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How “European” is the “European City”?

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How “European” is the “European City”?

The concept of the “European City” was developed about two decades ago, primarily by urban sociologists with an interest in history. Their aim was to distinguish “European” urban development from that of North America and also from the urbanization of developing countries and emerging economies. The “European City” has clearly defined characteristics, including first and foremost stringent urban planning, which is undertaken by experts and initiated by middle-class elites who are concerned about the functioning of the urban environment. Other features of European cities are clearly defined city centers, from which cities have historically grown, and their marked difference from the countryside. They contain a reliable public transport system, no or few areas of decay and poverty, institutions for cultural and educational pursuits, as well as health care and a whole range of other public services.¹

It is quite obvious that this ideal of urban development does not match historical realities, even if one limits the historical inquiry to Northwestern European cities, from which this typecasting has clearly emerged. However, it is fair to say that research into the development of urban Europe has focused largely on cities located in a relatively small part of the continent, geographically defined by the UK, Western Europe and Central Europe, particularly the former German and Austro-Hungarian Empires. Many urban historians and sociologists have undertaken research into various aspects of urban development in this region, and their studies deal with a fair number of cities that display many of the aforementioned characteristics. And while we are generally aware that this ideal of the “European City” does not exist, I would argue that we are still very much influenced by a perception of the urban fabric as found in Northwestern and partially Central Europe.²

¹ This concept of the European city is put forward by an urban sociologist in Walter Siebel, *Einleitung. Die europäische Stadt*, in: Walter Siebel, (Ed.), *Die europäische Stadt*, Frankfurt a.M. 2004, p. 11-50. Similarly, from a historical point of view, Hartmut Kaelble, *Die Besonderheiten der europäischen Stadt im 20. Jahrhundert*, in: Friedrich Lenger/Klaus Tenfelde (Eds.), *Die europäische Stadt im 20. Jahrhundert. Wahrnehmung, Entwicklung, Erosion*, Köln 2006, p. 25-44.

² Standard volumes on the urban history of Europe in different languages exemplify this geographical focus. Cf. Paul M. Hohenberg/Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000-1950*, Cambridge, Mass. 1987; Jean-Luc Pinol, *Le monde des villes au XIX^e siècle*, Paris 1991; Donatella Calabi, *Storio dell'urbanistica europea*, Milan 2004.

With the “European City” comes the idea of finding a common European identity, because that kind of urban makeup, it is claimed, is largely the result of a vibrant and constructive civil society, in which citizens have demonstrated a combination of will and talents in order to build a livable environment. The educated and usually quite affluent European bourgeoisie has ruled in the cities, if not always in the political institutions of their nations. Indeed, it is this bourgeoisie that is also often the object of historical research into urban development. The opposite of this ideal of the “European City” is to be found chiefly in the supposedly faceless, uncultured, slum-ridden and car-based urban sprawl of North America, devoid of civic inputs and driven purely by commercial considerations. At the same time, the sprawling megalopolises of the developing world, characterized by shanty towns and lawlessness, can be clearly distinguished from this European path of urbanization.

Where is the problem with that? There is another side to urban development in Europe. In large parts of the continent, especially in the south, south-east and to some extent in the eastern parts of Europe this model of the “European City” does not apply. In the following remarks, I focus in particular on the south and southeast of Europe. Here, very different paths of urban development are distinguishable.³

Southern Europe – with the exception of Northern Italy – urbanized only in the course of the twentieth century, with only a few pockets of industrialization. Above all, the flight from the countryside after the Second World War was characteristic for the growth of cities, especially some large metropolises. This urban development was by no means guided by an enlightened middle class that had a say in city government. In fact, it was mostly the central state which had a strong influence on the development of the urban environment. This was most pronounced in Portugal and Spain, where for decades authoritarian rule tried to keep cities under tight central control. Certainly, urban planning was also employed in the South, and many of the protagonists involved had studied in Western Europe and had been inspired by urban planning there. But their sometimes very complex plans were rarely or only partially executed. There are exceptions, such as the strictly managed enlargement of Barcelona by Ildefons Cerda, but this only influenced a part of the city and is by no means representative of the way in which Spanish urbanization evolved in modern times.

So how can the development of Southern and Southeast European urbanity be characterized? Cities grew mainly from the fringes. The influx of many migrants from the countryside over a short period of time created a massive housing shortage, which led to the development of informal settlements with

³ Explained in more detail in Martin Baumeister/Rainer Liedtke, Probleme mit der “europäischen Stadt“. Städte in Südeuropa, in: IMS H. 1/2009, p. 5-14.

makeshift buildings that were clearly not directed by urban planning. The infrastructure for such areas usually came later, when roads were paved, sewers dug, the electricity grid extended, or bus lines were added to the new areas. What started out as a provisional solution was consolidated later on. Authorities turned a blind eye when it came to transgressions of building or zoning laws, even though politicians occasionally had some makeshift houses very publicly torn down on the eve of elections to demonstrate that at least something was being done. A side aspect of this development is the importance of clientelism, which seems to be responsible to a significant degree for the way Southern European cities evolved. The fact that there was a clear lack of stringent application of urban planning may be an indicator of this. Patron-Client relations could, on a micro level, circumvent rules and regulations quite effectively.

