Social change and segregation in Copenhagen

Hans Thor Andersen, SBI, Horsholm, Denmark

Received 25 May 1997; accepted 1 January 1998

Abstract: This article examines socio-spatial changes resulting from economic and social restructuring in Copenhagen in recent decades. The main features of these changes have involved a sharp decline in manufacturing employment, a rise in the participation of women in the labour market, increasing unemployment among unskilled workers, a growing number of immigrants in obsolete dwellings and social housing estates, a relative decline in the number of families, and a growth in the numbers of single parent households. Do these changes challenge the classic models of segregation, or can they still be considered valid? Empirical evidence is provided concerning the socio-spatial effect of those changes in Copenhagen. The conclusion is that the classical model of social segregation is still valid, although some additional dimensions must be included. Furthermore, the overall socio-spatial structure of Copenhagen remains relatively intact, largely because of the inertia of the urban landscape and its social relations. However, the radical nature of the restructuring processes can also be called into question.

Key words: segregation, urban change, social geography, Copenhagen

Introduction

Since the 1970s urban development has taken on new forms. During the 1950s and 1960s stable economic growth, improving employment prospects, and widespread welfare measures led to an increase in general well-being, demonstrated in better housing conditions and incomes that were clearly rising in real terms. The aims behind the establishment of welfare states in many countries seemed to have been achieved.

However, during the 1970s the post-war boom suddenly ended and economic and social development started to take a different route, involving deindustrialisation and mass unemployment alongside the rapid growth of 'high-tech' industries, research activities, business services, banking and insurance. Economic restructuring has had tremendous effects on the labour market and social relations in general (OECD 1966). A considerable body of work has been produced on the supposed effects of this restructuring (cf. Esping-Andersen 1966; Castells and Mollenkopf 1991; Fainstein, Gordon and Harloc 1966). The social transformations resulting from economic change have normally been understood as involving rising income inequality, social exclusion, and the abolition of many Fordist institutions. Clearly, the changes in basic social structures must be a significant element in the socio-spatial structuring of western cities, although not every change or process will have an exact spatial counterpart.

When urban growth started to occur again it took on new forms. Urban development since the mid 1980s has been largely selectivity, such that while some areas were experiencing rapid upgrading, others were left untouched by change or continued their processes of physical and social degeneration. Urban restructuring during the last two decades has produced extreme visible features such as gentrification and ghettoisation. These pronounced changes in urban structures, occurring in most western cities, reflect more basic social changes resulting from the transition to post-industrial conditions, and to globalisation. An obvious suggestion would therefore be that...
in these new conditions social segregation would take place in a different manner. Yet it is a striking fact that most studies of segregation are still based on the model of social area analysis put forward by Shevky and Bell (1955) or its later modifications.

The theme of this article questions the validity of this social area analysis model in the light of general social changes and especially urban restructuring. Are the bases on which the model is built, namely the dimensions of social differentiation, still the decisive ones in present western societies? Or does social division under a system of post-industrial relations necessitate the addition of other approaches – or even the total replacement of the social area analysis model by a new approach to social division? This paper examines these issues firstly through a discussion of the Shevky and Bell model and later interpretations, and secondly through an empirical examination of selected key variables in Copenhagen.

**Social and urban restructuring**

The prevalent approach in studies of socio-spatial differentiation in cities is that of 'social area analysis' (Shevky and Bell 1955). This was based on an assumption that the increasing scale of society led to a transformation in the range and intensity of social relations, of functional differentiation, and of the complexity of social organisation. Such organisation was identified as having three dimensions of differentiation – social rank (economic status), urbanisation (family status) and segregation (ethnic status). Each dimension was then operationalised as a composite index of selected variables: for example, social rank was measured via the percentage of manual workers and the percentage of adults present with less than 9 years of schooling.

The model was used to identify uniform social areas in cities, with these areas generally consisting of people with the same level and way of living, and with the identified social areas differing from each other in systematic ways. As the model was logically constructed, easy to use, and could provide students with detailed information about the location of certain social groups and particular social environments, it became an attractive basis for urban social studies.

Shevky and Bell argued that any urban social area was the product of the three major trends deriving from the increasing scale of society, and that as such these trends formed the basis of modern society (Shevky and Bell 1955). However, the theoretical anchoring of the approach is more doubtful; despite references to the work of the Chicago School and particularly to Louis Wirth, the whole concept behind the model is problematical. Hawley and Duncan (1957) attacked the rationality behind the model as being little more than an ad hoc argument, whilst Udry (1964) claimed that there was no theoretical justification for translating social change into a typology of social areas.

However, on the basis of many factorial ecological studies as well as the classic works of the Chicago School (Park 1936; Burgess 1925), and the later work of Hoyt (1939), Murdie suggested that the three dimensions of socio-economic status, family status and ethnicity should indeed be regarded as the major dimensions of social space (Murdie 1969). When these dimensions were placed in an urban context, the well-known ecological model of sectors and concentric rings and tracts of ethnicity appeared. Murdie noticed that social space was not just superimposed on, but rather interacted with, urban physical space.

While approaches until around 1970 basically revolved around empirically-based studies of segregation, later Marxist research brought a shift to more fundamental theoretical positions. Indeed, cities were placed at a central position within the new Marxist studies. However, despite Marxist criticisms of previous research for being simplistic, atheoretic and class-biased, the difference between Marxist and non-Marxist empirical studies was surprisingly small. As a result empirical studies have continued to accord with the basic Shevky and Bell model.

Davies (1984) related general social development to urban form and the dimensions of segregation. He argues that as a result of the transition to post-industrial conditions and the accompanying changes in economic specialisation and in social and political organisation, new dimensions of segregation have to be added to the analysis. The new axes of differentiation involve more subtle categorisations of immigrant and ethnic status, further differentiation resulting from occupational specialisation, and distinctions on the basis of welfare dependency, new forms of poverty, and the formation of certain independent age categories such as young adults or the elderly.

The 1990s have indeed witnessed exactly these sorts of developments, particularly in terms of the accentuation of certain independent life cycle stages, such as prolonged youth, late parenthood, or retirement, coupled with other new distinctions within the population such as those involving single-parent households, childless couples, or those living alone. Other important changes involve new immigrant streams, new occupational structures which partly overlap with the old, the decline of traditional families, and women's increased importance in the labour market.

The emergence of new divisions within society also uncovers new logics behind social differentiation.