Three metals and the "post-socialist city": reclaiming the peripheries of urban knowledge

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ABSTRACT: Urban theory has long been in the grip of a handful of cities, and despite the recent recalibration of the catalogue of cities that inform it, the emerging geographies of urban studies remain skewed at the expense of cities often referred to as "post-socialist". This essay considers the notion of the "post-socialist city", suggesting that it inadvertently poses limits to our imagination, parochializing research, pauperizing its theoretical capacity, and limiting its potential for comparison by automatically organizing differences into the pre-conceived categories of what it is and what it is not. It is proposed that the concept (re)produces artificial boundaries that consign "post-socialist" urban research to the peripheries of urban knowledge, joining the vast ranks of ordinary cities that fail to meet the criteria of relevance or admissibility embedded in the hegemonic theorizations stemming (mainly) from the north-western quadrant of the world map. Using the example of an extremely peripheral city in Kazakhstan, this essay argues that the "post-socialist city" should turn its focus to relations, networks and flows while simultaneously dropping the "post-socialist", which (re-)produces differences vis-à-vis the supposed normality of the "Western" city – differences that are either imagined, exaggerated, misrepresented, outdated or imposed.

Keywords: urban theory, comparative urbanism, urban difference, post-socialist city, post-colonial perspective, transition.

Introduction: a tale of three metals

Urban theory has long been in the grip of a handful of cities, and although the past few years have seen a recalibration of the catalogue of cities that inform it (Robinson 2016b), the emerging geographies of urban studies remain skewed. Cities that have been known as "post-socialist" for almost 30 years remain routinely off the map or, alternatively, they join the discussion as exceptional cases – interesting, but with little direct potential to enrich the debates (Ferenčuhová 2012, 2016c, Sjöberg 2014, Haase *et al.* 2016). This piece proposes that it would be more helpful to let go of the project of theorizing the "post-socialist" in the "post-socialist city", despite the recent revival and de-territorialized revamp of the concept (see especially Tuvikene's recent article in this journal, Tuvikene 2016a), because it reproduces the illusion of "post-socialist" difference, prompting the perennial state of exception of cities such as Riga and Odessa. The argument will gradually proceed towards common theoretical grounds starting from the experience of a "post-socialist" city located in the outer periphery of urban knowledge (and in the interior periphery of the Eurasian continent), approaching it from what may be described as a postcolonial vantage point.

About 15 years ago, a curious billboard stood in front of the central department store of the Kazakhstani city of Öskemen (Ust'-Kamenogorsk)(Figure 1) – ostensibly out of place in its promotion of a line of

products from the Ulba Metallurgical Plant (UMP), a local industrial giant. Certainly, these products, namely, uranium, beryllium and tantalum as well as, more vaguely, "mechanical engineering", do not appear on people's daily shopping lists. Thus, rather than an advertisement, this billboard is something entirely different – a form of internally oriented place marketing aimed at bolstering local pride about a "unique" production, and at turning away the attention from this unique production's uniquely adverse environmental effects. With the ideological guidance of the Communist Party long gone and an identity vacuum created, this advert represents one of several voices in the identity bidding processes that have unfolded in this disoriented "post-socialist" city, attempting to glaze the contours of the local urban identity with an indigenous metallic patina. Other voices include appeals to nationalist sentiments, geopolitical imaginaries, cosmopolitanism, family values, religion, and the presidential soteriology expressed by Nursultan Nazarbayev's[1] "Kazakhstan 2050" master plan for the country's future.

Figure 1: Advertising billboard for the Ulba Metallurgical Plant in Öskemen (photo by the author, 2000).

Each of the three "identity metals" tells a story that is rather less glossy than the one communicated by the UMP. Uranium occupies an iconic place in the imaginary of Soviet socialism because of its association with the Cold War arms race. In the year 2000, as UMP representatives told this author, nuclear fuel pellets for Soviet-built power plants were the main output of the uranium factory, which supplied them to energy producers from across the former Soviet block, as well as to Finland.

