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Crisis and long-wave urbanization patterns: the case of Greece

Mr Emmanouil-stylios SKOUFOGLOU

Paris 1/NTUA Phd Candidate

25 Kallidromiou 10683 Athens Greece

manosskouf@yahoo.gr 0030 6977400496

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Résumé / Summary

It is not possible to explore current spatial tendencies and urbanization patterns in the context of a global capitalist crisis without a comprehensive theory about what the crisis, itself, is about. It is an unpleasant surprise to see that, actually, only a few geographers, urbanists and architects have really tried to get into a thorough scrutiny of the character of the crisis.

According to the approach adopted here, the crisis that outbroke in 2008 is, in the final instance, a crisis of overaccumulation of capitals and an expression of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. Its objective function is to destroy capitals and productive forces in order to pull the mode of production out of its saturation. This pattern of overaccumulation succeeded by destruction appears periodically throughout the history of the capitalist mode of production, subject to the classic 7-10 year “business” cycle, but also to longer-term periodicities, such as the Kuznets swings (Kuznets 1958) and the long waves described by Ernest Mandel (Mandel 1995) and others. The current crisis, with its particular intensity, can be described as the concurrence of the lowest points of most, if not all, different cycles of economic development (Roberts 2013). This concurrence of lowest points is a manifestation of the necessity for a destruction process of historical dimensions, one that has been postponed for decades only to be further accentuated nowadays (Kliman 2011, p.91).

In a certain sense, urbanization constitutes the spatial equivalent of capital accumulation. The question, then, is the following: does urbanization follow a trajectory analogous to the economy? More particularly, does it follow long wave patterns, as it has indeed been maintained in the past (Berry 1990, p. 107; Kelley 1969, p.642; Kuznets 1958, pp. 25-52)?

Spatial restructuring processes have been highlighted as a means to overcome economic crises, and thus as an essential ingredient of post-crisis boom periods. “Capitalism has found itself able to attenuate (if not resolve) its internal contradictions” only “by occupying space, by producing a space” (Lefebvre 1976, p. 21). If this is true, however, it is absolutely rational to also suppose the reverse: crises of capital accumulation correspond to crises of “urban accumulation”, that is of urbanization. This probably sheds new light on a theoretical debate that has been considered outdated for long: the hypothesis of counter-urbanization (Berry

1976; Fielding 1989).

According to our approach, what is interesting in this debate is not counter-urbanization as a historical phase in the global urban evolution or as a predetermined stage of a supposed universal pattern that would be applicable in each and every city or urban system, as many authors have already attempted to do in the past (Champion 2001; Klaassen, & Scimeni 1981; Geyer & Kontuly 1993). It is counter-urbanization as a possible actual process, which can be started, halted or reversed according to historical, economic, social and political conditions, and thus follows cycles more or less corresponding to the cycles of capitalist development in general. This means that, even if counter-urbanizations processes have been denied by observed facts in the 1980s, they may well reappear if similar conditions reappear as well.

The current paper is an attempt to explore the hypothesis of counter-urbanization processes in the context of the global capitalist crisis, both by means of theory and through an empirical study of the available data for Greece. Greece is not just an example among others; it has been, for various reasons, the epicenter of one of the most severe manifestations of the crisis, and this is why it has attracted massive international interest. There is the quite widespread impression that people in Greece are leaving big cities to move to the countryside, where the effects of the crisis are milder. This is a quite simplistic view, however, there seems indeed to be some evidence of a certain type of urban or, most probably, metropolitan exodus, with particular features. This "counter-urbanization" tendency is found in two different forms: the form of distant ex-urbanization and the form of an impetus towards the islands. The incentives leading to each tendency as well as the economic, social and demographical characteristics of the regions involved in each case differ a lot. In order to capture the current spatial dynamic in Greece under the crisis, it is essential to examine this dual process and juxtapose it to the respective tendencies recorded in the past.

Key-words: destruction, counter-urbanization, Greece, accumulation, long waves

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