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Social Borders in the Urban Space

Comparative Study of Two Peripheral Urban Districts of Galati and Braila

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ABSTRACT

The PhD Thesis entitled *Social Borders in the Urban Space. Comparative Study of Two Peripheral Urban Districts of Galati and Braila* represents a scientific, theoretical and practical analysis of the concept of social border and a way of identifying it within peripheral urban districts.

The theoretical dimension of the concept consists in its analysis, both as individual value (interpretive) and in relation to other operational notions in the urban space (comparative), thus achieving a whole framework and thoroughgoing conceptual context of the social borders.

The applicative valences of the concept were individualized within the field research, which aimed at identifying the social borders present in the urban peripheries and the way in which these borders are perceived or not by the public.

The Actuality of Research Topic

The PhD Thesis entitled *Social Borders in the Urban Space. Comparative Study of Two Peripheral Urban Districts of Galati and Braila* deals with a very current issue of great importance for the research of urban communities in general, and for the urban peripheries, and not only, in particular. So far, the issue of urban peripheries has not been the subject of numerous studies, being achieved only a number of collateral references; the social border issue has been examined in the context of educational process by Professor Mihai Dinu Gheorghiu[1] and his team.

Although the studies on the process of urbanization of certain phenomena in urban areas (poverty, crime) have developed over time, the study of peripheral areas where these phenomena focus was relatively small and limited to a few small areas.

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[1] Mihai Dinu Gheorghiu, Monique de Saint Martin in collaboration with Bénédicte de Montvalon, *Educatie si frontiere sociale. Franţa, Romînia, Brazilia şi Suedia/Education and social borders. France, Romania, Brazil and Sweden*, Polirom Publishing House, Iasi, 2011.

The literature of the city's issues (see Rostás Z., 2002; Miftode V., 2003; Sandu D., 2006; Chelcea L., 2008; Lupu, O., 2008) treats both the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of this theme. But the aspects regarding the peripheral districts are analyzed by only a few authors (Toth A., 2006; Mionel V., 2012). There is no analysis focusing on center-periphery relationship, the life in the exterior district, while in the Western Europe (France) and American urban sociology literature the urban peripheries issue is one of the most studied (Wacquant L., 2007; Lapeyronnie D., 2008).

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

The overall aim of the thesis is to "make a radiography" of two peripheral districts in urban areas (Galati and Braila cities) in order to identify the social borders present in this area and the way in which these borders are perceived or not by the public. To this end we have proposed the following objectives:

- describing and analyzing the formation way of the Micro 40 and Vidin quarters (meaning birthday, location);
- identifying the categories of the population living in these quarters;
- highlighting the educational and residential trajectories of the population of the two quarters;
- identifying social borders emerging in the quarter and the relation to other neighborhood quarters;
- highlighting the way in which people relate to these social boundaries;
- observing how the two quarters relate to the "center".

The general hypothesis of the thesis is that the urban periphery is separated from other areas of the city through concrete borders, the residents overcome these frontiers for the development of social life outside the district.

The working hypotheses are:

- There are differences between populations within the districts, "socially assisted" persons and the persons with income;

- There are differences between the old studied population and newcomers, both economically and culturally;
- Residents live a sense of exclusion, given the location and social position of the district compared to other city dwellers.

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The PhD thesis is structured, in compliance with the canons imposed by the scientific rigor, in three basic parts (theory, methodology and case study), presented as six chapters, supplemented by *Introduction, Conclusion, References and Annexes*.

The *Introduction* highlights from the beginning the actuality, the purpose and objectives of research, emphasizing the scientific novelty of the paper, the significance and practical value, all of which being above presented in detail.

In **Chapter I** there are presented the main directions of research in urban sociology domain, with an emphasis on the study of periphery and the contribution of the Chicago School of Sociology, as the model that stood for a long time based on any analysis of the city. There are then presented the new models of research reflected in the sociological studies of urban areas in the United States and France in particular.

An important part of this chapter presents the development of urban sociology in Romania, the contributions of Sociological School of Bucharest, in particular, the activity of the Laboratory of Urban Sociology and finally, it is presented the current research and the new trends in seeing and analyzing the urban area from Romania.

