Acting Peripheries: An Introduction

Franziska Görmar

Leibniz-Institute for Regional Geography / Leibniz-Institut für Länderkunde
f_goermar@ifl-leipzig.de

Thilo Lang

Head of Department
Leibniz-Institute for Regional Geography / Leibniz-Institut für Länderkunde
T_Lang@ifl-leipzig.de

Abstract

The term periphery is often linked to dominant images of rural areas, mainly portrayed as backward, unattractive and shrinking regions, or as idyllic tourist destinations. These labels are also assigned to actors in these regions and add a discursive element to economic, demographic and political peripheralization. The underlying discourses on such regions and their 'passive' residents are often seen as the outcome of uneven power relations and access to resources. However, actors in peripheral regions cannot be seen as passive victims of processes beyond their control, as they have capacities to act bearing potentials for strategic development that are often overlooked in political decision making.

Keywords

Periphery; discursive periphery; spaces of possibility

Introduction: discursive peripheralization and agency

The term periphery is often linked to negative connotations of backwardness, underdevelopment and environments hostile to innovation – supporting a dualistic relationship with the largely positive images of dominant core-regions (Keim, 2006; Kühn, 2015). Periphery is predominantly associated with images of shrinking regions experiencing limited access to and

diminishing (public) services, economic marginalization, out-migration of young, well educated people and an ageing or marginalized population (Beetz et al, 2008; Leibert and Golinski, 2017). Further, some peripheral regions are also portrayed as rural idylls where people live in harmony with the nature, suited as ideal tourist destinations (Silva and Figueiredo, 2013; see also Plüschke-Altof, 2016, on Estonia and Willett and Lang, 2018, on Cornwall). These images build a sharp contrast to cities, which are predominantly considered to be "places of connectivity, creativity and innovation" (EC, 2011: 6; see also Shearmur, 2012; Florida, 2005) and treated as growth engines attracting young, creative and successful entrepreneurs, accumulating jobs, knowledge, capital and power. Large cities are also supposed to be the home of progressive or even revolutionary bottom-up initiatives fostering social innovation and opposing current neoliberal and increasingly nationalist development trends (cf. Harvey, 2012).

These ideas indicate that, when talking about peripheral regions, simplified dichotomies are often prevailing (e.g. rural–urban, periphery–center, shrinking or declining–growing, backward–innovative, conservative–progressive, passive–active, (PoSCoPP, 2015)), consequently leading to a discursive construction of non-urban regions as peripheries (Leick and Lang, 2018; Kühn and Lang, 2017; Plüschke-Altof, 2016), a process that we understand as discursive peripheralization. These images and the related narratives of place (Willett, 2016) seem to be shaped by counter-images of a hegemonic culture of the urban (Silva and Figueiredo, 2013: 2). Hence, to maintain the positive core of an urban culture, peripheral regions are portrayed as the flip side of progressive and modern city life. This dominant process also shapes the inner perceptions of 'peripheries', their economic development and the lives of 'peripheral' residents (Leibert and Golinski, 2016; Willett, 2016). Whereas peripheries are often considered to lag behind, lacking political power or agency and being highly dependent on the centers (Beetz, 2008; Lang, 2015; Kühn and Lang, 2017), their economic, social and political potential and active role in shaping, opposing or reproducing these perceptions is widely neglected.

Moreover, these labels are assigned not only to regions but implicitly also to their actors (see Graffenberger and Vonnahme in this themed section; Meyer and Miggelbrink, 2013). Thus, also their residents are often described as powerless and backward or as being conservative, apolitical or even reactionary (cf. Landy and Moreau, 2015: 6). A consequence from this negative labeling is according to Leibert and Golinski (2016) the risk that the inhabitants of such regions incorporate this feeling. Negative internal and external images can lead to mental lock-ins and set off downward spirals of decline, paralyzing complete regions and being very difficult to break (Lang, 2012: 1751).

Leaving more space for agency, Willett calls for not only taking into account the past and the present in the discursive construction of peripheral regions but to consider future development and processes of 'becoming' as an integral part of a narrative of place and "an important political space for understanding the dynamics of regional inequality" (2016: 436).

With this themed section, we want to take these calls more serious and support an understanding of 'peripheral' regions as arenas within which future development perspectives arise (Shearmur, 2012) and 'spaces of possibility' can open up (Willett and Lang, 2018). By changing the structural patterns in a region, such spaces represent the discursive practices that allow new ideas and things to emerge (Ibid.:13). This might either be done through internal developments (actors adopting new perspectives or introducing something new) or by external events influencing the region's development. In contrast to a number of studies focusing on the (discursive) production of peripheries (see i.e. Nagy and Timár, 2017; Lang et al. 2015; Nagy, 2015; Fischer-Tahir and Naumann, 2013), the aim of this themed section is to shift attention towards the strategies of actors coping with and opposing to these processes.