The beryllium production unit's story is more opaque. Beryllium is an extraordinarily light, resistant and expensive metal, and during the arms race, its use was mainly within the defense industry – for example, in nuclear warheads (Kolanz 2001). It has many other uses too, but costly and environmentally hazardous production prevent its wider exploitation (Beryllium Science and Technology Association 2015). After the end of the Cold War, demand from the military decreased, while the UMP kept a large and precious stock of beryllium in its inventory, of which it was stripped in the mid-1990s in a shadowy deal that included a two-man firm based in Sweden with a past (it seems) in the UMP, the deputy prime minister and former director of the UMP and, of course, the UMP itself. This deal was an unlikely agreement whereby the "Swedish[2]" firm would have extended a multi-million dollar credit line to the UMP against

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[1] Nursultan Nazarbayev has ruled Kazakhstan since 1989, first as First Secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party, and subsequently as president of the newly independent state.

[2] The firm's name is Scanburg AB. This Scandinavianesque name might aim at making the firm sound more indigenously Nordic (presumably to make it appear more trustworthy), but "burg" is an ending that makes little sense in the Scandinavian languages (unlike berg or borg).

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a beryllium security that was to be stored in Gothenburg for the duration of the credit time (the details of this agreement are highly disputed, cf. von Shlezinger 1999, Shevchenko 1999, Shelgunov *et al.* 2001, Rosengrens Advokatbyrå 2001). Somehow, the credit agreement did not materialize, but plenty of beryllium remained outside of Kazakhstan and appears to have been sold off. The Swedish firm subsequently went bankrupt in early 2001 – officially because of unpaid telephone bills (Rosengrens Advokatbyrå 2001).

Then there is the tantalum. Tantalum prices skyrocketed tenfold in 1999-2000, and more than sixfold only in late 2000 (Vogel and Raeymaekers 2016), creating a bubble that was soon to burst, despite the fact that tantalum is a critical ingredient in cell phones and other electronic hardware (Marysse 2003).[3] Tantalum is present in significant concentrations in the conflict-ridden areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It is a typical conflict mineral,[4] and less scrupulous actors, including the UMP, were unable to resist the temptation of getting supplies from this region, again calling various shady actors into action, perhaps even the notorious mastermind of arms smuggling, Victor Bout, who is also known as the "merchant of death" (Alberizzi 2001, Kibasomba and Lombe 2011).[5] To facilitate the transportation of such dubious freight, the UMP entered the aviation business, operating its own airline, Ulba Aviakompania, which occasionally leased aircraft from an aviation company that had been run by said merchant of death (Cuvelier and Raeymaekers 2002). The UMP thus played an important role in fueling the humanitarian disaster of the Great African War, and this was exactly at the time when the people of Öskemen were being bombarded with positive images of the UMP's blood-tainted post-Soviet resurgence in recurrent advertorials in the local press and – through billboards of the type discussed above.

For the field of urban studies, there are lessons to be learned from an ambiguous billboard devoted to a relatively obscure metallic troika. First, it destabilizes frequent notions of centre vs periphery, global vs nonglobal, and primitive vs modern. Clearly, these are three metals, the flows of which connect a peripheral island of production to diverse sites across different continents, involving a highly diverse set of actors, from local factory workers in Kazakhstan and child labourers in rebel-controlled areas of the DRC, via criminal intermediaries, to global giants in the defense and electronics manufacturing industries.

In the hierarchical architecture of the world city narrative (e.g., Sassen 2001, Taylor 2004, and especially Derudder *et al.* 2003), cities like Öskemen inevitably appear at the very bottom, if at all. Ignored, or perhaps Othered by the hegemonic discourses of contemporary urban theory, such cities are rather untheorized than undertheorized. They are irrelevant because they are lagging behind, because they are far away, and because few talk about them in academia, and those who do are compelled to accept, absorb and adhere to a theoretical agenda developed, for the most part, elsewhere. However, as Jennifer Robinson argues (e.g., in Robinson 2005, 2008, 2011), losing sight of the ways in which cities *actually* connect to the surrounding world misrepresents their role in the global space of flows.

These three metals demonstrate that cities can connect in different ways, between and within different levels of the supposed global hierarchy of cities, in ways that unsettle the norming theories developed, mainly, within Anglo-American academia (cf. Amin and Graham 1997, Roy 2009). Öskemen may well be "past" and "elsewhere" (Robinson 2004) – past as in needing to catch up, modernize, become

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[3] The bubble was particularly fueled by the release of Sony PlayStation 2 before Christmas 2000. Very high demand for this product prompted a sudden price hike (Mantz 2008).

