

Commentary

The Post-Communist Town: An Incomparable Testing-Ground for Social Geography

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The study of the post-Communist towns of East Europe and Russia does not only present the social sciences with the opening of a new field and the attraction of exoticism close at hand. They are a remarkable observatory of the complex relations which unite the material facets of urban life (extension of the built-up area, architectural forms, types of distribution of infrastructures and services) and the social structures (mode of government, nature of the economic initiative, expressions of sociability). In three-quarters of a century for Russia, in fifty years for the countries of East Europe, cities many ages old were to have two changes of system: from liberal industrial capitalism to the controlled Communist economy, from interventionist autarchy to the globalized market. To give the lie to the poet (Baudelaire), towns change no faster than the hearts of mortals but beat to the rhythm of their continuities, their aspirations and their dreams.

More precisely, the post-Communist town brutally poses the central question of all social evolution: how at the points of rupture, does an organized group conceive its modernity and translate it into material productions of built-up spaces? The fact that it was to do with populations established on dense areas, endowed with a long history, erupting suddenly into an open and different world, adds to the complexity of the problem but did not weaken the force of the dilemma: should one reject the past and construct a new city in the image of the new values, or adapt and reinterpret it in pragmatic fashion? Urban civilizations have always hesitated before radical paths, most often adopting median positions, attracted by more extreme solutions to a greater or to a lesser extent.

The shape of the town and the spread of urbanization seem the most concrete evidence of these choices. With some dazzling exceptions (the identical reconstruction of Warsaw's old town in praise of patriotic Polish nationalism, the conservation of the central districts of St Petersburg, deposed capital of the empire, or the transformation of the centre of Prague into museums), the Communist régimes had opted on a massive scale for abandoning the city inherited from capitalism (Budapest) or for a break with it (Moscow). The dominant model was the construction on the outskirts of huge collective blocks of flats – we might call them grands ensembles – put up hastily with prefabricated industrial materials and built on the same functionalist principles of the Soviet microrayon (several thousand high-rise apartment blocks or several dozen thousand apartments enclosing the basic amenities – primary school, community clinic – and pushing back to their perimeter a few commercial services, derisory in both quantity and quality). From Berlin to Petropavlosk in Kamchatka, and from Sofia to Naberejny-Tchelny in Tartary – not to mention the outskirts of Algiers! – the town planning design and the influence of 'big brother', disseminated through the technical assistance of myriads of architects and engineers, can be recognized. A

combination of ideological and technical grounds explains the rapid spread of the model. The strongest were clearly the rejection of all forms of the dense, 'anarchic' town, symbol of the degeneration and social oppression of the bourgeoisie, condemned as much by the inflexible ideologues, who saw it as the seat of counter-revolutionary reaction and of the alienation of the proletariat, as by the enlightened architects close to the modern movement, who nourished the hope of building the ideal city. The spectacular rise of housing neighbourhoods on the outskirts presented both of them with the realization of their fantasies: a uniform and classless city, still homogenized by the norms of accommodation allocation, a rational habitat in the image of the new man who had been born. Thus they even managed to reverse the old distribution logic of urban spaces: at Moscow residential densities were higher at the edge of the urban area – which would be our suburbs – than in the central neighbourhoods!

How did the market economy and the liberalization of land and property policy alter these trends? There, too, the lure of the new and rejection of the Soviet period were immediately imposed. From Budapest to Moscow the aim of building a 'new town', at least a business district, to welcome international companies and joint ventures, has made building schemes spring up: a satellite city on an island in the Danube, 6 kilometres downstream from the Hungarian capital, was shelved; 'Moscow-City', Moscow's La Défense, admittedly situated in the heart of the built-up area, but which is being built at a slow tempo in a large disused area. On the other hand, the craze for individual peri-urban housing is expanding with the frenzy of a social body contained for too long by decades of collective restraint. At Moscow, cottages are overflowing in the green belt of the lesopark (literally, forest-park), as well as in the minds which associate the old Russia and the success of the 'new Russians' in these crenellated houses. And at Prague, as at Budapest and Warsaw, suburbanization progresses as all the statistics of the decade of the nineties indicate.