The contributions in this themed section highlight alternative and counter-narratives as well as the resources and potentials of 'peripheral' regions for future development, which are up to now under-researched (Lang, 2015: 182). The contributions are based on extensive qualitative fieldwork, which has been mainly carried out between 2014 and 2017 within a large research and training network focusing on socio-economic and political responses to regional polarization in Central and Eastern Europe (CCE), and complemented by a study in Cornwall, UK.

The contributions draw on a dynamic, relational, multidimensional and multi-scalar understanding of peripheralization (PoSCoPP, 2015), complementing studies on the (re)production of peripherality[1] and on governance in the Eastern European peripheries[2]. With this themed section we want to highlight that, despite their perceived powerlessness, actors in peripheralized regions continuously take decisions and respond to peripheralization. However, these responses show a great heterogeneity - ranging from the reproduction of peripheralization to various forms of resistance. Consequently, we call for a new perspective on the so-called peripheries considering them as 'spaces of possibility' within which different ways of living may find a place and social and economic innovations may emerge.

Challenging discursive peripheralization

Blowers and Leroy (1994, 203) define peripheries as "geographically remote, economically marginal, politically powerless and socially inhomogeneous". They are often characterized by poor infrastructures (Kersten et al. 2016), limited availability of social capital (Leibert and Golinski, 2017), high out-migration rates, especially of women, (Leibert et al. 2015), institutional thinness (Tödtling and Trippl, 2005), and supposed weak innovation capabilities (see Graffenberger and Vonnahme in this themed section; Shearmur, 2012, Graffenberger, 2019). Many of these features can be directly or indirectly related to hegemonic societal discourses stigmatizing and de-valuing these regions, while placing higher value on metropolitan or economically growing regions. Such discourses are often the outcome of specific political and social power relations and of an uneven access to resources, which determine "who has the right to speak and be heard in the discourse" (Plüschke-Altof, 2016: 13). As peripheries are often lacking "capacities necessary to influence [discourses and subsequently] political decisions in a way that would benefit their interests" (Kühn et al, 2016: 2), powerlessness emerges as an important component of peripheralization processes (cf. Beetz, 2008). The lack of capacities leads to a perpetuation of the "inability to influence political decisions [and] solidifies the conditions that allow for a continuing reproduction of disadvantage" (Kühn et al, 2016: 14). This is especially true for CEE countries, which have faced several phases of centralization and decentralization since the collapse of the socialist system, limiting today the room for maneuver of local actors.

Kühn highlights that peripheries nevertheless "do at times have options, which can become game-changers" (Kühn et al. 2016: 13). The dynamic, procedural and open character of discourses allows not only actors from the centers but also from the peripheries to articulate positions and eventually counteract hegemonic with alternative discourses. Consequently, discursive peripheralization can be challenged, rejected or even reversed on the long run (Keim, 2006; Lang, 2013). We assume that every actor has some power, "if only the power to resist" (Sharp, 2009), or to adapt to the current situation. However, the resulting actions are often delegitimized by the above mentioned discourses and do not necessarily meet the expectations that actors in the centers have towards actors of the peripheries. Often, policy makers or development and funding agencies have their

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[1] See: Special Issue in European Spatial Research and Policy 24 (2), 2017.

[2] See: Special issue in Administrative Culture 18 (2), 2018.

own understanding of how regional or local development should look like without acknowledging the specific spatial and temporal contexts in which peripheralization processes occur. Regions rely increasingly on funding through short-time projects instead of long term strategies. Szöke (2013: 76) even speaks about the "projectification" of regional development which, because of a lack of locally available knowledge on the complex funding schemes, relies on external knowledge and the influence of the newly established (urban) "project class" (Ibid.: 84 ff; Raagmaa et al. 2019; for the influence of external consultants see also Cebotari in this themed section). Development projects have to fit changing funding programs designed by 'central' actors, which impede strategic agency in peripheralized regions. At the same time, municipalities and other local and regional actors often lack resources to co-finance projects.

Against this background, innovative thinking and knowledge of peripheral actors is often devalued. This is because the social position and the economic and political power of agents in the center plays a decisive role when it comes to accepting and implementing innovative approaches and development projects (Shearmur, 2012; Leibert and Golinski, 2017).

Thus, there is a need to look at the progressive potential, processes and strategies of actors located in the 'peripheries'. They often have a variety of options for action, to take decisions and to engage in discourses (Willett and Lang, 2018). However, these capacities often are overlooked or downplayed in political decision-making (PoSCoPP, 2015).

