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Applied Social Geography: Management of spatial planning in reflective discourse

Research perspectives towards a 'theory of practice'

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Abstract

Why are there still problems concerning the management of spatial changes? Are spatial development projects really unique or are there typical patterns, which occur regularly? Is there a possibility to generalise such principles towards a 'theory of practice', which will be able to provide better management strategies for spatial development?

Key words: applied social geography; management of change; theory of practice; spatial planning; project management

Aplikativna socialna geografija: Upravljanje prostorskega planiranja in raziskovalne perspektive na področju »teorije prakse«

Izveček

Zakaj se srečujemo s težavami pri planiranju prostorske transformacije? Ali so projekti prostorskega razvoja enkratni ali pa predstavljajo nek vzorec, ki se redno ponavlja? Ali je možno te principe posplošiti v neko »teorijo prakse«, ki bi lahko prispevala k boljšemu izvajanju strategij prostorskega razvoja?

Ključne besede: uporabna socialna geografija, upravljanje transformacij, teorija prakse, prostorsko planiranje, projektno upravljanje

1. INTRODUCTION

Some significant changes concerning the research priorities of applied social geography have taken place. There have been transitions from scientific description towards policy consulting as well as from spatial planning towards active spatial development. But, out of this emerged various new problems concerning the true management of spatial development projects. Only optimising application (learning by doing) cannot solve these difficulties of implementation. It is much more necessary to think about what really happens in application (learning by examining). Although each spatial development project looks unique at first sight, a detailed scientific analysis shows that there are typical patterns, which occur in all projects regularly. To analyse and to generalise these principles (standards of management) is the first step towards a 'theory of practice', which will be able to provide better management strategies for spatial development.

The article deals with the application of social geography as a management of spatial development projects, as well as with theoretical perspectives towards a 'theory of practice'. It shows that both sides – application and reflection – are combined very closely, but that there is a huge lack of theoretical approaches to understand what really happens when spatial development projects are managed. This is one of the biggest problems for any applied science, because you can only optimise reality if you really understand it. However, you cannot understand something only by description but by reflection. Finally, the article gives some examples for applications and research, especially – considering the main topics of the conference in Portoroz – concerning the fields of rural development and agriculture.

2. SIGNIFICANT TRANSITIONS IN APPLIED SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY

2.1 Scientific description - spatial planning - project management

If we take a look at the history of applied social geography, we see some remarkable developments. There was a shift (first transition) from scientific description towards active policy consulting. In all ages – even in ancient times – geographical knowledge has always been used for social affairs. For example: location of raw materials, dangerous sea routes or military uses. But especially in the last century, social geographical knowledge was more and

more demanded for spatial planning. Many geographers designed plans or did consulting work on how to develop our landscape, villages, towns or regions in the best way (Boesch, 1989).

But - unfortunately - many of these plans have never been realised. There are a lot of reasons why, which will not be mentioned here in detail. The more important question is how social geographers reacted when they saw that their ideas of spatial development were not realised. They understood that it is not enough just to give good advice. It is much more important to be present and to become a part of the spatial development process, if you really want to change something.

This was the second very important transition in applied social geography. Geographers were no longer only scientific consultants from outside. They became a part of the change management itself. Schaffer (1997) calls this 'interactive social geography', which means that geographers support the process of change where it happens. Such work requires not only geographical knowledge. It was also necessary to develop completely new technical and social skills. For example, in the field of rural planning, geographers had to learn how to design development projects and strategies together with farmers to ensure their acceptance. They had to learn how to lead workshops and to find solutions together with citizens, administrative and political bodies. Communication and interaction became the most important terms (fig. 1).

Figure 1: Management of spatial development projects by interactivity



Source: Hilpert (2002), pp. 129, 106

From this point of view, the agricultural problems in Slovenia are in their core very similar to the problems of rural regions elsewhere: There are protest marches by angry farmers in Ljubljana. Some say, that the politicians do not understand the real problems of rural regions in Slovenia. So this is almost the same in every country. But following the ideas of the 'interactive social geography', geographers have to transform protest into learning processes. They

have to create consciousness for the real life problems among politicians. This is sometimes a very hard job, which often leaves the borders of pure science.

