ADDRESSING THE ISSUES OF POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION OF THE CITY’S INHABITANTS ON PRINCIPLES BASED ON CHRISTIANITY

Martina Bocanova and Katarina Slobodova Nováková*

Department of Ethnology and Non-European Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, J. Herdu 2, Trnava, Slovakia

(Received 23 January 2018, revised 3 March 2018)

Abstract

The study focuses on the analysis of the possibilities of solving the problems associated with poverty in all its spheres and the consequences on the example of the situation in Trnava, specifically at one of its districts. The study aims to point out the influence of the Salesians in the socially excluded marginalized part of the city. In the study, we point out the effort to address the issue of poverty in the locality with more or less systemic interventions by the city council, churches or associations. However, there are a few moments which are significant, such as the increasingly intensified Salesian influence, the status of the Church, and even the arrival of relocated inhabitants from the floodplains of northern Slovakia. We deal with the moment of the arrival of two powerful stimuli - Salesians and displaced people, who were deeply religious. We point to a systematic effort to address the unfortunate situation on the part of the clergy, particularly in the field of working with youth, the formation of their relationship to education and meaningful leisure time, and Orava’s immigrants, who have tried to fill the principles of Christian teaching in their everyday life, to become a model for the original residents of the neighbourhood. The study that tracks the continuity of these two elements points to the transformation of the city’s neighbourhood, which has been characterized by all manifestations of extreme poverty, into a lucrative neighbourhood whose urban identity is heavily marked by religiosity.

Keywords: urbanism, extreme poverty, marginalized groups, Salesians, Christianity

1. Introduction

Slovak cities have undergone major changes in historical development, even though it has proved to be the most significant for the past two-three decades. It has been enabled by political, economic and social transformation after 1989. Cities are exposed to global trends more than smaller communities because they attract multinational capital and together with it more job opportunities, which subsequently results in increased migration and tourism and increased diversity of lifestyles, cultural characters and representation. However,

*Corresponding author, e-mail: katarina.novakova@ucm.sk
not every city absorbs these effects of globalization equally. Local processes and phenomena develop hand in hand with global ones, so it is important to keep in mind the dynamics of these processes and the specificities of each locality. Cities can be viewed as ‘microcosms of a society’ whose development and functioning can be interpreted as ‘ecosystem’ functioning by invasion and succession and explained by urbanism as a specific form of social existence, to continually restructure the space, or to perceive its structure as a symbolic and spatial reflection of whole-community processes. In a deeper view of the city and longer-term participation in the city, we can uncover the immense diversity and heterogeneity of the urban environment, the multiplicity of relationships based on social stratification, conditioned by political, professional, confessional and interest heterogeneity, as Darulová mentions [1].

Urban organisms are an appropriate base for entering the city space as an object of ethnological research. In addition to the fact that the community can be perceived as a link among the family-community-society, it is easier to understand and monitor the social organism in comparison with the whole of the urban society. To understand the city’s society, it is also important that communities and their relationships work on the basis of social communication. Analysis of its elements provides, among other things, the opportunity to understand the functioning of the city as a whole.

Let’s think about what study opportunities are provided for us within an urban environment. Robert Park, founder of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology, says in one of his classical statements that we can see the city as a mosaic of small worlds that touch but do not overlap [2]. These Park’s ‘small worlds’ give some degree of mutual penetration. The mosaic metaphor is repeatedly used in the characterization of diversity, whether urban or global, but can often be misleading [3]. The perception of a certain space, public urban space, in our case the city district, could be analysed as small worlds intertwining and influencing, but in many ways resolving apart from each other. The world of the city district, which has only acquired the urban character since the mid-20th century, is such a Park’s ‘little world’. Whether or not its inhabitants feel like the city’s inhabitants, is the subject of our research. But keeping in mind the definition of the town and its inhabitants by R. Pouš [4], that in each country the city is where the inhabitants feel in the city, we can consider them the inhabitants of the city irrespective of whether we are talking about the situation in the 19th, 20th or 21st century.

2. City in the walls and outside the walls

At the beginning of the 20th century, Trnava was one of the most important towns in Slovakia. Gradually, it became the third largest Slovak city. In 1911, it had about 15,000 inhabitants, and in 1930 nearly 24,000. At that time, many public and private buildings grew in the city, business and industry grew as well, and new suburbs began to emerge.
Trnava was enclosed by the walls until the second half of the 19th century. In the second half of the 19th century the city began to expand and the houses began to rise behind the walls. It was itself a revolutionary act, denying centuries of conscious awareness of the braves’ superiority (‘we in the walls, they behind the walls’) to build a house outside the walls. And some of the city’s inhabitants really felt superior to those behind the city walls. At the beginning of the 19th century a major new element began to appear in the city’s urbanization. While previous building activity was carried out almost exclusively in the territory defined by the walls, the new construction activity was applied both spatially and externally. In addition to the drifting roads from Trnava, natural and uncoordinated streets, even the bigger businesses, the whole districts were created. There was also a new district of Kopánka (derived from the verb to dig, which proves the existence of a brickyard in this part of the city) [5].

