Institutional Dilemmas of Urban Resetting: Politics, Functions and Symbols

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Abstract

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Introduction

The intensifying levels of economic and social globalization of open societies are widely considered as the ubiquitous drivers of change in the metamorphosis of contemporary western cities (Scott 2001, Soja 2000). Non-place bounded, social and economic relations permeate and reconfigure territorially nested urban systems and the consequent rescaling and decentralization of urban activities is internationally observed since the early 1990s in urban spaces (Brenner 2004). However, the transformation of cities differs highly from city to city and the actual processes of change cannot immediately and adequately be explained solely by the influence of the changing external social and economic parameters. Cities also follow their own intrinsic logic (Berking & Löw 2008, Löw 2008b). It was Martina Löw and her colleagues in Darmstadt who alarmed urban sociology to explicitly take notice of the intrinsic logic of cities. If we want to understand the differentiation of urban change, we should make study of the intrinsic characteristics that are underlying more or less autonomous ways of thinking and acting at urban level. Löw took a radical position with this regards and rejected the prevailing approaches in urban sociology that consider the fate of cities and their changes as puppets of the macro- economic and social strings of globalization (Löw 2008a). She took the reversed position in assuming an underlying metaphysical structure of own urban logic at the micro level of cities (*Eigenlogik der Städte*).

Personally, I am not so sure about the supposed autonomous logic of intrinsic metaphysical characteristics of cities: the fixed autonomy of isolated logic, the depersonalized characteristics of urban identity and the sole metaphysical underpinning seem to weaken Löws conceptualized urban structures. Urban activities are employed in open interaction with

the outside world and are driven by different motives of human agencies and conditioned by the asymmetries of real power. Still, the notion of an intermediating logic of cities appears to me highly relevant. It makes sense to analyze processes of urban change by referring to the particular settings of the 'own' physiognomy of a particular city. Living urban systems are highly opportunistic, they respond on many incentives and certainly also on structurally changing global conditions but they do not blindly adapt to changing external conditions. Urban systems transform more gradually and more specifically not only responding on new impetus but also on the specific customs and codes of behavior and the established routines and norms of action. The change of cities goes – in words of John Friedmann - 'through their own transformation' (Friedmann 1973, Ibid. 1993). In order to investigate the mediating forces of urban transformation more precisely I will adopt an institutional approach (Healey 1998, Savitch and Kantor 2002). The ongoing change of cities is intermediated by a variety of institutional conditions. Following this line of arguing this paper states that the differentiation of urban change under the current conditions of globalization and rescaling may be explained by institutional analysis. The behaviors and attitudes of the users of urban space are deeply institutionalized by social codes which on their turn condition (constrain and enable) the actual potential of urban transformation in specific ways.

There is a risk in taking the institutional point of view in explaining the differentiation of urban transformation because a large deal of institutional theory emphasizes the historically established routines that consolidate established normative patterns - thus affirming the social codes of 'the cities of the past' - rather than explaining the current change of cities. For our sake of explaining processes of change, however, it will be necessary to take the evolutionary and innovative perspective of 'institutions in action' (Bourdieu 1991, Dembski & Salet 2010). We will investigate whether and how the meaning of institutional conditions adapts in times of change. Following recent lines of research at Urban Planning studies of the University of Amsterdam, the potential of institutional innovation will be explored on three aspects : politics (the patterns of political power), functions (the location of functional urban facilities), and cultural symbols that underpin the changes of urban identity. The paper first indicates the current changes of social and spatial configuration of cities and the corresponding change of the urban agenda. Next, we will explore the meaning of 'institutions in action' to explain the different responsiveness of cities by specifying on respectively political relationships, economic functions and symbolization.

