

THE UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT OF SUBURBANIZATION DURING TRANSITION IN HUNGARY

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Summary

This paper considers how far suburbanization in Hungary has followed the Western model. The authors argue that the transition period, as a distinctive era, will not bring about fundamental changes in the cause-and-effect relationships of suburban development. The decisive role of capital in Hungarian suburbanization is evident in the uneven development of this spatial process. It is contended that the actors in the suburbanization of transition, although labelled 'distinctive' by some commentators, do not have a trajectory which is essentially different from that of their western counterparts. Differences arise from the means and pace of acquiring property and capital. As in advanced capitalism, suburbanization in Hungary results in social tensions, segregation and exclusion.

KEYWORDS ★ capital investment ★ privatization
★ real estate market ★ suburbanization

Suburbanization has been one of the most spectacular spatial processes of the 1990s in several East Central European countries, including Hungary. Researchers in Hungary differ first and foremost on whether this process can be regarded as exclusively the product of the new economic and social order (e.g. Ladányi and Szelényi, 1997; Dövényi and Kovács, 1999), or whether it had already existed before the transition (e.g. Timár, 1992; Kovács, 1999). But the issue that has attracted most attention is whether suburban development in this part of Europe follows the Western model, has a post-socialist trajectory, or perhaps is defined by particular national characteristics. Although there is a lack of both theories and comprehensive empirical studies on this subject, a number of differing opinions can be outlined:

- The majority of researchers focus on the *social composition of suburbanites* and, with a consumption-based approach, on the charac-

teristics of the demand for accommodation. Some accept the presence of Western-style suburbanization, with qualifications. Accordingly, Tasan and Kok (1999) only consider those parts of the inner ring surrounding Warsaw, where young professionals move out to family houses, as 'genuinely' suburban settlements. In contrast, they argue that the social composition and causes of migration in the outer ring do not vest it with a 'suburban nature'. Others claim that the very distinctiveness of suburbanization in post-socialist countries lies in the social composition of the actors being significantly different to that in the Western model. Herfert (1999), for example, emphasizes the importance of 'atypical households' in the East German process, whereas Dövényi and Kovács (1999: 53) – in their studies of Budapest – conclude that 'suburbanization does not wholly follow the traditional western pattern, for here affluence and poverty alike encourage moving out of the city'.

- Other researchers study suburbanization by focusing on the overall interrelationship between *socio-economic transformation*, as a given framework, and urbanization in a broader sense. They emphasize that, in the countries of transition, current suburbanization is not just belated or imitative; instead, according to Fassman and Lichtenberger (1995), some phases of urban development gather momentum and occur simultaneously. Burdack and Herfert (1998) outline the different influences on suburbanization of post-Fordism and post-socialism.

Relatively little attention has been given to the causes of suburbanization. However, making this the focal point of research would not, of course, make it less contentious, for opinions are divided with respect to the driving forces of suburbanization in advanced capitalism. Acknowledging the combined impact of economic, social, political and cultural shifts, we concur with the view that places the 'movement' of capital in the built environment at the core of capitalist suburban development (e.g. Walker, 1981; Harvey, 1985; Smith, 1996).

Adopting this approach, and accepting the presence of certain suburbanization characteristics in East Central Europe and Hungary at present, we emphasize a number of important similarities between East Central and Western Europe. The

