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Representing urban shrinkage – The importance of discourse as a frame for understanding conditions and policy

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ABSTRACT

How are shrinking cities perceived by scholars, policymakers and citizens in different national contexts, and how do their discourses affect the nation's policies toward those cities? Although the interest in urban shrinkage has steadily grown among scholars worldwide during recent years, little has been written about these issues. This is the gap which the Special Issue “Urban shrinkage” presenting a cross-national comparison (Japan, US, Germany) seeks to fill. This article sets up the frame for the SI; we outline a circular relationship between conditions of shrinkage, the discourse and the design and implementation of policies to counteract challenges posed by shrinkage. We focus on six propositions with which we try to define the boundaries and limitations of the shrinking city literature. Afterwards, we present a model through which we interpret the triangular relationships of discourse, conditions and policy. Finally, we set the stage for the articles that follow.

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1. Introduction

Interest in urban shrinkage has steadily grown among scholars worldwide during recent years. While it remains for many an esoteric or painful subject, it is clearly receiving more attention, and is acknowledged to be a global phenomenon, decisively affecting the fates of cities and urban regions. Shrinking cities are reflected in many international cultural and architectural projects and joint publication since the early 2000s (*Shrinking Cities, 2004–2008*; *Shrink Smart 2009–2012–*; *CIRES – Cities regrowing smaller 2009–2013*), as well as in an extensive body of research. There have also been a number of scientific publications seeking to synthesize the accumulated knowledge on shrinking cities (Haase et al., 2013 EPA; BE, 2012; IJURR, 2012; Oswalt, 2005; Pallagst, Wiechmann, & Martinez-Fernandez, 2014; Richardson & Woo Nam, 2014).

The literature clearly shows that the reality of shrinkage is a worldwide phenomenon, its drivers and consequences as well as its contextual factors differ considerably not only across regions of the globe but within a single continent such as Europe. The same is true of the debate on shrinkage and the formulation and implementation of policy. While a large body of empirical case studies (although from a limited number of countries) has appeared, there has been little systematic exploration

of how real conditions of shrinking cities, discourse and policy are inter-related and condition/inform each other, and what role different national contexts play in these interrelationships.

There is no single model or archetype of the “shrinking city”. The features of urban shrinkage are interwoven with the social, cultural, political and economic conditions and history of a given country or region. What is more, shrinkage represents just one direction of dynamics of urbanization; it usually replaces former phases of growth and might be followed by new growth again. We argue that all those conditions and history define not only that country's unique dynamics of urban shrinkage, but also that country's unique discourse and the manner in which its policies emerge from that discourse. How each country frames that discourse, however, and what it means in that context to be labeled a “shrinking city”, and by whom, is likely to vary depending on the circumstances of shrinkage as well as on the social, cultural and political context in which it is taking place. While each country's literature offers empirical case studies that illustrate both national contexts as well as specific sub-national settings such as post-industrial cities, former mining towns, harbor cities, we find largely absent from the research is the systematic exploration of how conditions, discourse and policy are inter-related and both condition and inform each other, and what role different national contexts play in these connections. How are shrinking cities perceived by scholars, policymakers and citizens in different national contexts, and how do their discourses affect the nation's policies toward those cities? Little has been written about these issues. This is the gap which the collection of articles seeks to fill.

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Discourse has been defined as “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p.1). Although used in many often inconsistent and even contradictory ways, it reflects at its heart the common sense observation that human beings are subjective observers whose behavior is affected not only by “conditions” that is, factual developments, but by the way they perceive those conditions and communicate it. Inherent in discourse is the critical proposition that how we organize our perception of particular conditions and how we use language to communicate that perception in turn influence, or even define, how we act with respect to those conditions. Discourses represent certain issues, and through that representation provide the frame for policy responses.

The analysis of discourses is most significant in the context of issues that are highly contested, and subject to varying interpretations. Urban shrinkage is such an issue. Yet, the literature on urban shrinkage has focused mainly on framing definitions, analyzing its causes and trajectories, and exploring alternative strategies in response to urban decline. Important as that is, we hope to go beyond that, and try to link that extensive body of literature to the question of discourse in these articles. We look at the relationship between conditions, discourse and policy in shrinking cities in United States, Japan, and Germany as three of the countries most affected by shrinkage at a global scale, drawing connections between the nature of the debate, and the facts of the matter. Furthermore we draw our attention to the policies that those countries nationally and/or at lower levels of government have chosen to adopt in response to what they perceive as the challenges posed by their nation's shrinking cities. We analyze how debate is both socially conditioned and framed by the real conditions, and how it in turn frames and affects policy, taking the position that discourse and the debates that follow from the discourse) not only frame, but motivate and create the climate for public policy initiatives. By undertaking a cross-national comparison of three significantly different contexts – the United States, Japan, and Germany –, we explore the causes and contextual factors that lead to national debates, and bring to light both common patterns and resemblances as well as differences and contrasts between them.

