FROM FALLING BEHIND TO THE CREATIVE SOCIAL GROUPS - THE EFFECT OF THE INFORMATION SOCIETY-TYPE DEVELOPMENT ON THE GREAT PLAIN

SZARVÁK T.

Szent István University, Faculty of Applied Arts, Department of Socialpedagogy, Jászberény, Hungary

KEYWORDS: modernization, development of creative society, innovative local area, possibilities and principles for the development in the Hungarian Great Plain

RUNNING HEAD: Digital Inequality in the Hungarian Great Plain

ABSTRACT

The main statement of the essay is that these days the rigid frames of the classical social class–identity are fading. In relation with profit and labour market, post–modern dimensions have appears (common values, and cultural medium) and the creative social class, which is deeply rooted in this medium, can be characterised with new entity. With the strengthening of the creative class, the interpretation which is based on the consciousness of urban life, on information, multiculturalism and the exchange of concepts and lifestyles are getting stronger.
This study, based on the author's doctoral thesis in a revision form attempts to introduce the way of information society-type of development on the Great Plain. To shed light on its many-sidedness ranging from the falling behind to the creative groups due to the modernisation process.

INTRODUCTION

During a complex (sociological, historical, geographical) analysis of information society type development within the enormous topic of information society, the dissertation focuses on the new forms of inequality, the social and spatial emergence of digital disparity and the characteristic features of the present mega-trend of modernization in the Hungarian Great Plain. Castells (1998), in one of his lectures, called the relationship with the instruments of information society and cultural maturity the cornerstone of human

evolution. In his view, information and communication devices have a double role in modernization: on the one hand, they allow countries to skip certain grades of economic development by modernizing their production system; while on the other hand, the economies that are incapable of adapting themselves to the new technological system produce multiple symptoms of backwardness. Entrance into the information age depends on how the schooling level of a society can be raised and what the capacity of information reception and application is like (Castells, 1998.).

Everyone experiences that the instruments of information society and the phenomena accompanying their diffusion do not indicate the rate of social development. Due to the constant "experience of backwardness and belatedness", the vast majority of society has a biased attitude to the opportunities offered by the internet (and the world of networks), so they are unable to prepare for one of the consequences of the information world, namely the transformation of traditional social structures and institution systems.

That is why it is a significant question how we can move from the social periphery situation considering the existing heritage of the Hungarian Great Plain. This ontological position traditionally determines the discourse of the research of the Hungarian Great Plain. To see this it is sufficient to have a look at the title of the volume of the first conference on the Plain held in the decade of the changes in the political system: The Question Marks of the Plain Way. At that time already, employment, unemployed existence, gypsy society, farms, internal migration and changes of norms and values represented the focal points of research. At the first conference on the Plain in this millennium, classical topics of social science were re-discussed considering the points of view of equal opportunities and creating new opportunities. It is this generally valid public policy principle in the EU that can create a rational behaviour of individuals and communities, which could determine the success of the diffusion of information society.

Success in our interpretation is the process when the technical side of information technology becomes a factor of social and regional competitiveness, when the new technical devices, IT systems generate a brand new structure for the division of labour as well as a new lifestyle and space forms (Mészáros, 2003); they alter the mechanisms of social and economic decision-making and the feedback of decisions (Varga, 2000).

Besides presenting the possible virtual space categories and forms constructed by the concepts, facts and technology that form the abstract models of information society, the objective was to accentuate the elements which can be traced back to various causes and lie in the different uses of technology. Observing technology from the users' point of view, the research was focused on the individual skills and tasks, contents and possibilities, which are indispensable for the successful decoding and interiorization of digital culture.

Accepting the view of numerous researchers (e.g. Castells, 1998), the types and forms of the space concept born through the use of info-communication technology can be considered as those totally originated in society (Mészáros, 2003.).

As a result, the dissertation will be added to the general and local discourse born in regard to the digital gap – to use a fashionable phrase – with a slight difference: where

possible it confronts development possibilities with the points of view and interpretations of regional-social players, which, in more or less detail in certain capitals, depict the most neuralgic elements, the inconsistent points of information society type development, while also showing the possible ways of shifting.

HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses needed verification or refutation:

The triad of space, time and (the knowledge and skills of) the users of technology represent the conceptual framework for the geography of information society. Most of the causes of digital inequality can be traced in the accumulated regional and social disadvantages and socialization patterns. This typication reflects the discourses of various related disciplines (mostly that examining information society and temporal geography as well as the formation of social-technical networks; various sub-branches of sociology, psychology and sociography). The established constructional frame can be adequate to approach the subject in a multidisciplinary manner in the space of the Hungarian Great Plain.

