

URBAN ACTIVISM IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN
EUROPE: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**ALEXANDRA BITUŠÍKOVÁ**

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The study brings an overview of selected transdisciplinary theoretical approaches to the study of urban movements and activism placed within the framework of civil society and social movements, focused on the region of Central and Eastern Europe, and seen from a social anthropological perspective. It attempts to challenge older academic writings that described civil society in Central and Eastern Europe as underdeveloped and weak, and presents research that points out a specific nature of activism in the countries of the region. It builds primarily on the concepts of civil society, social movements, urban movements and urban activism as presented by scholars both from “Western” and “Central and Eastern” European countries and demonstrates that after more than two decades since the fall of communism it is still important to take different historic, political, economic, social and cultural contexts into account when comparing urban movements and activism within Europe.

Key words: civil society, social movements, urban movements, urban activism, Central and Eastern Europe

INTRODUCTION

*“You may never know what results come of your actions,
but if you do nothing, there will be no results.”*

Mahatma Gandhi

The interest in urban activism within a broader concept of civil society and social urban movements has been growing steadily in many disciplines (sociology, human geography, political science, history, women’s studies, ecology and recently also social anthropology). It is a consequence of the emergence of different kinds of activism in many urban settings across the globe: grassroots community- or neighbourhood-based organisations, interest groups, politically or culturally oriented pressure groups, housing organisations, mobilisations against globalisation and neo-liberalisation of urban policies or for environmental and social justice, anti-consumerism

groups, and many others. Urban activism has been increasingly considered an important part of urban governance processes as local activists participate in urban politics and influence decision-making through numerous participatory practices and tools. Citizen's involvement, participation and representation in governance is seen as one of the crucial factors and indicators of sustainable and smart urban development.

This paper looks at transdisciplinary theoretical approaches to the study of urban movements and activism placed within the framework of civil society and social movements with a specific focus on the region of Central and Eastern Europe and seen primarily from a social anthropological perspective. Its objective is to challenge older scholarly writings that underestimate the strength of civil mobilisations in Central and Eastern Europe and to point out a specific nature of activism in the countries of the region.

WEAK CIVIL SOCIETY?

The collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe roused high expectations about a rapid revival of civil society that is recognised as a key factor in the processes of democratisation. A number of scholars made post-communist civil society the new object of their study. Early publications, however, brought a rather pessimistic view of the development of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe (e. g. Rose 1993; Rose, Mishler, Haerpfer, 1997; Rose-Ackerman, 2001; Howard, 2003). They were based mainly on opinion polls and surveys; they used a limited number of indicators and did not take into account a multidimensional character of civil society. Marc Howard, for example, understood civil society as part of public space between the state and the family, and embodied in voluntary organisations (Howard, 2003: 1). Most statements on the weakness and underdevelopment of civil society in the countries of post-communist Europe were built on indicators such as low civic membership and low employment in voluntary organisations, weak social and political institutions and high level of mistrust of these institutions – factors being seen as obvious communist legacies. On the basis of these findings, some scholars even questioned prospects for democratic stability in the region. None of these early works mentioned an enormous and rapid growth of registered civil society organisations in Central and Eastern Europe. For instance, in Poland, the number of registered NGOs grew by 400 percent from 1989 to 1994 (Ekiert, 2012), in Slovakia by more than 500 percent (from 158 in 1990 to over 1000 in 1994; more than 40,000 in 2015).¹ These numbers show phenomenal mobilisations of citizens already at the beginning of the 1990s, however, they were not based on formal membership due to the legacy of mistrust of former communist membership organisations. As Grzegorz Ekiert notes, civil society organisations in Central and Eastern Europe were very supportive of political and economic transformations in the initial years of transition, and in the second decade of transformations they significantly contributed to the renewal of liberal commitments and policies (Ekiert, 2012: 71). This was the case of the Slovak OK '98 campaign (Civic campaign '98) launched by a platform of non-governmental organisations in order to mobilise the electorate. The campaign contributed to a record 84 percent turnout, to the defeat of the non-democratic rule of Vladimír Mečiar's party and to the total victory of pro-democratic forces that came to power and brought Slovakia to the European Union (Bútora, Bútorová, Strečanský, 2012: 21).

