

Review article

Region – city – social space as key concepts of socio-economic geography

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ABSTRACT

Terminology, that helps to organise research issues, is a significant component of each scientific discipline. In socio-economic geography, such expressions include concepts of a region, a city, or a social space. They are not disjunctive ideas – for example, we find a concept of an urban region where a social space can refer to a city, or a region, and at the same time regional, urban and social research can investigate these same areas. Concepts may also illustrate a specific model of an explanation in science, a particular stage of methodological development of the discipline, or a vision of the world. Bearing in mind the complexity of methodological issues, which is only briefly mentioned here, as well as a multiplicity of definitions of terminological concepts (region, city, social space), the author's intention was to compare the premises of occurrence of the concepts and their consequences for the development of socio-economic geography. The increases in complexity of socio-economic changes as an effect of the overlapping processes of social modernization, restructuring of economic space, and suburbanization were itemised. The main research tool in this case is the deductive reasoning procedure leading to the generalization of the output of regional and urban research, as well as existing analyses of social space. The rationale for investigating the problem arose from the significance of the above-mentioned research, both the ones carried out during the previous stages of development of socio-economic geography as well as contemporary research trends. The crucial aspect here is the increase in complexity of these processes, and the spatial and functional structures leading to the transition from simple post-modernity to a risk society. Therefore, application of regional, urban and social research is also important, especially in the context of the process of depopulation, and "shrinkage" of cities and regions. It affects the possibilities of creating urban or regional policy. The rationale for investigating the problem also results from periodic necessity to synthesize the research on basic terminological issues, especially in the periods when changes of socio-economic and spatial conditions occur, and affect transformation of the existing set of the basic concepts.

KEY WORDS: methodology of geography, region, city, social space, paradigm, research pattern

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1. Introduction

Assuming PEPPER (1942) four possible philosophical variant explanations of reality (formism, mechanism, organicism, and contextualism) enabled SAGAN (1998) to assign to them four different ways of perceiving space in geographical research – as an area filled with objects, phenomena, systems (formism); as a topological space with network-related nodes (mechanism); consideration of space in the context of cycles, circulations, development, synergy (organicism); or as a scene filled with actors, situations related to history and particular drama (contextualism). The chorological (spatial) dimension ceases to be the only determinant of

geography as a science. A region, a city, or social space can be analysed by means of a factual description (formism), a system-spatial analysis (mechanism), a structural-functional approach (organicism), or also as a narrative with empathic description (contextualism).

Variability in the approach to the above mentioned concepts is also visible in the context of shaping the main research orientations in geography (JERCZYŃSKI ET AL., 1991; MAIK, 2012), or in the context of the process of socializing of geography (JĘDRZEJCZYK, 2001, 2004; LISOWSKI, 2003). Time changes in paradigms as the models for practising science – distinguished both, in the general methodology of science, and in its particular

disciplines – emphasize the historical process of the emergence of successive patterns beginning with the classical approach, through scientism, hypothetism, cumulativism and anti-cumulativism, conventionalism, or instrumentalism, each can be applied to a search for the best way to approach research problems (SIEMIANOWSKI, 1978). These paradigms are often accompanied by characteristic concepts. Geography is not an exception to this. The classical paradigm is associated with the concept of a region, different research paradigms are used in research into cities, while social space is most often associated with contextualism (MAIK, 2012). Identity problems of regional geography caused a crisis in regional research at the beginning of the 20th century. On the other hand, the interdisciplinary multitude of urban research has contributed to its specific "blurring" and methodological vagueness. The region is a historical and geographical concept, but the city is of interest to many disciplines of science which also apply various explanatory models (MAIK, 2012). Socialization of geography caused a reinterpretation of the concept of space, including a wider interest in social spaces considering both the metric and conceptual approaches (LISOWSKI, 2003).

The tendencies of change, as indicated here, require a slightly broader commentary. Therefore, the aim of this work is to compare the developmental premises of the above-mentioned concepts, their characteristic features and their likely impact, on further changes in the discipline.

