

INTRODUCTION

ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIALIST CITIES

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Abstract: The collapse of the Socialist bloc after 1989 has been a topic of inquiry in many of the social sciences. In urban geography, however, there has been little systematic review about the changing nature of socialist cities in an era of rapid globalization. This paper outlines some of the macroeconomic contours that have conditioned national and metropolitan economies since 1989. It then reviews some of the defining features of the socialist city as a backdrop to Warsaw, selected Chinese cities, Ho Chi Minh, and Havana, which are the case studies of this special issue. [Key words: socialism, uneven development, globalization, urban morphology, public spaces.]

The power of language and geography can never be underestimated. Labels, toponyms, and descriptors convey multiple meanings. They conjure up connotations that, rightly or wrongly, portray the attributes of a particular place or society. When the socialists took over power in France in 1981, the French government was identified as the Left. However, as Body-Gendrot (1987, p. 237) explained,

Although the Left thought it could implement its policy in effect from a clean slate, in reality it inherited a legacy that would prove to be a formidable barrier faced with stark realities (i.e., plant closures), the left radically changed its utopian vision.

We should not expect, therefore, that substantive change should be profound, quick, or permanent just because of a name change or holding elections. Socialist projects, by definition, stake out long-time horizons to take root and to counter uneven development caused by market economies. As Chilcote and Edlestein (1986, p. 121) argued, "The progression from the consolidation of a socialist regime to the achievement of advanced socialism is a project whose length is measured in generations." While some social scientists are inclined to monitor these changes over decades, many urbanists look for changes in the built environment that are apparent in shorter periods.

To be sure, one writer's label may be another's antonym. During the Sandinista government of the 1980s, Ronald Reagan popularized the idea that one man's counterrevolu-

tionary (contra) was another's freedom fighter. Andrew Carnegie viewed Pittsburgh's sweet smell of coal with nostalgia and longing in his later years, while Charles Dickens believed the industrial 19th century steel town was "hell with the lid off." What, then, of the "postsocialist" and "socialist" city? Manuel Castells (1977, p. 94) made the point when he stated:

designating a society as capitalist, then specifying the precise conjuncture and the stage of capitalism that is revealed in it, enables me to organise my analysis theoretically. But the reverse is not true: to designate a social formation as "socialist" does not elucidate its relation to space, and, very often it tends to divert research, which takes refuge in a series of ideological dichotomies tending to present the obverse side of the capitalist logic, instead of showing the real processes that are developing in the new social forms.

These conceptual problems are even more real today—two decades after Castells' observations—and would include cities after the demise of the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc. Even cities outside the contiguous eastern European and Soviet realm have experienced immeasurable change in just ten short years. Or, have they?

One curiosity of current research in urban studies, particularly urban geography, is the paucity of work addressing the conditions of urban life before 1989. Michael Dear and Allen J. Scott's pioneering *Urbanization and Urban Planning in Capitalistic Society* blazed a trail when it was released in 1981. Coincidentally, that was the first year of the Reagan administration and the beginning of a slow but steady climb out of a global industrial crisis spurred by the inherent weaknesses of capitalism as well as the post-1973 OPEC oil price hikes. Dear and Scott (1981, p. xiv) argued that "urbanization and planning are embedded in and derived out of the overarching urban question (i.e., a nexus of conceptual problems) appears as capitalist social and property relations are projected through the urban land use system." In that same volume, Joachim Hirsch (1981) posited that the maintenance of advanced capitalist production would mandate greater state intervention to ensure state-controlled reproduction. The crisis of capitalism, seen through the lenses of the materialist theory of the state and the Marxist theory of accumulation, portended a conflict-ridden period ahead for capitalist society, especially social relations in the capitalist city.

Political economy as conceptualized by critical scholars taught us that the world of modern capitalism would support a global network at all costs. Components of this network consist of a web of cities and corporations. New York, Tokyo, and London serve as "world command cities" that specialize in capital and money markets. "State command cities" entail powerful government centers that exert considerable influence of their own territories, and then some. Washington, DC, Paris, Brasilia, and others belonged in this category. Conjoining these and other urban centers is a complex organizational realm that serve as the pins that clasp the global economy together in a new version of the international division labor (Sassen, 1991).

