Degenerative Spaces: the spatiality of social disadvantage as represented in political discourse in Halle (Saale)

The term “diversity” in the English language can mean both Diversität and Vielfalt, both referring to difference. In both German and English-speaking cultures, Diversität, Vielfalt and “diversity” have become more than a reference to difference. These terms now represent a positive state of co-existence of different ethnic, cultural and social groups in societies which are increasingly oriented around a perspective of global reliance. Urban areas set the scene for many different forms of this co-existence at a local level.

Since the concept of multiculturalism (as discussed by Taylor, 1992) was originally rejected in Germany during a long and controversial debate on a “leading culture” (Leitkultur), both the political and much of the public opinion has changed. German politics have mainly abandoned the framework of a leading culture, having accepted the almost omnipresent existence of culturally diverse inhabitants in Germany, and the reality that assimilation as a policy ideal actually hindered assimilation in practice. Now, in times of city branding and multi-level competition for the “creative class,” diversity is “in.” A diverse urban environment is more creative, more attractive, more tolerant and open to an international and internationally-minded clientele. Diversity, as a welcome discursive change from Leitkultur, emphasizes the positive effects of difference on society and on urban environments. Cities use “diversity” both to outwardly advertise an attitude of tolerance and to support positive, forward-looking local integration policies.

Despite the seemingly openness of diversity propagation, there are also problems with this approach to urban policy. First, “diversity” as a positive state of co-existence ignores the inevitable conflicts that occur in a multicultural setting. Even more detrimentally, while “diversity” capitalizes on supporting the unique possibilities of productivity among a diverse population, it excludes the socioeconomically weak. This last critique is most relevant for my research.

My research approaches the problem of socioeconomic segregation in Halle (Saale), Germany, aiming to understand how political discourse has shaped policy-making and policy implementation surrounding this growing problem since 1990. The focus on socioeconomic segregation is due to the relatively small proportion of immigrant population in Halle (ca. 4%), as well as to the

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necessity to address socioeconomic segregation with the same urgency as ethnic segregation, particularly in structurally weak areas of Eastern Germany. A political discourse analysis will attempt to identify the social imaginaries and political practices which lead to certain understandings of disadvantaged neighborhoods, and to the policy which addresses them. My main hypothesis is that political discourse on segregation – both that which emerges from local historical situations, and that which is passed down from national or European political programs – does not seek to explain the origins of the problem and tends to seek neighborhood-scale, rather than city-wide solutions.

In addition to this hypothesis, there remain many open questions about the results of this discourse analysis. As briefly mentioned above, to what extent does political discourse reflect local situations or to what extent is it borrowed from wider regional, national and European policy? How have discursive changes related to “diversity” and “poverty” since the 1990s affected discourse on socioeconomic segregation?