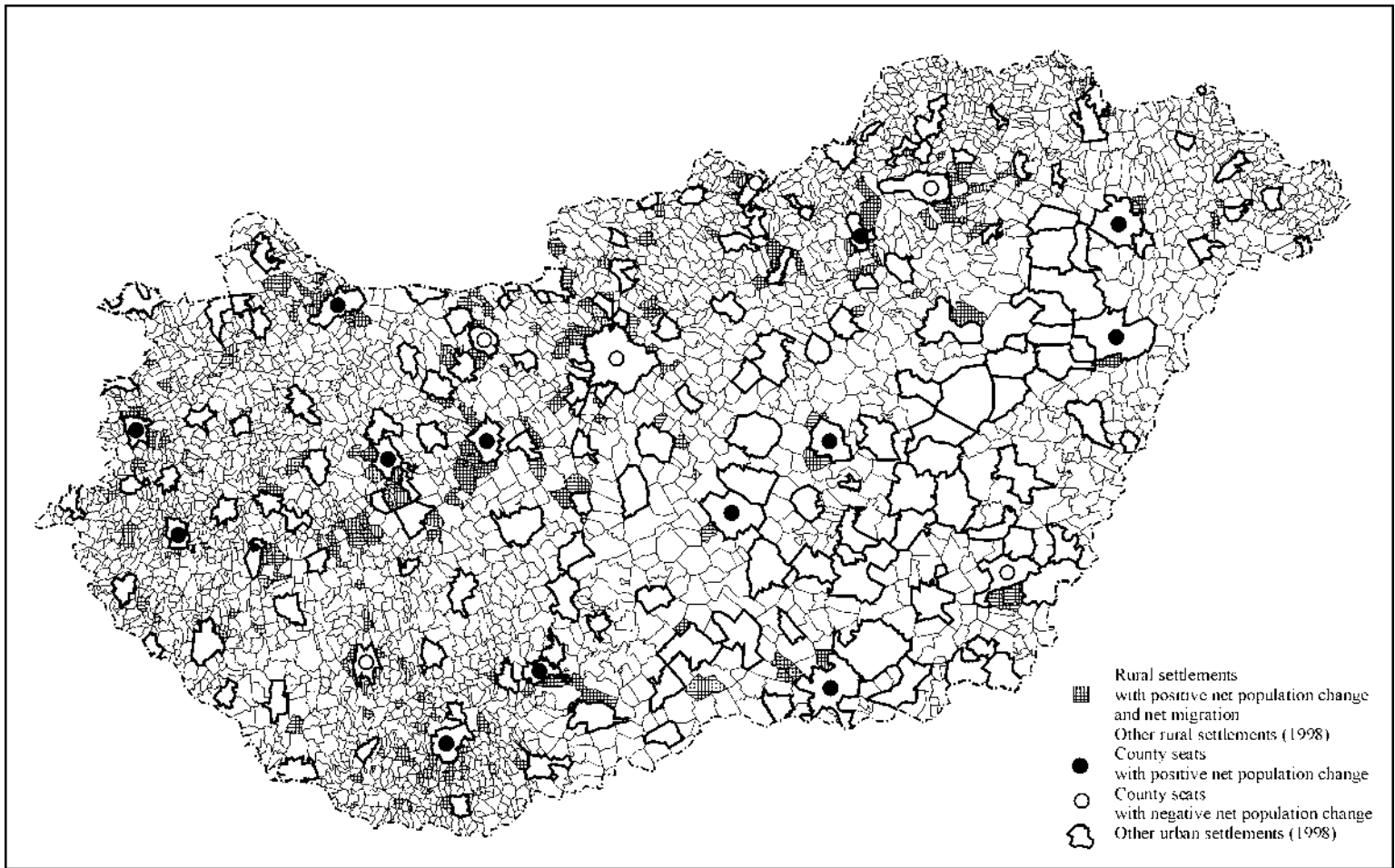


Figure 1 Types of population change by settlement (1980–9)

Source: Population census (1980; 1990).

most important correspondence is that suburban development is closely connected with the logic of capital accumulation. The decisive role of capital in suburbanization is evident in the uneven development of Hungarian suburbanization, and the authors have explored this through a number of case-studies. Finally, we show that the actors (and the way they become participants) in suburbanization during transition, although considered 'distinctive' by some commentators, do not have a trajectory which is essentially different from that of their Western counterparts. As in advanced capitalism, suburbanization in Hungary also results in social tensions, segregation and exclusion. We hope that this approach not only makes the study of suburbanization an issue of East Central European 'identification', but also contributes to a better understanding of capitalist urban development.

Suburbanization: regional differences and universal causes

We consider suburbanization, at the urban scale, to be the decentralization of urban population, capital and human activities. On the national scale, however, 'suburbanization is the outward expansion of centralised urban spaces' (Smith, 1986: 23). The roots of the conspicuous evolution in the 1990s of residential suburbanization in Hungary, in the above sense, go deeper in time. The data on population change and migration indicate that, in the 1980s, the decentralization of urban population (and housing investments linked to this) had already begun around the largest towns. At that time there was no broad, dominant process creating a complete ring of suburbs: instead, these cities still had the power to concentrate population but outflows to some adjacent villages had already commenced (Figure 1).

The privatization of property and the emergence of the market economy, as well as the transformation of social structure and spatial processes, resulted in extensive changes in residential suburbanization:

- *In the early 1990s*, suburbanization accelerated mainly around Budapest, but was also strongly evident around other large cities (Figure 2).

- *Since 1995* the populations of the villages have increased, partly or wholly through migration gain, and they have been forming a closed ring or a widening zone around not only Budapest but also some other major cities (Figure 3). The centre of gravity around most large, and a few medium-sized, cities has 'shifted outwards' as the population in these cities has decreased. Residential suburbanization seems to have passed beyond its initial stage and we are now facing absolute, instead of relative, decentralization.

These data serve only to evaluate the suburbanization tendencies and do not define the area of the suburbs.¹ However, we can turn to some former studies on the Great Plain (Timár, 1992), and more recently Budapest (Daróczy, 1999; Dövényi and Kovács, 1999; Kovács, 1999) and the environs of Pécs in Transdanubia (Bajmócy, 1999). These attest that a significant proportion of the villages, in the vicinity of larger cities, which are growing through migration, owe this growth, first and foremost, to urban outflows. Therefore, we can conclude that the data really do support the existence of residential suburbanization.

