict overshadowed the abstract market powers as analyzed by New Urban Sociology and social geographer David Harvey (see below). Geographically speaking, Pahl remained almost literally on the border of rural and urban, since English suburbanization is based on the flux of urbanites into the surrounding country/villages. Whose city means to Pahl often the basic conflict between the new and the old population.

Quite the opposite, Molotch’s metaphor of ‘city as a growth machine’ (1976) remains in the city focusing exclusively on the urban land market in the USA. According to this author, there is but one consensus: the need for growth, which means a possibility of improvement. If this need is shared by all participants in the urban process, the costs of growth remain distributed rather unevenly. For the Chicago school, the city is a ‘mosaic of natural areas’, for Pahl, the (sub)urban community is a troubled cohabitation of the new and the old; for Molotch, the city is a mosaic of communities (not strictly sharing the very same locality) of interest who compete over attracting the growth without having to pay the costs. This is the key to urban dynamics – it is not the natural competition over the space, nor it’s the city a passive result of abstract capitalist forces. It is more or less planned collective action of the groups trying to enhance public and/or private resources in order to build growth. The means of this competition can, Molotch writes, be masked by the morality of the common, often with the help of local media and political ideology. He admits (given the reality of that time, it would be very insensitive not to see this) the existence of collective protest—political od informal—yet he limits it to those “well-off enough with the time and resources to fight pro-growth coalitions, since those sophisticated middle classes are independent from the growth”. Fighting for nicer environment, they force to close factories; hence they increase the unemployment rate of the poor.

#### II.A.2. *The theory of ‘housing classes’*

It may seem that the work of Rex and Moore (1967) is closely connected the the urban (under)class struggle as depicted by New Urban Sociology, notably Lefebvre. This in fact is far from being true since Rex and Moore base their reflections of inequalities on (and beyond) housing market on the Weberian concept of class. Geographically examining the center of the city (precisely the zone of transition in the wording of the Chicago school), they focus on the immigrant population and their position on the housing market, and--which is unique by that time—its consequences on their chances on the labour market. Here the “good” and “bad” addresses well-known from the US reality of that time, come to play. Far from discussing the class struggle, the authors focus on the status and strategies of these citizen groups and note that they remain mostly individual.

#### II.A.3. *The secondary circuit of capital*

Following the thoughts of Henri Lefebvre on the production of urban space, David Harvey pointed out the specific processes linked to the land and housing market, naming all the system as “secondary” as opposed to the “primary circuit of capital” dealing with the production of consumption of non-realestate goods. The secondary circuit literally “builds the environment” for the production of commodities and is specifying mainly by different timing of the processes (e.g. investing in land market) and, which is socially important, the built environment is inevitably a part

of collective consumption. Both these specificities deter the private sector from investing, which makes the space for public—and political as well as social—interests. This necessarily brings about regulation and bureaucratization of this secondary circuit of capital. Despite these notions, Harvey (at least in his early work) sees no place for effective collective action shaping the urban along or in contrast with the forces of the secondary circuit.

## ***II.B. Reconnecting the 'social' and the 'urban': Gottdiener and (late) Castells***

Mark Gottdiener (1985, *Social Production of Urban Space*) opts for a narrower and less politicized approach. The core of his theory is the contingent nature of the production of urban space. Sociologically, this is derived from the dialectics of structure and agency in the conditions of the advanced capitalism. His main focus is not the new forms (of urban environment—e.g. suburbs, CBDs; of struggles) but the urban process and its actors. Gottdiener's version of capitalism is notable for its fragmentation which often lead to unexpected coalitions or decisions where Molotch's metaphor of growth machine is replaced by "local growth networks". Thus, there is enough space for competition of interest groups, including those organized by local people for whom the urban environment is not only of exchange, but rather of use value, in Lefebvre's words. Different fractions (local/global) of capital compete over resources, yet they are limited by the legitimization of their practices in the eyes of the local citizens. This approach, say of weak capitalism, leaves the door open to theoretical considerations about urban social movements, even if Gottdiener does not do so explicitly.

This is made by Manuel Castells after his departure from the Marxist perspective (as introduced in his *Urban Question*). In his work *Urban Struggle (La Lutte Urbaine)* he shifts the attention from the production of urban space to actually its consumption. A good example is public transportation (and say its consequences for the access to education and other services) or even culturally defined parts of town (for example gay quarters). Castells core question, not present in above mentioned work, ask about the connection between social change and urban change. It is clear that the former does not necessarily bring the latter and vice versa. The question than is, what factors can connect these two.

Castells draws his conclusions from over thirty case studies ranging from historical case of the Paris Commune to various Madrid movements from the seventies. In his conclusion he presents the following:

- 1) The higher is the socio-economic status of the area's population, the lesser is the chance for effective mobilization
- 2) The more recent is the urbanization of the area, the higher is the probability of action; i.e. stable social networks does not seem to be a condition sine qua non for developing effective mobilization
- 3) The lower is the quality of housing, the higher is the chance for citizen action

Castells does not see urban social movements as the only way of collective action, quite the opposite—it is the highest form, distinct (in its effectiveness) from reformists and utopist movements, corporations (vanish after having accomplished, usually small scale, mission). Focusing on analytical model of urban social movements, Castells differentiates between the structural components of USMs (goals, operators) and urban effect (level of urban change, effects on urban politics and impact on urban culture).