[4] Conflict minerals are minerals that are mined in war zones, generating revenue that sustains and prolongs the conflict. Notable examples include "blood diamonds", as well as tantalum, tin, tungsten and gold. Such minerals became more important after the Cold War sponsorship evaporated (Le Billon 2001, Collier and Hoeffler 2005).

[5] Viktor Bout was arrested in Thailand in 2008, extradited to the Unites States in 2010 and sentenced there to 25 years of imprisonment on multiple charges in 2012 (BBC 5 April 2012). According to Alberizzi (2001), the regional governor of the time, Vitaliy Mette, had been seen in company with Bout. Mette was the former director of the UMP, and former deputy prime minister of Kazakhstan.

European, or Eurasian, and elsewhere as in distant and uninteresting – but it is a city that has its own role, place and connections in the global economy, with effects that run across different scales. Structuring our thought about such cities following the rigid discipline of functional categories or regional archetypes will not bring us any further in our quest for a truly inclusive theorization of cities. Instead of seeing cities as "discrete, self-enclosed and analytically separate objects" (Ward 2010, p. 479), objects that lend themselves to convenient categorizations that mask the complex, elusive and even heterodox nature of the relationships between them, we need to view cities for what they are (Robinson 2005), and relationally. The remainder of this paper discusses what the author perceives as the inconvenience of one such convenient categorization – the "post-socialist city" – suggesting it be demised in favour of an alternative language that facilitates building bridges and connections rather than drawing boundaries and sealing off regions.

The "post-socialist" in the "post-socialist city"
Much – but of course not all – of the literature on cities in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) that has emerged over the past three decades or so places these cities in the firm grip of post-socialism, whether explicitly or implicitly (Szelényi 1996, Stanilov 2007, Diener and Hagen 2013, Tsenkova and Polanska 2014). It may well be a diverse post-socialism, one that does not lend itself to sweeping generalizations or to theorization of a broad geographical coverage, but post-socialism it is.[6] And post-socialism produces "post-socialist cities", identifying them primarily as successors to the defunct socialist city, which in itself is a somewhat debatable creation (Hirt, 2016). Before we know it, post-socialism in the former Soviet satellite states will have outlived socialism.

Importantly, post-socialism has been subject to renewed examination across various social sciences (Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008, Bandelj 2016, Raikhel and Bemme 2016, Schmidt 2016, Tuvikene 2016a), possibly making its way into a *third* generation of theory-making on societal transformation in CEE, which stretches beyond the first generation (early to mid-1990s), characterized by linear catch-up narratives of transition, and the second generation (post-2000), which placed greater emphasis on context variation and cross-disciplinarity (Bönker *et al.* 2002, Kollmorgen 2013). Even so, the resilience and durability of post-socialism are remarkable, considering that state socialism is now almost 30 years behind. For example, in a recent article, we learn that runners in Sofia, Bulgaria, are effectively "experiencing post-socialism" (Barnfield 2016), though admittedly a very complex and multifaceted version of it.

One of the reasons lies in the softness of the concept: most scholars have an immediate sense of what it is intended to describe, yet few would be able to agree on what exactly it includes, for "post-socialist" is a multi-layered construct. It is multi-layered because, at its most basic level, it refers to a particular region, supposedly for a limited period– a literal "post". However, as Tuvikene (2016a) explains, "post-socialist" may also refer to a particular (hybrid) condition, making its durability a function of the length of this condition while retaining the regional connection, but it can also be made into a de-territorialized notion, decoupling it from the specific regions that it is usually intended to describe (see also Tuvikene, 2016b). In the de-territorialized understanding, post-socialist cities cannot exist as such, but certain aspects within them can be post-socialist, *e.g.*, memory politics relating to the socialist past. These different layers of post-socialism are thus initially likely to co-exist – unlike Tuvikene (2016a) and Bernt (2016), I prefer seeing these three post-socialisms as complementary, and layered, rather than as competing – but over time, the only possible survivor is the de-territorialized version, as both the post-socialist "era" and "condition" are likely to succumb to their own increased obsolescence. For sure, de-territorialization is