2. In the beginning there was a region

The beginnings of the empirical delimitation of regions date back to the end of the 18th century and developed in the mid-nineteenth century with the formation of geography as a science. As noted by WRÓBEL (1956), the degree of concentration of a population and the diversification of its agricultural activity became the basic identifying criteria, and along with dynamic industrialization, branches of the economy also enabled the delimitation of different regions. Development of regional research also resulted from the possibility of its application. The expeditions of Europeans in the 19th century, undertaken in order to acquire colonies, required knowledge of those territories necessary for efficient exploitation of raw materials as well as conducting trade. Furthermore, the development of mathematical and natural sciences, which started at the end of the 18th century and continued over the next years, created methodological and instrumental opportunities for the delimitation of regions. There were also

attempts to organize the current knowledge about a region, related concepts, and formation of the theory of regions (e.g. BEREZOWSKI, 1978; CHOJNICKI, 1996; DZIEWOŃSKI, 1961, 1967; PARYSEK, 1982; RYCHŁOWSKI, 1967; RYKIEL, 1985).

Extensive theoretical and methodological, as well as empirical achievements in the field of regional research presented in the geographical literature allow us only to point out selected issues. The genesis of regional research in geography is associated with the classical model of explanation, with key research questions: what is located, where is it located? The universality of the concept of a region for ordering the components of space was so durable that despite the emergence of further explanatory patterns, the region remained in geography as a useful concept. On the other hand, its understanding at the methodological level has changed. First, in the 19th and 20th centuries, when distinguishing a natural (physical-geographic) region from an artificial (anthropogenic) region, it was argued that physical and geographical phenomena are primary, and they are decisive in determining the region, while they are further overlapped by secondary forms of human activity (RATZEL, 1882, 1891). On the one hand, treating regions as research tools, as tools of action and the objects of cognition was the consequence of the scientific model of explanation (how? why? how?), and on the other hand, it resulted in a significant extension of the theoretical and methodological basis of knowledge about the region. There is a distinction between the delimitation of regions based on available statistical data in existing administrative units for practical purposes (urban, engineering), and the delimitation of regions based on an ad hoc approved system of uniform, pre-arranged spatial units. In the latter case, the goal is to limit the impact of unequal territorial units on the significant characteristics of the whole region. The theoretical and methodological development of the basis of knowledge about the region brought several results, including:

- attempts to organise terminology (including the region and the related concepts: surface region, node region, complex region) (BEREZOWSKI, 1978);
- development of tools for the delimitation of regions (multivariate analysis procedures for typology, classification and regionalization purposes) (PARYSEK, 1982);
- development of the theory of regions (e.g. KUCIŃSKI, 1990; CHOJNICKI, 1996).

Treatment of a region as a system is a consequence of the process of socialization of geography. Identification of constituents, system boundaries, intra-system relations, external relations

made the formulation of concepts of a territorial social system possible (CHOJNICKI, 1988), and also enabled the presentation of a region into socio-systemic categories (CHOJNICKI, 1996).

Departing from the mere metric treatment of space is another manifestation of the consequences of the socialization of geography. The humanistic methodological and explanatory pattern enables a subjective-ordering of socio-cultural differences (e.g. JAŁOWIECKI & SZCZEPAŃSKI, 2002; JĘDRZEJCZYK, 2001, 2004; LISOWSKI, 2003). Thus, in the literature, we find regions treated as a cognized, used, shaped, or valorised space (JAŁOWIECKI, 1988), or as a space at varied levels of cognition and various degrees of freedom in behaviour (JAŁOWIECKI & SZCZEPAŃSKI, 2002).

The distinction between the world of nature, the world of things (spatial management), and the human world (single people, households, local communities, regional communities) is also a reflection of the diversification of research in the region. In the case of the human world, differences in awareness and social identity cause further possibilities of delimitation of various generic classes or integral social regions.

3. From a region to the concept of a city

The growth of importance of urban issues along with the development of geography was not accidental because it resulted from dynamic urbanization in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The industrial revolution together with the accompanying multifaceted socio-economic consequences began to change the type and intensity of spatial development – from the domination of a natural-agricultural landscape towards an anthropogenic (urban-industrial) landscape. Until that time, the human impact on space had been small, being limited to agricultural activity or development of a settlement network whose location was determined by natural conditions, such as defence needs or position on trade routes. Development of industry and transport in the 19th century weakened or eliminated many of these limitations. Since that time, occurrence of natural resources, availability of sales markets or capital resources have influenced development of a new type of city, i.e. industrial cities. The regional geography that had been developing thus far – based, in many cases, on materials, travellers' relations, or sources not necessarily generated in the research community (data from trade companies, government institutions) gradually became less important. It occurred not only due to depletion of groups of areas

which had not been researched yet, which did not have their own regional syntheses (environment, man, economy, history, culture), but mainly because of increasing difficulties in synthesizing complex spatial and structural relations between physical and socio-cultural components, or infrastructure which were economic areas analysed in terms of regions.

