Introduction: Making sense of urban social change in "unusual" contexts

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INTRODUCTION: MAKING SENSE OF URBAN SOCIAL CHANGE IN "UNUSUAL" CONTEXTS

In September 2005 we organised the Urban Sociology Stream during the 7th Conference of the European Sociological Association in Torun (Poland). A number of very interesting papers were presented on that occasion and their authors were invited to participate in this special issue. The scope of the papers that eventually reached publication is quite broad: some discuss recent trends in urban social inequality, involving immigration and changing forms of segregation, while others elaborate on regulation modes within different welfare regimes and on changing socio-political attitudes and practices in contexts of economic and political transition. At first sight, there is no rigorous thematic coherence among the papers chosen for this issue, and each should be read in its own right. However, there are three aspects of this compilation that make it more than the sum of its parts:

The first aspect is that all six papers deal with issues situated either in Eastern or Southern Europe. They refer, therefore, to geographical areas outside, or at the borderline regions of the traditional core of industrialised countries as well as outside the epicentre of post-industrial socio-economic restructuring. Referring to this kind of "semi-periphery", they deal with areas that have systematically been, and still are, peripheral in the international Urban Sociology literature. In this sense, the papers that follow contribute to overcoming this deficit.

The second aspect is that most of the papers included in this volume stress path dependence explicitly or implicitly – even though they are not dealing with technological progress. New governance arrangements in the direction of liberally inspired activation policies have given very dissimilar results in Italy and in Finland, due to long standing differences in established practices and in the know-how of their respective welfare services;

democratic reform of neighbourhood governance in Poland has produced substantially lower mobilisation rates and effectiveness than expected, as a result of the long established practice of centralised government; the new diversity of relatively unaffordable housing options has led workers in St Petersburg to be positively reminiscent of a hard past that paradoxically appears to have provided them with more effective choice than the present; and the long processes that have shaped the current face of nationalism in Greek society have been one of the main components determining the place occupied by the immigrant "other" during the last 15 years, while the level and patterns of immigrant segregation has been largely dependent on the specific socio-spatial structuration of Greek cities and, in particular, of the shape of housing provision during the first three post-war decades. Path dependence means that specific outcomes are not occurring only under the influence of important structural forces, but may also be heavily dependent on historical paths, and, therefore, that no specific case analysis is redundant if one is interested in studying specific local outcomes and implementing adequate policies.

Path dependence is, in a way, related to the importance of context. This brings us to the third aspect, which is about context and theory. The legitimacy of studying every possible context does not only derive from the need to respond to local stakes that are partly at least dependent on local specificity –although this would be reason enough, not making, however, each case study eligible for broader interest– but also from the contextuality of theory. Even though theorizing would be irrelevant if not in constant struggle to eliminate, or at least to control, specificity and context through pertinent abstraction, it always remains tied to the context in which it is generated. To a certain extent this could not be otherwise and, to take a recent example, the global city thesis (Sassen, 1991) may have legitimately endeavoured to be relevant outside the confines of specific global cities but, of course, would never attempt the absurd task to overcome its dependence from the global city context altogether. However, regardless of the intension of its producers, theory may be context dependent, but it is not context confined. Theoretical explanations lead often to simplified schemes and powerful metaphors that constitute frames and prisms through which reality is perceived and analysed; and this reality usually extends much further than the contextual confines to which theoretical propositions rigorously correspond. Social duality and polarisation have become, as a result, a dominant way of expecting to see, and ultimately of seeing, social reality in any western metropolis regardless of its global city status. The case of the

inadequate use of the *ghetto* as a general signifier of downgraded residential areas (Wacquant, 1997) is another classic example of the unrestrained use of concepts and theoretical claims outside their contextual limits.

In a recent presentation of his project *les mots de la ville*, Christian Topalov stressed that the multilingual thesaurus his international group endeavours to compile strictly avoids translation between the eight major languages of the project.[1] This option was taken in order to avoid loss of meaning related to each word and its historical constitution within a specific context. Topalov refered at length to the example of the *square* –denoting much more than the open space between surrounding buildings– and the clear loss of meaning in case it is translated using some variant of the Greek *πλατεία*, *like place* or *piazza*. The thesaurus of *les mots de la ville* is focused on words related to the empirical reality of the city, avoiding more elaborate concepts, probably because the latter contain translations and abstractions that have already cut the links with the historicity of signifiers of urban facts. In the world of theory and conceptualisation this loss of meaning is part of the game. Abstraction is by definition a partial loss of meaning and generalisation is a form of translation between different contexts.

The problem in this case is not the loss of meaning in general, but the systematic loss of particular meaning operated by uncontrolled conceptualisation, i.e. by the generation of concepts and theoretical propositions that have been estranged from their own contextual origines and have implicitly assumed an overbearing validity. This particular type of lost links regarding the contextual origines of concepts and theoretical propositions does not occur at random, but in systematic ways within the geographically uneven structuration of power relations in academic production.