Based on the diffusion of the technical-technological background of information (and knowledge) society, it can be presumed that access to information will result in further social-regional differentiation. The technical-technological bases, however, may broaden due to development. These days, however, the building and actuation of (broadband) networks can be described along an economic rationale; therefore it has a segregating effect. In the case of accelerating diffusion though, the technical-technological background does not have an excluding effect because the receptive and adaptive capacity of the given society will become more important with regard to setting up networks.

As a result, it is believed that the technical-technological background infiltrating every level of the social-regional „life-world" (employment, training, housing, care, services, cultural consumption, communities etc.) is a necessary and sufficient condition to the "propagation" of information society, but it is also necessary to examine the adaptive (receptive) and innovative (user and developer) behaviour forms of various groups and strata of society. So in the information society development programme of a given geographical space, both factors need to be emphasized. Currently, in the documents aimed to promote the development of information society, the emphasis is put on the (undoubtedly determinative) role of innovation. This, however, many times does not meet the demands and means of the local level. Therefore in the interest of advancing equal opportunities and regional levelling it is required to activate human resources locally.

When mapping the factors that support or hinder the effects of information society in the Hungarian Great Plain, modernisation (innovative), adaptive and backward regional and social islands (regional centres, mezo-, sub- and micro-centres) can be discovered. With Manuel Castells's concept in mind, the primary question is what could be considered as innovative milieu in the Hungarian Great Plain, and it is also important how this entity is reproduced in this geographical space.

The network model that can be described on the basis of the spreading of the knowledge/application (as innovation) linked to the diffusion of info-communication instruments is in connection with the fact that the access to and the possession of information in a wider sense induce core-periphery islands in the 21st century. The question is what sort of centre-periphery type change will be induced by the factors supporting or hindering the spreading of information society in such a region – which can sporadically produce knowledge and innovation centres -, or whether, in part, similarly to global trends – in the case of adequate and conscious development – they will reduce or eradicate big differences thus establishing the possibility of a more organic regional development.

The dissertation surveying the chances of the spreading of information society also deals with the question of what sort of connection can be revealed between the mass communication of settlements prominent in modernization (e.g. market-towns) and that of the region itself. It is presumed that the socialization forms of knowledge, news and information regarding a local community well reflect the social demand for mass communication in a (small) region. It is thought that this action linked to the local social public is stronger in areas where social communication has deeper roots historically.

Within information society type developments, the complex and organic approach gets more and more emphasis. Among the intervention areas, the segments of society become more determinative because modernization (or any development process) should provide society with the possibility of "building up organically". It is specifically true with regard to the spreading of info-communication technology. One can agree with Pintér's statement saying 'if progress brings exclusion for the majority of a society, it can retort, and yet progress in the long run leads to a standstill' (Pintér, 2004).

STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION AND CONCLUSIONS

The dissertation consists of two main units. One of them is based more on theory, while the other one mainly interprets empirical findings. The presentation of sociological and geographical approaches to information society constitutes the frame of the theoretical part. This part reviews the theories and concepts, which can be ranged among the field of sociology and social geography of the information society, but at the same time, the topics are placed into a historical-philosophical context by recalling the roots of national sociography as well as the theories of modernization.

In our opinion, an analysis of a historical approach is indispensable for the interdisciplinary examination of the concept of information society. Therefore value pairs and theories that point at the characteristics of the "Plain Way" get a special emphasis. In our interpretation, these are the following: modernization and traditional development; mass communication and direct communication; the relation system of local and global elements; network forming and settlement-social individuals; core-periphery relations.

In the theoretical parts, the objective was to form a picture of the state of the society in the Hungarian Great Plain. The goal of this capital is to discuss the traditional causes

of digital inequality and the features that characterize the society in transition and the ongoing regional processes.

It seems to be a commonplace that since the last decade of the 20th century, Hungary has gradually joined into a (European) integration process connected to the mainstream of modernization, whose new challenge was to meet the requirements of the information age (which included the promise of sustainable growth).

