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Professional Social Work in Divided Cities?

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Abstract

The basic observation underlying the present chapter is the manifestation of a spatial segregation in Western cities since the last third of the 20th century. At the same time, it is not said that poverty is concentrated exclusively in specific disadvantaged residential areas, the so-called “hot spots”. Such an implication is in danger to reify residential groups as members of what is called a “new underclass” in specific city districts, as “cast offs” and the “losers of modernization”. In spatial terms: The social divide is misleadingly manifested only in territorial ways.

But this assumption is often found in current community-oriented social work. These assume that social problems need to be understood increasingly as spatial problems, making it necessary for social work to locate its services *within* the disadvantaged residential areas. In the following chapter, we propose that such a perspective is subject to fundamental constraints. Therefore we argue for an alternative perspective to prevent such a “containerizing”: It is necessary to critically examine the issues and position the actors involved in the organizations responsible for social work according to the outcome of such examinations.

Keywords

city, spatial segregation, exclusion, new underclass, social work, urban policy

Introduction

Recent decades have seen increasing horizontal and vertical social inequality not only in existing nation-state contexts but also inter- and transnationally (see Sassen 2008). The manifest social divide this has generated along with the increasing formation of precarious social zones (Castel 2009) is also developing a spatial dimension—particularly in urban contexts. Thomas von Freyberg (1996) reports that this is leading to increasing divides within German cities,¹ and similar trends in society and, above all, in cities can also be seen in various other European nation states (see Higuera Arnal, Faus Pujol 2007; Kühr, Villechaise-Dupont 2007; Marchioni 2007).

Hence, the basic observation underlying the present chapter is the manifestation of spatial processes of division and increasing precariousness since the last third of the 20th century.

¹ See also the concept of “dual cities” or “two cities” (Alisch, Dangschat 1998: 87).

This is found—although in very different degrees—in both Germany and the majority of OECD states. Specific cities and regions, but also single city districts and neighborhoods, are revealing a notably higher number of residents who are living in poverty, are unemployed, or have no secure employment compared to other urban or small-scale contexts. The concept of *spatial segregation* aptly describes this situation:

Social inequality is also reflected in social space. A population with different social, cultural, and ethnic structures reveals a tendency to also segregate spatially and form relatively homogeneous social, cultural, and ethnic spaces. The decisive aspects in this segregation process are access to the accommodation market, the attractiveness of the residential area, planned allocations, group-specific attractions, and so forth. These interact as mechanisms that lead urban spaces with unequal structures to develop into sociospatially identifiable city neighborhoods. (Wohlfahrt, Zühlke 2005: 108, own translation)

Nonetheless, these signs of increasing sociospatial segregation should not be misunderstood as implying that social inequality in the form of poverty or precarious employment is concentrated exclusively in specific disadvantaged residential areas of late 20th and early 21st century cities, the so-called "hot spots." This implication identifies residential groups as members of what is called a "new underclass" in specific city districts and blocks, as "cast offs" and the "losers of modernization." In spatial terms, this consolidates a boundary between a bourgeois ingroup and an outgroup in what seem to be emerging "parallel societies."² In other words, the social divide manifests territorially.

However, it has to be pointed out that such descriptions are contradicted by numerous findings indicating that the absolute majority of members of society living in poverty or other precarious circumstances still live outside the residential areas marked in this way as "hot spots".

This diagnosis of spatial segregation obliges social work to ask about the social processes in which this is constructed or constructs itself. This chapter presents an alternative perspective to the interpretations broadly found in community-oriented social work (in German: *Sozialraumorientierung*). These assume that social problems need to be understood increasingly as spatial problems, making it necessary for social work to locate its services *within* disadvantaged residential areas. However, we propose that such a perspective is subject to a twofold constraint: First, it limits the professional processing of the problem to a fixed locality; and, second, such a dualistic approach divides society into a socially and spatially integrated versus a correspondingly disintegrated or excluded population group. In contrast to such an interpretation of a given spatial segregation, attention needs to be focused on the processes that create the fine-scale dynamics of political, cultural, and social power structures. In the following, two examples will be used to present and discuss these dynamics: (1) the increasing local activation of civic involvement and the accompanying hope that this can replace previous state-run services in, for example, those residential areas that are categorized

