

LIKE IT NEVER HAPPENED: TEACHING POST-SOCIALISM IN K-12 GEOGRAPHY 25 YEARS AFTER 1989

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18509/GBP.2015.61>

UDC: 316.323.72,,713“/37

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decades, both academic and school Geography have neglected post-socialist transformation. Based on theories of transformation, this paper aims at analyzing to what extent the school Geography of selected former socialist countries discusses post-socialist transformation. Qualitative text and content analysis served to map the central concepts in Geography textbooks from Romania and Germany (Berlin) published both before and after 1989/1990. The results show on the one hand a strategy of inertia (Romania), on the other hand a strategy of replacement (Germany). In both cases, post-socialism merely serves the purpose of reproduction and low-value knowledge acquisition.

Keywords: post-socialism, transformation, Geography Education, Germany, Romania

INTRODUCTION

Growing up in former socialist countries, students face in every facet of their everyday life traces of socialism and post-socialist transformation. Despite its omnipresence, transformation has entered school Geography only in a reluctant manner. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to analyze to what extent the process is taught in selected former socialist countries 25 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

THEORIZING POST-SOCIALIST TRANSFORMATION

When compared with other regions, research on socialist countries remains rather humble. Even if some scholars merely refer to post-socialist transformation in a footnote as „1989 and all that“ [1], throughout the 1990s a broad process of theory construction of transition and transformation took place [2]. While some disciplines carried on theorizing transformation in terms of path-dependency [3] or as small transformations [4], economists started stressing an emerging „post-post-socialism“ [5].

Based primarily on the work of Iván Szelényi [6], Urban Studies in general and Urban Geography in particular produced a number of regional empirical data on urbanization, suburbanization [7] or heteropolitization [8]. Starting with the mid-2000s, however, the theoretical discourse turned towards the concept of „post-transformation“ [9].

TEACHING POST-SOCIALIST TRANSFORMATION

Given the rather humble research interest in former socialist countries, tertiary Geography Education dedicated little attention to post-socialism as well. Overall, interest remained limited to generic declarations, such as „[p]erhaps other things could be learned by reflecting on other places“ [1: 161]. One of the few examples involved on-street teaching and fieldwork of UK students in Moscow [10].

In contrast to higher education, Geography in K-12 classrooms works with a different set of objectives and content. Depending on the individual educational system, time resources, curricular architecture, tradition of Geography Education, educational media and materials, the objectives and teaching reality of school Geography can vary considerably. According to this, teaching about former socialist Europe carries different meaning in post-socialist countries and in those not looking back on a socialist history [11]. In case of the former, teaching and learning about post-socialism means understanding proximities and contemporary spatial reality. In essence, understanding their own spaces and places of post-socialism should enable students to act in their everyday life. In contrast, students living outside former socialist Europe are generally confronted indirectly with post-socialism when making contact with migrants or understanding general (economic) dynamics on continental scale. Therefore, teaching and learning about post-socialism in these contexts often becomes reduced to additional case studies and understanding remote spaces.

Against the background of heterogenous objectives and traditions of school Geography, this paper aims to take a closer look at the way post-socialism is dealt with a quarter of century after the fall of the Iron Curtain. To do so, it sets a special focus on an area closest to the reality of many students, namely Urban Geography.

METHOD AND SAMPLE

Qualitative text and content analysis served to identify segments discussing Urban Geography. Following the identification, all segments were subjected to content analysis. Following several (re-)iterative steps of in-vivo coding, categories were established and revised using MaxQDA.

During the mid-2000s, the German Geographical Society developed Educational Standards in Geography for the Intermediate School Certificate. According to the document students are required to develop skills in six areas of competence (subject-specific knowledge, spatial orientation, methods, communication, evaluation, action) within three performance levels (reproduction, reorganization and transfer, reflection and problem solving). The performance levels were used as categories for the analysis of tasks.

The sample consisted of lower secondary Geography textbooks published between 1983-2014. A total of ten textbooks for the grades 5-8 (students aged 12-15) constituted the Romanian subsample. Given the federally structured German educational system, the state of Berlin was chosen as German subsample. For the time period before the German reunification, textbooks from both the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) were considered. In both cases, textbooks for the grades 5-10 (students aged 11-17) constituted the sample. For the decades after German reunification textbooks for the new lower secondary education (grades 7-10, students aged 12-15) were selected.