It is still important not to exaggerate these reverse tendencies. Observations, above all by researchers coming late to the field, certainly magnify what is new, and the persistent dearth of reliable localized statistics favours the impression of novelty to the detriment of that of permanence. It seems clear, even according to the importance of the collective apartment estate, the sustained shortage in the housing crisis and the growing demand exerted by new agents (business offices, services for the population as a whole), that there cannot have been a huge-scale desertion of the buildings of the Communist period, whatever their often deplorable maintenance and their symbolic denial. Similarly, for foreign or national companies, the recovery of an old building, renovated or simply refurbished, often presents faster and more functional opportunities for carrying through their goals, and surer prestige addresses than in modern and anonymous blocks of flats. This was the case at Moscow with many of the Stalinist buildings of the fifties which, once they had been cleaned up and brought up to standard, revealed an interesting architecture and a solid framework, or at Budapest with Haussmann-type buildings (avenue Andrássy). Opposition to these building renovations in fact provoked more opposition from the former populations in situ – at least those who did not profit directly from the sale or renting of their apartments – than the new agents of economic and social life. The municipal authority had therefore to arbitrate between the major interests of the city (economic development of the market) and the democratic demands of the grass roots, who could take exercise in the same central spaces. The transformation of the urban districts does not appear to have been the instantaneous and direct reflection of changes in society, but was established at the cost of more or less indirect processes.

They are all the more complex because the preservation of cultural dimensions diversifies them as well. Already in the great shortages of the eighties at the end of the Brezhnev era, even the occasional visitor could not help comparing the dearth of supplies in Soviet towns with the at least

apparent opulence which the traditional Chinese markets had been able to maintain in Red China, although much more hard-line than the decadent Soviet Union. The inheritance of an old mercantile culture thus undoubtedly showed through in contrast to a civilization that was much more land-owning and more impervious to exchange. In a still more lasting fashion, beyond the universal tendency towards the edge city and the desire to escape from the confinement of the Soviet town, it is an indisputable fact that in Russian towns at present there is a direct opposition between a deep liking for country life, even expressed by resolutely urban strata, and more pronounced urban tastes. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the success of the *dacha* from the domain, first aristocratic, then bourgeois (as in *The Cherry Orchard*), to the meagre shed on the Kruschevian garden plots, via the solid piles of the government apparatchiks, has never faltered. At the same time, to the beat of forced industrialization and the collectivization of ways of life (urban transport, cinemas, theatres), the average Russian has also developed a taste for the town. Here, the liberation of post-Communist society is as much a child of political overthrow as of the struggles for secular influence between those drawn to the Slav or to the Western worlds.

The experience also makes it possible to provide evidence on public-private relations. Under the Soviet system, the public sphere, brought under state control, was considerably developed, allowing only fragments of personal life to survive, still subject to close surveillance and eventually repressed. There, too, opening-up involved irrational and erratic processes in a society which was neither juridically nor psychologically prepared for freedom of initiative. Thus, at least in the early days of the establishment of a free market in housing, transfers to occupiers and re-sales were carried out in total anarchy: in the same block of flats there were provident owners, speculative investors, and suspicious tenants, with little inclination for being entrusted with the title deeds to a property that was both badly maintained and held the promise of taxes in the offing. Incidentally, no one had given any thought to the management of the communal parts, whose neglect was still more evident than previously, although since the time of Hausmann this had been one of the keystones of 'horizontal property' (cf. the co-ownership regulations).

