

LITERATURE

Lang, T. et al. (eds.): Understanding Geographies of Polarization and Peripheralization: Perspectives from Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2015. 352 p.

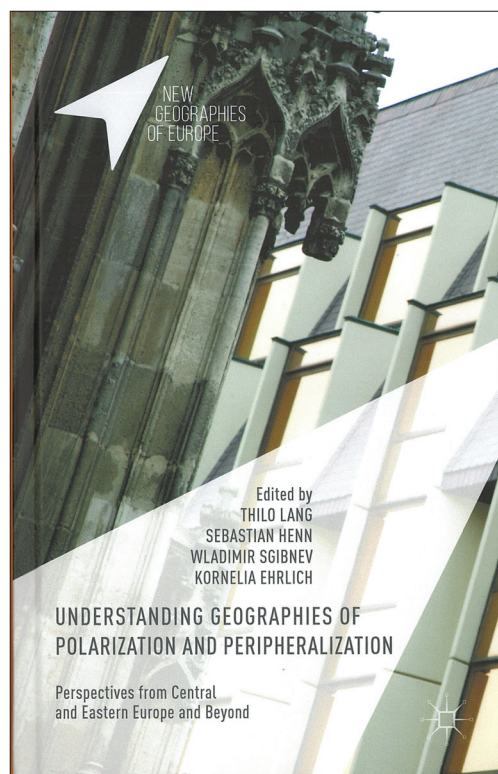
Given that increasing socio-spatial polarisation is one of the cruelest realities of our times it is surprising how few larger projects have recently been devoted to studying its mechanisms and outcomes. This is most likely related to the neoliberal hegemony of the 1990s and 2000s; however, especially since the 2008 global economic crisis a number of influential thinkers (STIGLITZ, J. 2012; KRUGMAN, P. 2012; PIKETTY, T. 2014; HARVEY, D. 2014) have taken this until then dominating regime under critical scrutiny. Yet such overarching systemic critiques need to be complemented with more on-the-ground theoretical and empirical research to grasp how polarisation unfolds in various spaces as well as more generally. The large ongoing Marie Curie project 'ITN RegPol² – Socio-economic and Political Responses to Regional Polarisation in Central and Eastern Europe' (ITN RegPol² 2015) is

undertaking such a task. Some of its first results were recently published in a theme issue of the *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin*, summarised in the introductory article by the guest editor (NAGY, E. 2015).

A good number of members of the above-mentioned project contributed to the book *Understanding geographies of polarization and peripheralization*, although the list of contributors goes far beyond. With its eighteen contributions by as many as forty-one authors, including Ray HUDSON, John PICKLES, Adrian SMITH, and Michael WOODS, this is one of the richest volumes of its kind – certainly among those focusing on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

The book emerged from at least two identified problems. On the one hand, empirical evidence indicates the study area has been particularly hit by growing socio-spatial polarisation (p. 1), which is definitely the case in comparison with Western Europe and some other regions. On the other hand, "[up] until recently, spatial development in CEE has mainly been researched through the lenses of post-socialist transformation and modernization" (p. 2). Whereas the latter has long been criticised (MÜLLER, K. 1992) for its structural-evolutionary assumptions, whether – or at least to what extent – the socialist and in some cases the post-Soviet heritage still represent an important legacy is also debated in this volume, for instance in the contributions on Ukraine and Russia. Further, it is an explicit argument in the book that adopting novel "approaches enables new comparative perspectives to similar phenomena in other parts of Europe and the world" (p. 2), thus escaping its validity for CEE alone (the geographic denomination does not appear in the volume's main title but in the subtitle). Relatedly, the anthology includes a respective case study on Northern Ireland, the Baltic Sea Region, as well as Central Asia.

In spite of the above, it is not the aim of the book to authoritatively come up with an "overarching framework that claims to explain it all" (pp 12–13). Instead, the editors' strategy to bring the different perspectives into conversation is a relational approach. Thus there is still a certain level of consensus reached: for several authors regional peripheralisation "is not only the simultaneity of a number of features constituting the formation of peripheries, such as distance, economic weakness and lack of political power, but is often also the dynamic formation of core and peripheral regions



overlapping at different spatial scales” (pp 1–2). Consequently, “applying these conceptual notions allows a process-based, relational understanding of up-to-date forms of spatial differentiation in CEE and offers opportunities for spatial research circumventing dichotomous ideas of urban and rural, of central and peripheral” (p. 2), and so on.

The book is structured in four parts. The first one presents a series of tools for grasping the fragmented complexity of agency and the multitude of actors related to region-building. This includes reflections on the theoretical backgrounds of peripheralities as well as methodological considerations. Some of the contributions in this part (on Thuringia, Central Asia, and Northern Ireland) form a series of ethnographically grounded accounts of social constructions of peripheralities at the level of everyday lives.

The second part of the volume sets out to examine the role of diverse socio-political agents in the production of peripheries. The authors adopt an actor-centred perspective and elaborate upon ways in which peripheralisation is being perceived, lived, and reproduced. In this regard these contributions take up the constructivist challenge of the volume’s first part and provide dense accounts of peripheralisation and polarisation processes in CEE. One example is the Hungary-focused case study by Judit TIMÁR, Erika NAGY, Gábor NAGY, and Gábor VELKEY.

For them peripheralisation appears as a process of making and entering various forms of dependencies, interwoven with weakening integrative social mechanisms. They argue that peripherality and marginality mutually support and strengthen each other through local actors’ strategies. Based on their rich fieldwork in four distinct rural regions of Hungary an excellent account of institutional practices of neoliberal capitalism at work is provided, showing that the European division of labour and a shrinking state in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis forced local agents to enter relationships based on dependence.

The book’s third part is devoted to studies of a fragmented and relational construction of peripheralities. Authors here provide dense quantitative analyses of peripheralisation at national or supra-national levels, and discuss tools of measuring as well as assessing divergent processes of polarisation and cohesion.

The contributions in the fourth and final part of the volume have a slightly more positive tone, discussing different modalities and relations between cores and peripheries. These authors deal with how responses to peripheralisation can be devised, implemented, and assessed. Such more optimistic accounts stem from Estonia, Slovakia, and eastern Germany.

Following the trend of recent years, also this anthology does not have a concluding summary or comparative analysis; although due to the explicit lack of ambition to come up with an overarching framework (which is understandable) such a separate chapter is

perhaps not necessary. While most contributions are equipped with tables, diagrams and maps, there are no images or photos in the book. This is of course hardly any harsh critique, but the authors’ “hope for vigorous future debates in academia and society on the causes and effects of polarization and peripheralization” (p. 16) could perhaps be easier fulfilled by having added at least a few illustrations or images of (so-called) peripheries. This not least given the character of the contributions, the majority of which tends to be qualitatively oriented.

Even the front-page image – a small detail from Budapest’s Castle District – portrays little of the severity of living conditions that much of the population in this large study area is facing. These minor criticisms do not change the overall impression of a well-researched and well-edited anthology on a still too under-researched subject. This challenging and extensive contribution, rich in novel theoretical and empirical approaches alike, is highly recommended to all, not least in CEE itself where the subject is still largely approached from classic and quantitative angles.

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