



Whatever happened to the (post)socialist city?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 April 2013

Accepted 22 April 2013

Available online 30 May 2013

Keywords:

East-Central Europe

Socialist city

Post-socialist city

ABSTRACT

For several decades, urban geographers asked themselves whether there was such a thing as the “socialist city.” Did cities during the duration of state socialism (in most parts of East-Central Europe, roughly 1949–1990) include spatial features that were sufficiently distinct from the characteristics of cities located farther west to warrant the existence of an autonomous term: the so-called socialist city? Were the processes of spatial production in these cities also sufficiently distinct? A quarter of a century after the end of state socialism in East-Central Europe, this paper revisits the old debate with a new twist. Assuming there was a “socialist city,” is there a post-socialist one? Did the features of the “socialist city” disintegrate or endure after 1990? Is the new formation distinct not only from its socialist predecessors but also from contemporary European cities that were never socialist?

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Introduction

For several decades, urban geographers of East-Central Europe have asked themselves whether there was such a thing as the “socialist city”: a city whose spatial characteristics were sufficiently different from those of its counterpart in the developed capitalist world (especially in Western Europe) as to warrant the very existence of the term “socialist city” (e.g. Dangschat & Blasius, 1987; Fisher, 1962; Hamilton, 1979; Sheppard, 2000; Smith, 1996). Two main schools of thought on the subject could be distinguished. The so-called ecological school (e.g. Van den Berg, Drewett, Klassen, Rossi, & Vijverberg, 1982) advocated the theory that urbanization in the 20th century was dependent on two primary socio-economic trends: modernization and industrialization. Since both were underway in capitalist as well as in socialist settings, the similarities between the capitalist city and the socialist city outweighed the differences. Both were versions of the general model of 20th-century modern, industry-led urbanity. If differences did exist, they were either a matter of detail or of temporal lag (ostensibly, socialist cities acquired the features of their capitalist counterparts with a few years’ delay because the countries in which they were situated were developing with a slight delay; e.g. Andrusz, 1996; Enyedi, 1996, 1998). The historical school (e.g. Castells, 1977), on the other hand, argued that the political economy and the mode of production played a key role in shaping urban patterns. The political economies of socialism and capitalism functioned so differently that their spatial products—the socialist and the capitalist city—were autonomous constructs. Some of the key

differences in the processes of spatial production included the fact that in socialist cities, the state had a near-monopoly on urban development (because it had nationalized the majority of urban land, real estate and means of production), that land and property markets were suppressed, and that the structure of cities was one of the means through which the almighty socialist state tried to create an ostensibly classless society (e.g. Bertaud & Renaud, 1995; Crowley & Reid, 2002; Nedovic-Budic, Tsenkova, & Marcuse, 2006; Stanilov, 2007). As a result of these specificities of the socialist process of spatial production, Szelenyi (1996) outlined several features which, in his view, sharply distinguished the urban system and urban forms in socialist nations from those in capitalist ones. These include less urbanization (i.e., a lower proportion of national populations in socialist states resided in large urban centers), less urbanism (i.e. socialist cities were marked by less diversity and marginality), and the socialist city had distinct spatial structure and characteristics.

This paper focuses on the one of the aspects of socialist–capitalist differences proposed by Szelenyi (1996): urban spatial characteristics. But instead of comparing the socialist city—a construct which in East-Central Europe now exists only in history—to the capitalist city, the paper evaluates its successor: the “post-socialist city.” This term is controversial. It invites perhaps an even greater number of questions than those raised by the term “socialist city.” For example: What is post-socialism? Is it an appropriate term to describe the condition of East-Central European nations in the late 20th and early 21st centuries? Is it a potentially long-lasting socio-economic situation? Or was it a temporary, transition that led to capitalism in East-Central Europe (e.g., Chari & Verdery, 2009)? If we could arrive at definitive answers to these questions, we could update the debate between the ecological and historical schools in today’s conditions. The ecological school would still argue that

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East-Central European cities are following in the footsteps of Western cities. But the historical school could only reach the same conclusion if it could be determined that post-socialism is a version of Western capitalism. If not, the position of the historical school would likely be that we are observing the formation of an autonomous post-socialist urban model. Furthermore, from the standpoint of the historical school, clear differences must be established between the political economies of socialism and post-socialism for us to understand how cities have changed from the first to the second time period. The literature has reached a near-consensus on the latter issue: whereas there may be some social and institutional continuities between socialism and its successor (i.e., what Stark (1992) termed “path dependence” in this context), overall the current mechanisms of urban spatial production in East-Central Europe are very different from what existed a quarter of a century ago: the state no longer has a monopoly on urban development since it has relinquished ownership of the majority of urban land, real estate and means of production; resources including land and property are distributed according to market principles; and no central planning mechanisms exist that would explicitly pursue a heavily ideologically-loaded spatial structure (e.g. a “classless city” dominated by public spaces and uses—the type pursued by socialist authorities; Andrusz, 2001; Weclawowicz, 2002). These transformations suggest that there are clear reasons, from the point of view of the historical school, to expect that the post-socialist city is principally different from its socialist predecessor. What is less clear, however, is whether we can talk about a convergence between the post-socialist and the capitalist city. This is because a number of authors have emphasized that, despite the apparent similarities between post-socialist and capitalist city-building mechanisms, there are some differences. For example, authors have questioned whether Russian city spaces are produced through market mechanisms since we are witnessing an unusually strong hand of the state (e.g. Pagonis & Thornley, 2000). Others have highlighted the opposite: the presence of very weak states leading to highly informal means of spatial production typical of developing (non-Western) states (Tsenkova, 2012). Such arguments indicate that several “post-socialisms” may be developing which are corresponding to several post-socialist city types (Tosics, 2005).