Heterogeneous forms of agency: introducing the papers of this themed section

With this themed section, we seek to question the prevailing assumption that actors in peripheralized regions are passive victims of wider processes beyond their control and with little scope for own initiatives. We also strive to look closer at the varied dimensions of agency and strategic action in peripheral regions. The authors concentrate on peripheral regions in Central and Eastern Europe and the UK, that face multiple challenges such as geographical distance to regional and/or national centers, social marginalization and the withdrawal of the state (Mihály), the disempowerment of local communities to influence decision making processes in the center (Cebotari), as well as the negative labeling of places as non-innovative and powerless (Graffenberger and Vonnahme; Willett). Regional policies in these countries, focus on promoting a competitive and innovative economy (cf. Loewen and Schulz, 2019) in the metropolitan regions and around capital cities, while institutional capacities on local levels, especially in CEE, often remained underdeveloped (cf. Raagmaa et al. 2019), consequently leading to further centralization and peripheralization.

Against this background, the individual papers bring together different perspectives on heterogeneous local agency that result in a comprehensive picture on the manifold challenges peripheralized regions are currently facing as well as responses to cope with them.

Focusing on the community level, and in particular, on the relation between the local government and the 'ordinary' residents in Cornwall (UK), *Joanie Willett* argues that a fluid, dynamic and mobile local government is more capable to adapt to changing environments and challenge peripheralization processes than a static and rigid one. Homogenous council structures and failing communication between the community council and the population may lead to a self-perpetuating path-dependent development of regions. Willett proposes to understand communities and local governments as 'affective assemblages' made of "institutions, practices, ways of speaking about, economies, physical and conceptual structures, thoughts, and knowledges" constituting "a wide and diverse 'gene-pool' of ideas" and being embedded in and interconnected with other assemblages at different scales. The interconnection and interaction of the 'periphery-assemblages' allow enhancing the agency of people leading to new "spaces of possibility" and challenging peripheralizing narratives. That this is often not happening, she argues, is due firstly to the behavior of the more or less closed

group of community leaders in a parish council, secondly the formalized structures of these councils and thirdly to the ineffective use of communication tools which do not resonate in the population.

Changing the focus from the local authority to civil society organizations, *Melinda Mihály* looks at social enterprises that challenge on-going peripheralization processes in Northern Hungary. In particular, she examines the relationship between peripheralization and the social marginalization of Roma people. Mihály argues that the autonomy and funding opportunities vary remarkably depending on whether the enterprises are municipality-based, faith-based or civilian-based initiatives. Locally based initiatives face increasing difficulties to access funding due to ongoing centralization processes and a hierarchical governance model favoring state-led (municipal) initiatives. At the same time, the empowerment of Roma people as a means to overcome marginalization and peripheralization differs considerably according to the ways how the initiatives deal with the "Gypsy"-"Hungarian" differentiation and integrate participatory decision-making in their own practices.

*Sorin Cebotari´*s contribution examines two community-owned renewable energy projects (COREPs) in North-West Romania as a means to develop local communities in peripheral regions. He criticizes the powerlessness of local authorities in the decision making process at the national level for not taking into account the specific needs of their communities, which at the local level lead to a rather limited impact of the projects for them as a whole. His research shows that COREPs can have indeed positive financial impacts on communities by saving money for external energy supply and, furthermore, lead to an increase of the innovation capacity of the local authorities to facilitate the development and implementation of further projects. However, due to a lack of communication between local authorities and other members of the communities as well as missing financial support for training and education, the latter are barely involved in project development and implementation. Instead, external experts from the centers support local authorities in the planning and implementation process. Thus, the chance for knowledge creation within the community and further local development of social innovation is not seized.

In the final contribution of this themed section, *Martin Graffenberger* and *Lukas Vonnahme* look at economic actors and innovation activities in 'peripheral' Estonian regions. According to prevailing claims in economic geography, peripheral regions and consequently actors within them are considered to be isolated and distant from knowledge creation and diffusion as well as innovation generation which is supposed to happen more or less exclusively in metropolitan regions, thanks to agglomeration advantages and the concentration of "spatially sticky" tacit knowledge. Adopting a relational approach, the author argues that dynamic interactions at various spatial scales (regional, national and international) complement firm-internal capacities and the specific resources and distinct qualities peripheral regions may have. Both locally available knowledge as well as actor mobility, practiced for instance through trade fair visits or collaborations with external partners, operate as important levers for innovation activities in peripheral regions.

Producing 'spaces of possibility'

The contributions of this themed section show that discursive peripheralization is widely contested by the actors in the so-called peripheries, which are by no means as passive as often imagined. There are many local authorities, civil society organizations, entrepreneurs or individuals sensitive to strategic planning, who are taking deliberate action against dominant negative discourses of place – often in the form of progressive and alternative local and innovative projects. Such initiatives can be supported by local and regional authorities by initiating and channeling communication flows and knowledge networks between actors within and beyond a region. Often, key individuals such as innovative (social) entrepreneurs (see Mihaly; Graffenberger and Vonnahme in this themed section) or council leaders (see Willett and Cebotari in this themed section) play a crucial role to initiate and

pursue alternative developments and discourses (Grootens and Horlings, 2016; Christmann, 2016). Given these observations, successful local and regional development is a dynamic, participatory and future oriented process that creates narratives of 'becoming' instead of narratives on the past or present.