RESULTS

Along with the results of textbook analysis, the following chapters offer a general discussion of the changes affecting the overall framework of education in the selected countries.

BERLIN (GERMANY)

Prior to 1989, school Geography followed two different philosophies and experienced different realities in East-Berlin (GDR) and West-Berlin (FRG). The dominant tradition in East-Berlin was a combination of General and Regional Geography. After having been introduced to basics of Physical and Human Geography, students studied Regional Geography ranging from the national to the continental scale. Special attention was dedicated to the Geography of the USSR. In contrast, West-Berlin schools followed a more thematic approach. Regional case studies served as carriers of selected topics of both Physical and Human Geography. Rather than spatially inclusive knowledge about the Globe, students in West-Berlin were required to understand geographical processes at given scales and to subsequently transfer it to other spaces and scales.

As part of the educational system of the GDR, East-Berlin school Geography was taught according to a common national curriculum and one common textbook printed by a state-owned and controlled publishing house. Over the decades, textbooks became bi-, tri-, and eventually even multicolor. In contrast, West-Berlin adopted its own curricula. Given the small market and the structure of the educational system of the FRG (curricula and educational materials were produced for every federal state in part), the first textbooks for West-Berlin were printed at a later stage. During the first decades of German separation teachers produced their own teaching materials and used a set of textbooks from various federal states other than Berlin for teaching.

Following German reunification, Berlin became one of the sixteen federal states and produced its own curricula and educational media. During the first years after reunification, West-Berlin curricula and textbooks replaced the GDR curriculum and textbooks in East-Berlin, whereas the first common curriculum was developed and implemented in the late 1990s. In recent years, the federal states of Berlin and Brandenburg adopted a common curriculum. As a consequence, most textbooks were produced for and used in both states. The current curriculum for the lower secondary education (grades 7-10) follows a regional-thematic approach. Grades 7/8 focus on Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, while grades 9/10 introduce the Americas, Germany in Europe and a number of thematic units, such as the tropics and global interconnectedness in context of local and global sustainability.

When discussing Urban Geography, textbooks printed before 1989 in the former GDR emphasized the role of industrialization. Urbanization both in terms of increasing urban population and urban lifestyle expansion remained, however, in the background. Along with industrialization, socialist urban planning was the second important concept explaining urban structures and processes. Within a philosophy of commodification, textbooks made great effort to highlight both the importance and the features of infrastructure planning. Thereby, the role of state supremacy in decision-making served repeatedly as the explanatory scaffold for the justification of the „correct“ lifestyle and class equity. Another consequence of state supremacy, and concurrently also a prerequisite of the „correct“ socialist lifestyle was the timely housing incarnated by the large housing estates of blocs of flats. Most visuals of the non-continuous text depicted exclusively socialist housing and architecture. Regarding their regional distribution, most of them illustrated Russian or GDR cities.

Geographical skill acquisition also carried an ideological objective. While students were expected to reproduce the content of the textbook, some tasks also required reorganization and transfer of knowledge. In many cases, these tasks were also the carriers of socialist ideology. One example is a comparison of the old and new (socialist) Moscow. Based on

the information presented in both continuous and non-continuous text, students could only describe the predominant benefits of socialist urban planning and urban landscape. Textbooks used in West-Berlin before 1989 displayed a more analytic perspective on Urban Geography. The concept of urban planning dominated the discourse on urban structures and processes. Textbooks introduced both socialist iconography and architecture, highlighting their interconnectedness and illustrating it with rich visuals. Case studies served to explain decision-making and its consequences. Detailed information was given on large housing estates and blocs of flats. The policy of replacement of old „Gründerzeit“ urban fabric was met with strong criticism. Overall, textbooks drew a parallel between whatever was considered to be old and new (i.e. socialist). Reflecting the geographical fashion of the time, textbooks also introduced models of the socialist city. In most cases, these models explained the repercussions of political ideology on space, and consequently on urban life. Additionally, two main aspects shaped Geography textbooks used in West-Berlin prior to 1989. On the one hand, command economy served as an explanatory background of urban planning. The repercussions of command economy on community and individuals' life appeared both on the macro-scale of cities and housing estates and on the micro-scale of individual flats in blocs of flats. On the other hand, textbooks used predominantly original sources from the GDR for any visuals depicting urban structures and processes in former socialist Germany.