In **Chapter II** we discussed the theoretical aspects of the concepts of space and the defining city for research, and its related items such as urban periphery, the phenomenon of urban segregation and ghetto, as a form of segregation. The physical and social space cannot be addressed separately, as on the field we witness their interdependence across the urban space.

The concept of district, regarding the urban periphery, represents the core element of the chapter, being defined from the social and geographical point of view. The present segregation process in urban areas exists in several forms, favoring the ghetto, a concept that formed the basis of many urban researches. The way in which the urban periphery is

perceived and the relationship between and periphery and the social environment produce visible signs, in the sense that borders are marked, both physically and symbolically.

The central theme, the basic concept of the research, the *social frontiers* has been the analysis subject of **Chapter III**. Based on the concept theorizing achieved by Lamont and Molnar, who defined the social boundaries as "objectified forms of social differences, that are manifested through the unequal access to the material and symbolic resources and through their unequal distribution" (Lamont & Molnar, 2002, p. 167), we went for a border approach in relation to space, through the presentation of main research conducted in the U.S. and French space by M. Lamont. The defining element of social border issues is reporting to "them" and "us", the spatial representation model of this difference and the factors that favor the emergence, maintenance, and perpetuation of borders in time. In the light of the influence of these factors, there are various forms of social borders: internal and external; spatial and temporal; economic, cultural, political, and symbolic.

Assuming that borders not only divide the space, but also offer an identity to the population of urban peripheries, in the last part of this chapter we presented the theory of social identity that formed the basis for defining the specific elements that offer an identity to the residents.

Research Methodology is the subject of **Chapter IV** and it represents the glue between the first part, the theoretical approach and the third one, representing the applicative side. There are presented the main methods of data collection: document analysis, semi-structured interview and observation, research sample, and also the way in which the field survey was conducted in the two quarters, Micro 40 of Galati and Vidin, in Braila. We presented the data analysis approach by designing thematic analysis grids and research limitations.

Were analyzed in **Chapter V** the phenomenon of urbanization in Romania and the description field research (the formation and evolution of the two districts). Based on statistical data, mostly from the National Institute of Statistics, we have highlighted two major phases of urbanization in our country: the early 1950s and the early 1970s, and the second stage being the moment of creation of the studied quarters Micro 40 in Galati and Vidin in Braila.

In the second part of the chapter, we focused on the representative data for the two districts: number of inhabitants, the evolution in time, the current situation in the local and regional context.

Chapter VI presents the results of the field survey divided into eight subchapters.

In this part there are regarded issues on: quality of housing and quarters, residential trajectories of the inhabitants of the two peripheral districts; residents' work in the suburbs and the factors that influenced the career paths of individuals; the health of residents of urban peripheries; the adult education, and especially the children in the context of living in marginal districts; the reporting method of state institutions in the peripheral districts (City Hall, police, social assistance, NGOs' environment).

The last part was devoted to the changes that have occurred in these districts, over time, how people relate to these quarries, the image of the district among the outside population.

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This research introduces several new elements of the urban space, in general, and peripheral districts, in particular, from the point of view of the perception that people have on the level of living and the way of relating to the living space of the population, and also from the point of view of the official documents relating to these urban areas.

Social representations analysis on the quality of life has brought a validity addition to the empirical approach and it has given us the chance of knowledge from the "inside", by having discussions with people, the professionals who work in urban peripheries and the representatives of local public institutions have given us the opportunity to observe the differences in vision in order to shape a full picture of the Micro 40 and Vidin quarters.

The study is based on a comparative approach. Thus there are confronted the opinions of various categories of people who are related to the peripheral urban space, even if we regard the people living in the two districts, the specialists in various fields who carry out their daily activity in the quarters or the representatives of local public institutions who, through their work, affect in one way or another the life in the quarters.

The social border issue was reported to the two dimensions of individual existence: on the one hand we have captured aspects on educational, professional training, and its relation to others and to the living environment; on the other hand we highlighted items such as education, health, work, the way in which the district where he lives is seen.

The first tier of the analysis has focused on the quality of housing in the urban peripheries, the everyday problems that affect the living standards and the efforts to overcome the daily drawbacks. The lack of access to public utilities has represented the foundation on which the speech of each person interviewed was built; another aspect is the presence of people of gypsy ethnicity. These two situations have direct consequences on the evolution of the real estate market in the area, of prices and it represents the basis of district's characterization as deprived areas.