² Nonetheless, it has to be pointed out that in German-speaking countries, one still cannot talk about completely decoupled or even ghetto-like city districts that have formed their own "parallel societies"—even when such dramatizations are to be found repeatedly in the mass media (see Reutlinger, Brüscheweiler 2011).

as being disadvantaged; and (2) the increasingly space-related concentration of the residential areas of the privileged milieu.

This chapter then goes on to ask about the consequences of these developments for a professional social work and thereby for the welfare state services responsible for actively supporting and purposefully intervening in those everyday ways of life that have been earmarked as socially problematic, as being, for example, impoverished or precarious.

It will make it clear that social work, particularly within the context of its small-scale readjustments, is in danger of contributing to a territorial closure of specific residential areas (see Kessl, Reutlinger 2010). To prevent such a "containerizing," it is necessary to critically examine the issues and position the actors involved in the organizations responsible for social work according to the outcome of such examinations.

Local activation of civic involvement

Since the last third of the 20th century, social work, like the social services in general, has become part of a fundamental transformation of the previous welfare-state arrangement (see Kessl 2009). One dynamic process emerging in this context is the changed structuring of social services. The provision of public infrastructure in communal space—such as public sports facilities, extracurricular education (city libraries, adult education centers, music schools), family services, and youth services—is being defined increasingly as completely or partly unaffordable in terms of costs. This diagnosis is rendered even more dynamic through the dominant assumption that an alternative, open-market organization of these services would be more efficient and more effective. As a result, local authorities frequently decide either to close down these services, to transform them into open-market or quasi-open-market structures, or to allow them to be taken over by members of society (*civic involvement*).

Particularly the latter variant in which previously public services are taken over by associations, citizens' initiatives, or cooperatives would initially seem to be a highly appropriate solution from the perspective of democracy theory: It means that "citizens are taking things into their own hands." Such civic involvement is also praised repeatedly as an even better—that is, more effective—solution than all previous, publicly provided ones. At the end of the day, it enables the users themselves to decide how services should be organized, and, as end users, they have a much better idea of what is wanted than the other possible service providers, namely, state agencies or market actors.

Therefore a whole series of authors have made sociopolitical appeals to build up and extend a civic alternative to the currently dominant meritocracy. This should promote cooperation instead of competition, and humanity and tolerance instead of indifference and elitism. Activating the civic involvement of residents also plays a major role in the context of the present reactions of social work to the spatial segregation processes in German local authorities.

Nonetheless, prior attempts to transfer previously public and, above all, state-run service structures into civic ones clearly reveal the limitations of this approach. Even at first glance, it can be seen that this process is not always a success in every urban area. There are numerous reasons for this. The first is monetary: Cost issues that were generally the reason for the

original outsourcing of previously public services do not simply disappear after a "civic takeover." This is evident in the recent attempts to hand over swimming pools or libraries to civic sponsors. In a great number of cities and local authorities, communally provided services have been successfully turned into civic ones for a few years. However, these civic initiatives soon run into difficulties when they need to invest in (necessary) new acquisitions or in renovations and repairs—a frequent problem with open-air swimming pools. The consequence is either the closure that the civic involvement was originally designed to prevent—but has only postponed for a couple of years—or the mostly very difficult attempt to tap other sources of income by the civic initiatives themselves. The most obvious source—a marked increase in entrance fees or membership fees—is also the most problematic. It raises the risk that the initiative will fall into the same structural trap as one of the alternative solutions it had been set up to prevent: an open-market solution. The difficulty in transforming previously public infrastructures into open-market ones, for example, by commercializing open-air swimming pools or youth services, is that it places the user in a different role, namely, that of a customer. Using the service then depends on financial resources. Hence, if initiatives requiring further investments want to avoid this type of solution, they have to avoid raising entrance or membership fees and seek alternative sources of funding. An inspection of several examples shows that this can either take the form of applying for public support, which brings everything full circle with the state agencies that stopped providing the service being (or having to be) involved again—at least in providing funds. Or, alternatively, initiatives can seek private support from, for example, foundations, sponsors, or individual well-wishers. However, this is also not easy: First, making applications or raising funds is too arduous and time-consuming for many civic initiatives. Second, attracting funds for previously publicly provided service structures is also frequently unsuccessful or less successful, because private sponsors are much easier to mobilize for innovative single projects and, above all, for start-up funding. This relates to the public image of foundations and their desire to gain public approval for supporting projects. From a marketing perspective, supporting a specific project is far more attractive than the long-term funding of infrastructure services.

