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Urban shrinkage in Germany: An entangled web of conditions, debates and policies

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ABSTRACT

Interest in urban shrinkage has steadily grown among scholars worldwide and Germany has received great attention in shrinkage-related research. Little has been written, however, about how the discussion of urban shrinkage has shaped policy responses and vice versa. This paper seeks to fill this gap with respect to the German experience by examining the relationship between (1) the state and conditions of shrinkage, (2) the discussion, and (3) the design and implementation of policies to address the challenges posed by shrinkage. Covering a time span from the 1970s to today, we explore four distinct chronological phases of this triangular relationship. Particular focus is directed to the rapid shrinkage trajectory of eastern Germany in the 1990s, which was seen as a particularly critical challenge, and which was addressed nationally by public policies through the unique development program known as *Stadtumbau Ost*. Based on our analysis, we conclude that the phases of the German experience identified represent paradigmatic situations that can be found elsewhere, and thus provide insight into why debates on urban shrinkage emerge, how they result in policies and vice versa and, finally, what can be learnt from this great body of knowledge.

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1. Introduction

From a historic perspective, urban shrinkage is not new, either in Europe or worldwide. Repeated ancient and medieval urban destruction resulting from wars, epidemics and economic decline make clear that pre-industrial urban development did not follow a linear process of growth. The normative assumption that urban development equals growth is a relatively recent product of the 19th century industrial revolution. In Germany, that growth paradigm was not questioned for a century, until the term shrinkage began to appear in urban policy debates in the 1970s. An open debate on the subject, however, both in policy and academic discourse, emerged only at the turn of the 21st century.

Since then, urban shrinkage has increasingly received attention worldwide and a wide range of publications have studied the drivers and consequences of shrinkage (Oswalt, 2005; IJURR, 2012; BE, 2012).

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International research has also pointed to the fact that contextual factors such as social, cultural, political and economic conditions affect not only trajectories of urban shrinkage but also the policies formulated and implemented to cope with or counteract it (Haase, Bernt, Großmann, Mykhnenko, & Rink, 2013; Pallagst, Wiechmann, & Martinez-Fernández, 2014). Some empirical studies have also explored particular debates and policies (Couch et al., 2012).

What is still missing is research that explores the links between conditions, debates and policies (see introduction to this special section by Haase, Nelle, Mallach). We consider this relevant because not only the real conditions of shrinkage (e.g. population decline, vacancies etc.) per se but the way conditions are presented in debates provide the frame for policy responses. We prefer the terms “debate” and “discussion” and mainly avoid the term “discourse” to clarify that we do not intend to undertake a “discourse analysis” in the formal academic sense. When we use the term discourse we mean “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 1).

We are not the only ones to argue that urban shrinkage has to be discussed and problematized – and not only seen to exist – before it can trigger a public policy response. We seek to go beyond this diagnosis by analyzing when and how the problematization of processes and patterns of urban shrinkage emerged, why certain topics were emphasized

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in the discourse, how this choice of topics shaped public policy response, and consequently how the policies that emerged (and new conditions that they may have contributed to create) have then fed further debates.

Our paper is based on document analysis of academic and “grey” literature, e.g. policy papers, government reports, etc. Through our review of the development of both the conditions and the academic debate on shrinking cities in Germany, we discuss how the factual or real conditions of shrinking cities (we call this the “reality” of shrinkage), the discourse (in the sense of academic debates and discussions) and policy are interrelated and affect each other. We are particularly interested in identifying “triggers” that turn a previously unfocussed awareness of shrinkage into a coherent debate. Because of our research background, we look exclusively at Germany. Chronologically, we cover a time span of about 40 years – a period of radical change including the German reunification in 1990 followed by major transformations affecting urban development. We argue that within this time span, four distinct phases can be identified that present particular relationships of condition, debate and policy response.

The paper is structured along these four phases, which are illustrated in Fig. 1: (1) isolated diagnosis and academic debates around shrinkage before 1990, (2) rapid shrinkage in the east versus diminishing problems of urban shrinkage in the west during the 1990s, (3) the “hot years” of intense problematization of shrinkage between 1999 and 2002, and (4) operationalization of shrinkage policies since 2002 along with an increase in the comparative international discourse, and the differentiation of shrinkage trajectories since 2010.

We argue that discussing conditions of, debates on and policies toward urban shrinkage in Germany together offers valuable findings

for future analysis of entangled webs of conditions, debates and policies in other national and regional contexts.

