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Round Table: The Industrial and Modern City

Representations, Perceptions and Appropriations of Urban Space
(DRAFT PAPER)

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1. Introduction

My research project on urban space is integrated into a programme of the Swiss National Science Foundation on „Integration and Exclusion" and is located under the roof of the Swiss Folklore Society. The project focuses on the mechanisms and processes of inclusion and exclusion based on the structure, perception and utilisation of space. The term „space" in this context is not seen as an essentialist category in the sense of a given container but rather as a socio-cultural construct. The concept of representation can often be found in comparable sociological research, which tries to overcome an objectivist approach to space and emphasizes its socio-cultural make-up - though most of the time this concept is only reflected on a theoretical level or used differently altogether. For this reason my purpose in this talk is twofold: First, I want to present ways to apply the concept of representation to questions concerning space and which theoretical approaches can be found in this. Second, in taking a main street in Basel as example I want to consider the question of how spatial representations and/or representations in space are to be analyzed empirically. Are there useful methods and approaches in the social and cultural sciences? In which ways is the concept of representation usable in a qualitative research, which does not focus on space alone but aims to show processes of integration and exclusion?

2. The concept of representation

Representation has a variety of connotations: In most cases it is understood as an idea of something, meaning that representations either represent something or refer to something. In an other connotation representation embodies the symbolic portrayal of specific views, values or behavioural patterns. And thirdly, representation also means „to act or to decide in the

name of", referring for instance to representation in a political body[1]. According to Leibholz (1966) it is essential to representation that something previously existing only as an abstract idea or not at all is being made visible by a representative.

So representation is a concept open to widely differing meanings and was - not surprisingly - also applied in different ways in research on space, as will be shown in the following.

Mental and discursive representations

Parting from philosophy and psychology, representation is perceived as visualization of the environment or as an idea of it. Therefore representation is seen as a way of putting order on and making sense of social and spatial realities. The pictures, imaginations and knowledge of space that people have in their minds in turn do influence the way urban landscapes are talked or written about. There are a number of authors[2] focussing on discursive or mental representations, the way space is perceived, spoken, read and written respectively portrayed on maps or in pictures.

Material representations

Ideas of ordered space are reflected not only in discursive ways but also in the given spatial structure, that is on the physical level. The built environment, the material, physical and spatial forms of a city, is itself a representation of specific ideologies, of social, political, economic and cultural relations and practices, of hierarchies and structures. One research topic is the different territorial modes of representation, i.e. the symbolic constitution of space. On account of their sheer material presence territorial phenomena lend themselves easily as symbols or visual representations. They are meaningful and culturally coded. This is why semiotic approaches consider space as text or code which is being read by agents. In this context one question is also about the contents and points of reference for territorial identification and affiliation. On the other hand it is emphasized in structuralist and marxist approaches that space and territory do not only represent ideologies, power structures and social-economic relations but also inherently constitute these same relations and structures[3]. Spatial structures play a role in restricting or allowing certain ideas, relations and acts of human beings. These again reproduce certain spatial structures in a vice-versa-process. So spaces are perceived as media of structural and symbolic representations of power, which may serve to hide or maintain certain power structures.

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[1] Pitkin (1972) distinguish „standing for representations" from „acting for representations".
[2] Lynch (2001); Ipsen (1997); Duncan (1993); Donald (1992) etc.
[3] Harvey (1994); Castells (1996), Zukin (1995) etc.

Social practices as representations

Other concepts of representation focus on the level of action by either analyzing the spatial, building and architectural practices as representations of the way spaces are produced, or by looking at performances and acts which are visibly produced as representations in public space[4]. Markets, protests, celebrations and contestations are such representational practices making manifest the attitudes, values and priorities which inform them. They also analyze the territorial behaviour of agents and the way places are used, appropriated and defended. In this context the focal point is the visual manifestations and representations of social or cultural groups. Here the expression „siting culture" comes into focus, that is the process of producing and assuring a collective identity through territorial marks. Very often this process is conflictual and different groups are battling over representational rights in space - a battle over the validity of representations which will be decided by power relations. So the evidence of representations depends on power relations and access to social resources[5].

There are researchers like Lefèvbre (1994), who are trying to do justice to the concept of representation as a complex, multi-levelled phenomenon. He focuses on the connections of all the above-mentioned levels of representation.

3. Empirical analysis of representation

The theoretical concepts of representation I have listed provide a number of approaches, perspectives and methods. In the following I will talk of my approaches and methods concerning representation, perceptions and appropriation of urban space by taking the main street of our research project in Basel as an example.

That main street, called Klybeckstrasse, stretches along the right side of the river Rhine, beginning at the center of town through the district of Kleinbasel and leading to a suburb called Kleinhüningen. In this main street the first thing that draws attention are the multi-storied houses that were built between 1860 and 1900 for immigrating workers. The apartments are as a rule overpriced, run-down and small. On the ground floor and in the backyards there are all kinds of small businesses and workshops. There are hardly any green spots or trees, the place for pedestrians is also too small. The street itself is marked by heavy traffic with the resulting problems of little parking space, noise and exhaust fumes.

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[4] King (1996); Lefèbvre (1994) etc.

[5] Fog (1997); Dürr (2002), Zukin (1995) etc.