As opposed to merely providing economical and infrastructural data as done by usual economic-geographical approaches, the conceptual arc of the dissertation is to shed light on the possibilities of thinking in cyber space as a complex concept and reveal the traditional and present differences of development. That is why there is more emphasis on the presentation of the connections of society and economy (regional development), the relationship of knowledge and learning, dealing with usage, personal habits and the social and regional groups that mediate models.

Reflecting to all these, the analysis focuses on the possible ways of describing the theoretical model and modernization scenarios of information society characteristic of one of the largest and unbroken geographical and ecological land in Hungary (which amounts to almost half of the territory and third of the population of the country).

In this approach, besides a static announcement of infrastructure indicators of economy and technology, with the help of previous case studies, the aim was to present the attitudes of the innovative and the less innovative groups of society, their vision of information society and the possible regional differences in the Hungarian Great Plain.

The characterization of the abovementioned groups is based on the target group (public administration, regional development, political sphere, economy and civil sphere) questionnaire surveys that were made during the background surveys of regional development in the Southern and the Northern part of the Hungarian Great Plain. Besides these, during representative society surveys (e.g. data collection for the World Internet Project in 2001 and various regional data collections), certain social-settlement types were separated as well as groups, which can be characterized with a more active or more passive use respectively (Dessewffy and Fábián, 2003).

With the help of our surveys, especially those on the efficiency of social policy (land programme researches, unemployment surveys), empirical studies of settlements and small regions (surveys of settlement conflicts) and various semi-structured sociological interviews, one can get a notion of the ideas of backward groups concerning usage. By this content analysis, a new light is shed on the complex „notions of inequality" in the deep layers of society in the Plain.

In the dissertation a separate unit is formed by the tele-house research done with structured interviews for the analysis of digital inequality in small settlements in the Hungarian Great Plain and by the survey to map the integration possibilities of gypsy society, a defining factor in the peculiarity of the "Plain Way", which was carried out by interviewing local minority governments.

The dissertation also deals with public policy projects aiming at the establishment of information society; namely the information society strategy in the two regions, the

programmes for small regions within the further development of the Vásárhelyi Plan and other projects in the Tisza Valley as well as documents on social development in certain counties are analysed.

To formulate the complexity outlined above in a different way, the dissertation keeps a type of scientific approach to the fore, which accentuates the „triad" of social geography, that is the place of residence, the place of work and schools (settlement services). In consequence, the dissertation building upon micro-, meso, and macro-level case studies will be well applicable for further research concerning the geography, sociology and social policy of information society (to present the regional and social features of cyber space).

In connection with organic development, the harmonic development of society and the demand for cohesion, at the end of this capital, a view present in the public speech of social science needs to be recalled, according to which the underlying conditions to economic performance (competitiveness) are tolerance and a social medium that is exciting, rich in experiences and supportive towards talents (Dessewffy and Galácz, 2003). Forming the social side of competitiveness is also assumed to be a significant factor in information society.

RESULTS

Summary of Special Literature

The thesis itself is practically a kind of research of social innovation based upon the development of info-communication technology. Like similar researches of this type, posing sociological questions is linked with problems of local aspect thus creating a multidisciplinary approach (Rechnitzer, 1993.). On the Hungarian Great Plain we looked for the factors which, in the mirror of turning into cyber space, reflect the effects of modernization-innovation, the process of breaking with old forms of behaviour as well as the impact mechanism of new activities. This work is expected to synthesize the age, which many theoreticians (e.g. Timár) describe as the long decade (fifteen years) of transition from the socialism of the Kádár regime to global capitalism, or label as the period of transformation into market economy and democracy (Szilovics, 2003) transition denotes a dynamic category similar to innovation. Thus this long decade, which can be well characterized by the diffusion of global patterns, can be also defined by the type of strategy (fear, stagnation, hope, joining, and participation) that the fact of changes incites in the local social groups in the Plain.

The primary questions posed in this PhD thesis were the following: In which social groups and in what geographical space does the social demand for creating cyber space form? What communities mediate the diffusion of knowledge capital connected to information society? How can a certain community or a small region join it? In other words, simultaneously with the global demand for sustainable growth, there exists the

"institution" of sustainable knowledge, which refers to the social demand that generates a community on different regional levels within which the instrument (technology) and the social goal merge into one (Csörgő, 2002).

The dissertation aims to examine the topic of digital inequality. In virtual (cyber) space there is only one thing that counts: whether you have access to the net or not. It is all in vain if information spreads rapidly, or it is accessible in each part of the world at the same time, in case the practical application of available knowledge is obstructed just like before. Information society as well as the new forms of inequality it creates has a "present" aspect. There is a serious contrast between social groups in different situations: those that fall behind tend to focus on the present, while for middle-class layers satisfying their needs in the future is a significant value.