By the end of the 1980s, the common thread linking the capitalist cities of the world appeared to be unraveling. A large body of scholarship documented global restructuring and the rise of new urban social movements and community politics. Social movements were defeating the last of the bureaucratic-authoritarian dictators of the Southern Cone in

Latin America (Scarpaci, 1989; Scarpaci and Frazier, 1993). South Africa's long-standing policy of apartheid was also crumbling. In the United States, deindustrialization was creating havoc (Perry, 1987) and informalization in world cities was creating a two-tiered society where the disparities among income groups were widening (Sassen, 1991). A nearly breathless academic community of New Left scholars waited as the inherent contradictions of capitalist production inflicted chaos and penury. In brief, expectations in the 1980s were that the get-rich-quick schema of the 1980s would self-destruct. A spent economic model of development would help to revive a welfare state that had been battered by Thatcherism and Reaganism (Mohan, 1995). Street protest, fueled by structural adjustment policies, would become the norm in a postcapitalist, postindustrial cities (Walton, 1987).

Worker-owned industry was another possibility that would emerge in a postcapitalist era (Fainstein, 1987). Using untapped retirement sources would allow ailing smokestack industries to reinvest—under careful conditions agreed to by labor—so that industrial collapse in the North Atlantic region would be put in abeyance, at least for the short term. Some scholars had identified even broader responses to market-created tensions. Manuel Castells (1975, 1977, 1978), pushed beyond the parameters of heterodox Marxism and his earlier emphasis on collection consumption and the realm of production by focusing on community empowerment and cultural identity (Castells, 1983). Although far from proposing a predictive analytical model of capitalist evolution, Castells (1983) indicated that the success of new urban social movements—empowered by feminism, new labor, alternative communication, and self-management—could only transform the wild market speculation of the 1980s.

By the decade's end, however, the unexpected had occurred. A combination of *perestroika*, *glasnost*, and the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev had produced a powerful force that led to the demise of the Soviet Union and a domino-effect crash of the Council of Mutual and Economic Exchange. Indeed, while urbanists and political economists were focused on the maladies of globalization, little attention had been directed to the course of socialism, and even less to its built and cultural environments. Across the globe, government welfare services were increasingly dismantled, albeit for different reasons (Scarpaci, 1998). The commodification of public spaces, long an affliction of the capitalist city, is visible in the cities of Poland, China, Vietnam, and Cuba. In socialist Cuba and Vietnam, there are signs that the public health systems can no longer provide the quality care that once prevailed. In Ho Chi Minh City, patient costs have risen, forcing more out-of-pocket payments in the form of official and unofficial expenditures to staff and payments for prescription drugs (Witter, 1996). In Havana, asepsis problems plague surgical rooms and patients' family members often must bring food and linen to hospitals. These "cracks" in the social safety net contrast with the ways in which those two nations are entering the global market.

How nations as diverse as Poland, China, Vietnam, and Cuba contend with both commodification and new market forces is uneven, frequently messy, and they impede our ability to form broad generalizations. For example,

the economic disintegration that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union and the apparent ease with which organized crime gained control of newly emerging petty enterprises contrast strongly with what happened in Vietnam. This suggests that the

informal sector was already well organized at the grassroots level prior to 1986, when the government lifted restrictions on private enterprise (Freeman, 1996, p. 180).

If Soviet *perestroika* set the stage for Vietnam's *doi moi* (the introduction of elements of a market economy as discussed in Smith and Scarpaci's paper), the outcomes could not have been more different in these two nations. The Russian economy kept declining, as did social and political hierarchies. In Vietnam, though, the political elite cling to a socialist banner that forbids opposition, yet set the stage for unprecedented foreign investment that has increased internal disparities and unemployment in Vietnamese cities (Spreitzer, 1997).