These challenges aren't too idealistic. Up to now, social geographers at the University of Augsburg have been doing such work for more than 15 years in many fields of social geography (see e.g. Schaffer/Zettler/Löhner 1999). Many local governments, communities or local and regional politicians ask if they could consult and support their development ideas. The scientists in Augsburg also created a completely new branch of study called regional management, where students learn all the necessary skills they need for the management of spatial development projects. Students learn how to lead work-shops, how to build up learning processes, or how to find solutions that are accepted by all.

2.2 The third transition: from project management to reflective discourse

But one thing is very remarkable, leading also to a completely new perspective in applied social geography that can be seen as the third transition. Namely, the fact that these students are very often disappointed by their first visits to the villages or regions where they should manage a development project. Why? They tell that the farmers don't want to cooperate, that the local governments cannot be convinced of the necessity of changes or that the politicians block all their efforts. This is really a problem of education, because obviously the skills they learn aren't by themselves sufficient to guarantee successful project management. But: What is the key to successful project management in the field of spatial planning?

If you ask sociologists, they tell you that the most important thing is to build up a network to concentrate trust and power. Psychologists – on the other hand – proclaim that it depends not on a group but just on certain key actors, on single individuals who are convinced of their ideas. Pedagogues argue contrarily that such personalities can be changed, and therefore it is much more important to organize learning communities. Economists tell us that all these things are only soft reasons. In the end, it would all depend on time and money only. This short list could be carried on with further points. But what becomes clear up to now is, that when you really try to think about which factors are the most important ones to manage successful development projects, you find yourself quickly in a very complex situation, in a jungle of uncountable theoretical approaches, a mass of different scientific views that almost seems too complicated to solve. And, in the end, it seems that the

success of a development project depends much more on coincidence and luck than on management strategies.

This would be a very unsatisfactory situation for all scientists. But one thing gives hope that in all this chaos there is a specific order. Because, when spatial development projects are managed not by students but by older and experienced colleagues, the probability that they are successful is much higher! Why? Because due to their experience, they know what to do in specific situations. And this means nothing more than recognizing certain patterns. They are not aware of their knowledge in a scientific sense, but they have a feeling for certain constellations that reoccur almost regularly. If every spatial development project were singular, experiences would be worthless. So, there must be some repeated patterns.

Only this finding gives hope that in all this complex dynamics of development projects there are very simple and reoccurring patterns that can be generalized. To optimise the application of social geography, it is necessary to identify these typical rules and principles in order to discover standards of management, to achieve a theory of practice (see Hilpert/Huber 2002).