As the data above suggest, the new tendencies in migration and the transformation of the built environment are *spatially uneven*. Residential suburbanization does not simply adjust to the characteristics of the urban network; it also exhibits regional differences:

- The outflow of urban population to neighbouring settlements, and the gradual 'shifting outwards' of the centre of gravity of population growth around Budapest (in the central region) is more dynamic and on a larger geographical scale than elsewhere in Hungary.
- Residential suburbanization in the western regions is generally spreading more rapidly, and in the vicinity of more cities (including non-county seats) and in a wider circle of villages than in the eastern regions (Figures 1–3).

These regional differences also indicate that suburbanization in Hungary at present is a special form of the uneven development endemic in capitalism, and that *capital* plays the key role in its development. One indication of this is that the distribution of foreign capital, competitive

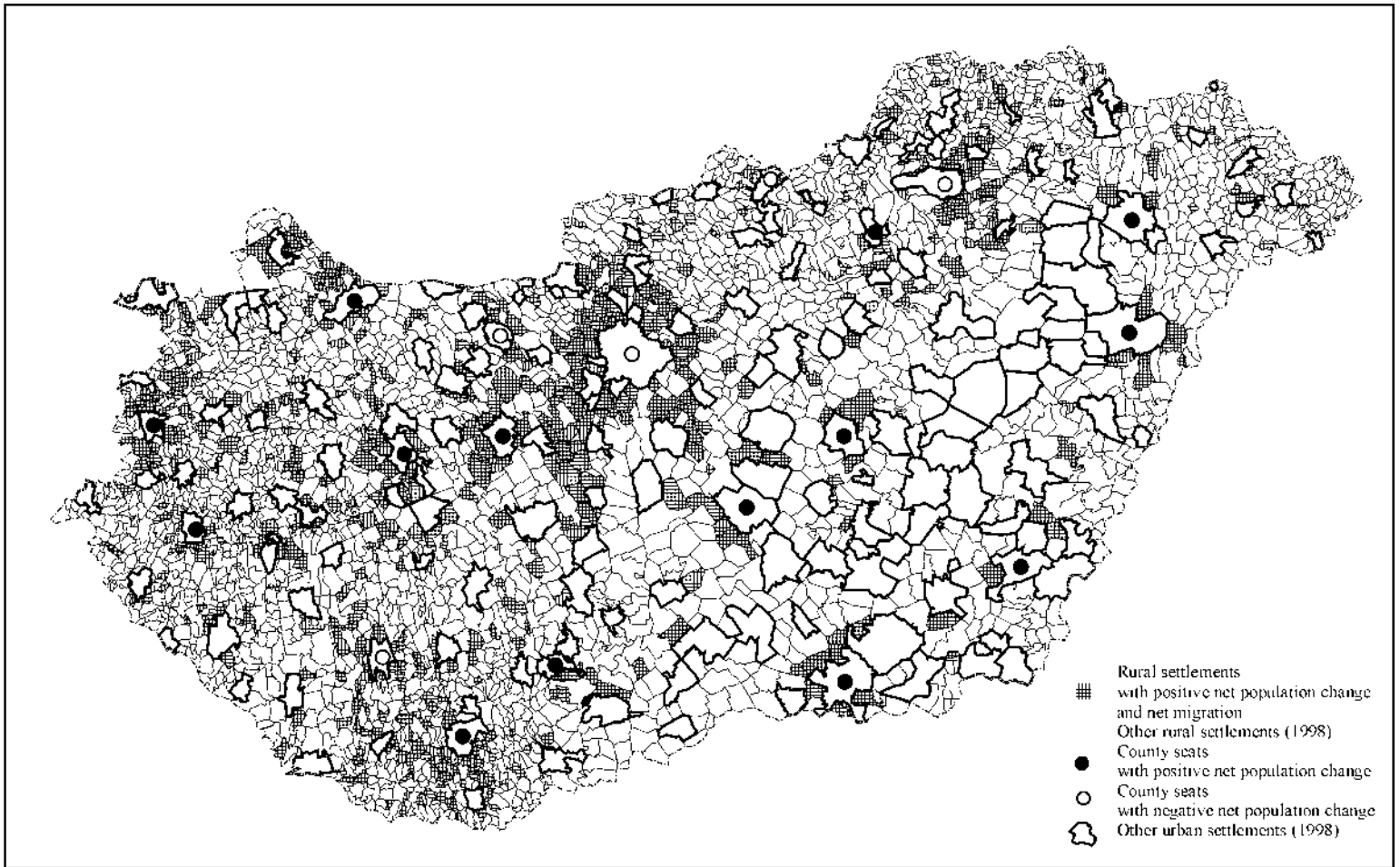


Figure 2 Types of population change by settlement (1990–3)

Source: Population census (1990); T-STAR (1993).