The emergence of urban conurbation and its problems

In Europe - more recently than in USA - the spreading out of city over large peripheral areas is considered as a radical new stage in the process of urbanization. It is not as much the phenomenon of extending urban areas as such (although since the early 1990s, the pro-growth policies in the neo-liberal epoch considerably relaxed the familiar compactness policies of contained urban expansion which resulted in larger and more loosely structured areas of urbanization) but new is in particular the radical change of spatial structure within the regionally widening frameworks of city. For the first time in Europe's history of cities,

the hierarchical urban dichotomy of central urban cores with a concentration of the most specialized and advanced services in the centers on the one hand and urban peripheries with residential zones and agricultural uses subservient to the urban center on the other, has begun to crumble. Over the last twenty years a lot of empirical evidence is collected about the new stage of urbanization in all countries of Europe, usually with new labels in order to indicate the radical change of spatial order (the métapolis Paris, Ascher 1995; the Zwischenstadt in Germany, Sieverts 2003, and Keil 2011; the nebular city, Neutelings; the polycentric city, Parr 2004; the 'cities of cities' in Milan, Balducci et al 2011; the post-suburban city, Phelps et al. 2010, 'peripherialization' Kuhn und Sommer, 2012; etc.). What these approaches have in common is the recognition of a fragmentary urban landscape, highly scattered, with different centers of urban specialization but also including non- identified areas (urbanized but not being city nor being rural), sorted out urban spaces with specialized activities (often large-scaled) with regards to both production and consumption, fragmentary landscapes. Although central parts of the city often keep an advanced position, this is no longer the twentieth century mono-centric urban space surrounded by middle class residential suburb, rather it is labeled as form of 'post-modernism', characteristically indicating rather what it is no longer (modernism) than the new state of affairs.

The physical configuration of these transforming cities may be indicated as 'urban conurbation', a term introduced by Patrick Geddes one hundred years ago for the agglomerating of scattered pieces of city at regional level (Geddes 1915). Nowadays conurbation may be described as 'a region comprising a number of cities, large towns, and other urban areas that, through population growth and physical expansion, have merged to form one continuous urban and industrially developed area. In most cases, a conurbation is a polycentric urban agglomeration' […] (description Wikipedia). The fascinating of this description is the differentiated nature of its central elements, the rise of a new urban disorder. There is a loose coherence of the overall space and it is not demarcated with clear borders (Parr 2005, Davoudi 2008, Rodriguez-Pose 2008). The hierarchy between core and periphery has blurred, the urban core still may be dominant but it has definitively lost its monopolistic position. New are the large areas 'in-between'. It is crucial to distinguish this emerging urban conurbation from the stereotypical configuration in the previous stage of urbanization: the 'city-region'. The difference between city-region and urban conurbation is much larger than just the widening of urbanized space. The city-region was very well contained and ordered around the central core which was surrounded with subservient residential zones and green buffers. The present stage of urban conurbation combines different city-regions at larger level of scale and is no longer colonialized by the primate of the urban core. The term city-region is often loosely used for both stages of urbanization but here we make a concise difference between the two configurations because – such as will be demonstrated later in the institutional analysis - the consolidated state of city-regions is one of the notorious obstacles to respond adequately on the stereotypical problems of the emerging urban conurbation.

The urban literature leaves no doubt about the drivers of urban change. The rescaling of social and economic parameters in a time of globalization apparently is pressing on the urban settings. The historic core of cities usually is still an attractive place, specializing in cultural

economies and specializations of knowledge while in the periphery of cities new concentrations of economic activity arise in particular around airports and other nodes of infrastructure. Also social functions such as medical centers, centers of higher education, retail centers, or exposition centers are spread out over regional spaces (often specialized and enlarged after mergers). Residential zones, increasingly, are segregated and heterogeneously laid out over the urban conurbation. These tendencies have amply been registrated in the relational geographies of the last two decades. The tendencies of economic and social change have raised new issues and policy agendas at the level of scale of urban conurbations. These issues are profiled in different ways over the different contexts of conurbation. We consider the next agenda for the urban conurbation:

- Thus far, most attention is given at the strengthening of economic competitiveness at the level of conurbation (in particular focusing on office sites and infrastructures); but the conurbation agenda touches on deeper problems and dilemmas (Jones and Ward 2007, Salet 2009);
- First of all, the problem of spatial match of the spread out specialized activities: the spatial isolation of specialized activities at divergent locations versus the more compact and more often spatially mixed arrangements of the previous city-region; the working units at one side of the region, the living areas on other sides;
- The fragmentary nature of outside urban areas with urban rest functions and sprouting new (international) functional activities requires balanced efforts of creating new habitability (Keil and Ronneberger 1994);
- Increasingly, mention is made of social polarization, dividing the living areas in gated prosperity on the one hand and in concentrations of deprivation on the other;
- Issues of selective accessibility are progressively mentioned as a major concern of the emerging urban conurbation. Most urban systems combine the traditional core-centric patterns of radiated models of transportation with new infrastructures around the major external nodes of transport and transportation, thus systematically neglecting the areas in-between and in particular a large part of the outside areas;
- The classic issues of the tension between mobility and sustainability enter a new stage in the emerging framework of urban conurbation;
- The loosening contrasts between concentrated urban activities on the one side being 'buffered' by green zones and rural characteristics on the other side, creates issues of identification and urges to define innovative combinations of 'cultural landscaping' and new urban uses of landscapes.

The concerns of sustainable urban development are addressed in very selective and thus far suboptimal ways. We propose an institutional approach to better understand the local differences of responsiveness to the changing economic and social parameters.

Political institutions

The crucial question with regards to the role of political institutions in the processes of urban transformation is how the established relationships of political power adapt under the changing conditions and how these (more or less) innovating political patterns enable to

address the issues of the emerging conurbations (Tewdwr-Jones and McNeil 2000). The political landscape is complex because the context of urban governance involves both the public sector and the private sector at different levels of scale in numerous networks of conflict or cooperation. Three conglomerate sources of power stand out in most urban conurbations (each of them being subdivided in more complex relationships): the central state, the urban cores (there are often more than one in large urban conurbations), and the market (Salet and Thornley 2017). The additional role of different actors can only be investigated in specific case studies but rarely matches the power of the three above mentioned edges. For civic groups, environmental lobbies, and several interest groups it usually appears to be very challenging to organize itself at the level of conurbation in this transitional epoch. Thus far we did not find much evidence of their appearance at this level of scale. Also for the enclosed small municipalities in conurbations (which may be quite numerous in a number of countries) and their voluntary associations it also appears difficult to mobilize a powerful role. However, in this respect the literature is more variegated because municipalities are backed electorally and have some legal power (in particular with regards to spatial planning), and a selected group of municipalities in the urban surroundings is strategically situated in regional zones of development. It might bring them in a position to play the political game and to actively participate in political coalitions (Savini 2012). Next, the large group of quasi- administrative organizations and the private sector based non-profit organizations may play a decisive role in certain sectors (such as housing, health, education). These organizations often keep tight relationships with the three powerhouses mentioned above. Further, the media are usually very fragile at level of conurbation. Finally, and most strikingly, the fluctuating level of urban conurbation as such is nowhere fully institutionalized in an autonomous and independent way, making the long list of conurbation agenda dependent on in-between politics and their underlying asymmetries of power (Jonas and Ward 2007). The lacking institutionalization of problem-ownership of the urban conurbation creates the need of inventive solutions of interconnected leadership. How is responsiveness organized in this multi-level political landscape?

Kantor, Lefevre, Saito, Savitch and Thornley recently explored this question of governability in four of the largest mega cities: London, New York, Paris and Tokyo (Kantor et al 2013). They also focused on the intermediate variables in order to investigate the different response of mega cities on the compelling influence of globalization. The institutional context of the four cities is highly divergent, ranging from the market led and highly decentralized patterns of the New York conurbation to the extremely public led political institutions in the conurbation of Paris, with London and Tokyo somewhere in-between the two poles. Governability appears to be highly challenging in these institutionally divided contexts. The most striking outcome is that it is still the central state in all four models (albeit not the federal republic but the tri-state in case of the New York City conurbation) to take the most effective initiatives of collective action! In all cases this central influence goes back to the huge impact of these mega urban economies on the competitiveness of the national economy and the corresponding need to arrange the mega infrastructures (the accessibility of airports, seaports, nodes of high speed lines and highways, etc.) in decisive ways. The other parts of the new agenda of conurbation (the issues of sustainability, fair distribution, balanced spatial

planning, etc.) are hardly addressed by the central state, however, nor by the other intermediate institutions… (Kantor et al 2013).