However, it is not just financing that limits the possibility of civic involvement in the field of formerly public infrastructure services. Patricia Landolt's (Landolt, Goldring 2009) report on El Salvadoran immigrants in North America gives an impressive example of how civic initiatives may succeed in mobilizing extensive resources. At the beginning of the 1990s, future initiators of these groups traveled to civil-war-torn El Salvador after the signing of the peace treaty. The complete destruction of much of the infrastructure led to the involvement of *Hometown Associations* that emerged in, for example, Washington DC or Los Angeles—the current homes of El Salvadoran immigrant groups. According to World Bank reports, immigrants transferred two billion US dollars to El Salvador in 2001 alone, with the *Hometown Associations* contributing a considerable portion of this. Nonetheless, the marked drop in membership numbers in the following years led this support to crumble relatively quickly. In particular, however, the distribution of money achieved by these immigrant groups was extremely imbalanced and voluntary in nature (*social closure*). And this names the second reason why the transfer of formerly publicly financed service structures into forms of civic involvement frequently fails: their in many cases markedly milieu-specific closure, and thereby their socially imbalanced structure. In contrast to state agencies that ideally function

on the basis of formalized rights of participation, civic initiatives involve principles of loyalty and interpersonalism. Although membership is decisive in both cases, it is given by citizenship in the former and does not depend on a chairperson's decision or on a specific set of rules as in the latter. The dilemma in any initiative is that its members in no way reflect society as a whole. Roth (2004) have pointed out that the typical civically involved member of an association is not only a middle-aged, employed family father but also in most cases, one who sticks to his own milieu. In other words, civic initiatives and associations are relatively milieu-homogeneous groups. This tendency points to one of two basic forms of social closure: the "power of solidarity" alongside the "power of exclusion" (Parkin 2004: 31, translated. As Parkin (2004) states,

Weber (1985) understands social closure as the process by which social communities try to maximize advantages by restricting access to privileges and chances of success to a limited circle of the chosen. This leads to an emphasis on certain, externally identifiable social and physical features (such as race, language, social origin, or descent) as the reason for justifying the exclusion of competitors. (p. 30, own translation)

Territorial concentration of the life spaces of privileged milieus

These processes of social closure are reproduced continuously by the logic of milieu-specific membership structures. In other words, members of society coming from other milieus continue to be subject to broad and systematic exclusion. Now, one could say that the above-mentioned example of open-air swimming pools run by civic initiatives contradicts this. These initiatives have been set up to make services available not just to members but potentially to all citizens. In the best of cases, this may well be true, but the degree of milieu-specific involvement—and thereby the milieu-specific closure on the level of members—leads to the circumstance that such civic initiatives mostly succeed only in locations in which this milieu is also represented. Hence, residential areas with a strong middle-class representation, a high degree of academization, and a large proportion of families frequently possess a greater number of civic initiatives and thus a greater range of services of this kind than city districts with a large proportion of migrants, persons receiving income support, and unemployed citizens. Structurally, this difference is based particularly on the resources that each group of residents has at its disposal such as available time and access to, for example, local media or political representatives who are decisive for the realization of such projects. In spatial terms, this unequal milieu-based distribution of civic involvement structures corresponds with the above-mentioned tendency toward sociospatial polarization: Privileged residential areas with privileged residents can be distinguished from disadvantaged areas with residents whose involvement in society less frequently takes the form of engaging in such civic initiatives (see Munsch 2003).