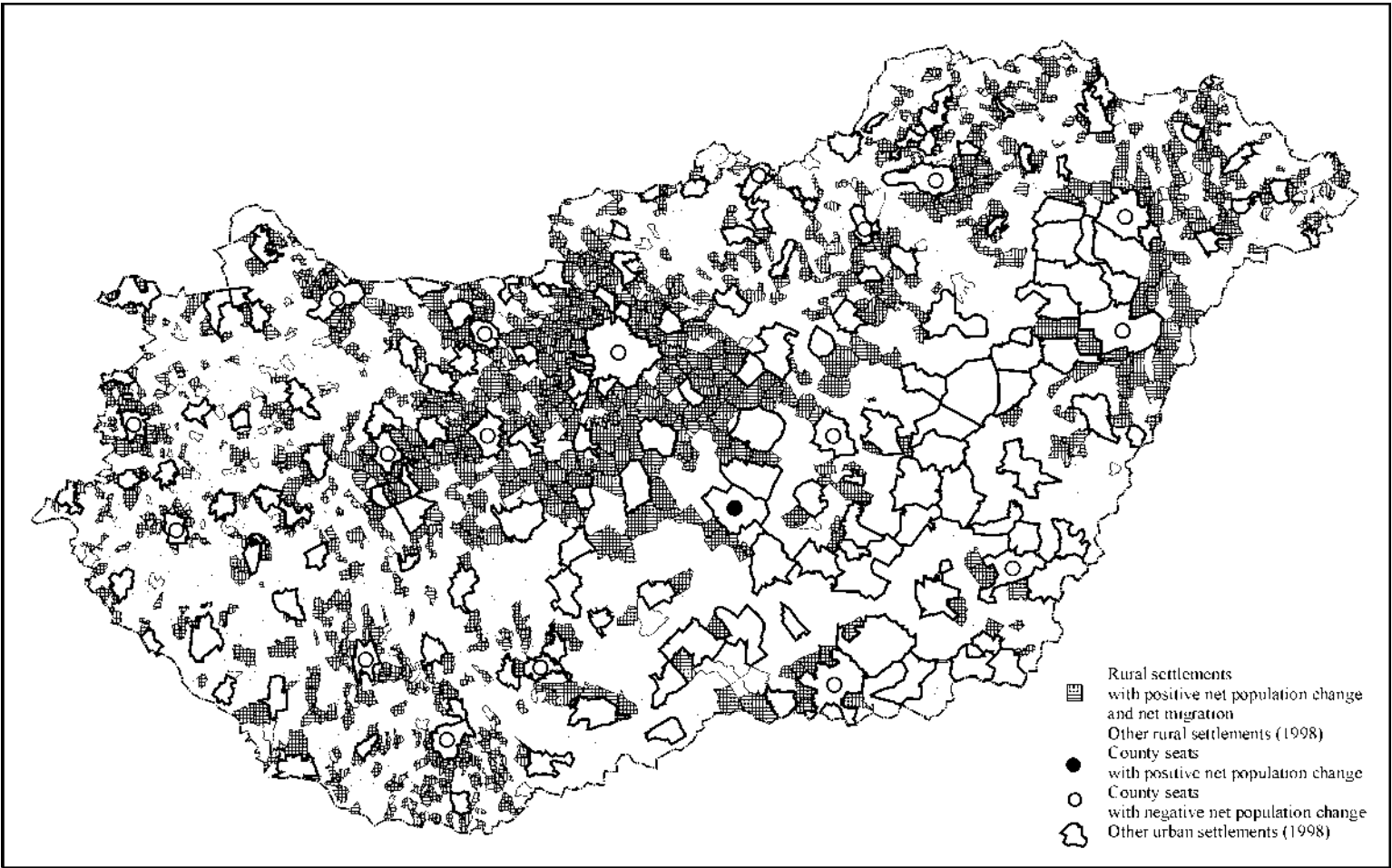


Figure 3 Types of population change by settlement (1995–8)

Source: T-STAR (1995; 1998).

enterprises and efficient capital investment is very similar in several respects to that of suburbanization (e.g. Horváth, 1993; Rechnitzer, 1993; Enyedi, 1994; Nemes-Nagy, 2000; Kiss and G. Nagy in this volume). Investing in the built environment in Hungary in the 1990s became a successful way of securing surplus value and realizing profits. Suburbanization, as the increasing expansion of urban space, takes place alongside the capitalization of the real estate market, facilitating the flow of global capital. It is obviously not by chance that large-scale residential suburbanization around Budapest is shaped by the participation of real estate investment firms, partly or wholly in Western ownership, whereas this is rare elsewhere in Hungary. At best, some local governments may offer building sites for sale or try to sell 'residential parks' (e.g. around Pécs, see Bajmócy, 1999). Around most cities, especially in less developed regions, suburbanization is currently taking place without intermediaries extracting profits from the process; instead, personal capital investment takes the form of building family homes.