As a result of these growth patterns and also of the migratory clientele that made up a large part of the “young metropolises” of the South, the division between city and countryside – another supposed characteristic of the “European City” – was and is far less clear-cut in Southern Europe than in the Northwest of the continent. Moreover, in many Southern European cities, the newcomers formed distinctive neighborhoods where people from certain migrant regions congregated – often for many generations. As a result, in many places in the South, especially in the decades after the Second World War, it was difficult to make out areas divided by class and income. More and less well-off city dwellers lived in relative proximity to one another. The spatial separation of middle-class neighborhoods that characterizes the social topography of so many Northwestern European metropolises took much longer to establish itself in Southern Europe. However, there are also quite a few distinctions between different Southern European countries as well as regions within these countries, so on the whole no uniform pattern of Southern European urbanization is detectable.

There is a danger – as surveys of European urbanization as a whole demonstrate – that these peripheral cases are regarded as straying from the norm of the standard pattern of urban development. Even worse, the South or the East of Europe is seen in terms of belated urbanization in the same way as these regions are often viewed as “belatedly” industrializing. There is a strong connection between the two processes. Clearly, this is wrong. We have to acknowledge that there are a number of quite distinct paths of European urbanization (and industrialization, as a matter of fact). In the South, factors different from those in the Northwest informed the way cities developed, from simpler things like climate to more complex factors like migratory patterns, social and political relations (the above-mentioned clientelism) or the role of organized religion.

To name just one example: The Orthodox Churches' regard for benevolence, charity and social work differs enormously from that of the Catholic and the Protestant Churches, and that has left a mark on the institutional life of cities – or the lack thereof. One very important, substantially different factor is the relevance of family and kinship in the structure of everyday life as well as settlement and employment patterns. Multigenerational families are still – although decreasing – much more important in Southern Europe than in the Northwest of the continent. In the South, the role of the family as a prime provider of all kinds of needs for the individual is still much more pronounced in everyday urban structures.

Such aspects, and surely many more that may help us explain paths of urbanization outside the European core, still need to be researched and uncovered by case studies. There is still far less research on Southern and Eastern European urbanization than on Western and Central Europe. There are a number of reasons for this. No doubt, it is important to note that research institutions and universities in these parts of the continent, especially in the post-socialist countries, are traditionally much less developed and less well-funded. An even bigger obstacle for researchers is the lack of useable primary sources, which includes fewer hard data in the form of urban statistics, and, at least in parts of the South, the absence of central land and property registers, which are crucial to understanding many aspects of urban historical research. In addition, the archives in many places are not optimally organized.

These obstacles notwithstanding, a fair amount of groundbreaking research on urban development has been conducted in Southern and Eastern Europe over the last two or three decades, but much of it is – until recently – not available in English translation and therefore only accessible to experts in the region, who are not necessarily interested in urban history. This is slowly changing, as can be exemplified by the historiography on Modern Greece in general and its urbanization in particular, which has been beset by politically motivated ideological rifts until the 1990s and is now firmly orienting itself towards new trends in historiography. However, it is not helpful that economic problems force many young scholars from Southern and Eastern European countries to seek academic employment far away from their home countries.

In conclusion, I would like to come back to one core element that has been identified as a *sine qua non* for the developmental path cities have taken, at least in Northwestern Europe, namely: The strength of urban civil society. This is marked by the interest and engagement of city dwellers – at least those with a certain education or financial means – in making their habitat livable, first for themselves and at least as a collateral also for the less well-off classes living next door to them. Is this element missing in Southern Europe and perhaps in

Eastern Europe? Examining a fair number of Southern European conurbations today, this seems to be the case. There is an immense housing density with few green spaces in between. Totally different types of housing exist side by side, many aspects of the urban infrastructure are poorly developed, and the same goes for associational life and non-commercial cultural venues. All apparently indicators of a weak civil society.

I am pleading for a different view on the influence of civil society. In the West it is usually viewed as something overwhelmingly positive. Concerned citizens take matters into their own hands and supplement or even replace public or state agencies and structures where they are not sufficiently strong. There is also the dictum that, particularly in post-communist Eastern Europe, the forces of civil society need to be strengthened so that people can improve their living standards, fight corruption and inequality, empower women or give rights to minorities. This assertion comes from people in the West, who usually live in environments which are strongly conditioned by states that can offer more or less efficient welfare provisions in a fashion that is not, or at least not primarily, characterized by corruption, huge social divisions and blatant inequality. Nevertheless, they still believe that life may improve significantly if capable and interested citizens try to get involved. That does not need to be criticized, yet it should be clear that this view of civil society as something universally positive and working for the greater good of all individuals cannot be applied to societies with a different history of “the state” and with less resources to distribute.⁴

Taking a closer look at the social fabric of many Southern European cities reveals a strong civic engagement of many people who live there today and have lived there in the past. However, this could take forms which are different from those prevalent in the Northwest. Civic engagement might benefit only a certain neighborhood, or a rather circumspect migrant group trying to find its way into the fabric of a metropolis that is rather unwelcoming to them. Even clientelism is, in my view, a form of civil society engagement. The state and its official structures are too weak to provide for many rather basic needs, so citizens look for different paths of obtaining them. Maybe that is benefitting only a small group of people, but it is still an act firmly located in civil society. These and many other circumstances should be factored in when looking at the urbanization on the “periphery” of Europe and when trying to judge the relevance of the “European City”.

⁴ The discussion about the scope of civil society, which places more emphasis on informal actors, is summarized in Jussi Laine, *Debating Civil Society. Contested Conceptualizations and Development Trajectories*, in: *International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law* 16:1, 2014, p. 59-77.