

Between structure and specificity – studying the city in a period of transformation

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Abstract

This paper aims to outline the problems related to urban research in a unique period, and socio-economic transformation is definitely one. Changes occurring in the city make it even more interesting for the researcher. Is this the case with all cities or only some selected ones? The author would also like to reflect whether the methodology used so far in urban research can be used in the contemporary context. Should the research tools be modified? If so, how should they be adapted to the new situation? Finally, what issues are likely to appear in the process or research preparation and implementation? To what extent are they the outcome of the changes themselves? The paper is the fruit of the author's own study based on his experience and reading related to the ongoing PhD preparation. The thesis ventured here will be verified in the doctoral dissertation.

Key words: urban geography, structure, urban policies, barriers

Introduction

It might seem that the beginning of the 1990s started a new era in urban research. It was then that references to the systemic and economic transformation began to appear in the titles of papers and publications. At that time, questions were posed about the results of the transformation, based on the well-justified conviction that they would be the most easily visible in the cities. The spatial scope of research frequently depended on the location of a particular research centre. Large cities were the preferred choice for research, while smaller attracted relatively less interest or were included as one of many components of a given research project. The research of large academic centres, such as Warsaw, the Tri-City (Gdańsk-Gdynia-Sopot) or Poznań, was carried out in the local universities and research centres. The subject matter of research included the issues of agglomeration development and their role in settlement structures (Korcelli 1996). The emerging regularities were seldom formulated as models. On the other hand, after 1989 case studies were quite frequent, which focused on individual cities or their parts. A large group of such research projects were commissioned by the municipal authorities, to provide a basis for the planning documentation that was being developed at the time.

Korcelli lists three features characterising the research concerning Polish cities (Korcelli 2002). Firstly, the subject matter of the research is very extensive and em/

braces links with history and politics on the one hand, and planning, society, structure and relationships within the settlement network on the other. With such a broad scope of research, the considerable spatial differentiation of its scale comes into play – from the scale of the city to the scale of the institutions. Secondly, authors mainly make use of secondary data – studies and statistical sources. Thirdly, the majority of works is atheoretical in character, which means that they do not make any serious attempt to relate their findings to theory. According to Korcelli, on the basis of those features this phase of research on the transformation of Polish cities should be defined as an early stage of diagnostic research. By now, we know about the general outcome of the transformation process and this is – Korcelli's words – common knowledge. Knowledge that fails to answer some pertinent questions. Among the preferable directions of research, the following should be named in particular: seeking regularities in the patterns of population distribution and flows, the impact of the functioning of the real estate market on the spatial distribution of social groups or the issues of the land use succession.

According to Węclawowicz, the intensification of the transformation processes depends on the size, location and importance of a city. The most profound changes occur in the capital city, which is the social and economic centre of the nation, while large cities change more slowly, and the smallest ones should record the slowest pace of change. The city's spatial accessibility and the level of technical infrastructure have a major influence on its situation in the discussed conditions. Nonetheless, the inherited functional structure does also play a significant part. Cities with a marked differentiation of the economic functions definitely have a comparative advantage. However, the most important factors in this respect include: the education level of the city's population, social participation, self-governance traditions and the resulting social and political involvement of the local society (Węclawowicz 2000). The community's characteristics should be translated into the quality and implementation of the municipal policies.

Between Structure and Specificity

When we look for research methods applicable in the study of contemporary cities, we move between the two extremes, termed by the author as the structure and the specificity. The concept of structure can be understood in two ways. The more narrow meaning relates to a pattern of constituent parts making up a whole, with various relationships occurring between them. The broader meaning reflects the traditional approach to urban research, an approach in which the researcher attempts to identify the relationships between physical facilities seen as the carriers of municipal functions and which is expressed in the theoretical framework as – among others – the concept of the economic base. On the other hand, the notion of specificity describes a separate set of characteristics, unique for a given city. A set which is made up of the interrelationships between the development potential, political ambitions of the authorities and their putting into practice. Is it possible to assume a research attitude that would be characteristic for one of those two poles? Probably not. Investigation of the structures themselves can only provide us with information about the results of the transformation. It does not provide sufficient ground for formulating conclusions

about the causes of the changes and does not allow for making forecasts. A thorough study of the specificity of a given city would far exceed the scope of any single work. Therefore, it is necessary to select components that determine such specificity. In the process of selection, one should take into account the availability of data and foresee likely barriers that might emerge during the implementation of a research project.