Private enterprise got some reprieve in 1993 in Cuba, when Fidel Castro decriminalized the dollar and permitted more than 100 private sector self-employment jobs to flourish (Peters and Scarpaci, 1998). In 2000, however, the streets of Ho Chi Minh City are bustling with entrepreneurship and, despite income disparity problems, there is a bustling private sector. Moscow retailing, on the other hand, remains flat. Inflation and liquidity problems keep Muscovites from stores. In addition, Havana reflects a limited private sector despite the fact a huge shadow economy operates underground and provides basic essential goods that the state ration book (*libreta*) cannot. How, then, did these transformations evolve so unevenly in the streets of these cities in the post-Soviet era?

While a rich research question might address why so little attention had been given to the changing nature of socialism, that query must remain for another study. In this special issue, we are concerned with a related but distinct question. Simply put, what has happened to the socialist city in the 12 years or so since the demise of Socialist bloc? How has civil society realigned itself with the new market forces? What tensions, if any, exist in those postsocialist places? To what extent can we use these changes that are etched into the urban landscape to inform our understanding a new kinds of civil society? Our geographic settings—Poland, China, Vietnam, and Cuba—at one time served as important cornerstones in a large socialist field. Like the far-reaching consequences of socialism's antithetical cousin—industrial capitalism—the comparative experiences of socialist cities are at once unique yet strikingly similar. Before reviewing our case studies, it will be useful first to examine some of the defining features of the socialist city, to which we turn in the next section.

ON BECOMING A SOCIALIST CITY

Much has been written about "socialist cities,"¹ focusing on the characteristics that distinguish them from their capitalist counterparts (Bater, 1986; Forbes and Thrift, 1987; Andrusz et al., 1996). Szelenyi (1996) has forthrightly proposed three sets of characteristics about the socialist city. First, cities in socialist countries tend to be "underurbanized." Therefore, they are usually smaller and show lower population densities than capitalist cities. This stems from a repressed demand resulting from the elimination of private property, as well as specific policies designed to curtail rural-urban migration. Second, socialist cities exhibit fewer qualities of "urbanism" (high density central business districts, clusters of retail centers) than do cities in market economies. Competing demands for scarce resources mean that, for the most part, planners and politicians "urbanize on the

cheap.” Many socialist cities operate as functional administrative centers that evoke a Spartan character, lacking even rudimentary design amenities. Public spaces shaped under socialist regimes are designed for mass organizations and demonstrations as opposed to smaller more intimate encounters found at cafes or small shops in market economies. Open space is used more liberally in the construction of huge public squares and monumental structures. Warsaw and Havana manifest these features exceedingly well. In addition, there is less physical and human diversity than exists in most capitalist cities. There remains a relative dearth of entertainment and recreational facilities. To their credit, though, most socialist cities also historically have fewer “social problems” (crime, prostitution, poverty, and homelessness) than their counterparts in market economies.

Antiurbanism has manifested itself socialist planning, especially in the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and Cuba. Chauncy Harris’s seminal review of the Soviet Union in 1962 revealed a consistent aim of Soviet policy to curtail the growth of large cities (>100,000) and promote the growth of small- (<50,000) and medium-sized places (50,000 to 100,000; Harris, 1970). Such an “antimetropolitan syndrome” became a spatial representation of Marxist-Leninist ideals that departed from the excessive spatial concentration and regional inequality nurtured by capitalism (Jensen, 1984). Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 demanded the gradual elimination of town and country distinctions. Ironically, industrialization and the creation of a socialist state would ensure an urban basis of the revolution, yet large cities would undermine that process. Havana is a good example of a metropolitan government that adopted an antiurban posture, opting to build up provincial and rural centers instead supporting the capital city, Havana (Eckstein, 1981; Segre et al., 1997). Some problems of the modern city, though, are difficult to avoid regardless of the prevailing political economy. For instance, although Vietnamese planners do not want to see Ho Chi Minh City become another Bangkok, “urban planning controls are limited and far from effectively enforced,” and underreporting of return migrants may be as high as 25% of the official urban census count (Drakakis-Smith and Dixon, 1997, p. 36). The gap between urban and regional theory, on the one hand, and regional planning, on the other, is wide.