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[6] In a stinging little piece of academic satire called "first sentences of post-socialism", Krivý and Tuvikene (2015) assemble the opening statements of a wide range of scholarly publications that have in one way or another engaged with "post-socialism", including some of my own work. While the decision to label these works as contributions on "post-socialism" may be somewhat arbitrary, Krivý and Tuvikene's experiment highlights the main arguments present in the literature, revealing many of its taken-for-granted and repetitive assumptions which, taken together, illustrate the dearth and conceptual limitations of the extant narratives of "post-socialism", as well as the lack of true alternative narratives.

likely to increase the appeal and applicability of any concept, simply by liberating it from compulsive geographical chains, but does this mean that all concepts can or are worth being de-territorialized? And can we learn anything new, or gain new perspectives and understandings, from a de-territorialized post-socialism? And can a de-territorialized (or any other) notion of post-socialism really escape from the concept's deeply rooted association with the territories that were once directly or indirectly ruled by Moscow? There is reason to be doubtful, and I argue against most usage of any version of "post-socialist" to describe cities or, for that matter, the societies within which they are embedded. It will be proposed that "post-socialist" (re-)produces differences and oppositions *vis-à-vis* the supposed normality of the "Western" city, and that these differences are either imagined, exaggerated, misrepresented, outdated or imposed.

The pitfalls of "post-socialism" and "transition"
Scholars interested in CEE cities frequently describe these as either "post-socialist", including variations such as post-communist, post-Soviet, *etc.*, or by making use of various types of regional signifiers.[7] The latter occasionally emerge as sub-categories of the former (see, e.g., UN Habitat's *State of European Cities in Transition* report, UN Habitat 2013, which identifies four sub-regions[8]). Clearly, preference for "post-socialist city" would indicate interest in the fact that there is a socialist past somewhere in the background, and that this exerts some kind of influence, be it active or passive. Conversely, writers who prefer to use territorially defined concepts such as Central and (South)Eastern Europe, East Central Europe, and so forth, ascribe greater value to the similarity of certain economic, political, social and morphological characteristics of cities within a specific - region. And while they may accept or even emphasize the internal differentiation within this region, they will nevertheless tend to assume that what lies outside of it is different in a more meaningful way. This imaginary has deep roots in the mutual Cold War Othering that took place in both East and West Europe (see Ferenčuhová, 2016a).

Whatever the preferred nomenclature – post-socialist or territorial – the effect is similar: boundaries are drawn solid, and in an instant, Prague and Nuremberg are more dissimilar than Prague and Tashkent. The main problem is, as Outhwaite and Ray (2005) put it twelve years ago, that the theoretical construct of post-socialism is at odds with the variation present in the huge region that it (usually) refers to. Crucially, its boundaries petrify the outer geographical limits of our theoretical imagination, simultaneously misrepresenting the relevance of the area that they enclose. This is a trap that is not easy to escape from, and the "post-socialist city" literature is certainly not its sole captive (Nijman 2007), for "even in sophisticated analyses […] the temptation to territorialise insights through naming a regionally distinctive urbanism (for example, as Asian or African) emerges" (Robinson 2013, p. 672).

While it is not easy to discard such monikers, in order to speak to a wider audience, and to trump the hegemony of the western-made *prêt-à-porter* theory packages, such as "neoliberalism", "global cities", "creative cities", or even "transition", urban scholars interested in CEE need to leave the space open for alternative questions, interpretations, and ontological horizons, without submitting to the current geopolitics of academic knowledge production and to the order established by the frazzled North Atlantic fortress of thought. To take the example of neoliberalism, Kangas and Salmenniemi (2016, p. 6) suggest that it "is treated as a phenomenon with a specific, spatially bounded lineage. Presumptions of a teleological transition are problematized insufficiently, and the analytical arrows, however crooked

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[7] To give a few prominent examples, three of the most influential edited collections of the 2000s are entitled *The Urban Mosaic of Post-Socialist Europe* (eds. Tsenkova and Nedović-Budić 2006), *The Post-Socialist City* (ed. Stanilov 2007), and *Transformation of Cities in Central and Eastern Europe* (eds. Hamilton *et al.* 2005). Moreover, in the title of a recent edited collection comparing residential segregation in European cities (eds. Tammaru *et al.* 2016) – a very good book overall – "East meets West", even though none of the cities analyzed in the volume are particularly "easterly" (Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius, and Prague are the "East's" representatives).
[8] These are the Western sub-region (stretching from Estonia all the way down to Slovenia), the Eastern sub-region (Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova), the southern sub-region (the Balkan countries, excluding Slovenia), and the South Caucasus region. Russia is not treated in the volume.