¹ <http://ngoemanual.org/2006/09/24/po-roku-1989>

Social anthropologists (e. g. Hann, 1992; 2003; Hann, Dunn, 1996; Buchowski, 1996; 2001; Torsello 2012a) criticised another notion presented by several Central European dissidents as well as Western scholars that civil society was totally absent in the communist countries of the region, and therefore, there was nothing to build on. Chris Hann argues that in fact there was a continuous movement and a great diversity of social activities in these countries (Hann, 1996: 7). He demonstrates a number of voluntary associations in Hungary well before 1989 (Hann, 2003: 62). Michal Buchowski describes two types of civil society in communist Poland: first, official associations and corporations created and licensed by the state, and second, unofficial civil society that took various forms, including kin groups and informal interest groups (Buchowski, 1996: 83–84; 2001: 123–124). Davide Torsello talks about a parallel “civil society” that supported “semiformal and informal networks, circles, associations, foundations, which were not necessarily of a political nature”. He continues that these forms have been partly used as matrixes on which new civil society was built (Torsello, 2012a: 182). According to Hann, the anthropological study of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe should not focus on Western notions of civil society that privilege the world of formal nongovernmental organisations or topics of citizenship, trust, etc. that have been debated by other disciplines.² Anthropology should distinguish itself from other disciplines by investigating “those alternative local models of civil society, which look quite different from those of Tocqueville and Putnam, and are overlooked in the more abstract theorising of Ernest Gellner” (Hann, 2003: 70–71).³

URBAN (SOCIAL) MOVEMENTS

Social movements have attracted the attention of social scientists for several decades and have been redefined many times. The key and broader characteristics of social movements are that they are formed by a group of people engaged in a collective action with the objective of accomplishing their goals (Jacobsson, Saxonberg, 2013: 255). They often aim at implementing or resisting social change and in order to do so, they use a range of different strategies such as campaigns, petitions, public meetings, demonstrations, rallies, public statements etc. The beginnings of social movements date back to the 18th – 19th centuries and are connected with industrialisation, urbanisation, the growth of working class and the fight for their rights. These movements are known as old social movements. New social movements, the concept developed by Alain Touraine (1985) and Alberto Melucci (1980; 1985), go beyond the class contradiction and reflect the transition to a new, post-industrial or information (programmed) society (Salman, Assies, 2007: 222). Examples include feminist move-

2 Ernest Gellner, one of the first anthropologists writing about civil society, also argued against the narrow notion of civil society based on non-governmental organisations as a counterbalance to the state and preferred to see civil society as social order without any ideological or institutional monopoly (Gellner, 1994, quoted by Torsello, 2012a: 180).

3 Alexis de Tocqueville (2000) emphasised the important role of associations in the creation of American democracy. Robert Putnam (1993a, b) with his social capital theory measured a good and prosperous civil society by civic engagement in associations and networks and membership in non-governmental organisations. Ernest Gellner was convinced of a superiority of Western model of civil society and almost no possibility of any citizen's engagement in countries under socialism. He argued against the narrow notion of civil society based on non-governmental organisations and preferred to see civil society as social order without any ideological or institutional monopoly.

ments, civil rights movements, peace movements, environmental/green movements, anti-globalisation movements etc.

