



*Spaces of Late Socialism*. James Mark, University of Exeter; Josie McLellan, University of Bristol, 25.03.2013.

Reviewed by Marcel Thomas

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (September, 2013)

## Spaces of Late Socialism

In the last two decades, historians have produced a rich literature on the spatial history of the Eastern bloc. See, for example: David Crowley / Susan E. Reid (eds.), *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, Oxford 2002; Anders Åman, *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe during the Stalin Era: An Aspect of Cold-War History*, Cambridge 1992. A wide range of studies has shown that the physical spaces of socialist Eastern Europe 'had politics' and were crucial to regimes' attempts to intervene in the everyday lives of their citizens. David Crowley / Susan E. Reid, *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, in: David Crowley / Susan E. Reid (eds.), *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, Oxford 2002, pp. 1-23, p. 2. However, space remains a highly complex notion and historians have also used it to conceptualise a wide range of interactions and power struggles between different actors in society. See, for example: Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilisation*, London 1995; Breda Luthar / Maruša Pušnik, *The Lure of Utopia: Socialist Everyday Spaces*, in: Breda Luthar / Maruša Pušnik (eds.), *Remembering Utopia: The Culture of Everyday Life in Socialist Yugoslavia*, Washington 2010, pp. 1-35. The workshop 'Spaces of Late Socialism' held on March 13, 2013 at Exeter University set out to explore the different ways in which social groups, activists and socialist regimes conceptualised social space and its relationship to political conformity or opposition between the 1960s and 1989.

In a short introduction, JAMES MARK (Exeter) stressed that the workshop was designed to revisit the historical debates about socialist spaces so far and ex-

plore future directions for a spatial history of the Eastern bloc. As all six papers discussed a different country, the workshop provided an opportunity to compare the politics of space across socialist Eastern Europe and analyse whether transnational patterns can be detected in the use of space by activists or regimes. Moreover, the participants aimed to discuss the role of an 'imaginary West' and examine whether it would be justified to speak of 'parallel histories of space' in East and West in the post-war era. Finally, the workshop was designed to develop new thoughts about chronologies in the spatial history of socialism. With its focus on the last three decades of the socialist era, it tried to explore the role of spaces in the transformation of Eastern bloc societies and the eventual collapse of the regimes.

JOSIE MCLELLAN (Bristol) presented a conceptually challenging study of the role of space in the political self-understanding and activism of gays and lesbians in East Berlin between 1968 and 1989. She introduced 'scale' as a concept which is fundamental to an understanding of the ways in which individuals imagined their own place in socialist society. Although scale has long been an enormously important concept for geographers, it has so far hardly been used by historians. Understanding the world as scaled – with scales ranging from the body, the local and the neighbourhood to the national and the global – provides us with a sense of power relationships, size and hierarchy. McLellan pointed out that the gays and lesbians of East Berlin used a wide range of scalar notions to position themselves in relation to the regime and socialist society. For example, gays and lesbians often used the scale of the body to 'come out' or playfully turned

the home into a political space when they used it to meet and cross-dress. In some cases, they also intentionally took their protest to the public scale of the neighbourhood and the city when they participated in the May Day parades in East Berlin. As McLellan stressed, these different scales were not isolated, neither in real life nor in the thoughts of the activists. Instead, the 'play of scale' employed by East German gays and lesbians is key to an understanding of their activism in a socialist dictatorship. Therefore, McLellan demonstrated that scale can help us to understand the 'geographies of everyday life' and the complex ways in which individuals imagined their own role in socialist society.

JAMES MARK focused on spaces of dissent in Hungary between 1965 and 1975. Due to the lack of a Hungarian '1968', the literature on 1960s activism in Hungary is sparse. However, Mark stressed that activism did exist, but mostly within institutional spaces provided by the state. Communist youth reformers advocated local grass-roots power and had quite specific demands to put their ideals of communism into practice. However, they did not challenge the authority of the party and rather saw themselves in a dialogue with the regime. Some – such as reformers within the Communist Youth movement – categorically rejected public protest and were often suspicious of the Prague Spring. As Mark pointed out, these reformers were supported by the state because the regime wanted to channel youth activism into official spaces and build socialism on a day-to-day basis (the so-called 'revolution of the everyday') to avoid another escalation of protest like 1956. Nonetheless, there was also a small number of orthodox Marxist activists who expressed political protest outside these official spheres. For example, in 1965 they organised the first public demonstrations since 1956 to express solidarity with North Vietnam and attack the regime for having abandoned the revolutionary path. These activists started to organise themselves as an underground party and tried to gain the support of the workers, but their protest was brought to an end by their arrest and trial. Mark highlighted that some Hungarian activism revealed a similar development to 1960s protest in the West, as activists at first unsuccessfully tried to change politics and later successfully changed everyday life instead.

DAVID CROWLEY (London) examined the role of socialist architects in Eastern bloc societies and their relation to power and dissent. Focusing on the relationship between opposition and architecture, Crowley explored the question whether architecture in the Eastern bloc could be seen as a form of dissidence. Central to his

analysis was the notion of 'paper architecture', architecture in which the expression of certain ideas is more important than the actual realisation of buildings. Drawing on examples from Poland, Hungary and the Soviet Union, Crowley pointed out that architects could express criticism in their work despite their proximity to the regimes. He outlined three different types of criticism put forward by architects in the Eastern bloc: *kritika* or *samo-kritika*, 'licensed critique' (for example the criticism of housing plans that would not improve the housing situation) and dissent. Moreover, he pointed out that the state did not have a monopoly on construction, as for example the most ambitious architecture in the Eastern bloc was produced by the Church. Eventually, Crowley stressed that more research is necessary to determine whether critical architecture could really be called 'protest' if it was officially approved by the regime.