Also the second source of power - the core city - is very effective in consolidating the international position of the central business community. Greater London extended its central core position to the level of the Greater London Authority in close cooperation with the business community (Thornley et al 2005), it also took some initiatives on the environmental agenda (via high tariffs for users of the automobile) but the social agenda did not materialize. This core-centric policy was counterpointed simultaneously by further economic and social decentralization in the wider conurbation, in particular in the localist south east (Pain 2008, Tewdwr-Jones and Mcneill 2000, Holman et al 2013). The dominant role of the core city in the New York conurbation is almost evident. The tight networks between the city and the private sector take care for the international economic competitiveness while the social and environmental priorities are moderate. Beyond the central city there is beyond the above mentioned state policies on infrastructures no evidence of active conurbation policies, rather it is characterized by inter-municipal rivalry (Kantor et al 2013). Paris might be the test case for conurbation policies, because of its dominance of public led policy strategies, and its proverbial deterrence of pro-growth policies (mega infrastructures being the object of national concerns). The central city indeed embarked on a progressive agenda of development, public transportation and social housing and environmental aspirations. The city successfully joined some developments with progressive municipalities in the first ring (Savini 2012, Savini 2013). Considering the full conurbation, however, the extreme localist political structure, the lack of coordination mechanisms and the political conflict between the alliances of the prosperous SW periphery and central government versus the city and NE periphery prevented effective policy strategies for the full conurbation. So also in a public led system it appears to be difficult to empower the new urban agenda. Tokyo elaborates on the tradition of 'developmentalism' which tightly interconnects the state and the private sector in joint trajectories of pro-growth development. The public sector is centralized combined with strong local government, in this case in particular Tokyo Metropolitan Governance (comparable with Greater London Authority) (Kantor et al 2013). Noteworthy here is the traditional embedding of environmental policies, both in the economy and in the culture. The service and financial economy is extremely concentrated in the metropolitan core, the outside areas in this conurbation however are fragmentary and increasingly polarized qua social characteristics. This overview may learn about the inertia of changing political institutions. There are experiments at small scales in all regions but the overview demonstrates the lack of problem ownership of the emerging conurbation, the consequent need to find solutions in multi-level networks and horizontal coordination, the vulnerability of these networks for the influence by consolidated powers of city, state and market, resulting in suboptimal interim balances of urban transformation: The major infrastructures for the national economy are guaranteed by the state, the central cities still tend to expand around its own core and radius, while the peripheries still depend on the sherry picking of the market. The political recognition of conurbation is still very fragile, it is not yet routinized and still depends in this transitional stage on experimental developments. Positive evidence is mainly found in local experiences of collective action.

Institutional dilemmas of relocating economic functions

The relocation of advanced economic functions (service and trade centers, centers of knowledge) and major social amenities (specialized education, medical complexes, centers of entertainment and retail) in changing urban settings has become the bone of contention in the development of cities in Europe. Relocation of specialized central urban functions is a frontal attack on the prevailing models of urban centrality and compactness of the previous century. The actual developments appear to be highly paradoxical. On the one hand the urban core manages to maintain and further develop a central position for advanced urban services, cultural economies and specialized services. On the other hand, there is ample evidence, simultaneously, of relocating advanced services, such as financial and legal services, centers of knowledge and other specialized facilities to the outer parts of the conurbation. New networks of universities are spread out over wide conurbations (Fedeli 2012), specialized formats of retail and entertainment are no longer the privilege of city centers (see an early analysis of outgoing retail centers in American cities Frieden and Sagalyn, 1989; Evers 2006). The cultural facilities and tourist destinations usually still are concentrated in central places but the overall picture is highly variegated (Burger and Meijers 2012). The dilemmas of relocation have become more compelling as a result of specialization, mergers and enlargement of scale (making central accommodation more delicate). Also the external accessibility has become an increasingly important location factor (such as the proximity to airports) because of the grown external dependencies.

