Input

Workshop V
Between Gentrification and Social Cohesion: The Role of Cultural and Citizenship Education in Processes of Change

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Loosing social cohesion?
European cities between social segregation and gentrification

The concern on the social cohesion of the city is based on the profound understanding of our societies as enabling equal living conditions for all citizens. This has been a main motive for sociological research since the emergence of sociology as an academic discipline a century ago. Not by coincidence, social research on segregation started in the city of Chicago, which was by then the fastest growing conurbation in human history. Confronted with massive poverty and wealth next door, the question of how people can live together in one urban space, has become the crucial point of research.

From the first moment, the idea that different social groups should live peacefully and with mutual benefit close to each other has been crucial for formulating policies against race segregation in the USA and fostered the general idea of a favourable social mixture also for European cities. The results of segregation analysis however have pointed out that it is not preferable for poor and just arriving migrants to have no "niche" and that segregated can be offering support, which they would miss otherwise. If segregation is rather a problem under certain circumstances and in some contexts, especially when it is forced and coincides with poverty and discrimination, then the question is when segregation would be a problem. To examine the pattern of segregation, statistical analyses have been worked out in the last sixty years. They allow us to follow developments on the long run and to observe the impact of certain societal changes like economic transformation. It can also help to compare the different situations in a national or international context.

It has to be said however that segregation research is limited by missing data, different definitions of social groups like who is regarded as "poor" or "ethnic minority". Data interpretation underlies moreover much political and public awareness and is often very sensible. Finally, the subject of segregation needs to be considered against the changing societal meaning of housing. As segregation is mainly researchable as residential segregation, it lacks recognition on the increased mobility and family structures.

Despite these shortcomings, segregation makes the state of affairs with regard to the subject of social inequality and urban spaces transparent. There are a few lines of general development, which characterises most of the European cities in principal:

1.   Changing importance of segregation factors

While the US segregation research has been mainly motivated by racial segregation, the European cities have focused mostly on the differences between rich and poor. Intensive conceptual and empirical research shows however, that ethnicity, gender, and age are dividing the cities in a significant manner. If one wants to understand how much different social groups are living together or separated, these factors play a major role and social inequality is not sufficiently described by looking only at the factor of income differences.

2.   Mirroring the society of the fragmented city

Contemporary segregation patterns can be better understood as "fragmented" than polarising between old-young, rich-poor, single-family etc. These factors are not causally related to each other. Less than the American cities, ethnic differences correlate less with poverty in European cities. The same is true for demographic and lifestyle differences. Segregation patterns therefore mirror the multiple division lines of society and show little tendency to form accumulated spaces of multifold problem concentration. It is thus not adequate to use the term ghetto. This is not to say that social inequalities and exclusion processes have no meaning. Segregation analysis only rejects simple assumptions on the nature of social problems as being based on residential areas.

3.   Redirected attention for segregation processes

In contrast to public debates, segregation research shows the relative stability of social and ethnic segregation in European cities. As only the dispersion and concentration processes are focused on, this result does not tell anything about the percent increase of poor people or ethnic minorities in cities, which we can mostly observe in at least the larger cities. Qualitative studies suggest moreover that concentration processes, and thus higher degree of segregation, can be found on a lower statistical level, that is on a block or in a high rise estate but not in a ward or neighbourhood. Segregation research however shows also that the public attention for different aspects of urban life and social inequalities does not reflect adequately the different relevance of segregation factors. While ethnic and social segregation are often overestimated in its empirical evidence, demographic and lifestyle segregation are only in recent years attracting more attention.

4. Re-interpreting social cohesion and segregation

As the last three decades have shown, the most significant changes in the social geography of European cities are caused by the effects of demographic development and lifestyle pluralism. The core centres of the cities have become predominated by single person-households and family life is placed to the periphery or margins of the city. While in 1980, the segregation of young people was evident and the elderly have been living in mixed age quarters, today the situation is opposite. Ethnic and income differences mostly deepen these differences but to some extent lessen them also.

5. Remaining effects of social segregation

These reconsiderations of segregation patterns do not imply that social segregation is less relevant or has lesser effects for the individual. Long lasting effects of segregation and of life can be stated in less favoured areas. As long term analysis indicates that the residential segregation influences evidently the educational chances and thus professional perspectives of children growing up in areas where poverty and unemployment are characterising the social profile of neighbourhoods. Educational infrastructure and pedagogical offers are at the same time a mirror of these segregation effects and a contribution to its lasting.

6. Gentrification as new social segregation

Important research has been undertaken in the last two decades on the effects of upgrading processes of formerly underprivileged areas. Especially American examples have motivated social scientists to look closer on the processes and effects of this beautification. Alarmingly, many old working class areas have been upgraded in a way that destroyed social coherence with its mixture of different income groups. As a result, lower class inhabitants had been forced out and thus victimised by gentrification. Research in Europe however shows that the expulsion of long residing groups cannot be found in such an evident way as in the US. Processes of gentrification are seemingly more complex, include a greater variety of actors, have multiple and controversial effects. Visible changes affect the local economy, the architecture and built environment, the service and infrastructure offer and the general atmosphere of a quarter. This leads especially in the big cities to a substantial change in the public urban culture. At the moment, prominent examples can be found which embody this kind of change. Unclear, so far, are the long lasting consequences.