Thus, the contextual dependence of theory is systematically skewed by the unequal access of different types of context to theory. Theory is usually developed in highly developed areas and this is part of what makes them the core regions in the academic division of labour. Moreover, this core contextuality of theory is reinforced by the language bias dominating the international academic literature as well as by the way the academic papers publication industry operates, i.e. the reasonable expectation that work to be published should be linked to important theoretical discussions. However,

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1. Presentation in the joint seminar of the *EHESS* and the Historical Archives of the University of Athens at the *Institut Français d'Athènes* in March 2007.

most of the published articles are only free-riding on the theoretical wave of the moment, and this is much easier when one wrights about the same context as the one in which the theoretical claim was generated. On the contrary, those who deal with contexts outside the core have to use the dominant conceptual frames and theoretical claims for the double purpose of making sense of the realities they have at hand (for which these tools may be partly or completely inadequate and misleading) and of making their own work visible and intelligible to the international audience.

In an unevenly developed world, things could hardly be otherwise regarding the academic division of labour and its impact on the relation between theory and context. It is important, however, to be aware of this biased relation and, although the deck of cards is marked, those working outside core contexts have no option but to play the game avoiding to sink into particularism and trying to challenge established conceptualisations and theoretical claims in terms of their contextual limitations. We believe that all the papers in this special issue are serving this purpose.

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Vassilis Arapoglou draws inspiration from the LA debate on the post-fordist city to gain insight into the spatiality of socio-ethnic structures in south European cities. The LA debate challenges the Chicago School assumption of integration of ethnic minorities through an itinerary from the initial residential location of immigrants in the city centre to their gradual movement towards the affluent suburbs in parallel with their social mobility. Moreover, other American scholars have shown that African Americans have not followed this pattern and remained ghettoised to a large extent due to overt or more subtle discrimination. The author considers this plurality of integration/segregation models inspiring for the analysis of large south European cities that have never followed the mid-western industrial metropolis integration model both because affluent groups were traditionally located at the centre rather than the suburbs and because they were ethnically homogeneous, integrating only their countries' rural migrants following spatial itineraries that usually started at the edges rather than the city centre. Belated suburbanisation and, mainly, the recent important immigrant influx have created a plurality of segregation/integration patterns. The author chooses Athens to illustrate this plurality. He uses several segregation indices to measure evenness, exposure, centralisation, concentration and clustering in the spatial distribution of immigrants' residential location. Segregation on all accounts is relatively low, even when controlled for

occupation, meaning that immigrants are not systematically separated in space from Greeks regardless of their position in the occupational hierarchy. A general feature is, however, that immigrants are more centralised than Greeks. On the other hand, particular immigrant groups have specific spatial distribution patterns. The analysis of ethnic segregation in Athens has led the author to conclude that fragmentation of urban space may be the link of the south European city with the LA debate, and that further investigation is needed in terms of establishing whether economic and political polarisation is also part of the picture.

The paper by Anna-Maria Salmi discusses housing in Russia and the apparent paradox that housing choice in the post-transition period has been reduced. The author draws on de Certeau's concept of tactics and on Therborn's concept of social steering in order to make sense of the margins of manipulation and intervention that the rigid and strict housing allocation rules of the soviet era were carrying in practice. This is contrasted to the effective absence of choice in the post-transition period due to the lack of means (money) to take advantage of the otherwise much improved possibilities of choice in the housing market. A number of interviews from workers residing in St Petersburg are used to illustrate the author's claims. Networks are discussed as a resource tactically manipulated to increase chances of housing conditions improvement. Manipulations refer to the adjustment of a host of family projects (marriage, childbearing, geographical mobility, cohabitation etc) to housing claims, following the fundamental rule of housing space allocated according to the size of households and further rules giving privileges to specific categories in terms of occupation, merit, geographical origin, housing history etc. Money is also discussed as a means to manipulate housing allocation rules during a period in which theoretically its importance was minimal. In the post-communist period, money, that previously seemed abundant against limited consumer choice and sufficient to cover basic needs, became scarce against the proliferating consumer choice and increasing prices, making the improvement of basic components of everyday life (like housing) increasingly inaccessible to wide social groups. In such conditions of socially diffuse inaccessibility to the required resources in the housing market, important numbers of workers continue to dwell in their previous small apartments, which they may have privatized in the meantime, and following the family network arrangements that gave them access to. However, these arrangements have frequently backfired (divorce being the main reason) leading to frustrating impasses. Following this analysis, the author concludes that there is more than pure nostalgia in

many Russians' positive remembrance of the soviet era in respect to their current hardships.

