The Phenomenological Approach and its Relevance in the Contemporary Development Context

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Abstract: - The aim of the paper is to present the main features of the phenomenological approach and to prove the validity of the method in the context of contemporary development, in relation to the paradigm of social geography and behavioral geography. The phenomenological approach focuses on the individual whose conscience, resulting from experience, inclusive of spatial experience, implies intentional behavior. Under the influence of phenomenology, social geography, behavioral geography and regional geography deal with such concepts as: group, community, social networks, identity, territory, living space, but also project space, and define paradigms which – as the case studies show - enable to reveal the essence of territorial processes taking place in the present, in the context of globalization, but, especially that of glocalization.

Key-Words: - phenomenological approach, identity, territoriality, local development, globalization, glocalization.

1 Introduction

An important issue for the scientific environment is that of development inequality and, mainly, its perpetuation and even augmentation, in spite of the preoccupations for local development starting with the second half of the 20th century [4].

Bottom up development, also called endogenous development or local development, became the alternative to the models and theories that proved their limitations in resolving the multiple particular cases [17].

Local development represents a way of approach rather than a model [1] and is understood as a method of social and economic intervention in a strictly localized territory [9].

As reaction to globalization and placelessness [18], and not just to the failure of the models of exogenous development, local development thus recovers the territorial dimension of development [17] and is a component of the process of glocalization, by which local and global are built simultaneously [13].

The space becomes a space of involvement [9] where the main role is played by territorial actors. The studies of territorial actors, of the relations they develop with the territory, represent important premises for the improvement of the development process.

The scientific foundation of such an approach starts from phenomenology as well as from a series of concepts belonging to social geography, behavioral geography or regional geography. Treated more like epistemological curiosities, these concepts may and must become paradigms for the restructuring of the study of the human as inhabitant, main actor in the process of local development.

2 The fundamentals of the phenomenological approach of development

2.1 Phenomenology - science and methods

Phenomenology is the science of the conscience phenomena and a research method of the intentional (aimed at something) conscience which reveals the fundamental conditions in the establishing the objects of knowledge [19].

Starting from the idea that only interior perception may illustrate the existence of the object the term is often used with the limited meaning of describing the sensing abilities of seeing, hearing, namely to perceive main sensations. Nevertheless phenomenology implies more than that, focusing on the subjective, practical and social conditions of all human experiences- from the epistemological
experience to the ethical, political, religious, aesthetic and daily experience.

Phenomenology is the study of the structures of conscience as a result of experience, from a first person perspective. The meaning of things in personal experience can be emphasized, i.e. the meaning of objects, events, the individual and the time.

The relevance for the development studies is given by the fact that phenomenology studies such concepts as perception, thought, imagination, desire as well as intention, action, social perimeter, activity.

Phenomenology focuses on the causes for everyday individual behavior, interrelating persons and social behavior (idem) - essential elements for the process of local development.

2.2 The relation between geographic studies and phenomenology

2.2.1 The social geography paradigm

The definition as a geographic study dealing with the aspects of social life which determine differences in space [3], social geography interconnects with the field of phenomenology in its attempt to identify the causes of social behavior which influence space.

The Marxist current emphasized the economic causes such as labor division, organization of production process [17, 3].

In the ‘70s human geography rejected the model of homo economicus, homo rationalis, and considered space to be a social product, a result of a coherent combination of systemic relations between groups and spaces [17].

The group, the main creator of the produced space, is more than a collectivity or social category; it is an association of people who share the same norms, models, values, representations [3]. These grant identity to the group.

Social geography studies groups with an obvious spatial component, whose long term history determined the adoption “of a space from economic, ideological and political perspective” [11]. Thus, the identity is enriched with a sense of belonging to that space which becomes territory due to its relationship with the group.

There are several scale levels of the territory according to national, regional and local identities.

National identity refers to the distinct features of a group as a nation (same descent, language, culture, religion) and also to the sense of belonging of the individual to these (recognition of a common name, planning of individual existence within a collective narrative context, perpetuation of traditions from an immemorial past).

The spatial component of the national identity resides in the ownership by the nation of a unified territory within the borders of that state. Thus, national identity and the sense of belonging to that nation imply a symbolic identification with the state and its symbols: emblem, flag, and anthem. The nation identifies with the state.

National identity generates a certain type of individuals, interconnected by the means of a special type of community: the state. The nation is an imagined community shaped by the institutionalization of citizenship practices and social reproduction [16].