or imperfect, continue to point uni-directionally from West to East". Arrows, as a matter of fact, dominate the manifold illustrations that accompany most work on "transition" (or "transformation") in CEE, not least in urban studies, but any one arrow can only connect two particular things, and the connection either denotes a one-way movement along a continuum (e.g., from nominal rents to free market rental), or a direct causal relation (e.g., the removal of rent caps leads to economic displacement). A prominent example of arrow-heavy theorizing of urban transitions in CEE is Sýkora and Bouzarovski's (2012) multiple transformations model, in which a thick arrow leads from the totalitarianism-central planning bottom left quadrant of a 2x2 matrix to the democracy and market top right quadrant. Thin "crooked and imperfect" arrows are added to illustrate the diversity of the paths represented by the thick (and straight) arrow, yet only one general direction of movement is envisaged. However, it is a movement that has only taken place in part of the regions where it was expected; democracy in the former Soviet Union, excluding the Baltics, peaked at the end of the Gorbachëv period and has been retreating ever since (Hale 2016), and it is now severely under threat in Central Europe. And it is just herein that we find the main disadvantage of transition-thinking: it requires a final destination, an end, rather than being open-ended – it is in the very nature of the word. Moreover, it is impregnated with notions of stepwise progression, and things have to (or are likely to) take place in a particular order. In Sýkora and Bouzarovski's model, the order is democracy, market, society & culture, urban structures. Yet, this order is extremely fragile, for democracy does not thrive unless it is able to produce immediate results to legitimize itself. Therefore, Kuzio (2001) reverses the preferable order of the necessary transitions – of which he identifies four, doubling Offe's (2004 [1991]) third transition towards state institutions and the creation of a nation – suggesting that a "proper" transition would have to start with state- and nation-building, followed by marketization, and finally democracy. Yet, in CEE countries, these four "transitions" all took place at the same time (Kuzio 2001), heightening the challenge, with nation-building perhaps being one of the first steps taken to alter the urban landscape, e.g., in the form of "landscape cleansing" (from the communist semiotic blanket, Czepczyński 2008) and the overall revision of urban toponymics (Light 2004). Perhaps one way to escape the teleological trap of transition talk is to view the post-1989/1991 period as a period of multiple *building* projects – projects that develop at different speeds and with different characteristics and outcomes. Rather than experiencing four main transition processes (Kuzio 2001), we would thus be speaking about four main construction projects – of the nation, the state apparatus, the market and of the political system (unfortunately not always democracy). This amounts to a massive construction site, and it is a construction site that deeply influences the urban in ways that are neither predetermined nor predictable, an exercise in the production of place at a scale hitherto unknown to humankind. In such a context, Jennifer Robinson's (2016a) calls for a "light and revisable" theory appear to be particularly well-timed.

The responsibility for absorbing Prague and Tashkent into urban theory-making is both in the hands of the "mainstream" – the agenda-setting clique of scholars scattered across the north-western quadrant of the world map – and of the academically ghettoized scholars of the "post-socialist city", yet mostly of the latter (cf. Grubbauer 2012): just like it is unreasonable to expect academics based in Poznań to start talking about Kansas City, it is equally exaggerated to hope for Atlanta-based scholars to deeply engage with what is taking place in Minsk. And even though the wider community of urban scholars may have much to learn from a de-territorialized, exportable, notion of post-socialism as proposed by Tuvikene (2016a), the concept is forever tainted by its traditional area studies associations, while simultaneously being challenged by more easily "de-territorializable" ideas, such as post-collectivism (Pickles 2010). Among the myriad concepts circulating to describe urban societies worldwide, even the most refined, valuable, and globally relevant version of post-socialism is less than competitive.