The changes that have taken place in Poland during the transformation period have also affected the implementation of research projects in geography. Along with the emergence of new research issues, new barriers to their investigation appeared. The hindrances can be summarised in four categories:

- legal;
- organisational;
- statistical;
- financial.

Leaving aside the obvious reasons and consequences of the financial barriers, it seems worthwhile to look into the remaining three groups.

The legal barriers directly result from the changes in the legislation and their interpretation. The adoption of the Personal Data Protection Act in Poland can be seen as an example of such a barrier. Currently, this piece of legislation, originally intended to counteract breaching the privacy of citizens, is used by administration officials as an excuse for their refusal to make available any information containing personal details.

The organisational barriers are the result of an inadequate organisation of work. We encounter them when the competencies of administration officials overlap and when certain actions are not taken, for instance, data is not collected or databases are not updated. The manner of keeping records of business activity can serve as a good example here. In Poland, issuing of permissions to conduct business activity rests with the *gmina*, that is, the lowest unit of local government. The records of issued permissions frequently show invalid entries, as individuals who discontinue business activity do not inform the *gmina* authorities, and the authorities do not perform any verification. Sometimes databases are created in such a way that precludes the comparison of relevant data from different cities. This is true for the land records, for example. The *gminas* fulfil the statutory requirements to collect data on maps in 1:500 scale. Usually, no summary maps in smaller scales are prepared; their analysis might provide the basis for research on land use in cities.

There have been major changes in the operation of statistical services. Among the main barriers related to this sphere, changes in the criteria of data collection should be mentioned. In 1994, the European NACE classification was adopted in Poland, to be transformed in 1998 into the Polish Classification of Activities (PKD). The introduction of the new type of classification seriously impedes e.g. analyses of changes in the structure of enterprises and employment structure and comparisons with the earlier periods. Also, the methods of data collection are subject to change, which justifies the recommendation on the part of the Central Statistical Office (GUS) not to compare the data using a dynamic approach. In addition, data is obtained on the basis of estimates, e.g. concerning the education structure of the population.

It has been mentioned above that the use of secondary data is a characteristic feature of the contemporary research on the changes in cities. However, it is proved that secondary sources frequently suffer from inaccuracies and errors. This is yet another argument in favour of discontinuing detailed research on urban structures and focusing more on the study of the intentions of local authorities formulated as part of municipal policies. Municipal policy is most frequently defined as an activity aimed to ensure planned socio-economic and spatial development of the city, location of functions in the city and development of its municipal (technical) infrastructure (Grochowski 2001). Municipal policy can also be understood as a planned and structured activity of the municipal government bodies and other public entities subordinated to those bodies, which have executive measures at their direct disposal, which consists in the choice of goals and objectives serving the interests of the local community and in the selection of the right tools to attain those goals and objectives (Markowski 1999).

Reference to urban policies in scientific research makes it possible to seek answers to the questions such as: why is the city changing in a particular way? What changes can be expected in the future? The establishment of local self-government has been one of the most important achievement of democracy after 1989. Nowadays, it is the gmina that is in charge of the implementation of its idea of development. This idea takes the form of such documents as the Study of Conditions and Directions of Spatial Development or the Local Spatial Development Plan, as well as those elaborated by the gmina (city) depending on the actual needs. Analysis of those documents allows to monitor the management process, the awareness of the existing problems and the ability to respond accordingly. What is of importance in this respect is the knowledge of the sources of data that the local government is using, since at the end of the day the quality of management depends on the fund of the manager's knowledge. Examination of the documents confirming the implementation of objectives can be seen as a method of verifying the assumptions of municipal policies, such as resolutions of the city council or official reports. Such verification may also make use of statistical data.

Conclusion

Many leading researchers are of the opinion that, despite more than ten years' tradition, the studies on the transformation of Polish cities have not moved outside the initial, diagnostic stage. Use of secondary data is a considerable problem as far as city research is concerned. On the other hand, little reference to theory can be observed; there are also few attempts to seek new interdependencies using the already known laws and principles. Naturally, there are exceptions to this rule, for instance the work on the changes in Gdynia (Sagan 2000). The imperfections of public statistics, organisation of the offices' work and the flow of information – all this is a serious barrier to research work. It seems that the focus on structural aspects in the research could be smaller. Supplementing research with municipal policy aspects, particularly its elaboration and implementation, could increase our knowledge of the causes and further directions of changes. With research focused on large cities and their regions, more attention should be devoted to the relatively neglected research field, that is, the transformation processes in small and medium-sized cities and towns.

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