Regarding the residents Micro 40 and Vidin quarters, the residential trajectories and their temporal evolution highlight the way in which each person came to live in these urban areas. In this sense, from the subjects' responses, we distinguish three general trends: the acquisition of housing in the districts from the working place, in response to the need for labor force in the context of urban industrialization; moving towards the two other districts because of financial problems, a favoring action by low price of residences in such areas, receiving rental housing from the local authorities (Micro 40).

The residential trajectory was examined in relation to the educational and professional development of the people, being outlined three models of analysis that incorporate all three dimensions.

The first model emphasizes the dependent tendency that people have on social assistance received from the authorities and how this situation affects the professional path.

The second level of analysis focuses on employee-unemployed-assisted sequence, the professional "regress" is caused, in this respect, by the lack of education and skills to meet labor market requirements. In this context, the educational boundaries occurring at certain point from the lack of a prompt action are fundamented in time and they become very difficult to overcome.

The third defined pattern shows the lifestyle of people in precarious situations related to the vulnerability of people to the problems of life, even if it is about an accident or health issues.

The comparison analysis approach of the work in urban peripheries has included the work abroad, the unemployed situation and the working conditions of urban peripheries' residents.

Interviewees' speech focused a lot on the education at the schools in the two mentioned districts, an aspect mentioned by the population and reinforced by teachers. The lack of results, dropout, lack of active involvement of parents in the development and education of their children, "the reputation" that these schools have in these areas among the teachers in other school districts, makes the school in the peripheral area a segregated school. By all the actions of schools and by the involvement of teachers there is the desire of overcoming this invisible border, which is permanently felt.

The access to health care services was another issue mentioned by the interviewed subjects, both among population and also by specialists.

All of the difficulties which the population is facing generate both among the districts' population and their exterior, a negative image, maintained by a number of deviant behavior, violent acts occurring in this area. The violence specified by the state institutions produce a feeling of fear as a reaction to the quarter and apprehension for interacting with its population. On the other hand, shame is manifested among the residents to their place of residence in relation to people from outside the district. For example, the "fear" of exclusion determines the individual to manifest restraint in making public his address, to have reluctance in saying where he lives. The borders arising from this aspect are difficult to overcome and, according to the current situation they tend to perpetuate.

Regarding the image of the districts and its evolution over time, in the speech of the subjects there were discovered two trends: those who have more years of residence observed a worsening of living standards after 2000, when these areas were not subject to appropriate policy intervention, and a decrease in crime due to the migration abroad; the second category of people who had other residential experiences noted the negative image of the two districts that they have compared to other areas.

The public institutions' way of reporting in the two districts has revealed a lack of involvement, the fact that these two districts are facing delicate problems has not triggered the development of an intervention policy adapted to the needs of the population. At educational level the only support of the children in the districts is the non-governmental organizations involved in preventing the dropout risk, and at financial level, it supports with material goods

for elderly people. This is the domain where the authorities need to invest, in supporting bodies for the population.

The contributions of the study reach several levels:

Theoretical Contributions

During the research we combined the classical literature on the urban space research, studying various local and national organizations and institutions.

For a better illustration of the concepts with which we worked we exemplify: urban periphery, social borders, segregation; we have brought to the fore studies and authors - natives and from abroad, who have dealt with this issue in detail. The conducted research has connected various concepts, analyzing their causal effects. These analyses can generate new theoretical models for explaining and understanding the urban environment change in Romania.

Methodological Contributions

From a methodological perspective we consider that the work effectively combines the sociological research methods thus managing to provide a valuable insight on the Romanian urban environment. Moreover, the method of starting from general data on the urban environment and rendering pictures cut from reality in a descriptive and analytical way brings a whole new perspective in the social research.

Practical Contributions

A valuable aspect of this work is the practical one. This research may be for those whom we analyzed a good starting point for launching a social policy and more. Having more indicators regarding the quality of life perceived by the districts' residents and the vulnerabilities that can occur, they can give a new direction to the initiatives that they will take in the near future.

The paper highlights a number of solutions to improve the living standards of the population in urban peripheral districts.

We note the need for a new research to deepen some aspects of national urban peripheries situation in order to improve the living standards in these areas.

Keywords: social borders; city; social segregation; urban peripheries; district.

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