Socialist cities also display a unique “ecological form.” By this we mean that the role of the state in the providing urban housing and the restrictions placed on the urban land market tend to create an urban fabric that is noticeably different from that found in capitalist cities. These differences include the absence of a high-rent/high-rise Central Business District and the lack of exclusive single-family and low-density residential suburbs. Urban sprawl is not a problem, unlike the cities in the market economies of Latin America, Asia, and the United States.

Szelenyi (1996, p. 288) concluded that during and after transition, the socialist cities of Eastern Europe witnessed changes in these three sets of characteristics noted previously. In particular, “many features of socialist urban development are now decaying rapidly, and those that still survive are increasingly in contradiction with the emergent socioeconomic reality of the region.” After the collapse of collective agriculture, for example, many rural areas suffered a steep decline, resulting in greater out-migration, and a slight rise in urbanization. The character and quality of urban life also changed significantly with the (re-)introduction of capitalism, which has not resolved housing shortages, but rather has exacerbated the problem (Sachs and Woo, 1994). Today, city centers now are now bustling with small-scale service providers, traders, and immigrants. A few min-

utes observing street life in Warsaw, Shanghai, Ho Chi Minh City, or Havana make that evident. There has also been a rising prevalence of Western-style urban social problems. To offset these new market-created disamenities, some degree of suburbanization among the wealthier groups, and a shift away from of the massive apartment complexes that were built to house the middle classes, are now visible. It is curious to witness United States retail franchises and new shopping malls emerge in some of the richer suburbs of Eastern Europe and China when what we might call “worker housing” remains in short supply. At the same time, however, inner-city decay ensues. Long-standing city dwellers become trapped by poverty are left behind in the least desirable areas. Sadly, downtown Ho Chi Minh City and Havana reveal such underinvestment.

As well, Ivan Szelenyi’s (1982) now seminal review of socialist cities revealed several reasons why inequalities necessarily prevail under command economies of the socialist realm. First, central planning in socialist governments cannot be expected to remedy uneven capitalist development in a few short decades. Second, transitions to real and sustainable socialism entail some private sector function to compensate for the state’s inability to produce selected goods and services. Third, a private market linked to hard currency transactions serves as a window to external capital. Finally, the historically specific periods in which Szelenyi addressed these issues included 20th century Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Because neither Marx nor Lenin had an empirically grounded nation-state to map the transition to a socialist state, well reasoned criticisms of 19th century industrial capitalism laid the foundation for a socialist project.

If, as Szelenyi rightly pointed out, the context for 20th century socialism draws on Soviet bloc, Vietnamese, and Chinese experiences, what about the smaller, peripheral economies in the developing world. Today, North Korea and the Republic of Cuba fit the profile of small and peripheral socialist economies with just 22 and 11 million residents, respectively. Unlike Libya, both lack strategic resources essential to industrial (fossil fuel) or service (information) economies. Moreover, these small peripheral nations now function in a post-Soviet era, complete with the challenges of rabid globalization and lingering traces of a hard-to-die Cold War foreign policy (the 38th parallel dividing the Koreas; Helms-Burton legislation directed at Cuba). Regardless of the latent or manifest outcomes of their socialist projects (famine in North Korea or optical neuropathy caused by Vitamin B deficiencies in Cuba), the built fabric of these places depict the many transformations unfolding in the socialist city.

Along with an increase in petty traders and retailing—themselves key changes in social reproduction—are growing signs of contesting state dominance. Civil society in China after the Tiananmen Square killings has spawned a broad array of underground Chinese organizations that, thanks to fax machines and the Internet, can simultaneously schedule protests in New York and Beijing. Asian’s economic downturn in 1998 led the regime to crack down on political arrest. An old Chinese saying—“killing the chicken to scare the monkey”—may help to explain this crackdown as social discontent rises and as state companies downsize and layoff redundant workers (Liu and Watson, 1999). In Cuba, opposition groups in Havana and provincial capitals coordinate activities to protest their perceptions of civil liberty violations and to argue for political parties other than the Cuban Communist Party.