This paper explores these complex issues through discussion of urban spatial characteristics in today's cities of East-Central Europe. It discusses five key elements of spatial composition: overall spatial articulation, scale of urban development, functional balance, building typologies, and urban aesthetics. To answer the question of whether we can make a case for the existence of a “post-socialist city,” the paper discusses each of these spatial aspects from three perspectives: first, how did this element of city form contribute to the distinctive character of the “socialist city”?; second, how has this element of city form evolved since the end of socialism?; and third, how does this element compare to what exists in today's cities farther west that were never socialist? Although the focus is on urban spatial character, attention is also directed to the socio-economic and ideological causes that underpin it. In so doing, the paper attempts to shed light on the complex question of whether we can make a case for the “post-socialist city” within the context of the forces of the political economy that are ostensibly producing it.

The paper has several limitations which should be acknowledged at the onset, all of which follow from the need to address a subject in sufficient depth yet with sufficient brevity. First, it relies on secondary sources. Its purpose is to evaluate the case for a “post-socialist city” by citing examples of large East-Central European cities as presented in the literature over the last 20 years. A systematic analysis of a specific set of indicators of spatial change of all (or even most) large cities in the region is beyond the scope of

this paper. Second, the paper deals with cities in East-Central Europe (including European Russia and the westernmost former Soviet Republics) but *not* with cities in other parts of the world which can too be considered post-socialist (e.g. China, parts of Central Asia, parts of Africa). Third, the paper discusses East-Central European cities in general terms, without paying detailed attention to the trans-national variety of urban forms.

It alludes to the possibility of inter-regional fragmentation only in the conclusion. Lastly, it focuses on the large cities of East-Central Europe, especially the state capitals. An analysis of small towns, rural settlements or mid-sized industrial cities (which were a landmark legacy of socialism) may lead to conclusions slightly different from the ones presented here.

Spatial composition of the post-socialist city: Five key elements

Overall spatial articulation

One of the key spatial contrasts between socialist and capitalist cities was the fact that the former were denser and more compact (Hamilton, 1979; Haussermann, 1996; Hirt, 2006, 2007). Calculations by Kenworthy et al. (1999) for the year 1990 show socialist cities such as Moscow with significantly higher densities than capitalist cities, especially those in North America (it should be acknowledged, however, that European cities on both sides of the former Iron Curtain have consistently been much denser than American cities). In addition, socialist cities were marked by a clear urban edge framed by the last towers of the vast mass-housing complexes erected during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. There was little that resembled residential or commercial sprawl in cities during the socialist period. The political and economic reasons for these difference are clear. Farmland and green-fields at the edge of large socialist cities generally belonged to the state.¹ Since the majority of residential (and other) development was executed under public auspices, the state had nearly full control over the rim of its cities—control that far exceeded the authority that capitalist countries such as England could exercise over their own urban peripheries through designating greenbelts. The socialist state prioritized the construction of high-density, prefabricated residential areas which were equipped with the basic services such as schools and hospitals (of the type of the Soviet *micro-rajon*). These housed very large segments of the urban populations; for instance, 60% of Sofia's population, 77% of Bratislava's and 82% of Bucharest's (Hirt & Stanilov, 2009). Thus, there was no obvious mechanism through which spread-out and low-density urban peripheries—of the type that the private sector has been building around large capitalist cities for many decades—could be constructed in socialist countries. Two exceptions must be acknowledged, however. First, there were many secondary homes of the type of the Russian *dacha* in the periphery of large cities. They served a recreational as well as a utilitarian function (many families raised fruits and vegetables in their garden plots). And second, there was growth in the periphery of large cities as a result of the relocation of residents from second-tier towns and the countryside who wished to settle in the large urban nodes because of better services and employment opportunities. Since socialist authorities tightly controlled relocation to the large cities (one had to obtain a permit to do so; Andrusz, 2001), many residents used the surroundings of these cities to gain urban access in the hope that one day they could settle in cities permanently (Tosics, 2005). This is why Ioffe and Nefedova (1999) call this process “stepping-stone suburbanization.” Still, these phenomena differ from the classic definitions of suburbanization in Western contexts. If we were to use

¹ There was some variation here: in liberal socialist states like Poland and Yugoslavia, some farmland remained in private hands.

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