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CHASING WARSAW

Socio-Material Dynamics
of Urban Change since 1990

campus

Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Introduction: Chasing Warsaw Monika Grubbauer and Joanna Kusiak	9
Theses on Post-Socialist Urban Transformation Karl Schlögel	25
I: Post-Socialism and the Dynamics of Urban Change	
Toward a More Comprehensive Notion of Urban Change: Linking Post-Socialist Urbanism and Urban Theory Monika Grubbauer	35
Comeback or Revolution of the Cities? Regina Bittner	61
II: Urban Form and Representation	
Continuity of Change vs. Change of Continuity: A Diagnosis and Evaluation of Warsaw's Urban Transformation Magdalena Staniszki	81
Gating Warsaw: Enclosed Housing Estates and the Aesthetics of Luxury Jacek Gadecki	109
The Liminal Cityscape: Post-Communist Warsaw as Collective Representation Dominik Bartmanski	133

III: Social Practices and the City

Sanitation and Disorder in Warsaw's Urban Space:
Cultural Determinants of Waste Management
Włodzimierz Karol Pessel 163

Visible and Invisible Ethnic Others in Warsaw:
Spaces of Encounter and Places of Exclusion
Aneta Piekut 189

Kiosks with Vodka and Democracy: Civic Cafés between New Urban Movements and
Old Social Divisions
Joanna Kusiak and Wojciech Kacperski 213

IV: Metropolitanism

The Laboratory of Polish Postmodernity:
An Ethnographic Report from the Stadium-Bazaar
Roch Sulima 241

Space, Class and the Geography of Poland's
Champagne (Post-)Socialism
Kacper Poblocki 269

The Cunning of Chaos and Its Orders: A Taxonomy of Urban Chaos in Post-Socialist
Warsaw and Beyond
Joanna Kusiak 291

List of Figures 321

Contributors 325

Index 329

Introduction: Chasing Warsaw

Monika Grubbauer and Joanna Kusiak

If a banal truth can sometimes come as a surprise in almost philosophical ways, it is because we have got used to its banality to such an extent that we no longer perceive it as a truth. The inspiration for the book's title came during small talk at a party in Berlin. As so often at international get-togethers, we were talking about the respective cities we come from. Soon, one interlocutor confessed laughingly that he was actually a scholar researching communicative patterns of small talk. Although his research was not directly related to the topic of cities, he claimed to have discovered a certain regularity when chatting with people from Warsaw at parties in Berlin, New York and Madrid; an observation further confirmed by our ongoing small talk. If, for instance, someone asked a young Varsovian "Where are you from?", and then responded to the answer ("From Warsaw") with the standard affirmative "Oh, how nice!", a true Varsovian would always ask back with a politely hidden mistrust: "But have you ever been to Warsaw?" Any "Yes, I have" will be immediately dwelled upon: "But WHEN was it?" However, most characteristic is the punchline that follows unfailingly, irrespective of the interlocutor's response, be it in 1987, 2001 or 2008. A punchline repeated resolutely by girls and boys from Warsaw with a sparkle in their eyes: "But you know, it's a different city now."

Inside the "black box"

If Warsaw must be "chased" by its researchers, it is because it keeps turning into "a different city" before we have managed to develop an appropriate language that could describe the previous state of affairs. Warsaw is commonly perceived as being always different from itself, as a city for which difference has become the core of its identity. Philosophically rich and yet elusive, the notion of "difference" can be easily translated into urban statistics. Warsaw has been one of the most dynamically developing European cities over the last few years. The 19,000 housing units constructed in Warsaw in 2008 matched the corresponding number in London—a city four times Warsaw's size—and the figure was almost five times higher than that of the housing units built in Berlin or Prague. There are 405,000 square meters of office space currently under construction, as well as numerous large-scale public construction projects such as a new metro line, a bridge, a river boulevard, and a sewage treatment plant.

If it seems easy to quantify the urban transformation of Warsaw, the transformation process nevertheless remains a mystery in actual fact, akin to Lefebvre's "black box": "The architect and the urbanist [...] know what goes in, are amazed at what comes out, but have no idea what takes place inside" (Lefebvre 2003, 27f.). The processes of intense material and social transformation in Warsaw since 1990 can be interpreted in terms of a secondary urbanization. This does not, of course, mean that Warsaw had to first of all be urbanized to become a true city after 1989. Yet the various stages in the urbanization of Warsaw in the decades from 1918 until 1989 unfolded according to different paradigms compared with contemporary processes. In the aftermath of 1989 the last-socialist-paradigm lost its legitimacy almost overnight, although its material structures and patterns of social practices still continue to affect urban life. The new wave of urbanization, devoid of any bounding paradigm or guiding vision, was expanding rampantly rather than being an orderly set of planned procedures. In Lefebvre's parlance, this was "a critical phase" of urbanization, "a painful transition"

(ibid., 28). What went into urbanization's "black box" at this stage at the beginning was the so-called socialist city-not so much as an ideal but as a real, functioning urban organism including built structures and social practices, which had developed at times in accordance with the system and at other times not. What came out of the box was indeed an amazing, if not occasionally scary mix of bazaars, cafés and conflicts, pho soup and property claims, shopping malls and artists, gardens, skyscrapers and much more. Most of these phenomena will be analyzed or at least mentioned in this book, but our main aim is to look into the "black box" itself and reveal some of the mechanisms at work inside.