Regional and local identity are defined in a similar way but they correspond to the inferior scalar levels of the territories of identification and refer to the distinctive features of a group and the sense of belonging to a group represented by perpetuation of language, preservation of specific traditions, customs, way of life and recognition of a collective depiction.

The process of modernization, characterized by spatial and social mobility, urbanization, fast transportation, telecommunications and globalization, determined the weakening and fragmentation of the traditional communities and identities (meaning Tonnies, Durkheim) as well as an alienation of the individual from himself and space and a perpetual search for meaning [18].

In postmodern societies, local identity and sense of belonging are built by mobilization practices and collective participation which determine interaction on the grounds of a common objective between the members of the community.

The identity system is focused on the place of residence and the individual. It is implied that local political actors- in their desire to induce a co-operative and not conflict relation between the members of the community- are directly interested in the initiation of such an identity reconstruction processes.

Social geography studies the causes of such processes and the differentiation of space in relation with identity reconstruction, an element of the superstructure of the territory.

2.2.2 The behavioral geography paradigm

Behavioral geography studies – as its name suggests – the behavior of a human group within a territory.

The territory, main component of the group identity, has itself an identity of its own, made of a
series of images with variable meanings, consequence of the experiences of the group during the historic time of the formation of the territory.

The territory preserves collective memories that withstand time and ensure the prevalence of the social body over individual existences [6].

The places “charged with meaning” are traditionally support for the transmission of messages between generations and are essential elements of collective identity and conscience and have symbolic function with role of mutual ideals.

The way in which the members of the group relate with the geographical space determines territoriality and includes the feelings of affection for the territory and the behavior of the group in relation with the territory.

The affection to the territory is called topophillia and is characterized by the use of the name of the territory – a shared code of identification, and by the ability to disseminate within the group an image, a full, global vision, as a discourse about the territory [14].

The mental reconstruction of the territory from its most significant places is a consequence of the examining and covering of the territory. Concrete experience of the space generates belonging [6].

The discourse on territory is a reconstruction of the perceived and represented space.

The perceived space and the represented space are defined starting from the acceptance of the two primary cognitive processes (perception, by which the psychic registers objects in their presence and representation, by which objects and phenomena are brought to mind in their absence) [11].

The represented space does not only reflect the mental features of the human spirit, or of the intensity of territorial perception, but preserves the mark of the codes and ideologies specific to the social group to which the subject belongs [11]. Every perception is thus charged with social imagination.

The revealing value of the represented space results in the way in which it is generated. The perception takes place first, i.e. the objects are represented in their presence, the perception being mediated by sense organs, age, sex, culture, motivations, social/economic status, qualities inherent to the subject, previous experiences, personal and group spatial experience, access to information [2]. The representation of a space is consequently built through the filter of the imagination and thought of the subject, through juxtaposing of symbols and signs and is considered “revealing for the meaning granted to the space by the inhabitants” because “to produce a representation of the space already implies a feature (…), a control, even if it remains within the boundaries of imagination” [5].

The study of representation of the identity territory is done by using topophillia questionnaires, which request the naming of significant places, the creation of a discourse on territory, and also by means of mental maps.

In this last case, each respondent is asked to draw the territory “the way he has it in mind”, without a model, therefore according to the representations he has on the territory. The result is “an abstract image of a seen / lived territory”, a mediated image – as it was presented- like any other representation.

The multitude of thus obtained images defines the shared image of the territory, a general representation of over- or underrated images in relation with the identification data of the respondents.

In the modern period, the behavior of the group within the territory was disturbed by the progress in transportation and communication technologies [7].

The possibility to cover vast territories led to the apparition of network territories, lacking continuity and which do not correspond to the surface managed by the territorial group.

On the other hand, communicational techniques eliminated the need of immediate spatial proximity and led to the erosion of the sense of rooting [7]. In developed societies the traditional territorial crisis materialized in de-territorialization, a fracture between the individual and space [18]. In the postmodern period the notion of de-territorialization and the intrinsic idea of de-territorialized identities are discussed in the context of globalization.

What type of belonging is possible today? Do the structures of the economic or political environment still correspond to the borders of the nation-states? Are the ancient territories which defined our lives still valid? We are living in a world of fluxes [16] which transcend identity territories formed in historic times, while dominant organizations transcend in their turn the social conventions of the cultural identities and local societies by means of the informational environment and technologies. We live like synapses in a network (idem).