It is proposed that the simile of information society is an innovation family that is linked to the information technologies as well as to the spreading of knowledge connected with these. It is important to note that this diffusion takes place in space, in social groups and in various fields of application, but nevertheless it is a process that takes place in time. Since it is the processes of consumption and learning that we talk about, the main question of connected policies is on which type of networks – at the workplace, at school, in community IT infrastructure (e.g. in the tele-house network), in the family or in a circle of friends, through informal networks – IT knowledge spreads more rapidly and more effectively.

The term *cyber space* connected to the spreading and use cannot be described briefly and in essence. One can only refer to it with examples and depict it with descriptions, however it is never defined. The problem could be explained like this: although the term cyber space is perfect for certain goals but at the same time, it needs to be kept in mind that the concept is in connection with similar ones whose separate nature should not be sacrificed, so these the borderlines can never be eliminated.

By the introduction of cyber space (or the concept of social capital), one cannot discover new processes that someone else has not described in other contexts. Amidst already existing concepts, it is all about a type of trans-disciplinary approach which covers the social demand for innovation. Still there is a good reason to introduce this new concept since the definition of cyber space lies in the structure of physical space and social conditions, and it functions like a kind of informal social resource that catalyses local demands. Besides the key geographical elements of cyber space, the methodological principle of regional planning can be considered a classical regional aspect. Although the successful developments of the digital revolution are in connection with the principle of concentration (mainly thinking of information technology achievements linked to technological centres connected with universities and regions – e.g. the agglomeration of Budapest or the Silicon Valley as classic examples), the network itself becomes efficient due to its decentralized nature.

SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS

The spread of modern information and communication devices has a cumulative influence on generating social disadvantages that is the access to these instruments, their form of usage, the different modes and extent of using online contents and services further increase social differences. All these are expressed by the notion of digital division, which on the one hand, presents and interprets these new forms of inequality, while on the other hand, by revealing the causes, it instantly allows us to formulate solutions in order to bridge this division.

Info-communication instruments – and having access to them – do not solve the problems of unequal opportunities, poverty and discrimination but they do contribute to reducing exclusion, and they aid in bringing about social participation on a much wider level.

With the further advancement of info-communication devices, a net access to almost all the areas of private, public and economic life becomes possible. Consequently, the idea comes about suggesting that making use of these instruments would become an indispensable precondition to social inclusion.

In this dimension, the dissertation hypothesizes that the groups having a disadvantaged position in social and communal hierarchy are mostly uneducated and compared to other layers of society, they set out from a disadvantageous situation since their origins, and family and social background provide unfavourable conditions right at the start.

It was assumed that those belonging to this social group, due to their poor education, would get into low-key jobs (doing unskilled or drilled work) rarely preferred by society. Because of the lack of vocation, the members of this layer have a forced employment status from the beginning. As a result, most of these people aim to keep their attained social position, as the option of promotion and mobility is of secondary importance. What is important to them is the security of making a living. This is the process called *poverty* or *inequality traps* (Hankiss, 2002). In the dissertation, automatisms were searched for, which help a given social group to reach a goal, or which make it impossible for them.

Out of the automatisms that were examined, it is the schooling level, the family size, employment mobility, the size of income, social roles, household models, job seeking strategies and the reception of knowledge that could be emphasized. These are the categories that the social groups falling behind were somewhat lacking during their socialization or individual career, thus they missed the social-economic mainstream. Permanent exclusion may endanger them if their thinking and scale of values adapt to the lifestyle accustomed to on the edge of society (Balcsók, 2001).

Various surveys (e.g. Kemény I. et al.) proved that the key categories of change (knowledge, performance, work) are being (re)born in the groups falling behind. It was found that in the majority of repliers the values and norms that would allow them, in the long run, to take part in the economic and social modernization processes in the late 20th century were not present to a significant extent. Training and retraining (lifelong learning), developing the complexity of employment programmes and making benefit of the

opportunities provided by information society could serve as adequate individual tools for persons to internalise all the abovementioned elements.

One can consider the establishment of community net access points in small settlements and agricultural innovation created by social land programmes as similar positive automatisms. Both are mentor aids for the local society of small settlements, which support the personality development that can function as a catalyst for leaving social-regional peripheral existence behind.