Thus, individuals who purchase property, redevelop it and resell for profit, or 'professional developers', as Smith (1996) calls them, have become involved in suburbanization. The majority, however, are 'occupier developers who buy and redevelop property and inhabit it after completion' (Smith, 1996: 69). They are not only 'suburbanites as consumers' but also 'suburbanites as producers'. Empirical studies show that construction on specifically selected building sites is not only a means of reproduction, but also an investment in expectation of later returns.² Examination of the residential suburbanization of Győrújbarát (adjacent to a regional centre, Győr, in the developed north-western part of Hungary) and of Szabadkígyós (in the vicinity of Békéscsaba, the county seat of a less developed south-eastern region), reveals that the former had been the target of a more dynamic outflow of city-dwellers, with its residents building larger and more ostentatious houses.³ This more intensive suburbanization is clearly linked to the higher levels of capital available to individual households in the former.

It is important to note, however, that analysis of the cause-and-effect relationships of suburbanization contradict the explanatory power of individual 'consumer sovereignty'. Instead, the regional

distribution of consumer preferences is similar to that which was characteristic of the period of collective consumption before the economic and political transition. The most important motivations for moving out to the suburbs are broadly similar, among those questioned, in both settlements. The most common drive is to secure either a place of one's own (preferably a house with a garden) or better accommodation. It is also remarkable that research in the 1990s on the environs of Budapest (Tosics, 1998, Dövényi and Kovács, 1999) and Pécs (Bajmócy, 1999), also report similar preferences, even if their rank order is different. In this respect, even the change of regime did not bring about seminal changes, for studies carried out around Kecskemét in the Great Plain in 1989 produced similar results (Timár, 1992). These similarities, both in time and space, support the hypothesis that accelerated suburbanization was not brought about by dramatic changes in 'personal taste', reflected in the choice of place of residence. Nor have differences led to differing regional dynamics.

Moreover, there are strong tendencies in the location of new productive activities in urban space. The association of commercial and residential suburbanization seems to be unequivocal, and not only in the Budapest agglomeration (see Kovács, 1999). The appearance of different types of mutually reinforcing capital can be observed, for example, in the widespread practice of entrepreneurs moving their homes out of the urban centres, and taking their businesses with them sooner or later. Commercial suburbanization could not have become the engine of profit for hypermarkets, established by international multiples around the largest cities, without the presence of a wealthy middle class with significant purchasing power and susceptible to new consumer habits (see E. Nagy in this volume).

The role of capital in suburban development is also indicated by spatial disparities in commercial and industrial suburbanization. In the vicinity of urban centres in East Hungary, only the zone around Szeged attains, or at least approximates, the density of individual enterprises and companies found in the most dynamic zones (such as Lake Balaton) and cities. Instead, high density levels and dynamism are more frequently observed in the narrower or broader environs of several Transdanubian cities. And the zone of settlements characterized by extremely high intensity of business activity is

especially broad in the 'halo' surrounding Budapest (Figure 4). Suburbanization in Hungary, as in Western countries, opened the way for several different kinds of investment during the economic recession of the 1990s and in the following years.

Some actors and consequences of suburbanization: idiosyncrasies or general characteristics?

Much of the comparative research on East Central European and Western European suburbanization focuses on similarities and differences between the actors. Here we examine *social consequences* in general and the *impact of the actors* in shaping suburbanization, rather than their social composition; this focuses on those attributes of suburbanization apparently stemming from the very nature of the transition in East Central Europe and, in particular, Hungary. Most of the empirical research has been based on studies of the Budapest metropolitan region. Although suburbanization around Budapest is distinctive in several respects, the very fact that it is at a relatively advanced stage makes it a useful case-study.

Some researchers have emphasized the close relationship between suburbanization and the *privatization of state-owned rented flats*. Studies in Budapest have shown that policies of selling apartments at well under their market value have created the financial conditions for households to move to the suburban belt (Dövényi and Kovács, 1999; Kovács, 1999; Váradi, 1999).

Tenement privatization in the early 1990s did provide an impetus to suburbanization in the capital city. However, the stratum of suburbanites which developed under these post-socialist conditions in Budapest is less common elsewhere in Hungary. On the one hand, in 1989 55 percent of the 838,000 state-owned rented flats in the country were concentrated in Budapest (Lengyel, 1998). On the other hand, the effects of nationalization in the late 1940s and of later housing policies were regionally differentiated, while there was strong price differentiation of real estate in Budapest as a result of the current capitalization of the real estate market (Beluszky and Timár, 1992). Consequently, the buyers of state-owned flats in 'socialist housing

estates' in provincial cities did not have the same opportunities to become suburbanites as their counterparts in the capital city. In spite of this, suburbanization is expanding around provincial cities. We can also note that suburbanization did not halt around Budapest after the completion of tenement privatization.

