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# URBAN SPACES AFTER SOCIALISM

*Ethnographies of Public Places in Eurasian Cities*

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# Sights and Signs of Postsocialist Urbanism in Eurasia: An Introduction

*Tsy pylma Darieva and Wolfgang Kaschuba*

The interest in urban spaces in Eurasia and their transformation in this volume is no accident. In putting together eleven case studies of seven cities situated on the margins of the former Soviet Empire, we have focused on ethnographic studies of public places to explore continuities and discontinuities in the reconfiguration of urban landscapes and societies after socialism. The book offers fresh insights into changing physical contours, social aspects and meaningful imaginaries in different public spaces from Tashkent to Tbilisi, from St. Petersburg to Osh. Whereas the first part of the volume discusses physical and symbolic contours of the city, the second part addresses the social dimension of Eurasian urbanism and voices heard in these places. Referring to the current fragile political stability as well as the privatization and globalization processes in a new geopolitical situation, the authors of this volume describe and analyze cultural and social meaning of contested public places. Some of them discuss the ways local urban memories and narratives of places are reflected in the voices of residents and subcultures, other contributors investigate the means by which ordinary residents appropriate public places beyond the mainstream paradigms and master narratives of the city image. These sights and signs of postsocialist urbanism are once again building a laboratory for new social distinctions and spatiality in the region where Europe meets Asia.

The recent literature on »spatial turn« and »place meaning« has significantly contributed to the theory of the spatial dimension of culture, sociality and the politics of locality, including the urban context<sup>1</sup>, but these concepts have rarely been discussed in the context of the (post)socialist

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1 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Doreen Massey, »Places and Their Pasts«, in: *History Workshop Journal* 39 (1995), pp. 182–192; Setha M. Low, »Towards an Anthropological Theory of Space and Place«, in: *Semiotica* (2009), 175, pp. 21–37; Beate Binder, *Streitfall Stadtmitte. Der Berliner Schlossplatz* (Cologne: Boehlau, 2009).

city and its dramatic transformation. All of the cities (Baku, Gyumri, Osh, Tbilisi, Tashkent, Yerevan) in this volume, except St. Petersburg, are involved in their own specific way in the post-Soviet world as geographically and symbolically peripheral cities located on the southern margins of the former Moscow-Kremlin center. The spaces described here were previously subjects of the Soviet order, which often controlled them from the »center«, and became objects of localized reorganization and contested re-imagining for the future. Since obtaining independence, »first« (capital cities) and »second« cities in Central Asian and South Caucasian states have been actively engaged in the processes of »postcolonial« nation-building and globalization, as represented in public places, monuments, museums, advertisements, and cultural events. Whereas some recent historical and sociological works illuminated the spatial and cultural dimensions of urban transformations in Russian cities such as Moscow or St. Petersburg<sup>2</sup>, the Eurasian cities of the South Caucasian and Central Asian areas have remained extremely under-researched despite occasional outbursts of geopolitical interest. The case of post-Soviet cities is largely terra incognita<sup>3</sup> and a study of postsocialist Eurasian urbanity has not yet really developed. This volume approaches this issue from the perspective of the study of public urban spaces.

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2 Blair Ruble, *Money Sings. The Hanging Politics of Urban Space in post-Soviet Yaroslavl* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995); Karl Schloegel, Frithjof Schenk and Markus Ackeret (Eds.), *Sankt Petersburg. Schauplätze einer Stadtgeschichte* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2007); Karl Schloegel, *Moskau lesen. Die Stadt als Buch* (Berlin: Siedler, 2000); Monica Ruethers, *Moskau bauen von Lenin bis Chrusčev. Öffentliche Räume zwischen Utopie, Terror und Alltag* (Wien: Boehlau, 2007); Thomas Boren, *Meeting-Places of Transformation: Urban Identity, Spatial Representations and Local Politics in post-Soviet St. Petersburg* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2010); Cordula Gdaniec (Ed.), *Cultural Diversity in Russian Cities. The Urban Landscape in the Post-Soviet Era* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

3 See Tsypylma Darieva and Wolfgang Kaschuba (Eds.), *Representations on the Margins of Europe. Politics and Identities in the Baltic and South Caucasian States* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2007); Thomas Borén and Michael Gentile, »Metropolitan Processes in Post-communist States. An Introduction«, in: *Geografiska Annaler, Series B* 89 (2007), 2, pp. 95–110. The Russian journal *Antropologicheskii Forum* (Vol. 12, 2010) initiated a valuable discussion towards the present and future of urban studies in the former Soviet Union. See: [http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/06/2010\\_12/](http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/06/2010_12/), last accessed on July 14th 2011).

Yet it is the marginality of Eurasian cities in both geography and disciplinary approaches that brings together and separates Europe and Asia. Two area studies disciplines, Slavic Studies and Central Asian/Middle East Studies, have staked out their claims to the region: the former because of the long-standing influence of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union on the Caucasian and Central Asian societies; the latter because of the large proportion of Muslim populations and the no less considerable historical impact of Middle Eastern cultures and civilizations on the region.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, there is a remarkable diversity in local understandings of the cities' geopolitical orientations and their images, ranging from the sense of being a European city, expressed by referring to presocialist and socialist modernist master plans, and simultaneously being »marginalized« and »Asian« by referring to preserved traditional urbanism in opposition to the Russian colonial center. This process of hybrid and ambivalent belongings is reflected in current physical forms, surface designs, symbolic economies, local cultural interpretations and claims by users of public spaces. Cities like Tbilisi, Baku or Tashkent offer an exciting area for historical and empirical in-depth studies and a comparative analysis of emerging societies. The papers presented in this volume are initial steps in understanding the Eurasian urbanism and intensity of its change.<sup>5</sup>