In the first half of the 20th century, poor people were scattered all over the city of Trnava, perhaps with the exception of a residential area inhabited by lawyers, doctors and people high in the social rankings. The inhabitants of the city relying on the help of others have accumulated to a greater extent in peripheral districts such as Tulipán and Kopánka (at this time, when people lived without social security, in crisis situations they expected help from the city council and churches). City council was unable to take systematic action on social issues and regularly failed in this area as shown by archival materials. In an effort to justify its inaction and a small involvement, city council even claimed that people are responsible for their poverty with their disordered lives [6].

The locality was characterized by a high rate of unemployment, crime, low education of the population. The district was a symbol of poverty in all areas - material, spiritual or intellectual [7]. The city of Kopánka was perceived as socially and economically excluded by the city’s inhabitants, residents of the neighbourhood were generally stereotypically perceived as potential sources of problems and persons threatening other inhabitants of the city. We try to analyse the effort to address the issue of poverty in the locality with more or less systemic interventions by the city council, churches or associations. However, the increasingly intensified influence of the Salesians, building of a church, and even the arrival of relocated inhabitants from the floodplains of northern Slovakia, which had to be destroyed during the construction of the Orava Dam, are significant moments. It should be noted that the reason to choose the resettlement in Trnava was to connect the city with an active religious life. Paradoxically, the district in which they were resettled did not show these characteristics.

In the context of socio-historical changes, mainly in the mid-20th century, locality maintained and it is still maintaining functioning strategies in the context of the Christian community led by the Salesians. For us, the central moment is mapping and analysing the socially and economically marginalized space, capturing the processes of transforming this city district into a region with a solid identity that is largely influenced by the factors of feeling of common origin and emphasis on personal, livelier and actively manifesting religiosity.
3. Poverty and its causes

Poverty is currently a serious problem that can become an element by which certain people or groups of people become unacceptable burden for society, and based on which they become socially and economically excluded not only from the local community but also from wider society. Socially and economically marginalized people are simply referred to as poor, although their poverty may be very relative, depending on their attitude to lack of resources, and also on views of other members of society [8]. In addition to relativity of poverty, it is also worth mentioning its various forms, not only material poverty, but also spiritual, moral, and intellectual [5]. However, each characterizes the limitation of man’s access to different sources - whether in different areas or in finance [5].

The places, where people live in larger concentrations for a long period of time with limited access to benefit sources for their future lives, will become a marginalized space that gradually begins to accentuate negative characteristics. We deal with the concept of social exclusion, understood as a simple finding that there are people in the industrial and urban society, at the end of the 20th century, who due to their physical or mental weakness, or their behaviour, or the absence of education, are unable to meet their needs and either require a stable care, or pose a danger to others, whether they are segregated by their own fault or by collectiveness [6]. The poverty is connected with economic instability, higher crime rates and a higher degree of tolerance towards their manifestations and other pathological phenomena in society (which are so defined).

Efforts to address the problems associated with poverty - its manifestations and consequences, as well as efforts to prevent its growth, have been associated with the activity of religious communities, churches and volunteers since the Middle Ages [9]. In the modern times, mainly the churches and the cities have been trying to solve the problems of poverty by establishing poorhouses, hospices, educational institutions and so on. This dimension of activity was also developed by the associations working in the field of charitable activity.

However, the aid was provided on irregular basis; more extensive system solutions were not adopted. The inhabitants dealt with the natural disasters, epidemics and wars. The members of the councils have begun to address this issue systematically. The Roman Catholic Church has set up the ideological foundations of its action aimed at helping the poor of their faith, which has been able to continually reduce the impact of poverty on the individuals over longer periods of time [10].

The question of poverty and the effort to mitigate its impact was dealt with greater or lesser success in the city of Trnava. Despite the development of both agriculture and industry, poor people have always been part of it (despite the fact that the council has officially declared that there is no poverty). Solving of poverty-related problems was difficult for the City Council. It pointed to the problems that arose in the neighbourhoods inhabited by the low-income population, and in the local press moralized about the causes of such a situation. According to the city’s leadership the way out from the bad situation was
employment, which they did not manage to secure. (The reasons were different - lack of jobs, unskilled labour...).

In Trnava, the long-term situation of children who were perceived as the most endangered by poverty had been long addressed. In families that had only one income, there were insufficient funds to cover often the basic needs. In families, where both parents worked, children were left on their own, with no role model, and without adult supervision they got into various groups that devoted themselves to minor thefts and begging. The most affected were orphans who had no one to take care of them. They were left abandoned; the cohesion of a wider family was not always the norm, because such children posed additional burdens to families that already had difficulties to survive.