In view of the above, my suggestion is to drop the post- and regional attributes altogether, *unless* their presence has a particular and indispensable meaning, which it rarely does. This means that we should avoid speaking about "experiencing post-socialism" while running in Sofia (to take the example used at

the beginning of this piece) when in fact what are being experienced are heavy traffic, pollution, crowded sidewalks and "privatism" and other common urban ailments (Barnfield 2016). Likewise, we should avoid looking for specifically post-socialist expressions of gentrification, *unless* we are able to demonstrate that there is something crucial in the local "post-socialist" context that is shared by other "post-socialist" locales, while being absent elsewhere. This crucial matter would have to rely on a legacy argument, which could look like this: the socio-spatial structure of socialist cities was characterized by conditions x, y and z; after socialism two of these conditions continued limiting (e.g.) the housing market, leading to specifically "post-socialist" outcomes x_1 and y_1 in this area; at this point, policy n, which is typical of "post-socialist" governments (e.g., the abolition of rent caps), is introduced in order to remove the conditions for what is perceived as the undesirable outcome x_1 without being able (or wanting) to change y_1; as a result, outcome y_1 is recognizable in all or most countries that have experienced a transition from socialism to the market, but much less in other countries that have adopted the same policy; y_1 is thus "post-socialist". This would be an ideal situation, but unfortunately it is not particularly realistic. Moreover, it demonstrates that the present is related to the past, but it does not necessarily demonstrate a legacy *effect*. According to Kotkin and Beissinger (2014), a legacy argument should focus not on what remains behind but on "what enables particular practices or beliefs to endure (and sometimes, to reemerge) – often in new form and to new purpose – in the context of large-scale macrohistorical change" (p. 8). Kotkin and Beissinger's perspective opens up for a range of areas where "post-socialism" could re-emerge as a useful concept, not necessarily by re-fashioning it as a de-territorialized concept, but by centering on certain characteristics of the demised socialist system, which need not be captured by the manifold stylized descriptions of it, such as the ones that appear in the handful of collections on the "post-socialist city". Housing may serve as a telling example. While one of the most significant changes that occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s was the near-abolition of administrative housing allocation, the socio-spatial patterns produced this way did not vanish immediately and are still present to a significant extent – an important left-over for sure, but as such they do not engender any legacy effects. Legacy effects may instead surface at the behavioural level, e.g., through the reproduction of expectations related to housing whereby experienced or imagined socialism inhibits the proper functioning of the nascent mortgage market (Zavisca 2012). Whether such expectations are sufficient to warrant continued reliance on post-socialism as a theoretical construct is a matter of debate.

Even so, in much work, "post-socialist" is used in a habitual manner, with the purpose of locating cities geographically and historically (see Ferenčuhová 2016b). This is empty post-socialism, and its (often unintentional) effect is to differentiate the particular case study from cities that are not explicitly being discussed. In such cases, the term adds little in itself, but it subtracts from these studies' export potential. Such studies may be excellent in themselves, and they may even attract citations, but as Örjan Sjöberg (2014) suggests, they are unlikely to generate wholesale theoretical engagement.

When used empty, the "post-socialist" in "post-socialist city", as well as its offspring (post-communist, etc.), has a number of weaknesses in relation to the way it assumes, magnifies and misrepresents the "post-socialist city's" own uniqueness and difference in relation to the category that it is not. Much of the debate within the "socialist" and "post-socialist" cities research community has focused on the degree to which these cities depart from the assumed normality of the "Western" city (Hörschelmann 2002, Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008, Wiest 2012, Ferenčuhová 2012, Ferenčuhová 2016, Petrovici 2015). In a certain sense, East-West comparisons were relevant for as long as actually existing socialism actually existed, and they remain relevant in as long as socialist legacies, for example poorly reformed institutions or heavily subsidized utilities, continue to linger. Such comparisons are also a matter of historical interest, for our understanding of what actually was under socialism is still incomplete (see Ferenčuhová 2016b, Hirt 2016) – in other words, the "socialist" in the "post-socialist city" is possibly the latter concept's weakest link, despite its indissoluble connection to it. Yet, works that set out to evaluate different aspects of the current "neoliberal" context with reference to the socialist era (e.g., Golubchikov *et al.* 2014) are strongly dependent on the solidity of the state of the art on the socialist city. However, the socialist past

