



Call for papers

International conference on

# Grassroots in the City: Urban Movements and Activism in Central and Eastern Europe

Conference venue: Södertörn University, southern Stockholm, Sweden

Dates: 24-25 May 2013

The conference seeks to gather researchers working in the field of social movements and civic activism in the urban environment of Central and Eastern Europe. The aim is to discuss the prerequisites for, and forms of, collective action in cities in this social context.

## Theme and rationale

Why a focus on collective action in cities? Conflicts in the city are illustrative not only of processes of urban restructuring and renewal, but also of larger processes and structures: economic restructuring and competition; migration and cultural diversity; and social cleavages and polarization. Cities are a critical junction, where global economic forces play out in a local setting. They are arenas in which different social interests compete, and claims to the right to the city and to a decent living are raised and contested. Consequently, a wide range of citizen mobilizations appear in the interface of the local and global that the city provides.

Urban movements, their mobilizations and their struggles are local, but they are not just local. They are often 'trans-local', in that they draw inspiration from local struggles elsewhere or are linked with

them through the internet or other networks. Others have conceptualised such movements as 'glocal', in their combining local and global orientations, or as 'extra-local', in that their claims simultaneously also address national or global politics (Hamel, Lustiger-Thaler, Mayer 2000). Urban movements do not fit neatly into the conventional categorization of 'new' (identity-based) social movements and the 'old' mobilizations around the 'social question'. Some have pointed to an increasing amalgamation of 'new' social movements with 'old' social issues, such as poverty, social exclusion or homelessness, and where urban movements combine the concerns of old social movements with the utopias and action repertoires of the new social movements (Roth 2000). Nor do urban movements fit neatly into dichotomies between, on the one hand, service-providers and self-help collectives and, on the other, pressure groups and collective action. Rather than 'either or', they are typically 'both and', being at once multifunctional in nature, practically oriented and oppositional (Jacobsson & Saxonberg 2013).

The citizen mobilizations we have in mind may be spontaneous and short-lived or well-organized and long lasting. They may be reactive or proactive. They may be reactionary or progressive in their claims. What they have in common is the aim to challenge the present state of affairs and to empower citizens on issues related to their daily lives.

Why, then, a focus on Central and Eastern Europe? For any social scientist interested in social change and the collective action that it spurs, the CEE region provides a splendid opportunity to test and develop social-movement theory – including that on urban activism. In this part of Europe, recent decades have been marked by liberalization of housing and urban policy, often opening fully to market forces; and often by problems such as the deterioration of the housing stock, inadequate state policies or legislation, and insufficient production of social housing (e.g. Tsenkova 2000, 2009). Such shortcomings have also brought about mobilizations and protests among residents demanding urban policy changes, safe living conditions and sustainable housing. There have been citizen protests to protect green areas and against the privatization of public space. Thus far, however, research on civil society in Central and Eastern Europe has often been focused on NGOs. Civil society is seen as weak. The NGO-ization literature gives us one, no doubt valuable, picture of civil society activity in the post-state-socialist countries. However, informal, more-or-less spontaneous grassroots mobilization takes place too. Yet despite evidence suggesting that 'self-organized activism' at local or neighbourhood level may be the most frequent kind of civic activism in post-communist Europe (e.g. Cisar 2013), the study of urban movements and activism in the CEE region has largely remained a blind spot in international social-movement and civil-society studies (for some exceptions, see Ivanou 2010; Lång-Pickvance, Manning, Pickvance 1997; Pickvance 2000).

Nonetheless, the recent initiative of a yearly congress of urban movements in Poland indicates that urban activism is thriving in at least some places in the region. Interventions of activists from autonomous/anarchist environments in the struggle for affordable housing in Poland exemplify how

socio-economically and structurally weaker groups can join hands with 'middle-class radicals' in local struggles. 'Urban guerilla gardening' is one example of how citizens take matters into their own hands in attempting to create a more hospitable living environment in the city. Is there even a rise in urban activism across the region? The extent to which that is true - and the extent to which collective action by citizens can actually change the status quo and make an impact on public policy or their own living conditions – are questions that we would like to explore at this conference.

We thus invite contributions on:

- urban activism concerning housing or homelessness, the local and urban environment, energy and other public services or other neighbourhood initiatives and mobilizations;
- the creative appropriation and use of public space in the city for claim-making, resistance, manifesting or living utopias or making the city a more hospitable place to live;
- attempts to theorize the structural forces, systemic contradictions and social tensions to which the grassroots mobilizations respond, or the city in the intersection of local and global forces and the role of civil society in the shaping of the life of the city.

We also invite a discussion of whether established theories are adequate and sufficient to deal with the specificities of the CEE region and collective action there, and the types of theory development that are required.

### Conference format and abstract submission

We aim for a fairly small conference with a limited number of participants, to allow for a good intellectual atmosphere and fruitful exchange around all papers presented. As there will not be parallel sessions, we aim for 12 paper presentations. In addition, another 20 people could be present and take part in discussions.

Paper-givers will be expected to present a full (and developed) paper to be circulated to all participants ten days before the conference. All papers will have designated discussants and all participants should be expected to discuss others' papers.

Funding for travel and accomodation will be provided for paper-givers, while other participants travel at their own expense. The conference as such is free of charge and lunches will be provided for all.

To present a paper, submit an abstract (of about 300 words plus an author description containing information about your research interests and some previous publications, no later than **December 1st 2012**. It should be sent to: [kerstin.jacobsson@sh.se](mailto:kerstin.jacobsson@sh.se).

To participate without a paper, indicate your interest to Kerstin Jacobsson by the same date.

Conference organizers:

Kerstin Jacobsson, professor of Sociology, Södertörn University

Elzbieta Korolczuk, researcher, Södertörn University

Dominika Polanska, post-doc at CEEES, Södertörn University

in collaboration with CBEES (Centre for Baltic and East European Studies).

Academic committee: Chris Pickvance, professor emeritus, University of Kent and Adam Fagan, professor, Queen Mary, University of London.

Södertörn University is a young university in the south of Stockholm, specialized in the study of Central and Eastern Europe. It hosts the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES) and the Baltic and East European Graduate School (BEEGS).

(P.S. Some participants may also want to participate in a one day conference on "Rethinking urban social movements", with talks by Margit Mayer and Justus Uitermark, at Gothenburg University 22 May 2013. More info will be published in January on this website: (<http://www.socav.gu.se/forskning/forskningsgrupper/csm/>). For any queries, please contact Håkan Thörn ([hakan.thorn@socav.gu.se](mailto:hakan.thorn@socav.gu.se))).