Socialist ideologies also seem to have created a spiritual void, or is it merely rabid globalization taking over? Since 1992, the Holy Bible has been the best-selling book at

Havana's annual book fairs (Malone, 1995). Christmas was also declared a national holiday, and December 1998 marked the first time in three decades that a children's play featuring John the Baptist and Jesus Christ was held at the National Cathedral in Havana. In Ho Chi Minh City, gift giving has become a mainstay among the city's fledgling middle class. In Beijing, Chinese buy trees to decorate their homes while card giving has become common at Christmas time. In Poland, although Western-style commercialism is on the rise, Christmas is still traditional. Polish homes often feature hay below a white tablecloth to symbolize the manger where Jesus Christ was born. In Moscow, garlands and Christmas lights glitter close to the Lenin Mausoleum. Although it appears that "the spirit of Christmas has won over politics it seems it's the commercialism rather than the religion that attracts most of [the Christmas revelers]" (Deane, 1998, p. 11A). Regardless of motivation, the socialist city is deeply transformed from what it was only a decade ago.

Socialist cities enter the new millennium exhibiting the greatest disparities in quality of life, income levels, and other quantifiable outcomes since the early years of their revolutions. In Joanna Regulska's essay about NGOs in Poland, we see a country reactivated by a return to democratic rule. No longer required to follow single-party rule, a plethora of political parties search out their respective electorate. Despite those efforts, electoral turnouts in other Polish cities are not strong. In tandem with this trend of political apathy, though, is a feverish rise of NGOs. This paper is concerned with the ways in which Warsaw's citizens can exercise their newly gained democratic right to participate in the political process. It argues that while *de jure* participatory channels have been established, *de facto* citizens still meet with various barriers and obstacles. Putting democratic theory into practice has been difficult in Warsaw. Scholars more or less agree that a set of procedures and institutions need to be established for democracy to exist, yet there is no precise consensus on what exactly constitutes democracy. These and related tensions redefine the nature of civil society in Poland in general and in Warsaw specifically.

Christopher Smith briefly recaps China's development trek from Mao Zedong's efforts, the Four Modernization projects of Deng Xioping, and the defining features of China's new hybrid system. He identifies how the mobility of capital and personal mobility have redesigned Chinese cities in new ways. Unlike the highly centralized Soviet model, we learn how China's more decentralized urban political system became more responsible for the mobility of capital and labor. Although Chinese cities display relatively ostentatious lifestyles as well as penury, China has been able to shift from a command economy to market competition without modifying the basic nature of the political system.

Smith and Scarpaci shift the regional focus from China to nearby Vietnam where a hybrid form of market-driven socialism unfolds. The 1986 introduction by the Vietnamese government of a *doi moi*—the introduction of elements of a market economy—has reduced the control of the state in some spheres, but not in others. State participation has been especially heavy in control over land resources and capital, but foreign capital has driven industrialization largely. Urban and rural development continues with marked disparities as the countryside provides new sources of casual labor and unskilled, cheap labor. The cities, especially Ho Chi Minh City, experience unprecedented levels of self-help housing that are often illegal but necessary.

State decisions about how to use newly unleashed market forces also appear in the review of Havana. Cuba's capital city of 2.1 million operates in a post-Soviet era that

increasingly draws on foreign tourists to generate hard currency, as well as remittances from expatriates that approach \$1 billion annually. The “dollarization” of the economy has created tension: tourists spend hard currency that sustains the socialist government and, in turn, there are groups of Cubans who have access to dollars and those who do not. However, investment decisions in Old Havana—a UNESCO-declared World Heritage Site since 1982—largely wind up in projects destined for tourism. A redevelopment corporation, Habaguanex, wields new power in the city’s urban affairs and planning. Like Vietnam’s *doi moi*, a hybrid model of socialism emerges. Both Ho Chi Minh City in the 1980s and Havana in the 1990s relied on remittances from overseas relatives and illegally hoarded dollars (in the form of “mattress banks” and credit circles [*hui*] in Vietnam, and *maceteros* in Cuba) provided key sources of capital investment in realms where the state could not deliver goods and services. However, unlike the Chinese cities’ draw of large number of rural peasants, or Warsaw’s newfound reliance on NGOs, Havana’s engagement with the market is guarded, and there are no new spaces for a civilian voice.