In this framing article, we outline a circular relationship between these three elements: conditions, the discourse and debates, and the design and implementation of policies to address what are perceived as the challenges posed by their shrinking cities. We begin in Section 2 by offering definitions of key terms that will be used in these articles, followed by six propositions with which we try to define the boundaries and limitations of the shrinking city literature. Section 3 presents the model through which we interpret the triangular relationships of discourse, conditions and policy, beginning with a discussion of the central importance of understanding those relationships in the different national, cultural and institutional contexts that affect cross-national research. Section 4, finally, rather than offering conclusions, will set the stage for the articles that follow, in which these themes are addressed in their national contexts.

2. Definitions and propositions

2.1. Defining our terms and the related research questions

Before addressing the shrinking city discourse directly, it is important to define the key terms that we are using. Being aware of all the trouble with distinguishing “shrinkage” and “shrinking cities”, we decided to use them as two terms for the same context: When we speak of *urban shrinkage*, we mean the process or phenomenon of population loss and related problems, when we speak of *shrinking cities*, we refer to the places or arenas of urban shrinkage. We include all cities that are or have been affected by shrinkage, including cities that may no longer be shrinking (“shrunk cities”); we are interested in the phenomenon of shrinkage, not in the trajectories of individual shrinking cities. For this purpose, we do not need to discuss or define the scope and duration

of shrinkage (see Bernt, 2015). Our focus is the problematization of and the ways of addressing shrinkage as a widespread urban phenomenon.

Our use of *discourse* has several dimensions, including debates in academic, practice and policy environments as well as in the public sphere and the media. We look at how the discourse on shrinking cities emerged and developed, which contextual factors as well as normative settings framed and drove it, which topics have been both in and out of the focus. In addition we ask which actors have led the debate and which have been excluded, how the discourse has affected policy formulation, and, not least, how policy reflected back on the development of discourse. Through our investigations, we better understand the relationships between factual developments, discourse and policy responses in three different national contexts. By using the comparative gesture (Robinson, 2011) to look for commonalities and differences between these contexts, we will explore how far we can draw general conclusions and enrich the larger debate on how discourse informs and determines policymaking and is in turn influenced or determined.

We use the term discourse in a way that is distinct from discourse theory as such, using the term less as a basis for a theoretical or analytical approach in a narrow sense than as a way to capture the underlying thinking or representation of information and ideas that then become part of a debate, and influence policy. Although we do not engage formally in discourse analysis, we feel that using the term discourse, even in its non-theoretical sense, allows us to capture something that ‘debate,’ for example does not allow, in terms of the underlying thinking or presentation of information or ideas that then become part of the debate or enter the policy sphere. Lastly, when we speak of *policy*, we refer to any type of strategies, measures, instruments and programs that are formulated and implemented to address shrinkage and meet its challenges.

Since discourse plays a critical role not only in framing, but also in creating the climate for public policy initiatives, we have to look explicitly at this relationship: How *does* communication frame and affect policy by interpreting conditions? How does interpretation shape the way we think about conditions? What types of response does the interpretation suggest? Discourses on urban shrinkage may stress different characteristics of the problem, such as demographic change, housing vacancies, or economic decline. They may be dominated by certain interest groups, such as local officials, nonprofit housing companies or change advocates. There is never, however, just one body of discourse. Especially today, numerous spheres compete for attention, and numerous discourses co-exist, whether in scholarly media, different forms of print journalism, formal speeches and lectures, and more recent innovations such as Facebook and the blogosphere.

2.2. Six propositions about shrinking city research

Before we turn to the central question of the relationship between conditions, discourse and

policy formulation, we situate our project within the existing body of research on shrinking cities. Rather than a formal literature review, however, we will try to summarize the most important issues that reflect how we understand and discuss shrinking cities through six propositions.

1. Urban shrinkage has emerged as a particular subject for research and debate.

Although the community of scholars dealing explicitly with shrinking cities is quite small, the subject nonetheless forms a distinct and substantial body of urban research. For a long time, however, the issue of urban shrinkage as a phenomenon was not addressed as such.¹ The existence of an explicit debate on urban shrinkage dates from the

¹ In contrast to the phenomenon of cities facing population loss/decline which were coined as “ghost towns” or “lost cities”.

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