THE EUROPEAN CITY AS A TRANSDISCIPLINARY CONCEPT: CONTRADICTIONS AND POTENTIALS

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I. INTRODUCTION

The European City as a model[1] for urban development seems to be more attractive than ever: Municipalities and private developers not only in Europe but also in Asia and Latin America are trying to implement urban strategies, masterplans and project developments under the label of the «European City». Despite its widely spread distribution the model remains vague and different disciplines like sociology, political sciences and urban planning have their own understanding of it. Therefore this article's objective is to analyze the different concepts and reveal the complexity, the dimensions, contradictions and the potential of the *European City Model* and especially to show the problems which appear if the model is applied in a changing urban environment. This can be characterized by social heterogeneity, a new role of urban politics and the diversification of spatial development patterns.

The methodology consists of the analysis of approaches from different disciplines towards the model of the European City. The article not only tries to indicate the various thematic understandings but also highlights the different uses of the model for urban studies and urban development and its helpfulness to understand recent urban development trends.

The starting points of the search for the European City Model is from the observation that the label «European City» is not only used to indicate the physical location of cities which can be found in a –however delimitated– geographical area of Europe but also as a specific type of city or a certain form of urban pattern. The paradoxical situation emerges that there is no direct relationship between the cities located in Europe. The concept of the European city exists and simultaneously the concept «European City» can also be applied to cities elsewhere like for example in Latin-America or Asia.

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1   This article is based on the results of a research Project on the European City which was realized from 2009 to 2011 by the author in cooperation with Oliver Frey of the Technical University Vienna. Preliminary results of the project were published in German in Frey/Koch 2010, Frey/Koch 2011 and presented on the 27th of June 2011 at a conference on Urbanism at the Technical University Vienna.

This also shows that the Model is not denying the existing differences between European cities and its aim is not to impose a general model which is applicable for all European cities. It may rather be understood as an abstract ideal type to which cities worldwide can approach or not.

II. THEMATIC SUBDIVISION: DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE «EUROPEAN CITY»

Various disciplines have their own understanding of the «European City». The following chapter presents the different perspectives in history, sociology, urbanism/urban design and political sciences (see also Frey and Koch, 2010).

II.1. Historic dimension

In his study on the history of the European City Leonardo Benevolo (1999, p. 13) describes the cities «as one of the reasons – maybe the most important – that Europe constituted itself as a historical unit». And he adds that the coexistence of public authorities and free market enterprise which have divided competences over land use issues characterizes the European cities. This equilibration between private rights and public control can only work if the interests of both parties are adequately represented (Benevolo, 1999, p. 223). The inherent conflict between a private and a public realm, but also the influence of different historical eras which shaped and still shape the urban development, leads to a so-called «presence of history» in European Cities (Siebel, 2004, p. 18) which is still evident and visible in the daily life of the city dwellers. Siebel adds that the European City is a place where a special form of living emerges which differentiates the inhabitants of urban areas from rural. However, a critical revision is necessary if the distinction between rural and urban lifestyles still exists today or rather if we experience a complete urbanization of society.

II.2. Social Dimension

The European City as a social formation is characterized through a minor grade of socio-spatial segregation, especially compared to cities in the Unites States (see Bagnasco and Le Galès, 2000, p. 14). At the same time the role of its citizens as important actors which shape everyday life in urban areas through their participation in organizations, associations, citizens groups is a characteristic of the European city. Therefore Bagnasco and Le Galès describe the ideal type of European city as a «collective actor». Its urban development and urban politics are not only determined by the elected politicians and other public authorities but through a variety of different groups and micro-projects, the major part of them not having an institutionalized form (Le Galès, 2002, p. 262).

II.3. Political Dimension

The political dimension of the European City is a product of its embedding in the national welfare state and a far-reaching capacity to act within a stable national context. This capacity to act is based on the fact that cities and municipalities receive national funds and have the autonomy to determine up to a certain degree how these funds are used. Thus, cities can

determine their politics and developments (see Kazepov, 2005). In addition, the inclusion in the supranational system of the European Union strengthens the capacity to act because secondary to national funding, cities can also strive for European funds and use these for their development. Symbols for the municipal autonomy and the far-reaching capacity to act are local investments in infrastructure, water supply, public housing and urban planning: European Cities have (had) the legal competences and the possibility to create and implement a local welfare state and determine the course of their policy. Also in a similar way the creation of modern urban planning instruments during the 19th century in European cities can be understood as a demonstration of municipal autonomy and the political idea to «restrain» market forces and obtain a coordinated development on the local level (Koch, 2011).