2. Phase 1: Developments and shrinking cities debate before 1990

2.1. In the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG)

Demographic decline in central cities in the FRG started in the late 1960s, reflecting declining birth rates and suburbanization. Brandstetter, Lang, and Pfeifer (2005) describe how this was first given attention in the 1972 recommendation by the Advisory Council on Spatial Planning, which called for differentiated analysis of growing, stagnating and shrinking regions in West Germany (ARL, 1995). In 1977, Rüdiger Göb (1977) published *Die Schrumpfende Stadt* (The Shrinking City), which outlined the effects of population decline, suggesting population loss would mostly affect large cities, slow down economic growth, and lead to unemployment, a loss of diversity and social erosion. The effects of population decline were further studied by an interdisciplinary research project at the beginning of the 1980s (Mackensen, Umbach, & Jung, 1984), that argued that urban shrinkage is not necessarily negative and called for rethinking the growth-oriented view of city development.

Sociologists Hartmut Häußermann and Walter Siebel added to this analysis their research on structural economic change and the collapse of traditional industries as triggers for urban decline. Their book “*Neue Urbanität*” (New Urbanism) from 1987 (Häußermann & Siebel, 1987), followed by the frequently-quoted article *Die schrumpfende Stadt und die Stadtsoziologie* (The Shrinking City and Urban Sociology) in 1988 (Häußermann & Siebel, 1988), are the first academic publications

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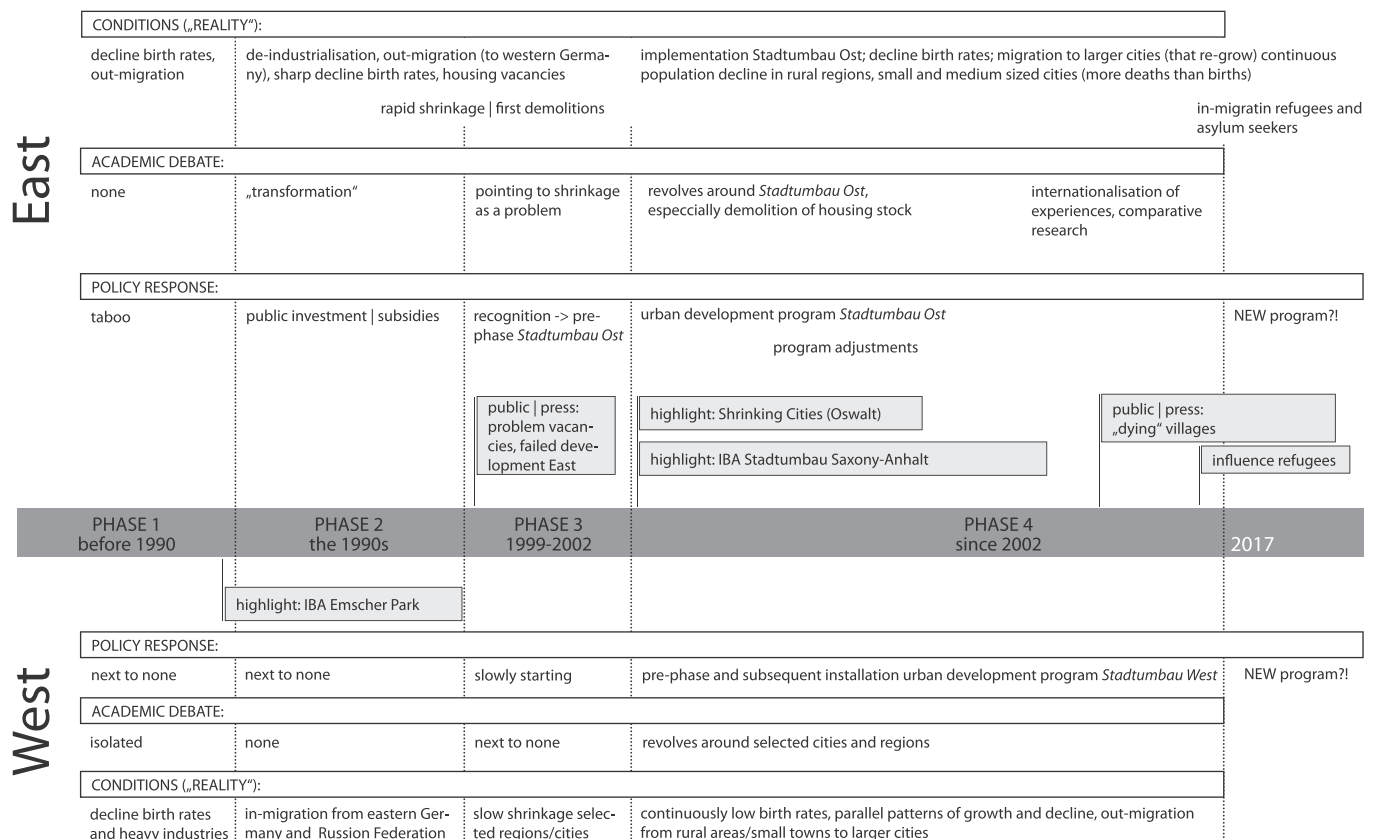


Fig. 1. Overview of phases of urban shrinkage (conditions, debate and policy response).

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