A new category of social movements, *urban social movement* was introduced by Manuel Castells in his book *The Urban Question* (1977) and later redefined in *The City and the Grassroots* (1983). His definition of urban social movements as “urban-orientated mobilisations that influence structural social change and transform the urban meanings” (Castells, 1983: 305) has been quoted many times. According to Chris Pickvance, in this latter book Castells describes urban social movements as those combining “collective consumption, trade unionism, cultural identity and demands for increased citizen rights”, and argues that these movements “have lost the ability to bring about structural change in power relations in conjunction with other groups” (Pickvance, 2003: 103). Castells used the term urban social movement in two senses – the restrictive and the generic. In the restrictive sense, he believed that citizen action could have one of three levels of urban and political effect: participation (lowest), protest (intermediate) and urban social movement (highest) (Castells, 1977). Pickvance considers the restrictive use of the term *urban social movement* as abandoned by many scholars in recent periods and he proposes the generic usage of the term, which avoids assessments of the actual effects of urban movements (Pickvance, 2003: 103). Another theoretician of social movements, Margit Mayer suggests that since the times of Castells’s early statements, urban mobilisations have expanded, differentiated and fragmented in many different ways (Mayer, 2006a: 202) and the narrow definition of Castells’ urban movements had to be replaced by less normative definitions of urban activism (Mayer, Boudreau, 2012: 275). In her works on urban social movements in the era of globalisation (Mayer, 2006b, 2007; Mayer, Boudreau, 2012), Mayer has focused mainly on the influence of new forms of neo-liberal urban governance (entrepreneurialised, market-oriented, public-private partnership based, and emphasising economic efficiency, individual responsibility, etc.) on the dynamics of urban mobilisations. She recognised three main trends in urban governance:

- the new contemporary forms of urban growth (efforts of cities to win international investments and services, mega projects, restructuring public spaces at the expense of old neighbourhoods etc.),
- the erosion of traditional welfare rights (new poverty caused by global processes)
- the change of the urban political system described as a shift from government to governance (Mayer, 2006b).

Urban social movements that have been founded as a reaction to neoliberal urban policies run by urban politicians, planners and developers are recognised as movements covered under the umbrella of the multifaceted *right to the city* demands. According to David Harvey, the key proponent of the idea, *the right to the city* is “... right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights” (Harvey 2008: 23). Protesting against numerous commercialisation projects (such as public space revitalisations and privatisations, new development plans leading to gentrification and gated communities or investors’ plans to build new neighbourhoods at the expense of urban heritage), *the right to the city* groups emerge in many countries (mainly Europe, North America and Latin America) under various

names and various claims. These groups, often consisting of the people of lower income and opposed to the rich and powerful, have been losing their civil, economic, social or political rights due to unequal and exploitative systems in urban decision-making processes (Mayer, Boudreau, 2012: 70). The *right to the city* movements, groups and initiatives use diverse tools and perform different actions: petitions, demonstrations, exhibitions, workshops, public debates and other creative ways of protests. They successfully operate both at local and global levels and are organised either in formal ways (non-governmental and non-profit organisations, agencies and advocacies) or informal ways (local ad hoc and informal non-membership and voluntary initiatives or various community activities).

The changing character of urban social movements in the global world has led to re-defining or refining the key concepts. Margit Mayer and Julie-Anne Boudreau see a distinction between social movements and urban movements and suggest that while social movements involve collective actors that mobilise and intervene in processes of social and/ or political change, “goals and activities of urban movements concern the city and its decision-making structures and processes” (Mayer, Boudreau, 2012: 276-277). They stress that urban movements have undergone significant changes and particularly “urban movements in the so-called transformation societies follow different patterns from those challenging the urbanism of Western democracies” (ibid.: 277). Urban movements in Central and Eastern Europe have become an object of scientific study only in the last two decades. After early studies written by Western scholars and focused on civil society in Central and Eastern Europe (as mentioned before), the later attention turned to mobilisations and activism, and particularly to the study of specificities of activism in the countries of the region.

URBAN ACTIVISM

Activism in this study is understood in a very broad sense as a range of actions that lead to social, cultural, political, economic or environmental change and are performed by individuals, groups or movements. The meaning of the term *urban activism* is more specified. The aim of urban activism is to focus on improving the quality of the urban environment and space, urban society, and urban life. That means that urban activism is not just any activism performed in an urban setting, but it is collective action oriented towards the city and its decision-making processes. In order to focus on urban activism in Central and Eastern Europe, it is important to start with scholarly debates on activism generally.