II.4. Urbanism/urban design Dimension

Marcuse (2004, p. 112) mentions the physical characteristics of the European City: a historical centre with low rise buildings (except for state and religious buildings), public places, neighborhoods with a mixed social structure and small commercial units, clear geographical limits, a high degree of densification and a well equipped public transport system. Urban (2008) also mentions the mix of functions and a sensible treatment of historical buildings as attributes of the European City. Public space, particularly the market place has a huge importance for being the location where urban society in medieval Europe was founded and different social groups met and interacted in a democratic way (Hassenpflug, 2002, Farías, 2005). The design of the public space and its use through different social groups therefore determines a major difference between the European City and the Latin American City: for example, one which was shaped from its Hispanic origins through different types of public spaces for different population groups and not as a democratic place (Flores, 2004, p. 137)[2].

Regardless of the often romanticized notion of the European City as an open and democratic city, the urban structure of the European city can be characterized through density, compactness, centrality and mixed uses.

The contradiction that the spatial structure of European Cities also consists of extensive suburban areas, «Zwischenstadt/Cities in-between» and depopulated urban centers (and not only of dense and compact urban structure) shows that the European City Model is not a descriptive concept which mirrors real urban development processes but an ideal type!

The revision of the distinctive approaches in history, sociology, political sciences and urban design/urbanism reveals different definitions of the European City. The European City can be understood as the ideal type of a certain form of built-up environment, and as a social formation on the local level or as a political unit which poses a high degree of autonomy. Nevertheless interconnections exist between the various definitions which are the focus of the concluding chapter of this article.

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2   Nevertheless, the medieval European City was less open and democratic as often assumed. Only determined groups had the possibility to participate in political decisions and receive full citizen rights. A huge part of society (population without land ownership and women in general) was excluded from municipal participation and did not have the right to vote.

III. FUNCTIONAL SUBDIVISION: THE DIFERENT USES OF THE EUROPEAN CITY MODEL

In addition to the various thematic denotations, the concept of the European City also inherits different functional meanings which help understand some of the thematic approaches mentioned in the previous chapter. We can distinguish between a normative-utopian understanding of the European City and the use as an analytical framework to evaluate urban development and societal processes as well as urban politics. Between these two functions also exist; overlapping aspects which makes a clear distinction complicated (see Häußermann and Haila, 2005).

III.1. Analytical framework

The use of the European City as an analytical framework is based on the work of the German sociologist Max Weber (2000), who defined five characteristics of the medieval European City. These characteristics were, in his understanding, the reason why capitalism appeared precisely in European cities in the middle ages and not in other times. The characteristics were: a fortification, a locally controlled market with its own court, the association of citizens who created their own representative bodies, political autonomy and self-governance.

Of course, today most of these aspects do not apply to the contemporary European City. Nevertheless, the so called *neoweberian approach*, most prominently represented by Bagnasco and Le Galès (2000) see the formation of urban society as a collective actor or a social formation which emerges through the interaction of different social groups and citizen's association which features in the European City of today. These features may be used as a framework in order to analyze urban processes in different cities and evaluate how «European» they are (eg, see the analyses of Giersig, 2008 of Stockholm and Helsinki or Betz 2011 of the Ruhr Area). The analytical framework may contain political, social, historical as well as urban design related criteria and allows analyzing present urban development processes in Europe and elsewhere through this perspective.

The analytical framework of the «European city» is often seen as the opposite of the North American city which is described through overwhelmingly negative features like an out of control urban sprawl, with the absence of spatial planning, and growing social segregation. Whether this binary thinking of European and North-American cities corresponds to the reality, is not discussed here (see for careful analyses Hannemann and Mettenberger, 2011 and Keil 1999). Nevertheless this comparison shows the closeness between the analytical European City framework and the implicit or explicit use as a normative-utopian concept.

III.2. The normative-utopian model

The normative-utopian model understands the European City as a kind of instruction guide for future urban development. This use is widely spread and for example the German Ministry for Urban Development mentions in a recent report that the European City is a model for success which leads to economic growth, social integration and ecological sustainability and therefore cities should adapt their own developmental strategies from the European City Model. (BMVBS, 2009). In addition, outside Europe, the urban design aspect

of the European city is used as model/instructional guide. New Urbanism Projects in the US, planned new cities in China or gated communities in Latin America or Eastern Europe refer to the European City as an architectonic form. They try to implement compactness, density and centrality, while neglecting in general the social, political and historical dimensions of the European City.