In the PhD panel in the afternoon, AGÁTA DRELOVÁ (Exeter) explored the relationship between the state and the churches in Czechoslovakia through the notion of 'memory spaces'. In particular, she focused on the St Methodius festival of 1985, which was co-organised by the state and the Church and attracted up to 150,000 people. The regime tried to hijack this religious event to both strengthen its bond with the official Church and combat the secret Church. Drelová pointed out that this intervention of the regime represented the culmination of a fundamental change in its policies towards religion. The original position of the communist leaders had been characterised by an official disinterest in religion on the one hand and sustained efforts to suppress the memories of Catholic nationalism on the other. However, the regime's disregard for apolitical spaces enabled the Catholic Church to successfully recruit among students and organise the first mass pilgrimages in the 1970s. Drelová showed how the state reacted to the rise of Catholic activism in postwar Czechoslovakia and especially in the 1980s began to use religious identification for its own cause, which led to a 're-Christianisation of national narratives'.

ANNA KAN's (Bristol) contribution analysed the physical spaces that were used by young members of a rock band in Leningrad in the 1970s and 1980s. As Kan demonstrated, the rock scene in Leningrad was heavily influenced by Western ideals. Young people tried to recreate Western rock music with simple means and also followed Western ideals in their desire to discover a new way of life. They appropriated the cafés, squares and parks of Leningrad to their own ends and thus gave them new meanings as spaces of the sub-cultural scene. Al-

though fears of the police and the regime constantly influenced the group's actions, they cannot be said to have gone underground. Many of the spaces they used were open public spaces, such as parks or the courtyard of St Michael's castle in Leningrad. Kan also highlighted that there was an interesting dynamic between the singers and their crowd, as both knew each other and in fact acted as members of one group. Together, they were increasingly able to use public spaces for their alternative life styles and thus quite literally reclaimed urban spaces from the regime.

LJUBICA SPASKOVSKA (Exeter) examined the conflicting understandings of socialist citizenship among the youth of late socialist Yugoslavia. In particular, she explored the 'youth infrastructure' of Yugoslav society as a space of activism and dissent. Youth centres for example provided real spaces for self-expression and offered opportunities to create a counter-cultural 'parallel world'. As Spaskovska emphasised, public and media spaces were used by young people in similar ways. Numerous youth magazines published themes similar to Western magazines and provoked with their radical cover photos. A new generation of young people in the late socialist era succeeded in 'hijacking' youth media to publicise their own beliefs and express social critique. Moreover, this also caused what Spaskovska called a 'spill-over effect', as members of the counter-culture began to occupy public spaces as well. For example, a square in Ljubljana was taken over by young punk activists and publicly renamed 'Johnny Rotten Square' in 1981. Spaskovska argued that for these youth activists the expression of personal freedom was the only thing that mattered and she thus opposed the common interpretation of their actions as standing for bigger ideas like nationalism.

In the concluding debate, the participants agreed that youth movements had emerged from the conference as a common and prominent space for self-expression across the Eastern bloc. Mark highlighted that the emergence of new alternative spaces in the 1970s and 1980s which did not necessarily have to be seen as oppositional constitutes another linking theme in the history of socialist

Eastern Europe. However, he also pointed out that more research on the diverse motivations of activists and the actors involved will be necessary to confirm this observation. Reflecting on more conceptual issues related to the notion of 'space', Crowley reminded the participants that space immediately seems to 'leak out' into other concepts and thus also poses a number of challenges to the historian who uses it to conceptualise power struggles in socialist society. Eventually, the workshop demonstrated that all over the Eastern bloc the reconquest of different spaces by the people in the 1970s and 1980s lay at the heart of a deep-rooted transformation process in state and society. To what an extent this development can be linked to the collapse of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe will have to be explored further. Therefore, the workshop showed directions for further research and revealed how a spatial history of the Eastern bloc can help historians to understand the changing relationship between the state and the individual in late socialist Eastern Europe.

#### Conference Overview

##### *Introductory Remarks*

Josie McLellan (Bristol): To scale? Gay and Lesbian Spaces in East Berlin, 1968-1989

James Mark (Exeter): Where to Be Political? Activism and the Use of Space in Hungary, 1965-75

David Crowley (London): Architecture at the Limits of Critique in Late Socialism in Eastern Europe

##### *PhD Panel*

Agáta Drelová (Exeter): Re-producing the 'Underground' in Post-Communist Catholic Memory

Anna Kan (Bristol): How Leningrad Became a City of Rock

Ljubica Spaskovska (Exeter): 'Pockets of Freedom' – Subversive Youth Institutions and Narratives of Freedom in Late Socialist Yugoslavia

##### *Closing discussion*

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

**Citation:** Marcel Thomas. Review of , *Spaces of Late Socialism*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. September, 2013.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40017>

Copyright © 2013 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.