Many orphanages operated in the city in the long run to take care for children without families. Children living in institutions were provided shelter, housing, education and food. Orphanages and poorhouses also took care of children who had their families, but which did not know how to provide adequate conditions for development. These children and teenagers did not live in the institutes, but they went to them for certain hours of the day. They were funded from voluntary contributions - charity, churches and city support. Another group of threatened poverty was elderly and sick people. For them, cities and churches set up poorhouses for adults and hospices [11]. The period of World War II greatly complicated the situation in this area. Poverty had spread to a broader spectrum of people, and federal activity faded. The poor could not rely on the support of their wealthier fellow citizens. During this period, mainly the Red Cross and the Catholic Unity mobilized [12]. This allowed them to be anchored in the religious beliefs and the resulting stability of the councils (associations were created and extinct, for example, in connection with the activity of the members or the membership contributions). It was faith that referred to charity and aid as a pillar of a relationship to people that allowed them to develop aid even in the longer term, and thus to create conditions for more promising projects. In Trnava there were Franciscans, Paulines, Jesuits, Ursulins and Vincentas; Franciscans were the most active ones [13].

Poor people could be found scattered throughout the city and its individual neighbourhoods, but their higher concentration was mainly in the Tulipán and Kopánka districts, so called Execír. In these areas, the families of workers, servants and low-income populations lived. In the mental map of the town, for inhabitants, these districts were not just the centre of poverty, but also a dangerous place where people lived on the edge of the law [14]. In particular, children and young people also devoted themselves to minor offenses, in particular to thefts, just to survive. Those who went to school also got help there, mostly in the form of breakfast. However, the situation was critical in this area as many families lived in such a bad way that they were unable to provide basic dressing for their children, making their school visits impossible, and thus isolating them from education. The situation in the district of Kopánka also deteriorated due to territorial division from the central zone of the city. This separation caused that the inhabitants of Kopánka could enter the city through a
neglected area connected with the city by a field road only. In times of bad weather and winter this area created a difficult obstacle to education for many people and reduced the possibilities of socializing and integrating into the wider community of the city. Kopánka became geographically and mentally isolated space within Trnava [6].

The situation in the district had long been critical. Even though there were also employed people, they were often families with low income and many children (5–10). This simple fact alone meant life in very unstable conditions. People were squeezing in deposed railroad wagons, whose thin walls were unable to protect tenants from bad weather. In the neighbourhood there were also several houses made of adobe bricks that were dangerous for their inhabitants. Especially in the spring when snow was melting, bricks got too wet and houses collapsed on the people who were inside. The problem was also the social facilities that many families shared outside their homes. Problems with drinking water, and with water in general, resulted in poor hygiene and spreading of diseases. These factors along with the pathological behaviour of the population of this marginalized neighbourhood lead to the largest share of mortality in the district [15].

4. Salesian influence

The situation in Kopánka was mainly addressed by members of the Salesian Order. These people came to the district when someone needed help, and also in the effort to spread enlightenment among the people. They devoted themselves to orphans, sick, old, war veterans, and tried to re-establish religious values and beliefs, and to bring faith and Christian learning to the everyday life of these people. The rejection of formal Christianity and the deepening of the living faith were the goal of many missionaries and theologians [16]. The Salesians who operated in Trnava had the same goal.

In the 1940s, the Salesians began to advocate the construction of a solid seat in this area, in particular, the effort to build a church. They saw one of the root causes of the decline of this district in moral misery. The inhabitants rarely visited churches in the city centre, because they felt handicapped, either because of their appearance, clothing, learning, but also because of the feelings of exclusion and mockery from the majority. In the 1940s, the Salesians developed maximum effort for the oratorio and the church. They tried to raise money in different ways - collections, but also local press calls. In 1941, they built the church and an oratorio in Kopánka, where boys could study and spend their free time meaningfully. Although this option was created, people perceived it rather than spending some time in warm and having at least one meal a day. The hope of religion lies in practicing it [17].

In the same year, immigrants from Orava also arrived in Trnava. They originally lived in the villages from the confluence of two rivers, White and Black Orava, and which were affected by regular devastating floods (Hámre, Slanica, Ústie, Osada). It raised concerns in the local population for several reasons. It turned out, that Orava region was offered grounds that remained after deported
Addressing the issues of poverty and social exclusion of the city's inhabitants

Jewish families. The state made a disadvantageous exchange of homes and grounds, regardless of their worth. This information generated an image of greedy people before their arrival. Stereotypes were created perceiving them as mountain peoples - backward ones who would not be able to adapt to the urban way of life. The location of their new homes in Kopánka certainly helped for creation and reinforcement of sceptical thinking about immigrants. Local residents assumed that people who would come to live in Kopánka will only pose an increased risk of crime for the city. Such a stereotypical view was nothing special; we can also find it in other localities or in a multi-ethnic environment, as Lenovský or Součková point out to the example of minorities in the cities [18, 19].