Application of Cartesian reductionism to these activities proved to be of little use in the case of the dynamically changing 19th century socio-economic reality within Europe, and later in other parts of the world. It was not until one hundred years later that the proposal of a systematic approach to reality suggested by BERTALANFFY (1968) allowed the study of complex systems of phenomena, including urban and regional systems. The increasing weakness of the classical research pattern in geography also resulted from different levels of socio-economic development of many areas previously treated as significantly different. This was true not only in Western Europe, but also in other areas. For example, the concept of a regional system by FRIEDMANN (1979), or the concept of a contact region by RYKIEL (1985) indicate, respectively, a gradual unification of the spatial-functional structure, or overcoming of border barriers in the unification of developmental processes. Hence, the exhaustion of explanatory possibilities of the classical pattern caused the need to search for other patterns concerning these issues.

As observed by MAIK (2012), urban research, as well as that of the region resulted from an interest in the diversity of space, in both spatio-functional and socio-economic regions, and cities. Their internal structure, their place in the hierarchy, direction of transformation, mutual connections, have allowed for not only conducting many various studies, formulating theoretical and model concepts, but also the cooperation with representatives of other disciplines (comparative studies) or using this knowledge in practice (urban policy). However, numerous possibilities forced research specialization in many cases. From the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the interest in urban issues has not diminished, on the contrary, it has been growing significantly.

4. Towards a social space – old and new challenges

Despite a multiplicity of urban research, the availability of appropriate materials illustrating the image of intra-city socio-economic differences is their significant limitation. Deteriorating quality

of census data, or new challenges of urban policy, which result even from the processes of political transformation, social modernization, depopulation and shrinking of cities, and suburbanization require a much broader scope of knowledge about socio-economic processes and structures to conduct good and reliable research. Transformation, as a result of socialization of geography, of the bipolar system of research (economic and social geography) into a four-element system (economic geography, social geography, political geography, cultural geography) allows us to meet new research challenges methodologically. It can be confirmed by the development of social geography which is one of the proofs of such a transformation. Interest in social space also means new methodological challenges, in particular the ones concerning analyses of causality in social processes. A simple analysis of correlation, or regression, between phenomena may not be sufficient in a situation when mutual interactions overlap, apparent correlations occur, a noticeable consequence in time are observed, or the influence of hierarchy on the formation of phenomena appears. In the interwar period – on the wave of development of social sciences – the complexity of causality in geographical research became the subject of interest of HETTNER (1927). Those issues have also been addressed by RUNGE (2010).

As early as at the end of the 19th century, the interest in relationships between location of social and professional groups, and ethnic groups in the city space in the context of spatial distribution of crimes and offences gave rise to the so-called Chicago school in sociology (CZEKAJ, 2007). Later, the issue became the subject of interest of social geography of cities as one of the important problems of social geography (WĘCŁAWOWICZ, 2003). As CZEKAJ (2007) and LISOWSKI (2003) observe, too radical simplification of the spatial and social structure models was the weakness of that approach to social space, as it limited them to three perspectives (concentric, sectoral, mosaic), while in fact due to continuous formation of the social structure in the context of the changing spatial structure, there may be more of them, as it has been shown, for instance, by the studies of the cities in the Silesian Voivodeship (KANTOR-PIETRAGA, 2007; RUNGE & RUNGE, 2015). In addition, the structures as well as the relations between them are subject to changes in time, both at the urban and inter-urban level. The direction and dynamics of those changes are varied not only in the centre-periphery system, which contributes to fragmentation of the image of changes in social space.