is frequently, and increasingly, described in a sketchy, sweeping and inexact manner, often disengaging "the true costs of communism" (Åslund 2012). The latter are certainly highly disputed – and Anders Åslund may well be a neoliberal nemesis for some – but full appreciation of these costs is nevertheless crucial to any understanding of the true costs of post-socialism, whatever these may be. Otherwise, we may be tempted to conclude that "there is nothing about the legacies of socialism as such that had predetermined the particular patterns and magnitude of uneven development before capitalism enters the field" (Golubchikov *et al.* 2014, p. 626). Clifford Gaddy (2014, p. 65) would disagree: the over-population of Siberia, for example, exacts a high toll on the Russian economy in the form of extra costs to enable continued human settlement (heating, higher construction costs, distance costs, etc.), but the economic and human costs of resettlement would be prohibitive.

However, the pitfalls of using the West as benchmark for normality are greater than the benefits because the comparison is based on rather explicit hierarchical binaries with a colonial flavor (cf. Chari and Verdery 2009) – modern (or postmodern) vs backward, rich vs poor, European vs Other, civilization vs barbarism, and of course normal vs abnormal, deviant. What this normality means transpires from the discursive framing of "post-socialist" cities and societies, and of their ongoing transformations, as a "Return to Europe", "convergence", "lagging behind" and, perhaps most vaguely, as "the effects of transition" (for a review, see Kollmorgen 2013).[9] Some scholars have made serious attempts at undermining this state of affairs (e.g., Hörschelmann 2002, Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008, Ferenčuhová 2012, Petrovici 2015, Tuvikene 2016a), but they are fighting an asymmetrical battle against a resilient teleology. Also, treating the return to Europe/normality as something that is projected upon the region entirely from the outside would be a misconception (Ferenčuhová 2016c). Such a post-colonially influenced reading of the situation would have to come to terms with the fact that, yes, certain Western institutions did offer an economic transition package that has been heavily criticized in some circles, but that its promise of a radical break from the past was certainly welcomed by many as evidence of a final and indispensable farewell to the system of colonization-by-comrades, gaining the support of numerous scholars, who identified discarding communism as a crucial moment in nation-building (Bunce 1999, Eke and Kuzio 2000, Kuzio 2001) and as a central prerequisite for successful economic reform (Åslund 2012). In a way, this is the situation that is currently being re-lived by Ukraine, yet the stakes are even higher because the Russian Federation, as it is today, is – or tries to be – a colonial power on the rise, whereas the late 1980s USSR was an imploding behemoth held together by a delegitimized ideology.

The point is that discussions on the ongoing transformations in cities that have experienced socialism – but not on "post-socialism" per se – tend to focus on economic aspects, downplaying the role of the social, the political and the cultural. This adamant reference to economic conditions perpetuates post-socialist difference, especially if its causes are sought in and within the state of having been socialist. Certainly, Slovakia is poorer than Austria, but so are Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain, yet no one associates these countries' relative economic backwardness with their post-Salazarian, post-Fascist, post-junta or post-Francoan conditions, despite the fact that the authoritarian rule that these countries had to endure certainly took its toll on their institutional landscapes. Therefore, interpreting urban development in Poland or Azerbaijan – or for that matter anywhere else in the world – requires looking beyond economic transition, marketization, or neoliberalization, which offer, at best, only partial explanations that need to be complemented with input from other vantage points. To be sure, economic forces are important, but we should beware of exaggerating their causal powers, lest they carry us away on a teleological pursuit of convergence against a background of misrepresented difference. Misrepresented,

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[9] When forecasts regarding these cities' future trajectories are made, they often come as possible outcomes related to static, empirically unhealthy, regional typologies. While the main message of the dominant "Return to Europe" narrative leaves little scope for alternative (desirable) futures, the literature offers some alternatives in this respect. For example, Stanilov (2007) identifies four scenarios for the mid-term future development of the "post-socialist city" – Western-European, North-American, Third World-style, and East Asian – concluding that elements from all four scenarios are discernible (of course, Stanilov himself is not to be blamed for the roughly pre-existing categorizations that these four scenarios are based upon).

because primarily anchored in discourses of economic transition that inevitably "perform better" as difference-spotters in the deceitful landscape of comparable statistics manufactured through the efforts of the OECD, Eurostat, UNDP, ILO, etc.