Eric Sheppard concludes this special issue by returning to the descriptive features of urbanization in socialist nations: lower levels of urbanization; more restricted qualities of urban life; and the absence of both a high-density CBD and high-income, low-density residential suburbs. Despite the variation in the four cities/nations profiled in the issue, he argues that there is an overall impression of difference, not unity. What is problematic, though, is whether these differences derive from the different foci of the papers because of a distinctive “postsocialist” path taken in each of the four countries, or whether they derive from the notion that the socialist city was always a challenge to conceptualize and describe. Sheppard goes on to argue that the settings in China, Poland, Vietnam, and Cuba reflect differences in geographic situation that create local and national variation in urbanization under comparable socialist and postsocialist regimes.

At the dawn of the new millennium, many pundits and analysts characterize the 20th century as an era of indisputable victory of industrial capitalism. When the seven-decade experience of Soviet communism came crashing down, the outlook for capitalism grew bright. Double-digit GNP growth in many nations was common in the early 1990s. By the decade’s end, though, the ramifications of market economies were all too apparent. Various dubbing the “tequila effect” (Mexico, 1994), the “samba effect” (Brazil, 1998), or the “dragon effect” (Japan and Southeast Asia, 1998), it became unclear whether contagion could be prevented elsewhere. Dunford and Smith (2000) argue that the European Union will create both convergence and divergence in the continent’s reunification: “market reforms and market integration will [not] automatically result in greater ‘cohesion’ between the various territories of Europe” (Dunford and Smith, 2000, p. 172).

Although European money markets began trading the Euro on January 1, 1999, and the United States had remained relatively immune from global downturns elsewhere, nothing seems a sure bet. By late 2000, the Euro was trading at just \$0.87 to the United States dollar. Economic summits held by the World Trade Organization in Seattle and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in Prague faced vocal opposition from scores of NGOs. Protest such as this, coupled with mounting evidence that globalization is creating uneven development (Mishra, 1999; Lechner and Boli, 2000; Waters, 2000), may temper the homogenization of public spaces in the early 21st century. Perhaps the socialist city will prove more tenacious than many believe.

This collection of essays offers but a modest contribution to urbanists as well as urban historians who wish to more fully understand the changing nature of the socialist city in the late 20th century. The geographic approaches to democratization and socialist transformation must necessarily remain broad. As a recent report to the National Science Foundation noted:

Democratic change is not just about economics or political structures or social arrangements. It is also about the interconnections among phenomena across spatial scales and in place. We can only hope to comprehend the complexities of democratization by making these interconnections among the principal concerns of the research community. (*Geographic Approaches to Democratization*, n.d.)

These papers offer a point of departure for this challenging task. Their analytical concern with the significance and nature of the urban socialist milieu is important because of threats to the roles of the modern state. Unpacking the socialist city as a unit of analysis allows us to tease out these different and often competing geographic structures of urban space.

DAVID W. SMITH

David William Smith (a.k.a. David Drakakis-Smith) was a pioneer in the study of the Third World city. Using Asia as a laboratory, he contributed widely to the interdisciplinary fields of urban geography and urban studies. His efforts to understand the interplay of urban morphology, street hawkers, and the power of the state in mediating urban life were formidable. The authors of this special issue are reminded of his contribution to a panel session at the Boston meetings of the Association of American Geographers in 1998. David succumbed to cancer at too young an age, a little more than a year after those Boston meetings; however, our recollections of him as a scholar, friend, and geographer-teacher at the University of Liverpool will endure. We are honored to dedicate this special issue to the memory of David W. Smith.

NOTE

¹I am indebted to Chris Smith for a rich discussion on this topic.

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