Despite a dominant tradition of reproduction, geographical skill acquisition included reorganization, transfer, reasoning, and pronouncing a judgement. To achieve this, tasks often resorted to comparisons. Most textbooks required students to compare the central area of West-Berlin with the one of East-Berlin. While working on the task, students had a variety of educational media, many of which were original materials coming directly from the GDR.

A quarter of century after the fall of the Iron Curtain, Geography textbooks used in Berlin tell a completely different story. Regarding urban development, case studies were exclusively limited to Berlin. Most textbooks still constructed the poles of East and West. However, urban development at Potsdamer Platz was mythologized to a symbol of unification. Additionally, the concept of Central Business District appeared in some textbooks. Furthermore, some textbooks also introduced the process of suburbanization and its effects. Along with current development occurring during post-socialism, textbooks also contained information explaining historical structures (with impact on current urban dynamics). Thereby, socialist urban planning was linked back to historical sources, such as Morus' *Utopia* and Campanella's *Civitas solis*. Though not as broadly discussed, the model of the socialist city (with emphasis on that magisterial and the central square) served as an explanation along with further details on industry and industrialization. Urban development after 1953 enjoyed special attention. In addition, some textbooks contain surprising elements. Some of these are the depiction of Moscow as a capitalist city per definition, the overall discourse proclaiming capitalism as natural order, and the complete lack of any information on urban planning and development in West-Berlin during German separation. Taking a closer look at the tasks reflects that the topics connected to post-socialist urban development are limited to the basic operations, namely reproduction. Students are required to explain the construction of council estates or to describe the post-socialist change by the example of Potsdamer Platz. In consequence, no reorganization, transfer or reflection of their urban environment is required.

Summarizing the German case study, an overall policy of replacement describes the development of the last quarter of century. In the federal state of Berlin, former socialist framework structures, such as curricula, textbooks, school types etc., were replaced by their West-Berlin counterparts. Socialist legacy remained, in terms of path-dependency, disregarded when the first curriculum and textbooks for the reunified state of Berlin were developed. Regarding content, contemporary textbooks offer a general background on both socialist and post-socialist condition. However, capitalism is accepted and introduced as standard and natural. In addition, textbooks avoid describing ruptures, hybrid structures, and both individual and collective struggle within small transformations [4]. Despite the overall tone of rationality inherited from West-Berlin school Geography, textbooks fail to provide students with the necessary tools to achieve the required level of reflexivity and rationality. Additional tasks enabling analysis, comparison, and judgment pronunciation seem to be indispensable. In terms of geographical skill acquisition, this would also mean a stronger focus on methods and direct contact with space on local level. In addition, small transformations [4] taking place in families and communities need to be addressed. Art projects, urban movements, and community initiatives offer a number of excellent possibilities to experience small transformations and overall (missing) path-dependency.

ROMANIA

School Geography during socialism introduced in lower secondary education general Physical Geography in fifth grade, followed by Regional Geography on continental (outer-European continents in sixth, Europe in seventh grade) and national scale (Geography of Romania in eighth grade).

Geography curricula experienced little structural change during post-socialist transformation [11]. While educational objectives shifted and declared a strong orientation towards the European Union, content experienced a surprising continuity. The most important change affected the time resources, as Geography was reduced from two to one hour per week. Despite this radical cutback, little change occurred on the content level. Fifth grade Physical Geography was complemented by chapters introducing Human Geography. Regional Geography still dominates the grades 6-8, however, the curriculum was adapted to the general European guidelines discussing now Europe in the sixth, and all other continents in the seventh grade. Apart from small chapters positioning the country within the European Union, eighth-grade Geography of Romania experienced minimal change.

In contrast to the curricula, textbooks experienced a number of changes during post-socialism. While the educational media have continued with the pre-1989 tradition of reproducing strictly the content of curricula, not only their presentation and content changed, but also the entire textbook market. In the late 1990s products of several publishing houses established a textbook market. The most obvious change affected the presentation of the textbooks, as multicolor editions replaced progressively the black-and-white ones. The content also suffered some adaptation mainly as a consequence of the shortened time resources. This became visible in a more exemplary approach within Regional Geography that gave up discussing all countries of selected regions and elected few countries carrying exemplary value.