Apart from the previously indicated image of changes of scalar features in the social space (demographic and social diversity of residents), the vector features are equally important (linkages, gravities). They allow us to identify the degree of integration, or social disintegration, in space. It is of great importance at all hierarchical levels of the settlement system, from the level of metropolis, through large, medium and small towns, rural communities, to villages. The scale of social ties affects the possibilities of human and social capital activation from the level of small local communities, through cities with a poly-centric social structure formed by stormy urbanization changes, or metropolitan complexes, where the key issue is to identify the degree of social closure as a necessary condition for successful creation of a metropolitan society. It is not so easy in the situation of both centrifugal and centripetal forces in space (COLBY, 1933). Historical development of metropolitan agglomerations is an illustration of occurrence of those centrifugal and centripetal forces (KRZYSZTOFIK, 2014), while at the urban level, it can be proved by the so-called poly-centric centres, created as a result of merging several or more than a dozen previously independent settlement units into one entity. For example, research on the cities belonging to the Katowice conurbation reveals the historical complexity of their formation process as a result of centripetal and centripetal forces (e.g. KASZOWSKA ET AL., 1992; KRZYSZTOFIK, 2014; SPÓRNA, 2012).

The vector presentation of a social space is also reflected in the shaping of various types of relocation of inhabitants within a city, an urban region or between them both. They are connected with the functioning of the labour market, education, or with the social and living needs of the inhabitants. Some of those relocations result from particular needs, having a character determined in time and space, but also such ones that result from the voluntary choices of the inhabitants and preferences may be encountered.

In addition to the metric space (real), there are also subjective spaces (imaginary) which cause that our attitude to space may bear the hallmarks of its perception, usage, shaping or valuation (WALLIS, 1960). While the first two types of activities are passive in character, the other two reveal their active character – possibility of making changes, as well as ordering values in hierarchy. In each case, affiliation of a specific space to a particular type is relatively constant, but it may change at any moment. For example, construction of a new housing estate in a town or city may cause a change in the value of the area of the district within which the construction was developed (increasing the

value of the place or decreasing it due to the decomposition of the existing natural value of the place), while for the buyers, it means obtaining a space used by them and perceived in a particular way. Positive perception of the space by its new users does not have to be consistent with the assessment of the same place by the existing, permanent residents of the place, which may be, at best, manifested by reserved attitude, or aversion of autochthons towards immigrants. Therefore, the relation to space is not only subject to changes in time, but in addition, the relation may be different in the case of different social groups.

This multilayered structure of components of the social space, namely the space, the residents and the users, as well as relations between individuals and social groups, which are analysed metrically or subjectively, does not only offer a wide spectrum of analyses by means of different models of explanation, but diverging from the static image of classical demographic and social variations in the city space, it also forces the researcher to investigate dynamically the relation of cognition, usage, shaping and valuation of the space, which is not possible when merely official statistics are used (RUNGE & RUNGE, 2016).

The need for a wider interest in the social space among geographers also allows us to consider the applicability of research in the context of local (urban) policy. Identification of a scalar and vector character of the components of social spaces makes it possible to identify significant social problems affecting development opportunities. It also allows for a holistic treatment, even in the context of a territorial social system (CHOJNICKI, 1988).

5. Summary

The presented consideration of the three key concepts of socio-economic geography, i.e. the concept of a region, a city and a social space, has led to several general observations:

Firstly – the four forms explaining reality, mentioned at the beginning (formism, mechanism, organicism, and contextualism), are observable in the current development of socio-economic geography, but they also reflect, historical changes in the research methodology in the form of determined development cycles from the stage of initiation, through development, maturity to regression (BUTTNER, 1993). Both the concept of Pepper (1942), originating from outside of geography, or the internal geographical concept of polarized development (KUKLINSKI, 1991), confirm the variability of the development of the discipline. One of the forms of such transformations is a

changed role of the basic concepts in explaining the reality.

Secondly – increase in complexity of socio-economic processes and structures is the result of the fact that processes of transformation, modernization and globalization overlap with each other in all their dimensions (economic, social, cultural, political, spatial), as well as at individual territorial scales (local, regional, national). Such a situation is generally reflected in the increase in entropy of the socio-economic systems, leading to a transition from simple post-modernity to a risk society (RUNGE, 2016).

Thirdly – in a situation of increasing complexity of socio-economic processes and structures, the social space is an important concept organizing the research field of such transformations, which takes into account not only the scalar and vector character of differentiation of the social space, but also its dimension of awareness, and social identity.

Fourthly – the issue of a social space is also important from a practical point of view, i.e. necessity to modernize, revitalize and carry out gentrification of both urban and rural areas, considering their already recorded and depopulation and "shrinking". This is a significant component of urban and regional policy.

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