Tsveta Petrova and Sydney Tarrow (2007) were among the first authors who challenged earlier sceptical writings on weak civil society and lack of activism in Central and Eastern Europe. By reviewing findings from the literature on citizen participation in Central and Eastern Europe and presenting results of their research in Hungary and other countries in the region, they argue that early studies on civil society in Central and Eastern Europe focused only on surveys of individual citizens' capacity and participation (whether people vote, join voluntary associations, turn out for demonstrations or protest meetings) and ignored other, relational dimensions of activism. They propose a new notion of activism – *transactional activism* that is based more on relational aspects of activism than on individual participation. By *transactional activism* they mean “the ties – enduring and temporary – among organised non-state ac-

tors and between them and political parties, power holders, and other institutions” (Petrova, Tarrow, 2007: 79). They distinguish transactional activism from *participatory activism*, which they define as “the potential and actual magnitude of individual and group participation in civic life, interest group activities, voting, and elections” (ibid: 79). Petrova and Tarrow focused on activism in a broad perspective (including urban activism) and they provoked new research in the field of civil mobilisations and activism in Central and Eastern Europe.

Ondřej Císař, the Czech political scientist and sociologist who writes about different kinds of local activism (political, feminist, environmental, etc.) in the Czech Republic within a broader Central and Eastern European context, has developed Petrova and Tarrow’s theories further and suggested five specific modes of political activism in the region that could be applicable also for other types of activism (including urban activism):

- participatory activism based on membership organisations (few events, many participants),
- transactional activism based on small advocacy organisations (many events, few participants),
- radical activism based usually on loose organisational platforms and on individual activists (few participants, militant strategies),
- civic self-organisation based on individual organisational effect (many events, no organisations and few participants),
- episodic mass mobilisation based on short-term events (many participants, no organisations and very few events) (Císař, 2013a: 143).

According to Císař, civic self-organisation that is based on collective action without the involvement of an organisation constitutes one of the common types of activism in Central and Eastern Europe. He brings evidence of this type of activism in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria where “collective mobilisations of this type tend to be numerous and at the same time small in size. The action repertoire seems to be dominated by petition and non-violent demonstration...” (Císař, 2013b). Other Czech scholars, Navrátil and Pospíšil support Císař’s points and state that despite low membership in civil society organisations in the Czech Republic, there are a large number of active civil society organisations and a considerable share of citizens that contribute individually to various civic campaigns (Navrátil, Pospíšil, 2013). Navrátil stresses the importance of “soft” factors in shaping the extent and character of civil participation (Almond, 1983, quoted in Navrátil 2013).

Research on urban activism from Slovakia supports the same arguments (Bitušíková, 2015) showing evidence of a variety of forms of urban activism – smaller or larger, visible and less visible, formal and informal or local and global. These smaller mobilisations are often overlooked by social scientists that prefer studying activities of formally established organisations (such as non-governmental and non-profit organisations or agencies). However, in recent years, some examples of growing civic urban activism have been presented by a number of Slovak social scientists, using qualitative approaches and methods (e. g. Lukšík, 2010, Šuška, 2014).

Publications edited by Kerstin Jacobsson and Steven Saxonberg (2013) and Kerstin Jacobsson (2015) can be considered the most significant and holistic recent contributions to understanding the specificities of grassroots mobilisations and activism in Central and Eastern Europe. They bring numerous empirical findings from Central and

Eastern European countries that take into account the specific nature of the societal contexts and do not treat these countries as one homogenised region as many early writings did (Jacobsson, Saxonberg, 2013: 2). They stress that previous research was focused too much on formal organisations and overlooked considerable differences among the countries in the region reflecting a broad range of strategies used by activist groups. Jacobsson in her Introduction to the publication *Urban Grassroots Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (2015) brings social movement theories closer to urban studies and presents examples of complex urban grassroots activism in the region that show different features to mobilisations and movements in older democracies (partly because of still existing post-socialist legacies). She calls for “a new research agenda” that should focus on urban grassroots movements and activism in Central and Eastern Europe. From case studies published in the book it is obvious that a significant if not the dominant form of contemporary urban activism in Central and Eastern Europe is the one of grassroots nature, local, small-scale, low-key and domestically-funded (Jacobsson, 2015: 275). Jacobsson, among other things, stresses the importance of studying the role of alliance-building in urban mobilisations and the increasing participation of urban activist groups in urban decision-making and governance.