This development is further strengthened by the fact that business and politics are increasingly giving priority to affluent city dwellers and their lifestyles. Correspondingly, certain so-called soft location factors such as consumption level or also residential quality play an increasingly important role. The reorientation of communal location strategies toward these soft location factors is based on the belief that cities are increasingly acquiring the role of catalysts within the globalized economic network: A specific location policy will determine whether relevant companies will decide to locate in a certain community or not. Urban administrations

particularly try to woo the control centers of transnationally active companies in the hope that these centers will succeed in attracting international flows of personnel, capital, and goods. Accordingly communal regulatory policies are directed toward providing an environment that will encourage companies to relocate there (see Sassen 1991).

This policy is accompanied by a tendency to reshape urban space in line with specific need structures, namely those of consumption. On the one side, this can be seen in the development of gentrified areas in which affluent consumers (should) prefer to spend their time as tenants, retail customers, or visitors to expensive leisure-time and cultural facilities. The other side of this gentrification dynamic is the attendant devaluation of other areas: Certain population groups, the less affluent urban residents, are increasingly excluded from the gentrified areas. This can be seen at its worst in the "antibeggar" and "antivagrants" laws passed by various German communes since the end of the 1990s that define begging, drinking alcohol, or loitering in public spaces as a misdemeanor. However, even just the concentration of consumer services for a certain lifestyle such as the postmaterial academic milieu already creates a dynamic of exclusion. Moreover, location policies within these marginalized areas also promote spatial segregation processes: Shops providing cheap consumer such as the so-called one Euro shops are located here.

Looking at the developmental process of prioritizing civic involvement structures instead of public, communal, state-run service structures and combining this with the associated communally and administratively dynamized stratification of urban space along small but fine and decisive differences in consumption and life style, it is necessary to ask what consequences this has for a professional social work.

Approaches to a reflective spatial positioning of social work

Social inequalities, that is, material and structural inequalities, are particularly visible in everyday life as sociocultural differences (see Bourdieu 1985). Taste, fashion, and behavior do not just reveal a particular actor's social position but are also decisive dimensions along which class- and milieu-specific inequalities are produced and reproduced. Analytically trained actors can even read these milieu-specific characteristics. For example, experienced social workers frequently possess such a skill. Even when they often do not apply it consciously, it can be seen clearly in the way, for example, family welfare workers answer items such as "What is typical about the families I work with is that they always" or the way community workers answer items such as "What is typical about our residents is the rituals that they frequently perform when"

Unfortunately, such appraisals by institutional managers or policymakers but even by the professionals themselves frequently lead to the conclusion that the identified problem is these behaviors themselves, in other words, the form in which certain members of society lead their lives. This overlooks the fact that each individual actor depends on the structural resources and accesses that are available or not available due to her or his social position. Taking an analytical approach to the present context of given and potential reactions to the spatial segregation processes within German communes, it is necessary to point out that social work is in danger of producing or reproducing an "ecological fallacy" when it fails to differentiate between social and spatial phenomena or how they are entangled, while tending to relate

specific patterns of action more to a specific area. The place, that is, for example, a certain residential area, is then not only marked in general as being "cut off," dangerous," or "in need of development," but is also inadmissibly homogenized as such:

Some of the people living there are in the third generation on social welfare—a social welfare aristocracy—they no longer have any idea of what it's like to get up in the morning, shave, dress properly, and go to work. They take their money from the state and do a bit of work on the side, if they don't actually become criminal. If we want to change things, we need to rouse these people from their lethargy, make them realize that they are responsible for themselves, their city, and their neighborhood. (Rolf-Peter Löhr, Stern-Magazine, April, 13th, 2005; own translation)

For more than a decade now, such undifferentiated and even stigmatizing analyses have formed the starting point for initiating development processes and stopping downward spirals—not only in urban development programs but increasingly in social work as well. A prominent part of the discussion over a so-called community development approach to social work is the simple restriction of social phenomena to spatial correspondences or to a fixing of these in the territorial world.

