

# **Regional and Urban Decline - Theoretical Approaches, Models and Classifications in the Course of Time**

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## **Introduction**

The classical pattern of regional disparities could best be characterized by the urban-rural divide. For decades efforts of regional scientists had been focused on analysing the differences between rural-peripheral regions on the one side – described by low economic growth rates, high unemployment and out-migration of population – and urban agglomerations on the other side – marked by increasing production and employment and in-migration. Similarly the main focus of regional economic policy was to reduce these rural-urban disparities. A fundamental change of this pattern of regional disparities could be observed in Germany and other European countries around the beginning of the 1970's when a new type of "problematic region" appeared – the so-called "old industrial regions" – the problems of which could not be explained by the classical models of regional science. Although the extensive research published on this item (especially in the 1980's) normally used the general term "regions", most of the analyses dealt with a special type of region, i.a. characterized by an above average degree of agglomeration concerning population as well as industrial and economic activity. Thus, research concentrated on cities and urban agglomerations and therefore the "old industrial regions research" marks – from the authors' point of view – a starting point of long-lasting regional scientists' research and discussions on a subject nowadays mostly described by "shrinking cities".

The paper proposed here wants to reveal the continuities in the discussion of urban decline since then. It also wants to uncover "cycles of research interest" that might be explainable by changing causes of urban decline and it wants to show that models or theoretical approaches used nowadays to explain urban shrinkage somehow neglect explanations used in former research cycles.

## **Aims and Objectives of the Paper**

The main objective of the paper is an inventory of research on urban/regional decline/shrinkage since the beginning of the 1980's that might help to put different ideas into a common context and thus to improve the general understanding of the "urban-decline-problematic". In detail three aspects are of particular interest:

1. The phenomenon of urban shrinkage itself is a very old one (Benke 2005; Friedrichs 1993; Wessmann 2014). Since the formation of the first cities there have been cycles of growth and shrinkage; creating a sort of continuity to the question of urban decline. The

authors want to use a wider definition of urban decline to analyse this phenomenon. This definition shall include urban agglomerations in decline, in shrinkage or in “slow motion”, i.e. with problems of economic performance, problems of adaption to necessities for structural change and problems to keep pace with general (national) economic developments. Starting from this wider definition the proposed paper wants to analyse research efforts done by regional scientists in the last 40 years to explore the causes and consequences of shrinkage and the relevant factors leading to or preventing from regeneration.

2. Furthermore, in the current scientific debate it is striking that relatively few theoretical models exist explaining the phenomenon of urban shrinkage (Mayer, Knox 2009; Haase et al.; Beer, Urbane Projekte Schmitz Potsdam 2001). The description of shrinkage in form of a downward spiral or a cumulative casual chain seems only partially adequate, considering that even shrinking cities can start to regrow or at least stabilize, and only rarely disappear completely. Thus, there must be factors, which stop the mechanism of shrinkage and lead to city regeneration (Wessmann 2014). It is noticeable, too, that the results and findings of past decades of research find comparatively little attention in the current debate. At least the cited references often do not go far into the past, even though the topic of shrinkage is – as mentioned before – rather timeless. A possible explanation might be the prevalent research practice to use sources that are up to date. Another explanation might be a change in wording and the use of varying terms describing similar fields of research (e.g. decline versus shrinkage). However it is questionable, if such proceedings lead to a loss of valuable knowledge gained in the past. Existing findings and experiences, e.g. regarding the conversion of old industrial regions, can provide useful insight, also for cities which are currently (still) flourishing (Schubert, Altrock 2004). Therefore, another objective of the proposed paper is to find out, whether models, theories und explanations used in regional science for this type(s) of regional/urban entities changed over time. Did the explanations change or did only terms change? Which role do former explanations and models play today, e.g. in the “old industrial regions research”? It has to be proven whether these former models and explanations are relevant and useful in explaining nowadays problems. The paper wants to improve the general understanding of urban decline by answering the questions...

- ... whether different terms used in this discussion mean different or similar types of regional entities (region, agglomeration, urban agglomeration, city).
- ... whether and why the analysed questions of detail changed in the course of time and
- ... whether the motives behind this research changed over time and therefore explain a kind of “research-interest-cycles”.

