

which represent the multilayered different worlds constituted by heterogeneous actors. In the closing part of the presentation, the mutations of the spatial experiences of inhabitants of anthropological spaces, new town developments, and users of emerging spaces (cities without qualities, non-places, simulacra, hyperreal space, etc.) will be illustrated by practical examples.

THE ROLE OF SMALL TOWNS IN STRENGTHENING RURAL DEVELOPMENT. CASE STUDY: OLTENIA PLAIN

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Small towns (with population under 20,000 inhabitants) represent a distinctive category of the Romanian urban system, having, theoretically, the role of a liaison between rural settlements and the urban ones at a superior hierarchical level. In Romania, on the background of a decreasing economic activity, after the year of 1990, and the subsequently socioeconomic changes, many of these current small towns gained similar characteristics to the ones of the rural settlements. Oltenia Plain is located in the South-Western Romania, the local economy having a strong agricultural feature. In this plain, there are nine small towns in three counties (Mehedinți, Dolj, Olt). The objective of this paper is to investigate the characteristics of these small towns in Oltenia Plain from the perspective of the polarizing potential of rural settlements and their capacity to generate a territorial development. The methodology used includes the following phases: (a) the analysis of the characteristics of small towns by calculating certain representative indicators; (b) identifying the rural degree of the urban settlements, including the comparison with the development level of the adjacent rural settlements; (c) identifying the polarizing potential of the rural settlements; (d) individualization of the development perspectives of the small towns as a consequence of the national policies and strategies. The results highlight differences as regards the development level of small towns in Oltenia Plain. Moreover, some of them no longer reflect the minimal indicators corresponding to the town status, in accordance with the legislation in force. In this context, there is much talk of a tendency of small towns' 'ruralisation', meaning that they are not capable of keeping their population. Consequently, the small towns present a reduced polarizing potential of the nearby rural settlements. The situation is all the more alarming as there are many demographic and socio-economic vulnerabilities in the respective rural area that will increase if the current situation does not suffer any changes. In this context, it is necessary to implement certain policies and strategies focused on small towns both for their recovery and increase the capacity to induce development in the adjacent territory.

MATERIALITY AND SPATIALITY: CHANGING SPACES OF ELECTRICITY PROVISION IN HUNGARY

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The recent 'material turn' in spatial theories has been hardly followed by empirical studies. Simultaneously, the ongoing uptake in social science interest in infrastructures breaks with the view that those just provide passive backgrounds of social life. Infrastructures are sociomaterial entanglements. Infrastructure studies often focus on either globalised infrastructures, such as IT networks, or the urban infrastructures constituting cities. This presentation, however, puts spatiality

and geographic scale in the centre of understanding infrastructures. In other words, the aim of the paper is to illustrate how sociomaterial infrastructures are integral to the spatial organisation of socioeconomic life. To substantiate this claim, I use the long-term historical transformation of electricity provision in Hungary as an empirical case study.

The history of providing electricity in Hungary is profoundly connected to spatial questions. How did the first (electric) public lighting schemes reorganise urban (and later rural) spaces from the late 19th century on? How was a national electricity network formed together with the socialist state after WW2? How did different electricity systems facilitate spatial integration as well as differentiation, both on the macro and micro levels, through subtle patterns of access, pricing, and organisation? How is the electricity system stretched currently in the wake of both Europeanisation and decentralisation?

All in all, electricity provision in Hungary offers an intriguing case study of the various ways of how historical changes in material infrastructure are connected to spatial transformations, from household levels to supranational networks. In return, the empirical case informs our conceptual thinking of how (social) space and materiality are intertwined.

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THE CONCEPT OF AUTOPOIETIC CLOSED SYSTEMS AND THE FUNCTIONING OF THE SPACES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Space is not an autonomous container in which things merely exist, but the concrete manifestation and order of co-existing things. Our choices and actions are not determined by an absolute space or an autonomous superstructure, but by those existing or imagined structures which underlie our ideas and discourses. Each idea (phenomenon, representation) about space is a social construct.

The openness of space implies that relations (configurations, linkages) can be created in a variety of ways and are subject to constant change. Space as a condition of possibility is open, while concrete spatial units are closed entities. The closure of space is explained by the cohesion, interrelatedness and cooperation between its components. Autopoietic systems establish a delicate balance between closure and structural coupling that ensures their self-construction and self-development. Endogenous self-referential spatial and territorial units are self-constructed entities with their own „genetic structure” and logic defining their functioning and guaranteeing their distinction from the environment. Their operation, mainly targeting dynamic self-preservation and self-development is organised in function of the desirable outcome which is also influenced by their capacity to mobilise territorial capital. Self-referential autonomous functioning is a necessary condition for the survival of bottom-up constructed „natural” spatial units.

How can we describe the functioning of the European Union in light of the concept of autopoietic closed spaces? The EU is a federation of relatively autonomous (sovereign, autopoietic, resilient) states whose main interest lies in promoting their proper development. The Eastern enlargement of 2004 was instrumental in serving the interests of the Fifteen. From their perspective, the accession of new members contributed to an enhanced reproduction of the existing system, territorial expansion (“empire building”), without impacting the essence of the Union or their self-identity. The communication of Brussels institutions testifies of this neo-colonising perspective. Since the