Statistically, Klybeckstrasse has a very high rate of fluctuation and, with 53%, also of immigrants. These immigrants used to come from Italy and Spain, nowadays they are mostly from Ex-Yugoslavia and Turkey. Even if the ethnical mixture has changed during the last few years, the social mixture has been unchanged, meaning that the more the street moves away from the centre of town, the higher the rate of lower class inhabitants. Agewise this is a working and family population with a high rate of young people. So the statistics show clearly that this neighbourhood is dealing with socioeconomic and structural disadvantages. Now a possible empirical way of analysis would be to look at the given structures in their historical development and in the context of ongoing urban and global processes and to derive from these the territorial representations of power and order. I want to take a different approach in that I part from the idea that there is not only a material representation but that territorial configurations contain in themselves several different representations and that different actors acknowledge different representations. So instead of taking the given structure, in a first step I considered the territorial acts and perceptions of single actors.

Examples of territorial acting in Klybeckstrasse are the facts that the houses are being neglected, that there is a high fluctuation rate of inhabitants and that immigrants open businesses and shops. I am working with participant observation and qualitative interviews with the aim to find out which persons or groups do use and appropriate Klybeckstrasse at which times and by which acts this space is being used and appropriated. This work is conducted on the assumption that appropriation of space is done via processes of representation and that space is being made a social place by acts of using and appropriating it. As an example of this I will take the territorial ways in which the Turkish population represents itself in Klybeckstrasse: For one it is obvious that more and more Turkish people move into the flats on Klybeckstrasse or that neglected houses go into Turkish ownership. So instead of traditional Swiss shops there are a number of Turkish travel agencies, clothes shops, groceries, cafés and restaurants in the street. Turkish and Kurdish organizations of a cultural, political or religious kind are also being established. The possibilities to meet compatriots, to play cards, and to enjoy traditional food, music or dance events are attracting countrymen from all over, and they all use the public space in their traditional manner as a kind of enlarged living room. The presence of Turks in the street is thus far higher than it is indicated in the statistics. By their clothing, language and looks there people are moreover easily identifiable as „non-Swiss". So the Turkish-Kurdish community represents itself in Klybeckstrasse through establishing institutions and clubs, through extensive use of the public

space and through cultural performances and practices. This preponderance of immigrant culture has consequences on the territorial practices of other actors, as becomes obvious in the fact that Swiss and Italian inhabitants have started to move away because they do not feel at home anymore. On the other hand, the public administration aims to counter these processes of segregation by becoming more present and visible in the public space through building measures, through hightened presence and controls of the police and through the establishment of public institutions in this street. So a Swiss „taking back strategy of space" is under way. This is linked to conflicts about representational rights, and these conflicts make it possible for the researcher to follow and analyse the mechanisms of negotiating interpretations and appropriations of urban space.

Following Lefèbvre there is an interaction between spatial practices and discursive and mental orders of space: So in order to get given images (meaning representations) of Klybeckstrasse, I am analyzing press articles and public statements through the lead questions of: who is talking and writing in which ways about this street? What are the lines of argument? Which mental and territorial images are at the background of these discursive representations? Moreover I am interested in the question which representations succeed most. In this area the press has an important role: They like to describe the street as an underprivileged area which struggles against traffic, noise, litter, criminality, ethnic troubles and drug problems. Implicitly the blame for the seemingly rising problems is given the Turkish immigrants. The street, perceived as a typical Turkish neighbourhood, is in a derogatory way called „Little Istanbul" and is thus being ethnicized and assigned to a specific ethnic group. This image of a conflict-ridden Little Istanbul is a very powerful representation of space which gets rooted in people's minds and influences in turn their perceptions and practices. But not everybody agrees to this image. Particularly insiders of all kinds have a slightly different perception and judgement, depending on their own specific ways of living or using the street. These different perceptions, judgements and descriptions of space by different actors I am trying to research through qualitative interviews, photo questionnaires and commented walks. On top of this I want to find out about spatial images through analyzing mental maps. I am hoping that by these different methods I will be getting evidence of mental perceptions and images of space, which in a second step can then be interpreted and analyzed.

4. Conclusion

It can be said that the concept of representation opens up interesting perspectives and hypotheses for the analysis of the interaction of perception of place, actual territorial behaviour and the existing territorial structures - all with the aim to find out about ways of exclusion. These representative mental images have an influence both on territorial structures, on territorial perception and patterns of territorial appropriation, they moreover help in building social and territorial structures which again are relevant in processes of integration and exclusion. As social practices these representations do on the one hand influence the way a given space is used and made up, on the other hand they produce specific images of this space. Acts of appropriation make it possible to visibly represent specific groups or ideas in space and thus to purposively integrate or exclude them. So the concept of representations makes it possible to analyze the cultural mechanisms and social consequences of territorial self-definition and of being accorded a territory.

By looking at the different forms of representation as practices and also by looking at the territorial structures and material representations which also play a role in defining perceptions and ways of use, it is also possible to find out about social relationships and constellations of power in a given space.

When empirically analyzing representations I took as a starting point both the given social and territorial practices and uses and the spatial perceptions of the inhabitants. For these I took the methods from the field of urban ethnology like participant observation, qualitative interviews, commented walks and the drawing of mental maps. Territorial perception and use should also be considered by taking into account the given structures. This is why methods like statistical analysis of the territorial and social structures, a profound knowledge of the neighbourhood and analysis of maps should also be used.

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