Professional strategies of social work should promote and regulate subjective ways of living. Generally, these strategies are restricted by focusing social work only on social contexts while failing to discuss spatial consequences or by understanding these simply as given, unchangeable structures (absolute space). In contrast, an appropriate professional social work needs to critically examine the production and reproduction of the dominant political, cultural, and social contexts as well as how they are represented as, for example "cut off" or "deprived," and it also needs to consider how social work itself contributes to their production and reproduction. Such a social work would not see itself primarily as a district- or neighborhood-related work, but as a sociopolitical activity.³ In line with what Bourdieu calls social space, such a social work thereby always conceives the relation to social spaces in terms of the power relations in which they are entangled and that they inevitably help to form. From the side of professionals, the focus of such a social work is on the formation of a reflective approach to spatiality. In contrast to the concept of community orientation to be found in the above-mentioned mainstream, we propose that this concept of social work should focus on a reflective attitude among professionals and an organizational context that supports this attitude.

The adoption of such a reflective attitude toward place and space is operationalized in social work through a systematic contextualization of every professional activity, that is, by a systematic and highly comprehensive investigation of the specific service delivery context. Ideally, social workers should become aware of which constellations of interests and thereby which power constellations are present. Determining how spatial contexts are produced and reproduced simultaneously casts light on the boundaries of current territorial orders. This means that a reflective attitude toward place and space can help those involved to see which spatial contexts are desired or not desired at a specific point in historical time. What is

³ We shall call such an adequately space-related social work "*Sozialraumarbeit*."

decisive for such a professional social work is thereby not only that which is desired but also that which is not desired, because it is the processing of existing territorial orders, the extension of the dominant ways of producing and reproducing space that can first open up or further extend the available action options for users (Kessler, Reutlinger 2008; Reutlinger, Wigger 2010).

This already points to the second relevant point for a reflective attitude: the need for a political positioning. This is because one dilemma in a community approach is that every conscious and planned intervention produces or reproduces specific interpretations of space; that is, it uses spatial descriptive categories, because categories always represent instruments of historical and cultural negotiation and cannot simply be changed at random. At the same time, their simple production and reproduction cannot be allowed to just be given and accepted because of the constraints these categories frequently impose on social work clients. Therefore, a reflective attitude calls for the adoption of a deliberate positioning, for example, as nonterritorializing work. This addresses a third central point: Such a social work is not per se good or on the right side. It has to legitimize its position—in terms of communal policy, professionally, and, not least, toward its clients.

This legitimation work is particularly decisive in light of the transformation of the prior welfare-state territorial order, because of the increasing pressure to legitimize itself confronting social work as a whole since the last third of the 20th century (see Kessler, Otto 2008). However, simply calling for a community orientation as a general guiding principle is an insufficient response to this pressure. In the sense of a reflective attitude, it has to show the actors in social work (professionals, organizations, and policymakers) why it is both meaningful and necessary to have a public body that supports and influences how people live their lives, and it has to demonstrate this in concrete terms and in relation to specific situations. Hence, adopting such an—indeed very demanding—approach is a continuous task that cannot be achieved merely by agreeing on an organizational or professional mission statement on "community-oriented social work." It also cannot be achieved through the commitment of individual professionals alone. It requires (local) political and organizational conditions that will make this possible for professionals and therefore also for their clients. Hence, such an approach does not require an alternative community-oriented program. In contrast to many existing programs and strategies, it does not offer operating guidelines or fixed methods. It aims far more to promote a framework for reflection that should be applied when formulating or further developing concrete and situation-specific space-related conceptions.

Only such a reflective approach will deliver an appropriate perspective on and way of dealing with the current challenges posed by the spatial segregation processes that are transforming urban landscapes as we move further into the 21st century.

(translated by Jonathan Harrow)

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