A process of reconstruction of the strictly localized territoriality is taking place, focused on the space of residence, which bears meaning and can generate a feeling of belonging, territoriality being a consequence of the identity process, parallel to the process of local identity reconstruction [18].

The support sustaining the building of these new identities and territorialities may be a project space which was not historically individualized but is the
subject of assuming and of management strategies similar to those of traditional societies.

This process of re-territorialization generates a strictly delimited local territoriality (idem) which tends to ensure a balance between individualism and the identity of the local collectivities, i.e. the spatial proximity and network proximity.

The new local territoriality is emphasized by the study of the living space/ living polygon defined as the area of the individual’s spatial practices.

This corresponds of the space frequented and covered with minimal regularity; it consists of attractive places, knots, synapses, around which individual existence is crystallized and answers to several needs of the individual – habitation, education, work, supply, recreation, socialization etc. The connection between attractive places is ensured by routes of circulation – often but not always recognized as important. Outside the attractive places and the circulation routes non-places are situated, with no meaning for the individual [2, 11].

The study of the life polygon and of the mental maps gives the possibility to reveal collective images of the space but also objectively invisible elements which give the landscape meaning and build the individual space in which the humans feels safe. This is absolutely imperative to ensure the equivalence between the space studied by researchers and the inhabited, covered, lived space [2].

Both local identity and local territoriality are the premises and the results of good local governance which, from the perspective of the theory of territorial systems, represents the organized form of the territory [14] which is responsible for its performance.

3 Case studies

3.1 Local identity and territoriality

The research premise is given by the fact that Timisoara is the largest urban pole in the west of the country and a traditional end-dynamic pole, its population being in a large proportion foreign. The research aimed to emphasize the share of high school students born in other places, specifically whose parents or grandparents come from other places or even regions of the country in order to see the consequences on the identity they assume for themselves.

The analyzed group was formed of 600 students with residence in Timisoara.

Hypothesis no. 1: the majority of the students were born in Timisoara as a consequence of the radical diminishing of the migratory fluxes following the fall of the communist regime. Hypothesis confirmed: 89% of the respondents were born in Timisoara, 11% of the respondents were born in another region.

Hypothesis no.2: a large part of high school students are the children of the migrants established in Timisoara during the major industrialization period of 1970-1980. Hypothesis confirmed: the families of 80% of the students come from other places, 42% of these coming from other regions. The families of only 20% are from Timisoara.

Hypothesis no.3: the identity assumed by the students is determined mainly by the foreign environment of the families and not by the place of birth. Hypothesis confirmed: although 89% of the high school students are born in Timisoara, only 53% assume the identity of dweller of Timisoara, 17.5% assume a regional identity, 14% national identity, 4% identities of other regions and 7% ethnic identities.

Hypothesis no.4 considered the covering of the urban space: due to moving autonomy, need of social interaction and free spirit specific to their age, high school students cover regularly a large area of the urban space. Hypothesis partially confirmed: the students have living polygons extended at the level of the urban space, but cover a small area of the city; the living polygons include the central area of the city where are focused the main socializing and recreational areas, open air concert places, as well as the peripheral areas where commercial and sports areas are located.

Hypothesis no.5: high school students have a representation of the urban space given by its regular covering. Hypothesis confirmed: all students offered a mental map of the city. Several representation types may be distinguished: circulating maps reproducing the route towards the high school; maps of the immediate proximity (neighborhood) which are representations marked by the functional importance of the urban space, the city being a place of living, immediate, void of any symbolic function, reduced strictly to experience; photographic maps which include symbolic images of the city which are assumed by the students and perceived as familiar, but not as much the patrimony landmarks; impressionist maps which represent an cherished space which often include representations of green areas in contrast with modular areas of
collective dwelling.

The high school students from Timisoara belonging to mostly foreign families have a medium level of local identity and attachment to the living space; which is more a functional space than a symbolic one. Nevertheless the assuming of a local identity (which is not the result of traditional mechanisms of identity building within the family) together with the critical representation of the urban space show a solidarity with the space and a favorable premise for the future consolidation of local identity.

3.2 Regional identity and territoriality

Banat is a historic and cultural region situated in the south-western part of Romania, positively represented in the national collective mind, characterized by a strong regional identity and a profile of the regional collective recognized for a culture of development, openness towards modernism, cosmopolitanism and entrepreneurial spirit [1].

The analysis aimed to demonstrate whether regional identity, still present, may form an advantage for the transformation of the individual inhabitant into a territorial actor.