The amount of capital acquired through tenement privatization depended on the price and location of the flat. This polarized suburbanites in the same way as they were polarized if they had secured seed capital in other ways, and refutes the argument about the 'post-socialist nature' of suburbanization. Experience in Budapest shows that the owners/sellers of the more prestigious and, consequently, more expensive real estate also moved to high-prestige suburban settlements (Váradi, 1999). Within the metropolitan region, there seems to be a fault line between the West–North West sector, offering the élite and the middle classes a pleasant setting and high-status real estate, and the South–South Eastern sectors which have become the destination of urban 'blue collar workers' (Dövényi and Kovács, 1999).⁴ Even if those escaping from harsh living conditions in the city⁵ can be found in these suburbs, they cluster in the least prestigious parts or are ostracized sooner or later even from these. Similar social segregation can also be detected in several suburbs of provincial cities, mainly between 'native' villagers and the newcomers, who can be further classified according to their social status. Thus spatial segregation is inseparable from residential suburbanization in Hungary as in Western countries.

Another peculiarity of Hungarian post-socialist conditions is the emergence of suburbanization actors through *land privatization*. The circumstances of restitution, and the structure of farming cooperatives, made it possible for a multitude of 'strangers' to appear as landowners in many villages (Váradi, 1999). Thus, some city-dwellers were able to secure landownership (initially, farmland) in the target areas of suburbanization, without real market conditions in operation.

These new city landowners – in common with local ones – can, at best, speed up or slow down suburban development. They do not have the capacity to generate suburbanization which is fundamentally different from that in Western countries. On the one hand, it is far from certain