Urban transport itself had a bad time of it with these brutal transitions. At Moscow, the underground, buses, and trolley-buses formed a fairly efficient network, with the exception of the town-planning aberration of building housing complexes on the outskirts several kilometres from underground stations on the pretext of preserving expropriated land for expanding central functions (ministries, commercial centres) which never materialized. Today, the increasing motorization of households hurls urban society along still more fearsome paths: blocking of the traffic in unsuitable infrastructures, anarchic parking along the main roads in the centre, illegal parking areas invading the bottom of buildings with 'tin cans', garages necessitated by the harshness of the climate. Overload and privatization of the public space are highlighted still further by the proliferation of services and businesses designed to alleviate standard deficiencies of the Soviet town. The result is a short-lived feeling of improved welfare for the inhabitant, but also a real deterioration in the coherence of the urban space and of general interest in the organization of the territories. Post-Communist society discovered to its own cost that 'public' did not necessarily mean the same as 'statist' and that 'collective' did not inevitably mean 'authoritarian'.

In an undoubtedly more abstract fashion, the experience also shed a brighter light on the relations between urban policy and socio-economic mechanisms. In the sixties, the Western societies and the Communist systems had followed parallel courses to establish at different levels – town, region – a better-balanced development of space. In France, it was the technocratic power of DATAR* which advocated decentralization of industry and then of services. In the Soviet Union this role was given to 'the scientific and technical revolution'. In its name, the growth of very large

cities was to be discouraged, first of all Moscow and Leningrad, always, moreover, suspected in the eyes of the régime of sheltering an anti-authoritarian intelligentsia. Control of internal population movement and restriction on housing programmes appeared to be sharper tools than the 'fervent commitment' of French-style economic planning. But they had, nevertheless, to take the constraints of the economy into account: since productivity was more significant at Moscow, on account of the education and skilling of the workforce, the state enterprises had little difficulty in convincing the Gosplan authorities (centralized Soviet economic planning) to release the restrictions on the creation of new jobs and housing production. Just as, in France, DATAR had to moderate its wishes after the 'crisis' of 1973, taking account of the increasing scarcity of investment, in the Soviet Union even the most uncompromising ideology could not completely ignore the laws of culture and education which still favoured the big cities.*

The introduction of the freedom to set up a business and, more timidly, to move freely clearly reinforced these social logics in Russia. But it often reversed the mechanisms. Before, secondary employment, above all – the 'economic base' – was the motor of urbanization, essentially for the hundreds of new towns – 'industrial villages', to use the expression of the Russian sociologist, Leonid Kogan – which the régime spread throughout the Union, but also – as we have seen in the case of Moscow – in the exemptions which reality imposed on the intransigent aspects of the ideal map of 'settlement systems'. Today, economic crisis is on the prowl in every sector: global competition makes Russian industrial products, once protected by autarchy, uncompetitive; the State itself, having become more miserly when tax returns are poor and influential potentates build up war-chests that are independent to a greater or lesser extent (Gazprom), has had to slim down the personnel of an overstuffed and underproductive administration, and of a vast army. In the face of this greater economic contingency, both individuals and businesses discovered greater freedom, the former to arrange or simply to wish for a place of residence, the latter to set up an investment. Decision-making geography rediscovered its rights, when it was reduced to the simple cartography of the impulses of the system and its dignitaries.

In fact, the discovery of the real potential of territories (education, training, culture, accessibility) instead of the arbitrary artificiality of ideological choices had every opportunity to propel the post-Communist town into the universal logics of globalization and its urban corollary: metropolitization. This bonus for the very big cities, often State capitals, has for more than ten years also established Moscow as the surest repository of the values of liberalism, as much for individuals who seek civil peace and upward social mobility as for businesses who maximize their profits there at the demonstrable risk of generating an extreme crisis in hundreds of middle-sized towns. But this rule, valid from Paris to New York and from London to Tokyo, is not neglectful of seventy years of the Soviet past: residential property, impact of mentalities, and the influence of Russian culture will make their weight felt for a long time to come in the interpretation of these interconnections between territory and societies. Here, as elsewhere, globalization does not necessarily go hand in hand with uniformization.

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Translated from the French by Juliet Vale

Note

* Délégation à l'Aménagement du Territoire et à l'Action Régionale, or Regional development and Planning board [translator].