URBAN (SOCIAL) MOVEMENTS AND ACTIVISM IN SOCIO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Compared to other social sciences, social anthropology has paid only limited attention to the study of urban social movements and grassroots activism and has been rather absent especially from theoretical and conceptual debates. Arturo Escobar was one of the first anthropologists who wrote a critical reflection on the “invisibility” of social movements in anthropology and the relevance of social movements for anthropological research (Escobar, 1992). He understood social movements as “symbols of resistance to the dominant politics of knowledge and organisation of the world” (Escobar, 1992: 421). He stressed the importance of studying the micro-level of everyday practices within “larger processes of development, patriarchy, capital and the State” and wanted to see how these forces find their way into people’s lives and how they affect peoples’ identity and social relations. He proposed close engagement and reading of popular actions as a way of studying these processes, and discussed positioning of researchers, activists and collective actors in this kind of research (Escobar, 1992: 420–421).

Since Escobar, a number of anthropologists have begun studying practices and processes of collective action – social movements, activism or other kinds of mobilisation; however, research focused on collective action in the urban environment is rather rare. When reviewing anthropological literature, it is obvious that anthropologists have contributed to the study of various forms of collective action against inequalities concerning indigenous people, women or the urban poor; environmental, religious, peace, anti-globalisation or identity-based movements; mobilisations against neo-liberal policies or recently also digital activism or CSSM – computer-supported social movements. June Nash in *Social Movements – An Anthropological Reader* (2004) notes that today anthropologists are the important observers of social movements and they are able to present new research directions (Nash, 2004). According to Yarimar Bonilla, the key contribution of anthropology has been “to expand the definition of collective resistance beyond the scope of formalised protest to encompass everyday forms of resistance”

and to examine also lived experience of actors, not only outcomes of strategies (Bonilla, 2012). The common feature of most anthropological studies is that they analyse actions, motivations, practices and strategies of activists and activist groups at both local and global levels within the theoretical debate on transnationalism, globalisation and/or civil society. Yet, the contribution of social anthropology to the theoretical discourse on social movements and activism has not been clearly articulated although it should not be underestimated – mainly because anthropology uses its own specific qualitative methodologies and approaches that can reveal local answers to global problems and help us to understand informal mobilisations and activism that are often overlooked by other disciplines.

Ton Salman and Willem Assies in their publication *Anthropology and the Study of Social Movements* (2007) attempt to contribute to theorisation of social movements in anthropology. They emphasise “culture” and “cultural dimensions” as crucial concepts for framing and theorising social movements that should include collective memories and identities, habits, narratives etc. (Salman, Assies, 2007: 207). They criticise the focus on movements as the main units of analysis and instead call for anthropological research of motivations, aspirations, beliefs, actions or attitudes of the actors and participants that make the movements. They also argue that local cultural perspectives, traditions, narratives etc. must be taken into account if we want to understand transnational or trans-local character of collective actions – and it is particularly anthropology that can do it (ibid., 2007: 258).

When looking specifically at urban movements, activism and mobilisations, the British anthropologist Sarah Pink has emphasised the importance of the study of urban activism and movements particularly in small urban contexts. She criticises the research preference of big cities in relations to urban social movements and activism and sees also small towns and cities relevant for the study, especially in the context of the local-global nexus (Pink, 2009: 452). On the example of the Slow City movement, she suggests studying the interconnections between national or transnational networks with local activist groups, which strongly influence local policies and may have a role even in global processes (Pink, 2009: 463). She tries to redefine contemporary activism by using the term “local socialities” understood as different kinds of face-to-face social relationships that develop around different activities (Pink, 2008: 172). These ‘socialities’ characterised by engagements with others, social interrelatedness, sense of belonging and being together can be regarded as indirect activism that might lead to “the production of human agency to bring about urban change” (ibid.: 184).