The attempt to expose the European City in its different thematic and functional dimensions shows the diversity of the concept and also gives an insight into the problems which might appear during its application in urban development processes. The European City is used as justification for contradictory ideas and urban strategies: it can serve as justification for a strict control of monument protection and the reconstruction of historic buildings and at the same time provide a theoretical basis for the development of new urbanism projects. It may serve as an explanation for strategies to reduce social polarization and at the same time for the revalorization of public spaces. In none of these cases the reference is incorrect, because due to its different attributes the European City can be used for almost any type of urban development. However the arbitrariness of the model may also lead to contradictions. Häußermann (2001) describes that the far-reaching municipal capacity to act - which is one of the characteristics of the European City in the political dimension - led during the 1960s and 1970s to the deconstruction of medieval urban patterns which were dense, compact and of mixed-use in order to create a more functionalist, car-orientated urban pattern. In other words: The ideal-typical physical structure of the European City Model was destroyed in many cities specifically because of the municipality's autonomy to elaborate and implement urban renewal programs.

IV. THE EUROPEAN CITY: A MODEL FOR URBAN DEVELOPMENT INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF EUROPE

The following chapter analyses recent trends in urban development inside and outside Europe and compares them with the different dimensions of the European City Model. Is the European City still useful or is its frequent use a barrier which distorts our view on cities and prevents the development of a contemporary analytical framework or normative concepts on urban issues?

- In the political dimension, the far-reaching autonomy of the municipality loses importance. Many of today's urban problems cannot be solved on a municipal level but rather on a regional/metropolitan level. Therefore new strategies and forms of regional governance are needed. Municipal autonomy and strong municipal planning instruments –one of the characteristics of the European city– do not provide answers for the challenges of regional governance and seem not to be appropriate in solving problems like the urban sprawl or the implementation of sustainable transport systems.
- In the social dimension, the European City Model describes the city as a social formation and collective actor which is based on various forms of citizen participation. This does not stand in accordance with recent trends in urban society, for example the emergence of multi-local households and transnational migration processes:

Multi-local households consist of persons who live in one city and work in another or have other reasons for a multi-local lifestyle which include the maintaining of various places of residence. These households do not belong to one urban society but to several and therefore the idea of the European City that the city dwellers are engaged in the development of their city does not fit in with this phenomenon. Related phenomena like the temporary location in one city which is different to the home town or - more traditional- the inter-municipal commuting between work and home show the limits of the idea of an urban society as a collective actor. The emergence of transnational lifestyles goes along the same line but on the global level. Migrants who have much stronger links to their country of origin than to their actual place of residence are a major fact in European Cities. Latin-American or African immigrants in European cities transfer money to their countries of origin and are thus more involved in urban development and society there than in the city they actually live in. Due to globalization processes, transformation of family structures and work conditions, multi-local and transnational households gain importance in urban society. This reality does not match with the traditional concept of urban society in the European City Model.

- Also in the urban design/urbanism dimension the European City Model needs to be revised: Density, Compactness and Centrality may be the appropriate guidelines for the construction of new neighborhoods, but the main problem European cities have to resolve today is the improvement of the existing building structure and its adaption to new challenges like climate change or the decreasing and ageing population. These developments make the adjustment of the built-up environment necessary and whether the European City Model provides sufficient answers for these challenges is questionable and has to be analyzed carefully.

Transferring the European City as a model for urban development to countries outside of Europe and especially to the Global South seem to have little prospect of success. It is doubtful, that the problems of cities in Asia, Africa and Latin-America can be solved with strategies emerging from the Model of the European City. Aspects like insufficient infrastructure, a high grade of privatization and informalization, rapid urban growth, the different role of public institutions and in general a distinct socio-economical context need other urban strategies.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This analysis may lead to the conclusion that the «European city» has to be interpreted as a «myth» which is not able to grasp new urban realities. If we see the European city as a normative model or as a kind of instruction manual it provides only limited answers to the new political, economical, social and ecological challenges that cities in Europe and in Non-European countries are facing today. Thus a readjustment of the major contents of the model to the present urban development trends is necessary.

Nevertheless it has an academic relevance as a neo-weberian analytical framework which helps to categorize urban development in different cities and can be seen as an important

counterbalance to universal urban theories (see Le Galés 2002). Even more important, the European City still has its importance and future not only in the academic realm but also in practical urban development: Not as a concrete instruction manual for urban development but rather as a possibility to join forces between disciplines. As I tried to demonstrate, the model becomes irrelevant or even contradictory if the different dimensions are regarded independently: A city whose built-up environment is shaped by density, compactness and mixed-uses cannot be characterized as a European City if the social, cultural and political aspects are not corresponding. The interaction between disciplines can be seen as the strength of the model. The European City, understood not as a precise model but as the idea to see urban development as a transdisciplinary holistic concept, which is nurtured by sociological, political, historical and urban planning aspects which provides an integrated view on the city. It allows the approximation of the complex reality in European and Non-European cities and is in this spirit more important than ever.