It makes no sense to take a public sector planning perspective in analyzing the role of institutional mediation of the relocation dilemmas. Public policies may be part of the considerations of the private and semi-private functional complexes but the dilemmas of relocation are first of all matter of economic choice. The institutional path dependency approach provides a handsome guide to understand the dilemmas of structure and opportunity in the relocation of economic functions. The approach considers relocation not as a spontaneous choice but as a structured, relatively deterministic process in historical sequence. Self-reinforcing forces hold a settled economic or social development on its trajectory (because of economic returns). A different technology, or different location might be more innovative but changing of trajectory would bring additional transaction costs, such as organizing new routines (David 1985, Pierson 2004). In practice, all urban functions experience this dilemma when comparing the alternative costs of sources of production (such as location). Economic trajectories may get entangled in a 'dead lock' when economic returns on a trajectory are slowing down while the change to a different trajectory has become very expensive. A dead lock stalemate might grow into a situation of critical juncture: the radical choice for new trajectory. In this way the relation between structure (settled trajectory) and new opportunities can be analyzed.

Vermeulen followed this approach in investigating the dilemma of relocation of exhibition centers (Vermeulen 2011). In the last two decades more than half of the 33 largest facilities in urban Europe opted for an outward location (Vermeulen 2013). In order to avoid an overstressing of the historic determination, he analyzed in each case four different trajectories of development (function, form, space and institution) that are pressing at different times for

opportunities of change (Vermeulen 2013). This approach seems suited to explain the divergent patterns of relocation in different cities.

Symbolization of new urban spaces

The cultural analysis of symbolic markers opens a new avenue of exploring the institutional mediation of urban change. It searches how urban developments are interpreted and imagined by investigating the use of symbols. The development of cities is framed in various ways by different constituencies and also the symbolic markers are context dependent. The potential impact of the interpretative schemes severely depends on the resonance of the schemes in the urban society and on the plausibility and salience of the markers (Benford and Snow 2000). For this reason a relational analysis has to search the ways in which frames are related to specific context in order to understand their 'real' meaning (Bourdieu 1991). In practices of urban planning framing and symbolic marking are often used to mobilize social energies into a desired change of direction. This instrumental use of framing and symbolizing fails to get impact if not congruent with real social constituencies. Successful framings are rarely inventions by the government but build forward as stepping stones on real existing sources and social networks in the urban society (Dembski and Salet 2010). The solidity of interpretative frames depends on its social support.

The crucial question is how consolidated schemes of interpretation can progressively move forward to the new stage of urbanization. This is no easy transformation. The solidification of urban containment and compact city-regions has been coined for many decades. The actual behaviors of urban agents have become far more complicated and do no longer represent the hierarchical dichotomy of urban core and urban periphery but the actual changes of behavior are not yet interpreted as a new stage of urbanization in the mindset of the population and it representatives. The new image of city is not yet established. Dembski concluded in a number of case studies in European urban regions that new conceptualization and symbolization of city are at point of breaking through but yet fall back in the previous stage in most cases because of insufficient resonance (Dembski 2012). Interestingly, the symbolization of new urban conurbation is initiated in these cases from different corners: It is initiated by a core municipality within the conurbation in the one case, it is initiated by the state, and respectively by the market in other cases but nowhere in joint concert. Besides the lack of resonance also there is not much evidence of deliberate inculcation of new symbolization (Dembski 2012). In the current stage of urban transition we mainly discovered examples of semi-breakthrough. A spectacular example is the case of Merseyside conurbation including the city-regions of Liverpool and Manchester (Dembski 2012). In this case the symbolization of the emerging conurbation was initiated by the private sector (the huge infrastructure company Peel) that had recognized the potential of organizing urban development at the level of conurbation and had prepared a huge investment plan for this sake. This conceptualization and symbolization came too early for the two inlaying and still extremely core-centric city-regions. Peel turned to the central government, who decided to cooperate via bilateral contracts on selective programs. The case also demonstrates the anachronistic perception of

the central state: Rather than urging the hesitating city-regions to cooperate in a self-regulating program, it opted for selective contracts following its own interests (Dembski 2012). In the current stage of urban transformation there are many initiatives on their way to the emerging urban conurbation but not yet robust enough to persist: it is the stage of embryonic change.

To conclude

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