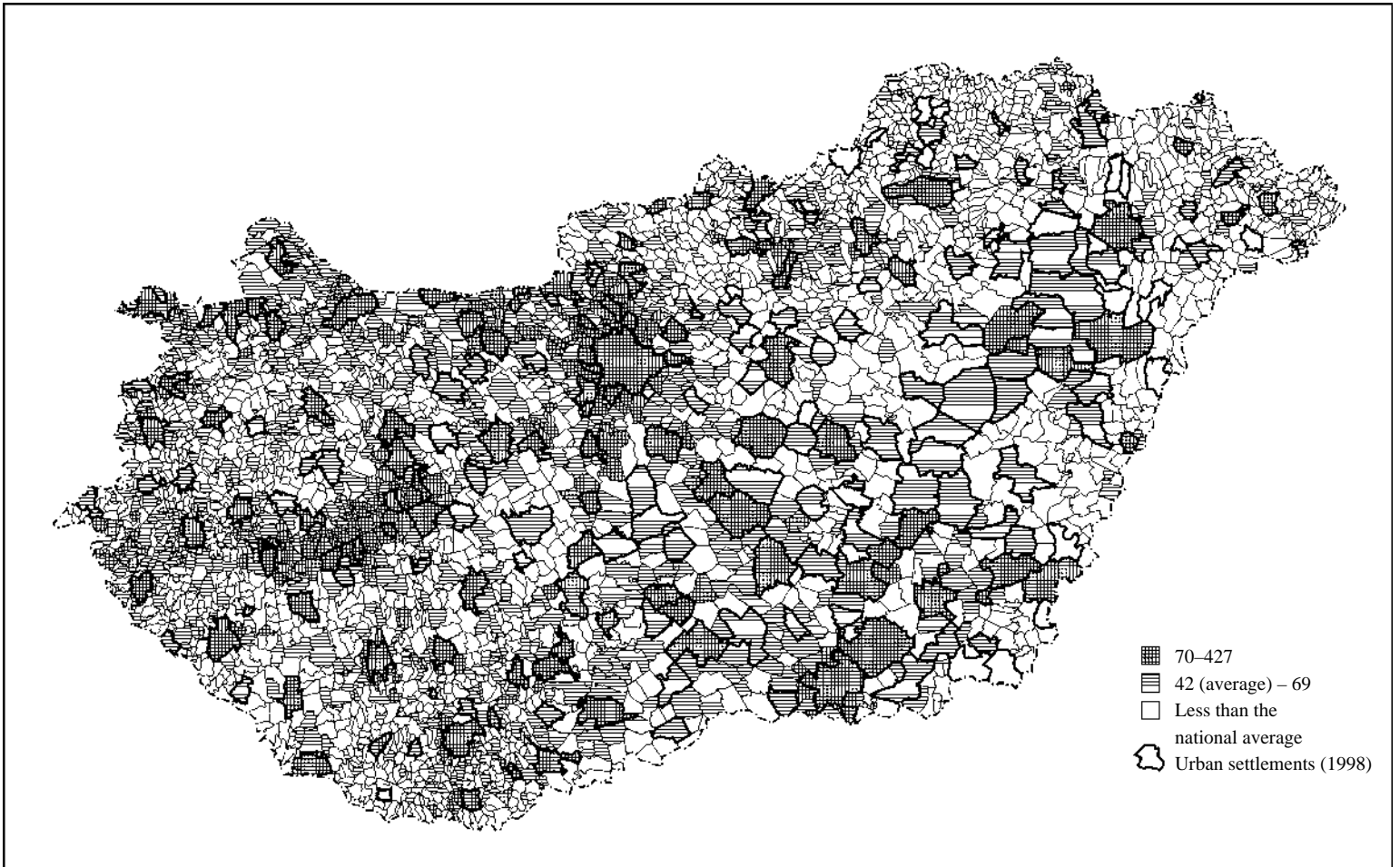


Figure 4 Number of enterprises per 1,000 inhabitants by settlement (1998)

Source: T-STAR (1998).

that these city landlords will ever become either 'professional' or 'occupier' developers. Irrespective of whether they cultivate the land themselves, have it cultivated, or speculate in land, it is clear that – as with Western speculators – they 'do not produce any transformation in the urban structure' (Smith, 1996: 234).⁶ On the other hand, they require a situation in which the investment of productive capital into the given geographical place becomes a profitable business in order to be able to sell their property to developers or to become developers themselves. From this point of view, the area around Budapest offers very different conditions to many provincial towns. Finally, city-dwellers eligible for restitution did not acquire land in every settlement next to cities, so that suburbanization continues in many areas without their intervention.

It should also be remembered that *local governments* have become actors in capitalist suburbanization. The legal framework for their autonomy was established after the change of regime. In addition to their regulatory purview, they have also assumed a new role as market players and, without having any previous experience or national regulations to rely on, are striving to influence the expansion of the urban space, applying the art of political compromise for the first time (Timár, 1998).

As in Western countries, their power and resources are varied. They can only influence real estate prices and the pace of development while they have enough land and resources at their disposal. Not every local government, however, managed to secure possession of sufficient state-owned land, following successful negotiations (e.g. Pilisjászfalu around Budapest); nor were local governments generally keen to buy large amounts of land from new owners during land privatization, thereby taking the risk of accumulating debt (e.g. Veresegyház in the vicinity of Budapest). Local governments that had managed to strike a favourable deal with the agricultural cooperatives prior to their transformation could become successful players and developers in the real estate market (e.g. Kozármiszlény adjacent to Pécs, and Telki and Budajenő around Budapest). Frequently, they sell the areas to be developed (e.g. Tinnye near Budapest and Győrújbarát adjacent to Győr) to real estate companies, either to strike a profitable deal or owing to a lack of funds. Their attitude is different in respect of the incorporation of sites outside built-up

areas into 'inner areas', where mass housing construction is permitted. In some places, real estate companies have already been pressing local authorities to do so.⁷ Their decisions are influenced by their attitudes to suburbanization and their development policies. Their positions range from outright refusal via indifference to active support, as suggested by studies of Budapest (Dövényi and Kovács, 1999). However, the strategy of outright refusal of further development, as for example in Pilisvörösvár and Pilisszántó in the vicinity of Budapest, is only sustainable as long as it is based on broad political and social consensus. Therefore, while the influence of local government seems unusually strong after the long period of state socialism, it is becoming evident that even if some authorities do temporarily withstand residential suburbanization driven by market interests, urban expansion will sooner or later emerge in another place or form. In some places, recreational suburbanization is becoming residential, often illegally or, because of the beneficial effects on employment and local taxes, little attempt is made to constrain industrial and commercial suburbanization.

The participation of local governments in suburbanization is surrounded by *social conflicts* similar to those found in advanced capitalism. These conflicts mainly stem from the competition between the city and its suburbs, and between the suburbs. Conflicting interests, linked with industrial and commercial suburbanization (e.g. the issue of local business taxes), have already emerged. Budapest has even started to develop strategies to counter suburbanization; these are disguised, for the time being, as efforts to remedy the (real) transport and environmental problems accompanying urban expansion, but are really informed by the goal of stemming the loss of higher income households (taking significant local tax revenues with them).