John Sayas attempts an investigation of the spatial patterns of sprawling that the growth of Athens undergoes since 1981 in terms of demography, economic activities, occupational structure and building stock. He endeavours to locate the "hot-spots" in these growth patterns using spatial autocorrelation measures built-in special GIS software. His demographic variables include population growth, aging and residential mobility; in terms of economic activities he investigates the changing location of different branches as well as large collective consumption equipments; in terms of housing it is the total housing stock and new housing construction that he takes into account and in terms of occupational structure he identifies the "hot-spots" of the residential location of major occupational groups. The paper is exploratory, using specific measures on a large variety of variables that should reveal clustering tendencies not immediately obvious to the naked eye. The major conclusion seems to be that although Athens remains a dense and centralised city, important changes –that may be revealing phenomena that will increase in importance in the future– are happening at the margins: clusters of population growth, obviously in parallel with new housing construction, and specific spatial dynamics of different age groups as well as social and economic activity clustering in suburban space are all worthy of further investigation.

Angela Genova addresses the question of new forms of governance dealing with social cohesion. She focuses on policies inscribed in the neoliberal conception of reaching social cohesion through (equal) opportunity in the labour market and individual responsibility for the outcome, rather than through socially guaranteed entitlements. "Activation" policies, marking a transition from welfare to workfare, have been the object of a comparative research project she has undertaken between governance schemes and their effectiveness in Helsinki and Rome. In the Italian case, the implementation of a recent law promoting activation has been obstructed by the multiple governance layers, the inadequate resources invested and the clientelist-residualist structure of the Italian welfare regime, leading to a symbolic rather than effective outcome. In Finland, on the contrary, a similar and equally recent law has been much more effectively implemented due to the simpler hierarchy of governance levels, to the investment of adequate resources and to the well trained Scandinavian welfare bureaucracy. The difference, however, is not only about effectiveness, since in the case of Finland a number of measures

complementing activation are seriously reducing its neoliberal substance. The result of the comparison induces the author to speak about path dependence related to the history and structure of two different welfare regimes.

Piotr Matczak deals with local government changes and decentralization in order to assess their importance in improving democratic accountability in Poland. He focuses on the institution of District Councils in the early 1990s, stemming from the traditions of village self-governance and urban "block committees", that were meant to strengthen local government in the sense of accountability, participation, democratic control and of a better adjustment of local services to citizens' preferences. The creation of District Councils responded both to the need for installing democratic processes in the post-communist era as well as to cope with broader challenges to local government operation. The author presents the case of District Councils in Poznan, where 65 units were instituted through a bottom-up process between 1991 and 2001. The main question he endeavors to answer is whether they had an important impact on accountability, participation and service efficiency. His conclusion is that their impact was rather small: electoral turnout is low (12% on average); their tasks and responsibilities are vague leading their initiatives and plans to depend on local governments' bureaucracy, and their budget is very small. Moreover, local preferences do not seem to affect the services they deliver, a conclusion drawn by the author based on the similarity of their budget structure that does not reflect their important differences and the presumed difference these differences would normally entail in terms of needs.

The paper by George Kandylis deals with the perception and the management of "otherness" in Greek cities, and particularly in Salonica, throughout the last century. Until the end of World War I and the Greek defeat in the Greek-Turkish war of 1921-22, northern Greece and Salonica have been ethnically diverse with substantial Ottoman, Jewish, Slave and Bulgarian populations. The conclusion of the conflict, codified by the Lausanne Treaty in 1923, inaugurated a period of ethnic cleansing with the exchange between the two countries of Greek population from Asia Minor with Turkish population from Macedonia and other parts of Greece. A substantial part of the incoming population was canalised to the cities, and Salonica started losing its ethnic diversity both under the changing ethnic group ratios and the assimilation policy of the Greek state leading to a homogeneous national(ist) identity. A second wave of intense migration to large Greek cities occurred after World War II and the Greek civil war

(1946-49) leading to fiercer policies of nationalist assimilation. In the meantime, Salonica lost its last element of substantial diversity, the Jewish community, that perished in concentration camps. These first two waves of Greek urbanisation have treated migrants as objects of assimilation to a homogeneous national identity, which became increasingly entangled with anti-communism up to the end of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes in the mid 1970s. The 1990s brought a new wave of immigrants to Greek cities. This time the incoming migrants were clearly national "others" that cannot be assimilated in the local national identity. Their presence is considered circumstantial and is tolerated due to their coinciding need for work with the needs of the local labour market and the social security system. The new migrants have no blood-right to the city, leading their "otherness" to be classified as an identity of circumstantial and temporary presence that will end as soon as their work contract is finished. Illegality, curtailed social and political rights maybe therefore easily accommodated within this second rate identity of the migrant "other" in the dominant perception of the host society. The author argues, inverting Soja's assertion that nationalism is the product of cities (2000), that cities are produced by nationalism following different patterns according to the specific socio-political and geopolitical contexts in which they develop.

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