Concluding suggestions

To conclude, I would argue that the "post-socialist" city's durable state of exception in the literature relies on differences that are either imagined, exaggerated, misrepresented, outdated or imposed.

They are imagined through the reproduction of the imaginaries produced and ripened during the cold-war era, when socialist urban difference hinged upon the geopolitics of this period. They are exaggerated for the same reason as they are imagined, but also because of the aforementioned excessive reliance on the economic aspects of transition as opposed to the rest of reality, which does not easily lend itself to quantification and superficial comparison. They are misrepresented because the socialist legacy is often misunderstood or given only partial significance, *e.g.*, by focusing on the restructuring of "capital accumulation strategies" towards the needs of neoliberal capitalism, failing to recognize that there is, to quote Kathrin Hörschelmann (2002), "a persistence of different conceptions and practices that challenge the status quo, as the subjects of post-socialist transformation will retain a memory of the past which, in its inevitably incomplete and remoulded shape, continues to influence evaluations of the present".

The "post-socialist city" is an outdated concept because the economic transition discourse upon which it frequently relies is increasingly obsolete. Economics matter, of course, but the economic transition from socialism to the market is an increasingly unreliable anchor of difference.

Finally, the "post-socialist city" is a concept that is imposed by the *policy community,* via the hegemonic discourses of neoliberalism/competitiveness, etc. And it is imposed from within the *research community,* via hegemonic theories in Western urban studies. In a contribution in *Geoforum*, Judit Timár (2004) even criticized the effect of the asymmetrical relations between individual academics in the West vs. the post-socialist rest, with the former mainly exploiting the latter to achieve their own career goals. Hopefully, this is not – or no longer – the case.

Yet, a final problem remains, and that is that imposed differences may be imposed from *within* the "post-socialist city" research community (cf. Petrovici 2015). This may be through self-censorship based on the implicit assumption that imported theories are more valuable and carry greater prestige than home-grown theories rooted in the local empirical harvest. The problem refers to the "geopolitics of the production of urban knowledge" (Robinson 2011, p. 17, see also McFarlane and Robinson 2012, and Verdery 1996). By dropping the implicit assumption of Western normality, and thus of the normality and applicability of Western-made theories, we may be able to free vast untapped intellectual resources. In this, I side with Robinson's (2005), and implicitly also Ferenčuhová's (2012) argument that we need to view the "post-communist cities" as ordinary. A focus on the "dual optic of networks and territories" (Robinson 2005, p. 763), on flows, relations and circulations as well as on city space, might be a good way to boost the export potential of locally produced urban theory. This, in turn, spells out a need for comparative research that transcends the (artificial) boundary lines drawn between "post-socialist" and non-post-socialist countries, between countries in "transition" and regular polities, between "East" and "West".[10]

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[10] Within urban studies, there are precious few studies that engage in a genuine act of comparison that includes cities in CEE within a wider set of cities; specifically, there is very little work that places these cities on a par with their "non-post-socialist" counterparts in their ability to generate new theoretical insights. Comparative work should involve more than a sum of case studies held together by a preconceived overarching theory and through misleading comparisons of superficially comparable statistics. In a recent article, Tuvikene *et al.* (2016) develop this very point, proposing, in effect, that any city can be compared to any other city, and that the food for comparative thought should be harvested locally, being "informed by the histories and practices of particular places, which are examined through essentially revisable and still emerging theoretical imaginations" (p. 4).

This brings us back to the three metals. These metals underscore the relationality and hidden global connectivity of an otherwise "unworldly" city. A "worlding" (Roy 2009) and theoretically inclusive account of the "post-socialist city" would need to tone down post-socialism in its use as instinctive regional marker. Post-socialism inadvertently acts as a superfluous barrier to our imagination, parochializing our research, pauperizing its theoretical potential, and limiting its potential for comparison by automatically organizing difference into the pre-conceived categories of what it is and what it is not. Instead of dressing up Prague and Tashkent as post-socialist, let us reclaim them from the periphery of urban knowledge by discovering them as – just cities. And like all cities, they have unique histories and connections that need not be eclipsed by pre-conceived categories, concepts, or theories.

Acknowledgment

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