In reference to Henri Lefebvre and Setha Low's approaches to exploring and analyzing urban spaces, this book addresses the question of the social production and construction of public places in the context of post-socialist urbanism as a way of life. Whereas political scientists, historians and linguists have extensively researched the transformation of socialist

4 See Bruce Grant and Lale Yalcin-Heckmann (Eds.), *Caucasus Paradigms: Anthropologies, Histories and the Making of a World Area* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2007) as well as Tsyplima Darieva and Viktor Voronkov, »Rethinking the South Caucasus. Introduction«, in: *Laboratorium. Russian Review of Social Research* 1 (2010), pp. 17–27.

5 Among the few works on culture and history of Eurasian cities see Jeff Zahadeo, *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent, 1865–1923* (Indiana University Press, 2007); Taline Ter Minassian, *Erevan. La construction d'une capitale à l'époque soviétique* (Rennes Cedex: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007); Catherine Alexander, Viktor Buchli and Caroline Humphrey (Eds.), *Urban Life in Post-Soviet Asia* (London: Routledge, 2007); Kristof Van Assche, Jozeph Salukvadze and Nick Shavishvili (Eds.), *City Culture and City Planning in Tbilisi. Where Europe and Asia Meet* (Lewinston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009); Paul Stronky, *Tashkent: Forging a Soviet City, 1930–1966* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

urban spaces on a macro-level<sup>6</sup>, they have rarely focused on the rapidly changing politics and cultures of everyday life on the micro-level. One would be mistaken, however, to see these developments solely associated with the structural change and linear transition from the totalitarian to the democratic society and a radical break with the past.

Our aim is not to exoticize the meaning of remote places, but rather to identify the distinctiveness of urban spaces and common global trends in the process of spatializing urban culture and human experiences after socialism on the micro-level. Similar to Eastern Europe, we face in this part of the world a growing creativity and complexity of cultural representations of urban spaces on the one hand, and newly emerging hierarchies, inequality and social exclusion, on the other hand. The questions are: How are new urban identities in Eurasia, including city symbols and place brands, represented, managed and appropriated by different social groups? How do people transform and reinterpret urban space into their own places beyond the perspectives of grand narratives?

## The meaning of urban spaces

We have chosen to use the metaphor of »(post)socialist urbanism« to designate a dynamic of peculiar and near-universal change occurring in the process of the reconfiguration of urban spaces by local authorities, the influence of global trends and flows, and the ways ordinary people respond to this change. Whereas the city as a venue for popular activity deserves our attention as much as or more than the state in Eurasia, we emphasize that »place remains fundamental to the problems of membership in society«.<sup>7</sup>

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6 Sasha Tsenkova and Zorica Nedovic-Budic (Eds.), *The Urban Mosaic of Postsocialist Europe. Space, Institutions and Policy* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2006); Kiril Stanilov (Ed.), *The postsocialist City. Urban Form and Spatial Transformation in Central and Eastern Europe after Socialism* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).

7 James Holsten and Arjun Appadurai, »Introduction: Cities and Citizenship«, in: *Cities and Citizenship*, ed. by James Holsten (Durham: Duke University, 1993), pp. 1–20; Warren Magnesson, *The Search for Political Space: Globalization, Social Movements, and the Urban Political Experience* (Toronto: University Toronto Press, 1996), in particular p. 16.



The dismantling of the Soviet social order and its representations are most emblematic in cities, in those particular public spaces where state socialism manifested and marked its power and symbols in a different manner than in the countryside, and where resources were often more plentiful, as conflicts and contested places are today.

The growing mass of critical literature on the studies of Eastern European and former Soviet societies under transition rightly emphasizes the plurality of socialisms and diversity of postsocialist transformations and experiences.<sup>8</sup> While some ethnographers have examined aspects such as the economy, ethnicity, religion, food, violence, borders, migration, and social relations of these societies, by conducting their field work in the city, the city and urban space have mainly been treated as background rather than as a focus. Moreover, until recently, anthropologists have tended to neglect the analysis of the built environment as a cultural construction and as a spatial expression of social life. Architecture in the urban context has been taken for granted in this research and was »often seen as a static reflection of symbolism or cosmology«.<sup>9</sup>

The concept and theorizing of »postsocialist urbanism«, its specific distinctions in (re)configurations of public places and its meaning for residents, have rarely been a topic of discussion in the social sciences. Over the last few years, human geographers have developed a considerable interest in the relationship between the organization of the urban built environment, cultural landscapes and political regimes in Eastern European cities. It is certainly true that city landscapes are incorporations of power and local politics and policy, organized in a specific place. However, from an anthropological perspective, the material or ideological side of this transformation is dominant in the analysis of human geographers. The voices of people who inhabit these places and experience the changes in their environment imposed by officials, city planners and new actors, are of-

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8 Chris Hann (Ed.), *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia* (London: Routledge, 2002); Chris Hann, *Socialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Local Practice* (Routledge: London 1993); Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2002); Melissa Caldwell (Ed.), *Food and Everyday Life in Postsocialist World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2009).

9 See Caroline Humphrey, »No Place like Home in Anthropology. The Neglect of Architecture«, in: *Anthropology Today* 4 (1988), 1, pp. 16–18, in particular p. 17.