The invited authors demonstrate that a number of features are crucial to mobilize the progressive potential of 'peripheral' regions to challenge discursive peripheralization, at least in three different ways: (1) intensified social interaction and communication, (2) networking and coalition building across spatial scales, and (3) supportive institutional environments.

(1) The contributions of Cebotari and Willett, point out that lacking or deficient communication between local authority/government and community members leads to resignation or indifference of the residents towards the local authority and, at worst, towards local development issues in general. In contrast, better integration into project development and more intense communication could lead to more participation of the civil society and the creation of locally available knowledge, potentially facilitating place-based development. This must not necessarily lead to economic growth but to an improvement of the quality of life and well-being of a region's residents (Kinossian, 2018) and the appreciation of people's experiences and capacities which can be a first step towards 'deperipheralization'.

As Mihály notices in her work, this applies not only to the relation between local government and civil society, but also to that between social enterprise initiators and the communities at which they target their activities. In this case, communities are also a reservoir where local initiatives can find (volunteer) workers. This enhances both the performance of social enterprises and the capacity building for community development. In the field of regional economic development, Graffenberger and Vonnahme observe that a stable and trustful collaboration between local entrepreneurs can lead to the emergence of new products or even the establishment of new enterprises.

(2) In addition to communication between different actors at the local level networking and coalition building across spatial scales and with other regions are essential strategies to empower actors in 'peripheral' regions and to enhance their capacity to act (Kühn et al, 2016). Joint action can most likely mobilize resources more effectively and, thus, might contribute to overcome peripheralization. Networking and coalition building has been crucial for the economic success of local businesses in 'peripheral' Estonia (see Graffenberger and Vonnahme in this themed section), for the social enterprise development portrayed by Mihály) through the support of a Swiss organization. Thus, as the different authors argued here, it is necessary to consider not only local or regional actors but also the wider networks of social, economic and political forces in which they are embedded and with whom they are interacting. With their practices, discourses and decisions, these networks considerably influence and affect processes of de- peripheralization.

(3) Finally, the themed section also examines the relationship between agency in 'peripheral' regions and the quality and performance of local and regional organizations (Pike et al. 2017) potentially producing supportive institutional environments. Both Willett and Cebotari, show that a proactive and open, or, in contrast, a restricting local authority operating detached from its community, can make a difference in regional development outcomes. Organizations matter, "because they facilitate negotiation and dialogue, mobilize stakeholders and integrate them into the development process, enhance policy continuity and strengthen territories' voice'" (Pike et al, 2017: 52). As Willett shows, municipal organizations can support the community and the collective good as a whole and so can facilitate flows of information between differing actors within the region. In some cases, local municipalities are even initiators of development projects such as an organic village farm in North Hungary (see Mihály in this themed section), or renewable energy projects in Romania (see Cebotari in this themed section). Further, as Mihály shows with the national system in Hungary being targeted to

municipal administrations, lacking institutional support can make it very difficult for community initiatives to survive. This shows that alternative and progressive local initiatives and resulting small-scale counter-discourses are often neglected by national or regional mainstream discourses (cf. also Christmann, 2016).

Communication and networking depend on various actors as well as productive social relations and thus need the right timing and (place-specific) setting to unfold their potential. Bottom-up initiatives are implemented much better if they coincide with enabling macro-economic, institutional and political contexts (cf. Pike et al. 2017). Thus, instead of attributing 'successful' development to local residents or authorities, or decision-makers in the centers, the production of 'spaces of possibility' depends on multiple engagement and institutional environments open to innovation.

Our focus on discursive peripheralization should be seen as complementary to wider historical, political, demographic and macroeconomic development trends on national or European levels which are also crucial for the future of 'peripheries'. Further, our focus on 'Acting Peripheries' should not be seen as an attempt to make local actors responsible for local and regional futures. As Plüschke-Altof and Grootens (2019) put it, the responsibilization of local actors bears the risk of neglecting structural disadvantages of peripheralized regions or of idealizing the "rural idyll". One should also be aware that increased commitment of individuals and actors could easily result in their self-exploitation and, consequently, a decline of civic engagement and to further peripheralization.

Therefore, from our perspective, a broader debate on social and spatial inequalities and the actual meaning of local and regional development is necessary on national as well as European levels (cf. Pike et al. 2017). We suggest that, actors from the 'peripheries' need to take part in these debates, bringing in their perspectives of how to cope with ongoing peripheralization processes to find solutions for their particular needs and challenges.

Acknowledgements

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