3. RESEARCH BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

3.1 The research process of applied social geography

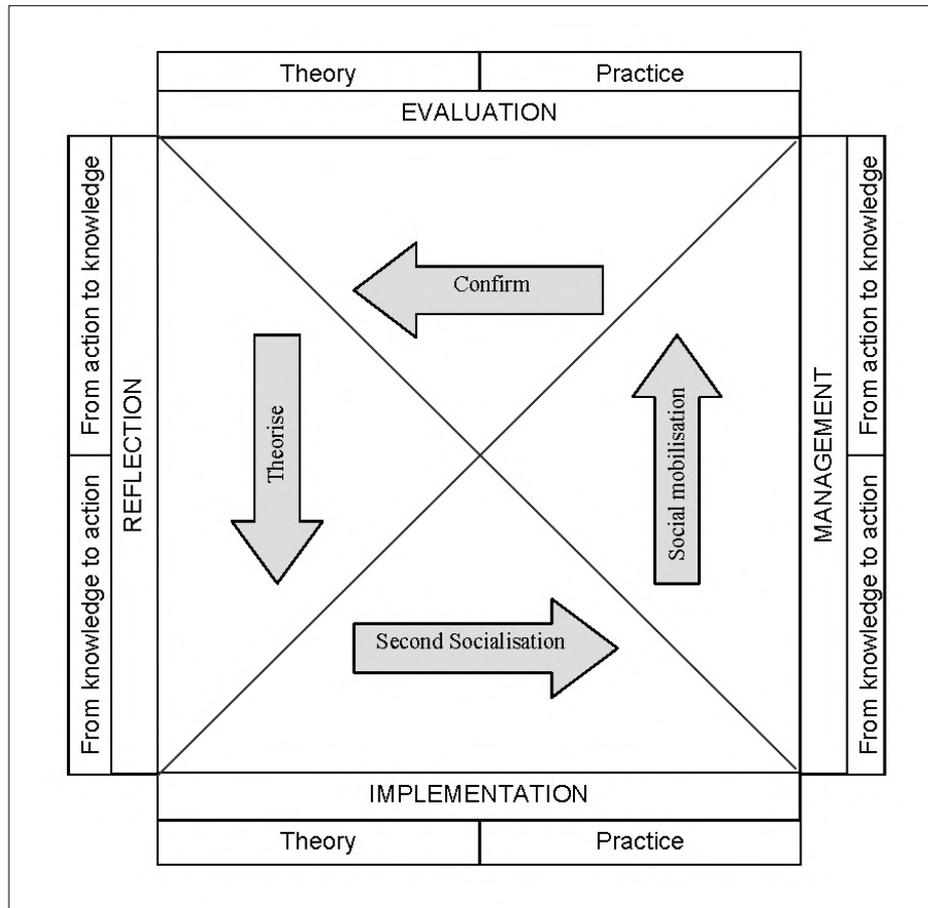
To discover the principles of spatial management, it is not only necessary to manage projects in practice but also to reflect empirical findings intensively. Therefore the research process of applied social geography must combine practical and theoretical perspectives very closely. Figure 2 shows the research process of applied social geography. It is organised as a circle. The model allows different points of view:

- The left fourth part is called reflection. Here empirical findings are worked up theoretically and new theoretical models and concepts are created.
- The implementation is the entry into practice. Normally, it is a transfer of knowledge, for example as policy consulting.
- The right fourth part includes the real management of projects in practice, for example in the fields of regional management or village development.
- The evaluation is for the collection of data and for the interpretation of findings in an objective sense.

If we divide the figure from top to bottom the left half is called theory, which means the academic work in universities or research institutes.

- The right half is the true practice where projects are realized, for example in villages or workshops.

Figure 2: Applied Social Geography – Research Process



Source: Hilpert (2002), p. 61

The border line between theory and practice

- is - from knowledge to action (in the lower half) – (especially at the beginning of projects) the second socialisation. This means that the scientist has to dip into the real life and to learn the specific perceptions at the actual place.
- In the upper half – from action to knowledge – the scientist has to confirm his observations and transfer them into a theoretical discourse.
- There are some more points of view. One is at least remarkable:
- The half left up (evaluation and reflection) includes purely the tasks of a theoretical science, where empirical findings are to interpreted and confirmed.

- The half right down (implementation and management) includes the tasks of a practical science and this is also the part which is usually meant when we talk about applied social geography. But, if we regard social geography as a science, this little section of implementation and management alone cannot be able to deliver a scientific knowledge about what really happens in practice. Applied social geography includes all section of research. That means: Mere policy consulting or project management by itself is no science at all. But, unfortunately, if we look around what applied social geographers do, we see that up to date research projects concerning evaluation and reflection are mostly an exception.

3.2 Gaps between theory and practice

The lack of evaluating and reflective research projects in applied social geography is the reason why we have large gaps and deficits in the field of our theoretical models. Although the question we ask is a very simple one: How can all those empirical findings concerning the management of spatial planning be explained? Of course, there are a range of theoretical models for certain aspects, such as communication, management, regional development, organisation or the process of learning. But all these theories are not able to explain what really is happening when we apply geography. The gap between our empirical findings and our theoretical possibilities for explanation is immense. Even more: The really significant situations, events and developments for our projects can neither be explained nor predicted by any theory! Two very simple examples shall show these problems:

- Some geographers wanted to realise a development project for regional agriculture. To get financial support by the government, they had to describe the structural problems in detail. But when they showed all the problems the farmers had, the regional administration became angry, because they thought that the geographers' analysis would degrade and lower their own efforts up to that point. And without the support of the regional government it is very hard to realise projects. But: Which theory would have predicted this problem?
- Another example: Some geographers did a project which aimed to create a certain regional consciousness. Therefore, they contacted the regional radio station and asked for co-operation. During the first meeting, the chief of the radio station was very pleased and offered some very interesting fields of co-operation himself. Three weeks later, during the second meeting, he proclaimed that he is not willing to cooperate any more. What had happened? He had heard that the geographers had also asked the local new-

paper for co-operation. And between the local newspaper and the regional radio station there had been a long-lasting conflict, which the geographers didn't know of. Again: Which theory would have predicted this problem?