### ***II.C. The limitations of above mentioned theories and the choice of Castells' model***

Firstly, Pahl and Molotch overestimate the power of the local elites. If it is doubtful whether it could have been that strong in their time, these days with the trans-national investment into urban milieu and especially in the case of global cities, the sovereignty of these elites is questionable. Secondly, the housing class approach (as well as other class based explanations of the urban world), is vulnerable to all the criticism that was brought onto the theory of classes. Thirdly, various activities (and their impact) of local citizen groups (e.g. various NIMBY groups or squatters) point to the fact that citizens are not that powerless face to face with various circuits of capital.

Apart from being able to cope with the above mentioned limitations, the Castells' model is the closest one to a clear operationalization and most open to empiric testing, which makes it attractive. In spite of this attractiveness, several limitations were mentioned by its critics. Firstly, it seems to be too focused on the power of the citizen movements, neglecting the fact that seventies and eighties (the time of Castells research) were literally full of generally oriented civil movements – the famous Civil Rights Movement in the US can be of an example here. Secondly, it is generally connected to a strong civil society (see Pickvance) as it is a base for the possibility of the movement's growth. And thirdly, it presupposes living tradition of active citizenship. These limitations become even more evident as we shift our attention to the CEE context, especially the Czech Republic and recent development in NGO and citizen-groups sector sets some new trends.

### ***III. The specifics of the Czech Republic***

It is true that the situation of various CEE countries varied a lot even prior to the fall of communism. Yet, looking at urban problems, they shared the following: crisis of urban planning (housing shortages), unclear tenure structure (sometimes some forms were not legally existent), citizens resignation to 'investing' into a political system. In the case of the Czech Republic, there was no clear right to own a flat, ineffective housing policy on a state level, and a rather corrupted (so called waiting lists) distribution of scarce housing on the local level. The existing, often more or less clandestine movements formed rather a non-political opposition in the case of the CR (some coin the name "parallel polis" or "non-political politics" for it) focused on general human rights discourse. Urban issues, mainly housing, was left to individual strategies of solution.

After the Fall of 1989, several structurally relevant conditions for urban social movements were rather lacking. (1) There was an absence of a clear class structure, evident in the sociological surveys of that time by status incoherency and huge gap between subjective and objective social status. (2) The rules of urban politics were not clear, especially the division of labour between various political levels (e.g. the state housing stock was transferred to municipalities and they were given the right, not obligation, to privatize it further, yet the rent in public sector remained regulated on state level up to the year 2011). (3) As there was no clear right to own a flat up to 1994, the housing privatization (decentralized, therefore different from municipality to municipality) remains still unfinished (see below) and some restitution claims are not settled to this day. (4) At the beginning the people enjoyed its newly gained political freedom, yet was focused only on participation through political parties, neglecting the other forms (NGOs were quite a rare new thing in the nineties).

According to Lux, urban and general housing issues were not counted between the priorities of the reforms and lot of the work has been transferred to municipalities without setting clear rules. Lux moreover states two other relevant issues – 1) thanks to at least some waves of privatization, the housing shortage was quite mild, moreover, the tenant protection by state laws is rather high, therefore no cases of huge evictions are known. 2) The state invested through state loans a lot into the support of owner-occupied housing, therefore a lot of people actually had chance to get new housing. More generally, the system of regional governments was introduced in the second decade after 1989 and local political issues were overshadowed by general problems linked to post-communist transformation. According to Kostelecky and other Czech sociologists, the local official political participation is generally low, although there are notions of growing awareness to local problems, especially in the bigger cities.

#### **IV. *Research questions and methodology***

One of the problems (both scientific and political) in the Czech Republic is the general low level of civil participation, even if it comes to the local level. And judging from the agenda setting and the correlation between state-level and local voting patterns, there is still low need to differentiate between the local and the state politics. On the other hand, there is a growing number of local protests ranging from NIMBY activities to preservation/anti-development protests. Given the rather low number, the statistical methods cannot fully reveal who, why and how becomes involved in urban politics, let alone its unofficial forms (outside the election process). Yet, there are survey carried out and some things/question can be validated through qualitative interviews. Questions involved the characteristic of the participants, their comments on housing and urban policy, their relations to political parties and other organizations as well as their media strategies. In future, the research counts on snowball method of sampling.

Two pilot interviews were carried out with the representatives of new citizen groups focused on the problem of privatization of public housing stock. The two interviews were carried out in 2009, one in the city of Prague, the other in Opava a smaller city in Northern Moravia. Both organizations were formed by sitting tenants waiting for their flats to be offered to them and both criticized their municipalities for lacking transparency and not performing the promised 'next wave' of housing privatization.

As for the characteristics of interviewees, both were middle class tenants without official political affiliation. Both organizations were (at that time) unofficial, not registered. They declared no wish to involve in official politics and declared that they prefer focusing solely on their problem, which is to have the opportunity of buying 'their' (so far public) flats. They both have tried to contact local media, yet expressed disappointment since their efforts were neglected. In Prague, the indifference of local media was—in the eyes of the interviewee—connected with political driven bias. When asked about the cooperation with other citizen groups, both groups expressed no experience and no present intention to do so.

#### **V. *Urban social movements in the Czech Republic: here and now...or (maybe) later?***

Given the specifics of developing citizenship (and general) political participations, we can confirm that there is a growing number of organized action groups. On the other hand, regarding their actual actions and functioning as well as their aims, we cannot fully identify these organizations with the concept of urban social movement. Yet, recent development in the Czech Republic shows emergence of new social movements on a general political level and it can be inferred that parts of these movements can sooner or later 'localize', i.e. focus on rather local issues. Therefore, if it is hard to find urban social movements now, there is a chance to find them later.