Local governments may also be caught in the crossfire of conflicting local interests, especially in those settlements where they undertake or support intense suburbanization. Inevitably, there are some groups whose interests are contradicted by privatization or who have not yet profited from suburbanization (Váradi, 1997). Furthermore, the example of Telki (near Budapest) clearly indicates that, in the absence of effective legal regulation, only moral considerations restrict the involvement of councillors in the real estate market. Where coun-

cillors are involved, and are seen to benefit substantially from such suburbanization, local conflicts follow. When suburban development and policies for individual settlements are discussed in the course of our interviews with the mayors or other actors, there are almost always hints about bribery and pay-offs to some local government leaders, representatives or officials. A close *association between politics and real estate markets* was also a recurrent theme in our interviews with the owners, entrepreneurs and designers concerned in these developments. Changes in government are closely followed by the players in the real estate market and the development in suburban zones. The privatization of land in some favoured settlements in the agglomeration engenders chaotic conditions which are especially favourable for realizing exceptional profits.⁸ However, the close relationship between the real estate market and politics is not a post-socialist phenomenon.

Conclusions and perspectives

The course of Hungary's suburban development in the 1990s was similar to that in market economies in respect of its principal features, the decentralization of urban population and simultaneously the centralization of capital, and their underlying causes. Uneven development attests to there being a close relationship between the intensity and scope of suburbanization and the regional concentration of foreign and domestic capital investment, as well as the distribution of consumer purchasing power. Differences arise from the means and pace of acquiring property and capital, which are the driving forces of suburbanization. Overall, it seems that the transition period, as a distinctive era, will not bring about fundamental changes in the cause-and-effect relationships of suburbanization. The 'distinctiveness' of urban expansion is more likely to lie in how capital, in adapting to particular conditions in this period, 'had to find' ways, different to those in advanced capitalism, to realize similar profit-generating spatial changes. The 'success' of this adaptation is not in doubt. The real question is who will be the winners?

There is, then, no reason why the social conflicts associated with suburbanization in Western

countries should not also be expected to strengthen and escalate in Hungary. Such social tensions merit particular attention in order to identify the peculiarities of Hungarian suburbanization, so as to inform those bodies (either governments or social movements) seeking to intervene in this arena. We consider the following to be particularly important:

- Hungarian suburbanization is polarizing society more rapidly and more sharply than in the 1980s. Recent developments of suburban space sometimes serve as the ostentatious 'showroom' of private property and this is especially socially provoking in view of the 'disruption' which is occurring in Hungary. The most recent state housing policy, however, favours the development of suburbs with detached houses rather than the construction of council tenements.⁹
- Local populations are less prepared for the aggressive interest representation of professional developers than in some Western countries, and lack the means to organize effective resistance to them. Official political discourses, at best, only touch on the environmental consequences of uncontrolled urban sprawl, without advancing specific solutions; however, they rarely address the social effects (e.g. the entanglement of the real estate market and politics). This is all the more disconcerting because, given the brief history of Hungarian suburbanization, those on the 'other side' have been quick to employ techniques that are common in Western countries, such as the development of residential parks, where social exclusion is used to fend off social conflicts.

In view of the above comments, we fear that in future we will have to report on the emergence of edge cities or neo-traditional towns, forms of urban space that are common in Western countries, bringing with them further social tensions and exclusion (see the social criticism by Beauregard, 1995 and Till, 1993) rather than an organized resistance to the market-generated social consequences of increasing suburbanization.

Notes

- ¹ Information is provided only on the migration balance

- and not on the direction of migration. Thus the target settlements of suburbanization feature in the same category as those remote villages where increasing numbers have returned, in the hope of making a better living, since the change of regime. They can be found, for example, in the backward rural areas of North and North-east Hungary (Figure 3). The migration process running counter to return is also worth mentioning; people from the eastern counties are heading for the capital city, but young couples with a number of children usually remain in settlements on the county boundary.
- 2 Not to mention the foreigners, mainly Germans and Austrians, moving to advantaged areas such as the suburbs of Transdanubia and the environs of Budapest with the intention of acquiring real estate.
 - 3 As part of a research project sponsored by the National Fund of Scientific Research (OTKA T020443), together with Irén Kukorelli-Szörényi as co-author, we undertook a questionnaire survey in 100 households in each of two villages, sampling both 'locals' and immigrants.
 - 4 Unlike Dövényi and Kovács (1999), we do not consider that the moves by socially less advantaged groups into the suburbs is significantly different in character from the Western pattern. Research contested the myth of the American 'white middle-class suburbs' as early as the 1960s (e.g. Berger, 1960; Gans, 1967), not to mention the working-class suburbs around Stockholm or – even further back in time – Paris (White, 1984).
 - 5 We do not know precisely to what extent they are being expelled by increasing gentrification.
 - 6 It is another story that the sine qua non conditions of the capitalization of the real estate market would have been absent without these private owners.
 - 7 Experience shows that, after long-drawn-out negotiations, developers may offer substantial payments to local authority budgets as 'sweeteners' for the councillors; local governments are entitled to ask for unlimited background development contributions.
 - 8 Telki might serve as an example, where a group of capitalists belonging to the Hungarian banking elite entered the local real estate market in support of the local government, although only temporarily.
 - 9 The conditions of the subsidized loans set by the state favour large families with higher-than-average incomes.

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