Actually, these two little examples show the various difficulties of spatial project management. But we don't find solutions for such problems in any textbook. Still, every applied working social geographer knows such problems. They are not singular, not unique. They are typical. But which theory can explain them? The gap between the things we do and the things we can explain is very large in applied social geography. Therefore, it is more than necessary to make progress concerning the theoretical basics of applied social geography.

4. TOWARDS A 'THEORY OF PRACTICE'

4.1 More than just empirical problems: the measurement of spatial changes

In addition to all those theoretical challenges mentioned above, there is a second problem concerning empirical methods. To analyse spatial development projects, it is not sufficient just to have some apparent descriptions. Success or failure of projects could in principle depend on so many factors. Therefore, it is necessary to do empirical analysis in great detail.

But, if we want to collect data about what is really happening when we manage projects, we don't know what to measure. Is it the structure of the network? The number of conflicts? The kind of communication? The sort of decisions? Or the range of resources, such as time and money? What is really significant for the success or failure of projects?

Even more: We also do not know how to measure: By interviewing the actors? By observing workshops? Or by analysing documents?

Obviously, we neither have any tested indicators for the management of spatial planning nor any social geographical theory of observation up to now!

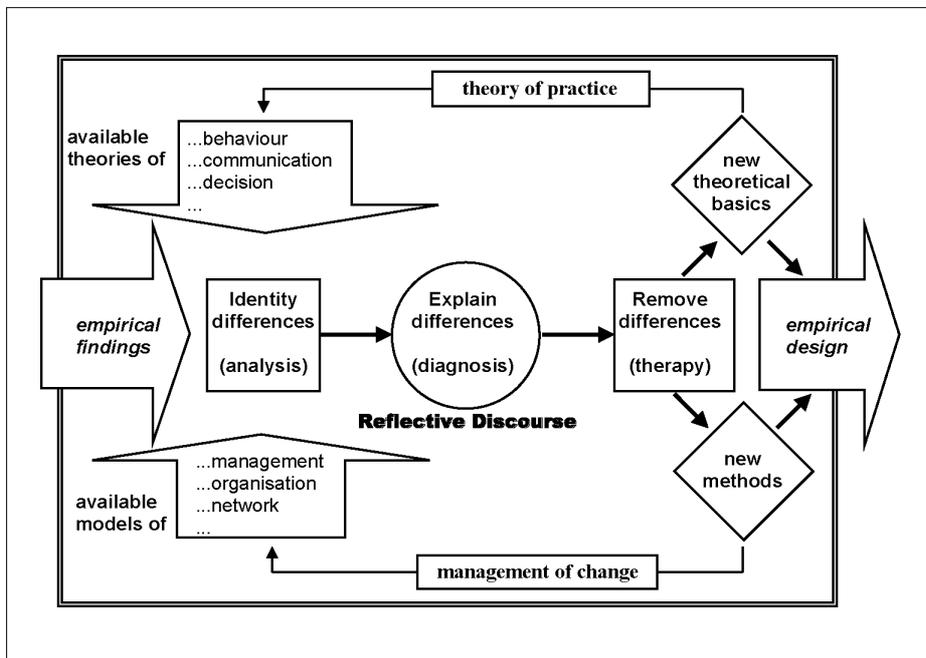
4.2 The 'forum of reflection'

„It is not enough for applied geographers to simply keep doing applied research. The inherent value of the approach requires that they engage their critics in debate“ (Pacione 1999, p. 2). The question is: Why are our theories not able

to explain or even predict real phenomena? The answer is to be found in insufficient theories and models as well as in inadequate empirical methods. To solve these theoretical and empirical problems, we need something like a 'forum of reflection' (fig. 3),

- where all our empirical findings are systematically compared with our theoretical possibilities of explanation in order to identify the differences between theory (explanation) and practice (findings).
- These differences are to be examined in reflective discourse.
- This is the only way to develop better theories as well as better empirical methods.

