

BOOK REVIEW

Mari Vaattovaara, Matti Kortteinen, “Beyond polarisation versus professionalisation? A case study on the development of the Helsinki region”, Urban Studies, 2007

**Carmen-Beatrice Păuna
Institute for Economic Forecasting, Bucharest**

The decision to make a review of this paper follows both the prestige enjoyed by its authors and the particular interest shown by specialists in the economic and social performances achieved in Helsinki, “a pocket-size metropolis” (as the area is called in this very paper).

Mari Vaattovaara and Matti Kortteinen belong to the generation of Finnish researchers with a modern vision and approach on urbanism – which also includes aspects of urban geography and sociology but also trends of the economic development in urban areas.

Mari Vaattovaara delivered her doctoral thesis in urban geography at Oulu University in 1999, and is currently professor of Urban Geography at the Helsinki University. Following her prodigious activity in research in the field she has been selected as expert and co-ordinator of numerous research projects both at a national and European level. Her rich experience as professor and in the field of research has been rounded off by that of author of numerous specialised books, studies and articles published by famous international publishing houses.

Matti Kortteinen is one of the Finnish avant-garde specialists in the field of urban studies and in his numerous papers that he published he showed his interest particularly in “pre-urban” spaces, social delimitation, regional and social segregation in metropolitan areas. Matti Kortteinen delivered his doctoral thesis at the Helsinki University and has been active for a long time in the academic field as well as a researcher in research departments of the Helsinki University and the Academy of Finland. Currently, Matti Kortteinen is professor of urban sociology at the Helsinki University and associate professor in the field of social research at the Lapland University (since 2004) and also associate professor (since 1996) at that will be part of the Public Health Institute as of 2009). In his capacity as

associate researcher at STAKES he has taken part in numerous European projects of reference in the field of urban studies.

As is known, Finland is traditionally assimilated to a strong pillar of the “so-called Nordic welfare regime”. International comparisons indicate that this country has a relatively low poverty rate and one of the most equitable distribution systems of revenues in the Western world. These national characteristics related to the urban and housing policies have been completed “by a long tradition of social mixing” existing in the Helsinki district which placed Helsinki, in a classification of European metropolitan towns, on the first place in point of social and spatial balance².

Another reasons why the authors selected the Helsinki district for their analysis is that in the past decade it has become one of the top European centres in the field of “information and communication technologies”, thanks in particular to the Nokia company, “the world market leader in mobile communication”.

Last but not least, the authors explain their choice of Helsinki district as subject of their study by the fact that in spite of the period of recession undergone by the Finnish early in the 90-ties, (in a much stronger way as compared to other European states, according to some authors) a balance was maintained between „the Nordic welfare state” and a strong „informational development”³. As a conclusion, the authors signal out that the Helsinki district could be accepted as a laboratory of experiments in which to watch the evolution of urban differences (from the social and economic points of view) in parallel with the strong manifestation of globalisation and the development of the IT sector – and in line with the intention of maintaining the „local policies of social mixing”.

The paper “Beyond polarisation versus professionalisation? A case study on the development of the Helsinki region” is a reflection of the logical and chronological scientific approach. After the authors present their arguments for choosing this particular topic, they present the historical evolution of the urban aspects in the Helsinki district. After the separation from Sweden, during Napoleon’s war, the centre of Helsinki – situated in the peninsula – developed an imperial style. The urban development of the town built on the typical outlook of the bourgeoisie, according to which the

² In 1999

³ In my opinion, as author of this review, a point of interest for future research could also be the end of the current crisis that started in the second half of the year 2008 in Europe, as well, in order to check whether the “Nordic welfare state” is still solid.

centre was destined to the well off while the periphery (in this case stripes of land sometimes separated by water from the peninsula) was mainly inhabited by workers and the poor population. After the Civil war of 1918, more exactly, starting with the 20-ties, politicians granted special attention to the social integration of the less well off categories of the population. Gradually, another idea developed namely to integrate the houses of the poorer (in general, individual houses) with the others, the remaining differences being only of an architectural nature. The next stage, around the years '44 was to integrate the houses that were private property with the dwellings that were meant for renting in the same area; there was however a difference in this type of estates and this difference was also in point of architecture. A new stage followed as of 1974 namely that of integration of the new types of dwellings (block of flats) among the existing ones without any architectural difference being made in this case. The studies carried out in the '80 (and also mentioned by Mari Vaattovaara and Matti Kortteinen) underline the fact that the social-economic divide inside the town thus gradually diminished. In other words, the authors point to the fact that –also based on wide scope own analyses according to numerous criteria – in a period of increasing social inequities in the urban areas, the region of Helsinki witnessed a spatial balance from the social and economic point of view (the record period of balance being so far the beginning of the '90). In their own analyses, the authors draw attention to a criterion used for the identification of the structure of housing in the urban areas, namely: the level of education of the people. This criterion has also been used in the development of the „social mixing” policy which in some periods of time yielded results in the region of Helsinki. As time passed, in spite of the efforts of the authorities for the homogenisation of the population reality indicated that as one advanced further to the West of the town – where the Technical University of Helsinki is located (the top university in Finland) – there was a growth in the number of inhabitants with a high level of education (academic and post-academic studies). This trend is also seen in Espoo, a suburb in the West of the town of Helsinki. The urban differences (analysed in depth by the authors in relation to other criteria as well) went deeper in the '90. This degradation of the spatial balance from the socio-economic standpoint in the region of Helsinki underwent the following stages, according to the authors:

- the beginning of the '90, with early symptoms;
- the new economic growth, following the development of the telecommunications and business service sectors. In addition, the Western part of the area around Ruoholahti, with the new headquarters of the Nokia

Company, is attracting more educated inhabitants. The clusters of companies in this area contributed to the widening of the differences in income and unemployment as compared to other parts of the area, for instance, the Eastern part;

- cultural differences and the emergence of migration – in the second half of the '90 ;

- the emergence of some “isles” (small areas) of poverty – particularly in the Eastern part of the region of the size of a block of flats, a house or even a wing of a block of flats.

In conclusion, the authors make an analytical distinction at the end of their in-depth analysis between the various spaces in the Helsinki district⁴, namely:

- new areas – areas of the elite, inhabited by people with a high level of education, with modern industrial activities going on and with a low level of unemployment (especially in the Western part)

- „grey zones”, with less educated people belonging particularly to the working class where less modern industrial activities are going on;

- „black holes” of urban development, areas particularly inhabited by people who do not work and where these forms of poverty are predominant; worth mentioning however is that these areas of poverty are smaller in size (as mentioned above, for instance, of the size of a block or even a wing of a block) following the very application of the „social mixing policies”.

In this context, at the end, the authors explain the very title „polarisation versus professionalisation” which they also presented in the introduction, setting out from the works of Sassen and Hammett, respectively. The idea coming out of this last classification of the areas in the Helsinki district (that is, the town of Helsinki including its suburbs) is the need to clarify some concepts used by specialists in their papers, that is, „polarisation”. Since specialists like Hammett, Sassen or Burgers (whose contributions are analysed by Mari Vaattovaara and Matti Kortteinen in the introduction to their paper) used this concept in analysing the „urban social and spatial structures “ of the „global cities”, Mari Vaattovaara and Matti Kortteinen believe that the theoretical ambiguities related to “polarisation” should be eliminated from the discussion as long as this concept refers to the bi-modal tendency of development, that is, „bimodal income or social structure”. When referring concretely to the Helsinki district, Mari

⁴ at the time when the study was carried out, that is, 2003

Vaattovaara and Matti Kortteinen believe that „polarisation” is not the most adequate concept to be used in their analysis. Thus, the analysis of the new urban differences in the Helsinki region pointed to the way in which the development of the ITC can become a challenge for the very equality characteristic of the „Nordic welfare regime”. The identified bi-modal urban differentiation is not interpreted by Mari Vaattovaara and Matti Kortteinen as a sign of „polarisation” but rather as a new phase in the economic development and more exactly in the evolution of the labour force structure. The authors pinpoint to the following: „there is an over-supply of less-skilled labour force and, at the same time, an over demand for highly skilled IT -work”. At the same time, we also witness a modification in the demand of labour force in favour of those with high-level work abilities. According to the demographic studies people that do not work and who live on the social benefits are older than „the working population on an average”, nearing rapidly the pension age. Under these circumstances, the labour force is expected to change in favour of those that are highly skilled, therefore, towards „professionalisation”, as suggested by Hamett, as well. In conclusion, Mari Vaattovaara and Matti Kortteinen believe that the Helsinki district goes through a bi-modal change both in the spatial structure and the social structure of the town but, by and large, there is a „unimodal” tendency of development in which the „welfare state” and the town are trying to meet the requirements of the market. Mari Vaattovaara and Matti Kortteinen conclude their paper by expressing concern however for „the Finnish model of information society”.

The paper “Beyond polarisation versus professionalisation? A case study on the development of the Helsinki region” enjoyed a wide appreciation among specialists contributing to the attempts of local authorities but also of the political decision-makers of maintaining the status gained at a European and international level of “the Finnish pocket-size metropolis”.

At the end of this review I would like to mention that I am glad I have had the opportunity of knowing personally one of the authors Matti Kortteinen, on the occasion of a visit to Helsinki University.

I thank both authors for giving me the opportunity to present their paper in “Public Administration and Regional Studies” and I wish them good luck in their pedagogical and research activity.