All things considered, besides the measurable effects of various programmes to raise cultural capital, it can be an adequate result if adaptation to social surroundings is facilitated. From this degree of adaptation, with time passing, innovation can "shoot out", and the individuals' consistent mobility can begin, which could lead to a more stable integration of those falling behind. The programmes that enhance social inclusion and establish new opportunities are extremely important in information society, where innovation is so fast that we tend to skip a technical step (thus missing the possibility of organic development too).

Besides a consumer attitude, the skills for using info-communication instruments are – to a growing extent – preconditions to an active employment status. In consequence to this kind of knowledge, the positive influence of applying info-communication technology appears in employment rates. In the case of e-government and other state service providers supported by info-communication technology, mainly in the field of public health and education, the expected saving potential emerges only if the majority of citizens have access to info-communication instruments and if they really know how to use them. What is more, a growing number of online services are available for the private sector with regard to everyday life, too. So it can be said that the costs of everyday life grow more for those who have no access to the internet and lack any skills of making use of info-communication technology (Hüsing, 2003).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

REFERENCES

BALCSÓK I. (2001): Growing Anxieties- Humble Possibilities Concerning the North-eastern Borderside Labour Market. (In Hungarian) In: A határmentiség kérdőjelei az Északkelet-Alföldön. Szerk.: Baranyi B. MTA Regionális Kutatások Központja, Pécs, pp. 170–216.
CASTELLS, M. (1998): Info Tech Project, Information Technology, Globalization and Social Development. Proc UNRISD Conf. Information Technologies and Social Development, Geneva. http://www.fes.uwaterloo.ca/crs/plan674d/castellspaper.pdf

CSÖRGŐ Z. (2002): Knowledge Society Based on Traditions (In Hungarian) In: A tudás társadalma. Szerk: Elek A., Juhász J., Kiss E., Varga Cs. Stratégiakutató Intézet, Nemzeti Ifjúságkutató Intézet, Ipargazdasági Kutató és Tanácsadó Kft., Budapest. pp. 594–607.

DESSEWFFY T. – FÁBIÁN Z. (eds.) (2003): „The map of the digital future". The Hungarian Society and the Internet. (In Hungarian). Információs Társadalom és Trendkutató Központ, TÁRKI, Budapest. 2003.

DESSEWFFY T. – GALÁCZ A. (2003): The New Order of Things"- Technological Diffusion and Social Change (In Hungarian). In: Internet.hu. A digitális társadalom gyorsfényképe 1. Szerk.: Z. Karvalics L., Dessewffy T. Aula Kiadó, Infonia Alapítvány, Budapest. 31-60.pp

HANKISS E. (2002): New Diagnoses (In Hungarian). Osiris, Budapest. 2002.

HÜSING, T. (2003): Zuhnemendes Nord-Süd Gefälle der digitalen Spaltung in der EU. In: Informationsdienst Soziale Indikatoren. Ausgabe 30. Juli 2003. www.gesis.org.

KEMÉNY I. – JANKY B. (2003): About the Gipsy Measurment of 2003. (In Hungarian) In: A magyarországi cigány népesség helyzete a 21. század elején. Kutatási gyorsjelentések. Szerk: Kállai E. MTA Etnikai-nemzeti Kisebbségkutató Intézete, Budapest

MÉSZÁROS R. (2003): Cyberspace. (In Hungarian) Hispánia Kiadó, Szeged

PINTÉR R. (2004): The Advancement and Development of the Hungarian Information Society from the Perspective of the Developers (In Hungarian). Szociológiai doktori (PhD) értekezés. Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Társadalomtudományi Kar, Budapest

RECHNITZER J. (1993): Falling Behind or Catching Up. The Innovations Shaping the Spacial Structure (In Hungarian). MTA Regionális Kutatások Központja, Pécs

SZILOVICS CS. (2003): Cheating and law abiding in the prospect of tax law (In Hungarian). Gondolat, Budapest 2003.

TIMÁR J. (2005): Politics, society and economy in space: spatial processes in the era of transition in Hungary. In: Hungarian Spaces and Places: Patterns of Transition. Eds. Gy. Barta, É. G. Fekete, I. Kukorelli Szörényiné, J. Timár. Centre for Regional Studies, Pécs. pp.1–16.

VARGA CS. (2000): Developing of the Country (In Hungarian). Agroinform Kiadóház, Budapest