Urban Geography displays the changes textbook content went through during post-socialist transformation. Before 1989, both continuous and non-continuous text emphasized industrialization and urbanization. Depicted as the key indicator of

development, urbanization went hand in hand with industrialization. While the USSR served as the positive example, different imperialist cities illustrated the negative effects of failed urban planning. Large housing estates with blocs of flats dominated the non-continuous text and demonstrated how socialist urban planning secured environmentally sound housing. In addition, most textbooks stressed the importance of the freedom of urban planning in socialist countries as opposed to the imperialist ones. Commodification and technology are other categories summarizing the discourse of the textbooks. Despite the strong ideological discourse, only in exceptional cases did tasks require students to compare socialist and imperialist cities. Overall, information on imperialist cities was scarce and fragmentary, congruently, comparison remained mainly tributary. All in all, the presentation of content was matter-of-factly.

After a quarter of century of post-socialist transformation, Geography textbooks for lower secondary education still introduced urbanization and industrialization as intrinsically interconnected concepts explaining development. Evidence supporting this was delivered by a set of indicators measuring the degree of urbanization. In contrast, all books emphasized a number of challenges urban planning has faced since 1989. However, none of the textbooks discussed the consequences of the socialist urbanization and industrialization in an explicit manner. The concept of transformation remained alien to the textbooks. Some new elements were city profiles offering a more balanced image of cities across the globe and an updated set of non-continuous elements depicting cities in former socialist countries not limited only to blocs of flats. Little change was observed regarding the tasks, as their majority was limited to the reproduction of information presented in the textbook.

Summing up the facets of the Romanian case study, a certain mixture of overall inertia and selective innovation seems to describe the last quarter of century. Few changes affected the overall framework. Content, curricula, and textbooks reflect a surprising structural continuity. Change seems to be limited to and being induced by aspects of presentation, such as edition in color, and overall framework changes, such as the reduced time resources. A closer look at the content, as shown by the example of Urban Geography, reveals a similar structural inertia. While explicit ideology was removed, no overall revision of the information presented in the chapters has happened as yet. The textbooks not only fail to describe the reality of transformation after 25 years, but also to explain mechanisms and consequences inherent to socialist urbanization and industrialization. Lacking data and reflexivity on processes of transformation, however, is not limited to the content. Tasks featured in post-socialist textbooks pursue the legacy of a highly descriptive discipline not fostering geographical analysis, synthesis, or (critical) thinking of any kind. In its current state, school Geography fails to provide students with essential skills to perceive, analyze, understand, and judge structures and processes surrounding them. As a consequence, school Geography seems to exemplify the ongoing process of path-dependent transformation. Based on the results of this paper, inherited socialist structures seem to be still the dominating elements of post-socialist school Geography. Despite their impact on the general framework of formal education (e.g. curricular reform, introduction and liberalization of a textbook market, improved production conditions, overall access to updated information), structures implemented after 1989, which represent new and alien elements of post-socialism, have remained punctual. A closer look at textbook content reveals an overall inertia with very modest hybrid elements emerging from the post-socialist condition. The lack of reflexivity during textbook production reflected by both continuous and non-continuous text affects

geographical skill acquisition. Latter is the key ingredient of any successful small transformation [4] leading to action and change.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite a general discourse of post-post-socialism, understanding the legacy of socialism and post-socialism in former socialist countries remains essential for everyday life. The results of this paper show two strategies of dealing with the (post-)socialist legacy. While Romanian school Geography has been experiencing path-dependency over the last quarter of decade, transformation was eradicated in East-Berlin by strategies of replacement. Both strategies have repercussions on several scales. First, the overall framework of education shows two poles of possibilities. On the one hand, the strong inertia in Romania requires more radical reforms. On the other hand, complete replacement of the old and socialist in Berlin without the possibility of dealing with the own past requires a stronger opening and more dialogue. Second, the content discussed in textbooks displays some differences. While Romanian school Geography avoids explaining socialism and forgoes any elements of post-socialism, its German counterpart introduces information on structures and processes both prior to and after 1990. Hence, Romanian school Geography remains reluctant and inert, whereas its German counterpart opts for an explanation embedded in a temporal framework. Third, geographical skill acquisition goes back to socialist and post-socialist space to foster „low-order knowledge“ limited to reproduction. Fourth, none of the two case studies actually involves direct contact with geographical space (e.g. by means of geographical methods or field-trips). Overall, school Geography is still less sensitive to the reality of the spaces and places students live in, shape, and construct, and as a consequence, it fails to impart essential skills for everyday life.

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