Figure 3: 'Forum of reflection'



Source: Hilpert (2002), p. 186

4.3 Research perspectives

The above-described approach of applied social geography deals with chaos and order. It is to look for typical and reoccurring patterns in very complex socio-spatial dynamics. It's an interdisciplinary approach, which combines

different scientific points of view. It's also very close to the principles of self-organization in a social sense. And - undisputedly - sometimes it is very hard to find explanations for human behaviour. There is no homo oeconomicus out there. Applied social geographical theories must recognize that people act and decide not only by reason but also by heart (Hasse 1999).

This new theoretical approach of applied social geography is just at the beginning. But there are some research progresses, which show that it is more than worth to follow this path. There are some research projects at the University of Augsburg in this field up to date. Two of them will be finished in a few months.

- The first one analyses specific patterns of making decisions among a large number of regional development projects. The findings show that the success or the failure of projects depends - to a certain degree - on typical patterns concerning the making of decisions. And these patterns occur regularly in all spatial development projects (Conrads 2003).
- The second research project is to analyse specific forms of network management. The results show that many events and situations that seem to be singular, surprising or accidental, have their causes and reasons in typical patterns of interaction. And these patterns of communication also occur regularly in all spatial development projects (Huber 2003).

5. CONCLUSION

Although each spatial development project seems to be unique and many of its events seem to be coincidental, a detailed scientific view shows that there are typical patterns and repeated principles occurring in all projects (see Dörner 1992). To understand reality and to optimize development strategies (e.g. towards a better policy consulting) it is necessary to examine and to explain these structures and processes. Some remarkable research result show that it is really possible to find order in all this chaos and to define rules towards a 'theory of practice'.

But, all in all, we only made just the first steps towards standards of management. Indeed, our first results show that, underneath the surface of the complex reality, there are typical and reoccurring patterns that explain or determine human behaviour in the context of spatial development. Further progresses are expected by using geographical information systems (GIS) for simulating spatial development projects. But, there is still so much work to do, so many questions are still open. Finally, the identification of management standards is a step-by-step process. But in order to advance applied social geography it is necessary to make progress developing the 'theory of practice'.

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**APLIKATIVNA SOCIALNA GEOGRAFIJA:
UPRAVLJANJE PROSTORSKEGA PLANIRANJA IN
RAZISKOVALNE PERSPEKTIVE NA PODROČJU
»TEORIJE PRAKSE«**

Povzetek

Uporabnost socialne geografije lahko razumemo tudi kot upravljanje s projekti prostorskega razvoja. Na tem področju pa se srečujemo z različnimi vprašanji, ki zadevajo upravljanje tovrstnih projektov. Samo optimiziranje aplikativnega procesa (učenje z delovanjem) ne more razrešiti težav v izvajanju projektov. Pomembneje je razmisliti o tem, kaj se dejansko dogaja v postopku aplikacije (učenje s proučevanjem). Na tem področju pa se srečujemo z izredno pomanjkljivim teoretičnim pristopom pri razumevanju dejanskih procesov pri upravljanju razvojnih projektov. To je velik problem, ker je možno stanje izboljšati le z njegovim poznavanjem.

Čeprav se zdi vsak projekt prostorskega razvoja na prvi pogled enkratno, pa nam podrobnejša znanstvena analiza pokaže, da obstajajo tipični vzorci, ki se ponavljajo pri vseh projektih. Da bi razumeli dejansko stanje in optimizirali razvojne strategije (npr. z boljšim svetovanjem pri načrtovanju razvojnih politik), je potrebno proučevati in razložiti tako strukturne danosti kot procese. Generalizacija tovrstnih principov (upravljaljskih standardov) predstavlja prvi korak k razvoju „teorije prakse“, ki bi lahko prispevala k boljšemu upravljanju strategij prostorskega razvoja.