The arrival of the people from Orava raised attention. But they settled very quickly in the new place. It should be noted that they chose the city of Trnava not only for the quality of the land, but an important criterion for their choice was that they wanted to move among the Roman Catholic population. The religious dimension was emphasized very often. When they were offered land in the border areas with Hungary (land quality), Levoča, Gelnica, Spišská Nová Ves or Kremnica, they did not accept it due to distrust of people of other religions. Therefore they preferred Trnava and Nitra, or Topoľčany and Hlohovec. Trnava and Nitra were of particular interest to them, as there was the idea of the strong religious background of the inhabitants of these places, which they demanded.

In addition to the strong religiosity, people from Orava insisted on the traditional values of the patriarchal family, emphasizing respect for the elderly people and community support. They emphasized solid family relationships and organized lifestyles, whose main strengths were work and commitment to religion. The cycle of work on the field and the order of religious holidays determined the rhythm of their lives. They insisted on the celebration of all Church feasts, they followed their traditions, participated in the processes and public manifestations of religious life. As soon as they arrived, they bound with the Salesian community and began to support it in all possible ways and showed great respect for the spiritual people. They were a completely new element in a location where emphasis was placed on bare survival under all conditions and on the edge of the law [6].

The people from Orava appeared to the local inhabitants as very skilled - many of them had been building the Orava Dam. They were trained excavator operators, carpenters, masons, drivers or welders and knew how to operate heavy machinery. At the same time they had a strong relationship to the land, insisted on the correctness of mutual relations, and recognized both secular and ecclesiastical authority as the natural order in the world. One of the basic characteristics of the people from Orava was their perceptions of non-conflict manner, the effort of compromise solutions and toughness, or modesty.

The personal example they provided to other residents proved to be very important. The original inhabitants gradually approached and tried to cope with them. Their modesty and strength in their faith were considered worth following. Their children started to join in the activities organized by the Salesians from their arrival in Trnava. The lectures and educational courses were also attended by
adults, and the children met in various activities organized by the Salesians with the intention of eliminating social, economic and moral misery. They did not place emphasis on the manifestation of wealth, but on work and traditions, which allowed their neighbours establishing friendly contacts with them. People from Orava became a worthy example for the rest of the population. Based on their example, they began to attend church regularly and also the Salesian oratorio, where they were meaningfully spending their free time. The Salesians have actively and intensively worked on improving Kopánka, with a significant material and moral support from these new neighbours. Progressive ideas succeeded among young people, who with the new situation received new and unprecedented impulses into their lives. Gradually, they began to study and do sports. The Salesians also supported them materially - by their international contacts, they were able to receive items of daily necessity and dressage from abroad. Although some people in Kopanka perceived clothing from abroad (America) as a handicap or the stigma of their social status, for the others from Trnava it became the desired article. Residents of the Central Zone, who were initially sceptical to immigrants, appreciated their positive qualities and they became even objects of admiration for their persistence in faith even during periods of a regime that was not inclined to it. Even though, by gradually wiping out the boundaries that created poverty and non-education, the inhabitants of the city centre were also open to this district, but this district still shows some characteristics which makes it closed towards other city parts, or better said, specific [20].

Although the Salesians have tried to systematically solve the situation at Kopánka from the beginning, especially in the field of working with youth, their efforts initially did not have a great long-term success. People perceived them mainly by solving their current problems. They perceived their situation as lethargic, they were lacking positive incentives. Kopánka was a working class district, which predestined the emphasis on revolutionary ideas from Marxism-Leninism. The situation has changed considerably with the arrival of the people from Orava, who brought positive values in the form of traditions, moral values, practice of religiosity, the pursuit of education and the ability to improve their lives, the ability to adapt to completely altered living conditions, craftsmanship and low cost lifestyles [21].

5. Conclusion

The coexistence of these elements, which appeared almost simultaneously in the socially and economically marginalized neighbourhood of Kopánka, created a space for radically changing the thinking of its inhabitants. Both models for life - the Salesians and the people from Orava were active in all spheres of human life - both sacred and secular. The continuous action of these two elements has resulted in the transformation of the city’s neighbourhood from a marginalized into a lucrative location. Urban identity is marked by these factors up to the present. Kopanka inhabitants create a group that is based on its positive
values. Within Trnava, this group has precisely the highest degree of the perceived identity of the population towards other urban districts. Religiosity, as a positive phenomenon, is perceived as a characteristic element of this locality by all inhabitants of Trnava even today.

References