Anthropological research on urban (social) movements and activism in the region of Central and Eastern Europe has been still rather rare. Italian anthropologist Davide Torsello has been studying civil society, social exchange, social networks, movements (especially environmental movements) and activism in Central and Eastern European cities (in Slovakia and Hungary) for several years (e.g. 2011, 2012a, 2012b). He stresses the changing nature of activism in the region (especially environmental activism opposing development projects) that is becoming increasingly an arena of political action strongly influenced by “Brussels”. He also suggests that it still makes sense to take into account the peculiar conditions of the post-socialist and EU enlargement experiences and to test whether changing historical and geographical conditions affect the relationship between the state and society (Torsello, 2011: 58). In Jacobsson’s publication of 2015, there are also several anthropological contributions on grassroots urban activism in Central and Eastern Europe (Bitušíková, 2015; Kopf,

2015; Lindqvist, 2015) that bring evidence on the changing nature of contemporary activism in the region. And not to forget the recent Slovak anthropological production, several scholars have been writing about different kinds of urban activism and mobilisations in the country (e.g. Darulová 2010; Janto 2007; 2012; 2013; Košťalová 2014; Luther 2010).

The critical point and question to be discussed is the particular challenge of engaged anthropology as a way to better understand the dynamics of movements, activism and mobilisations. Many anthropologists who study local activism have become increasingly engaged in practices and processes of urban movements and initiatives related to social issues, decision-making and power relations within communities, providing empirical experience to social assessment and ethical practice and linking anthropological knowledge, theory and practice to create new solutions and innovations (Low, Merry, 2010: 204). Engaged anthropology that can be considered part of applied anthropology has become an accepted, vibrant and diverse sub-discipline of anthropology. According to Low and Merry, there are several forms of engagement: (1) sharing and support, (2) teaching and public education, (3) social critique, (4) collaboration, (5) advocacy, and (6) activism. The engagement takes place during the fieldwork or is part of the fieldwork (Low, Merry, 2010: 204), however, it opens a number of ethical dilemmas such as the extent of engagement, power relations and possibilities to misuse anthropological methodology (for instance, by offering the expertise to those who can make decisions against marginalised communities or minorities etc.). As Low and Merry stress, there is the porosity of borders between academic and activist work, and the dilemmas, but also barriers to engagement are numerous (Low, Merry, 2010: 211–212). Research integrity of the researcher engaged in practice remains the key element of applied research. Types of research engagement that can be urban social movements and activism related, include policy research, evaluation research, cultural intervention research, advocacy or action research, and participatory action research (Trotter, Schensul, 1998: 692–694). Despite existing challenges, dilemmas and barriers, engaged anthropology plays a very important (and growing) role in research of urban movements and grassroots activism in Central and Eastern Europe (and elsewhere). From my personal observations in Slovakia, a number of young scholars use their anthropological knowledge, expertise and methodology in order to help non-governmental organisations and informal activist groups and initiatives to develop their agendas and arguments, especially the ones protecting human rights or fighting neo-liberal policies and nationalistic rhetoric. They connect their scientific anthropological expertise with local practice in order to fight against societal inequalities and local injustice, while trying to keep ethical rules of anthropological research. Despite all dilemmas, the future of social anthropology is (or should be?) closely connected with numerous forms of anthropological engagements.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I attempted to present a range of selected transdisciplinary theoretical approaches to the study of urban (social) movements and activism seen from a social anthropological perspective with a specific focus on the region of Central and Eastern Europe. By challenging earlier studies that emphasised weak civil societies in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, the paper brings a brief overview of evidence

about civil society in the region that shows different features from the one in “Western Europe”. It suggests using a more complex range of indicators that evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of civil society. The evidence from empirical research in Central and Eastern Europe demonstrates that there are numerous, often small-scale and informal initiatives and mobilisations taking place in the region, which are often overlooked by other social sciences that focus primarily on formalised collective action.

An overview of anthropological research on urban (social) movements and activism in the paper shows that scholarly anthropological literature on the topic is still rather limited and does not contribute significantly to theoretical and conceptual debates concerning new urban social movements and grassroots activism. Yet, existing anthropological studies (including those from Central and Eastern Europe) offer important empirical knowledge on urban movements and activism and bring different, mostly bottom-up local perspectives on people’s lived experience within civic mobilisations in global contexts. This deep empirical knowledge and experience based on well-developed fieldwork methodologies and engagement is an important basis for any theoretical concept on urban (social) movements and activism and should not be overlooked and underestimated in the broad context of social sciences.

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