May we still consider a Banatian identity (which would give the inhabitants of the region a sense of solidarity for a joint project)? What are its component elements? What relevance has regional identity today? Does it still represent a “code” for the preservation of the cohesion of the region? What are its ways of expression?

The questionnaire method and mental maps were used. The questionnaire focused of the comprehension of the represented space and of the elements forming the representations, including regional symbols, living space grounded on space practices, attachment towards places, associated identity discourse and to what extent a connection between these aspects and regional civic sense exists.The studied group was formed of 300 persons, 55% from the urban area, 45% from the rural area, 17.3% under 20 years of age, 64% between 20 and 60 years of age, and 18.19% over 60 years.

Hypothesis no.1: the use of the name of the region is a proof of the equivalence between the researched area and existential reality. The name is its identity code and the most powerful mark of the territory. Hypothesis confirmed: 95.5% of the respondents chose Banat for the name of the region in which they live. Consequently Banat is a shared and assumed name. Only 4.5% indicated the names of local areas.

Hypothesis no.2: the name Banat is still operational. Hypothesis confirmed: 87.24% consider that this name is used often. The variants for the context for using the name Banat are very numerous.

Hypothesis no.3: Banat is not only characterized by its name, but also by a consistent image which the inhabitants may synthesize into a discourse. Hypothesis confirmed: the image re-created by the discourses of the respondents covers several aspects of the territorial system: representations of the social environment, of the cultural values specific to the inhabitants of the region, of the landscapes, of the history and present dynamics of the economy.

Hypothesis no. 4: there is a mutual collective image of the regional space, consisting of places considered highly significant. Hypothesis confirmed: there appears to be an ontology of the Banatian space structured according to symbols-inclusive of the past-, the aesthetic and to the means of use of the term.

Hypothesis no. 5: the group holds the representation of the regional identity space, which is not only an imagined space, but also a living space. The request was: “draw Banat as you have it in your mind”. The main result is a low level of territorial representation. Only half of the group has this type of representation. The inhabitants from the cities generate more correct images, revealing a better knowledge of the regional space, inclusive by the means of plans and maps. For the inhabitants of the rural areas, Banat is more an imagined space than a living space. More than 90% consider Banat a unitary regional space, as it was formed in history, disregarding the interior, more recent, limits of the two counties which today form the region. Only 44.61% of the mental maps offer more than the shape (regardless of its correctness) and only 18.46% re-create the image of a “consistent” space which includes various geographic landmarks (cities, rivers). 10.95% of the answers are figurative answers that fulfill the requirement in an original manner: they do not offer a map, but a symbolic drawing. Their Banat is an idealized identity space which sometimes is sufficient, little practiced, mainly imagined.

Hypothesis no. 6: the territory is a major feature in the construction of the relation with exteriority, otherness, that which does not belong to the group. Hypothesis confirmed: the place of birth and existence, as well as rooting, are the most quoted reasons for the assuming of regional identity.
Hypothesis no.7: there still exists a Banatian identity group positively appreciated. Hypothesis confirmed: 70% of the answers identify positive features of the group which reveal the unanimity of the group appraisal.

Hypothesis no 8: the declared affection towards the region and group materializes in interest for the evolution of the region. Hypothesis confirmed: more than 90% give an affirmative answer, revealing a feeling of solidarity.

Hypothesis no. 9: there is a low level of recognition of the role of territorial actor as a consequence of the communist period, when the political regime was the sole manager of the territory. Hypothesis confirmed: the answering persons show a modest willingness to get involved: 50% are potential active participants in the regional development projects, 25% are not interested, and 25% are passive / resigned. Banat is still a shared territory. Hypothesis confirmed: the answering persons show a modest willingness to get involved: 50% are potential active participants in the regional development projects, 25% are not interested, and 25% are passive / resigned. Banat is still a shared territory.

4 Conclusions

The integration of the phenomenological approach in the paradigm of social geography and behavioral geography enables the study of identity, its forms of manifestation and identity mechanisms of the communities. Thus can be identified spaces with good potential for endogenous development with strong identity groups, active as territorial actors, and spaces inhabited by communities which require the reconstruction of identity and re-territorialization for their transformation into identity groups. Besides its heuristic value, this research has a real practical value in showing the political discourse and powers the necessary elements which may ensure the social cohesion of the group with the development strategies, generating good premises for their success: the planned (project) space becomes a new identity territory.

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