3. Finally the paper shall also contribute to get further insights as to a research gap identified by Großmann et. al., namely to adapt a more dynamic view on the relation of causes and effects of shrinkage: “To explore the interdependencies between the causes and effects of shrinkage, and the operating feedback mechanisms, academic interest should shift from the rather linear, static analyses of causes of population loss to dynamic influences of the local (and global) context. Future trajectories of cities are uncertain. Cities hardly ever get locked into continuous downward spirals of decline. Intermittent and surprising upswings and downturns in population development are frequently reported and need an explanation. We assume that intervening contextual factors such as changes in the administrative-political system as well as national, regional, and local policies play a role. Also, the morphological structure of the city, its ecology, and culture might impact upon the diversity of urban trajectories”. (Großmann et al. 2013, p. 5)

### **Methodological framework**

In order to answer these research questions several fields of research need to be considered:

First of all, the economic theories trying to explain urban growth and shrinkage need to be taken into account. In general, the focus is clearly on growth rather than shrinkage. An explanation might be the growth paradigm. Good overviews over a variety of theoretical approaches are offered e.g. by Steiner 1985; Hamm, Wienert 1990; Friedrichs 1993; Storper 2008. Besides, there are several publications focusing explicitly on the research branch of “Shrinking Cities”. Especially noteworthy in this field are the review article mentioning open research questions by Großmann et. al. (Großmann et al. 2013) as well as the conceptualization approach by Haase et. al. (Haase et al. 2014). Another relevant branch of research concerns path dependence and path plasticity. Ground-breaking in this field is the work of Grabher (1994). Concerning the path dependence and path plasticity of shrinking cities the paper of Vissers and Dankbaar should be considered, too. They apply the approach to the decline of textile cities in the Netherlands and elaborate on several causes leading the cities towards decline (Vissers, Dankbaar 2013). According to the findings of Craig R. Allen et al. medium-sized cities are less path dependent than so-called mega cities, since they are more flexible and faster to adapt (Allen et al. 2016).

In the economics literature some approaches can be found trying to categorize the causes of city shrinkage. One example is the work of van den Berg. In his book “A study of growth and decline, first published in 1982, he uses the terms “urbanization” (emergence of cities during the industrialization), “suburbanization” (development of population streams towards the suburbs of big cities), “des- or periurbanization” (gradual resolution of city areas) and “reurbanization” (future reentry into the phase of urbanization) to describe a typical urban

chronology. A more recent example for a classification is the one by Wessmann, who works with the categories: “empire collapse” (change of regime, political structural change), “rigidity” (unwillingness or inability to adapt) and “rapid growth” (infrastructure does not adapt fast enough to sustain the consumption needs of a bigger city) (Wessmann 2014). Another classification is made by Prigge: “deindustrialization” (“new distribution of industry and services with respect to the global division of labor, where certain cities and regions have gained or lost significance”), “suburbanization” (“the exodus of residents, industry and/or services, and culture from the big city centers into outlying regions”) and “transformation” (“the structural change of the socialist organization of politics, society, and the economy in Eastern Europe”) (Prigge 2005). A forth example mentions economic, demographic, environmental and political causes (Fritsche et al. 2014). Regarding the time pattern of change leading to shrinkage, Glock works with the dimensions “structural change” (rather slowly, e.g. Duisburg in Germany) versus “structural break” (rather abrupt, e.g. East Germany) (Glock 2006).

Some of the categories mentioned above are overlapping while others are not. It is the aim of this paper to create a comprehensive framework of potential causes of shrinkage that is able to explain the dynamic nature of causes and effects of shrinkage.

The elaboration of this paper is based on extensive literature review. The following research questions / steps need to be worked on:

- Recapitulation of existing theoretical approaches of urban shrinkage/decline
- Recapitulation of existing theoretical approaches of urban regeneration and relevant factors
- Evaluation of causes for urban shrinkage (analysis of existing categorizations)
- Combining this knowledge to a comprehensive explanation and classification of causes and stages of urban shrinkage

Integrated into the defined stages the following questions shall be answered, too: Is an increased research interest in the topic of urban decline noticeable, ideally measureable in publications? What theoretical approaches and models are used in the explanation of urban shrinkage? Are the same theoretical approaches used in different “research-interest-cycles” or were they enhanced, adapted, combined or neglected?

## **First results**

A draft paper with first results will be submitted in June 2017.

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