

The urbanization of transition: ideology and the urban experience

Oleg Golubchikov^{a,b} 

^aCardiff University – School of Geography and Planning Glamorgan Building, Cardiff, UK; ^bNational Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russian Federation

ABSTRACT

This paper debates the relationships between transition and urbanization by problematizing the operation of transition on three inter-related levels. Firstly, at the level of ideology, it is important to rehearse the understanding of transition from that of merely area-based reforms and rather understand it as a totalizing project of planetary reach, which completes the subjugation of the whole world to capitalism and crowns neoliberalism as the only global order. Secondly, at the level of practice, it is important to properly account for the spatializing effects of that ideology – which is not simply “domesticated” by local practices, but itself mediates the subsumption of pre-existing practices by capital, thus alienating them from their history. Thirdly, at the level of the urban: while urban change is usually portrayed merely as a projection of societal relations, the urban is actually the central stage where ideology mixes with the everyday, through which the societal change is mediated; new meanings, social relations, and class divisions are construed; and through which ideological transition achieves its practical completeness. What combines these three levels is the notion of urbanization of transition, which articulates the centrality of the urban in the spectacular post-socialist experience.

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Introduction

Although scholars of post-socialist urbanism at times indulge themselves in reflexive melancholy over their moderate impact on the wider urban scholarship, there is actually a fast-growing and already rather sophisticated body of internationally excellent literature that addresses significant challenges and provides diverse accounts on many aspects of post-socialist urbanization, both empirically and theoretically (for some reviews, see Borén and Gentile 2007; Sykora and Bouzarovski 2012; Kubeš 2013; Sjöberg 2014). However, I will argue in this paper that the relationships between the two key staples feeding this literature – transition and

CONTACT Oleg Golubchikov  GolubchikovO@cardiff.ac.uk

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urbanization – are still under-conceptualized, taken at face value, or fail to attract their due problematization. In this article, I discuss that point and outline possible avenues as to how to problematize those relationships through the lens of a spatial political economy.

To begin with, while urban change in post-socialist scholarship is usually portrayed as a projection of larger societal changes onto local practices, the urban is actually an important scale through which new ideologies, meanings, and social relationships are legitimized – there is a dialectical co-production between the urban and the social (Lefebvre [1970] 2003, [1974] 1991). The urban is also where the wider project of neoliberal transition is “domesticated” into concrete “transformations” (e.g. Stenning et al. 2010); however, the latter observation should not blind us from seeing the totality of transition in the first place. The discourse in post-socialist scholarship that disavows the vocabulary of “transition” in favor of more particularized “transformations” (Pickles and Smith 1998; Herrschel 2007), while rightly challenging the reductionist assumptions of the teleological projections of the Washington Consensus, has become too seductive itself. It has moved research from the understanding of the ideology of transition at large to studying smaller and particular processes, which per se become somehow sufficient to explain post-socialist experiences, while the wider meta-change is at best read perfunctorily under the now all-explanatory narrative of “neoliberalism.”

In this paper, I rehearse transition as an ideological, totalizing – indeed, totalitarian – project and discuss the role of the urban in making it such and rendering transition its social constitution. The dialectics of the total and the particular leads me to outline the contours of what I call “the urbanization of transition,” the appropriation of urban space by capitalism, simultaneously leading to the materialization, crystallization, and consequent reproduction of the new hegemony. I support my argument with some classical writings in political economy; the work of Henri Lefebvre in particular offers a useful grammar to knit the urban thread through the ideology and practice of transition.

I organize my argument as follows. I start with discussing why transition should not be easily equated with contextual transformations, arguing that to do otherwise is a debilitating position that obscures the global significance of post-socialism. I continue with discussing the totalizing nature of transition, which functions to close the civilizational dialog over alternative human futures. I then turn to outlining the spatialization of transition – as a contingent but ordered process of the subsumption of post-socialist legacy under the exigencies of capital. Against these fundamentals, I then discuss post-socialist urbanization and how it is central to these epochal and spectacular politico-economic restructurings.

Transformations or transition?

The collapse of the state-socialist project, climaxed in the well-documented geopolitical events of 1989/1991, brought about a surge of radical societal change.

Unlike regime change and retrofits in other places and times, the post-socialist momentum has rebuilt the very existential foundations of the affected societies – whose professed goal was no longer building “the bright future” of communism, with its aspirations for a classless society, good life and equity for all, but rather embracing the individualistic, entrepreneurial, and competition ethos of capitalism, framed politically as a “market economy.” The change has been underpinned by so-called “transition,” as a metaphorical and practical framework for the existence of post-socialist societies. Ex-communist societies were then all seen as societies in transition, at the core of which was a technocratic package of reforms for the economic and political domains.

Since the very start, the teleological notion of transition has been challenged. While transition has been both a prescriptive and descriptive idea, many have critiqued it for being reductionist and thus failing to account for the complexity and multiplicity of pathways engaged by *actually existing transition*, which is shaped by local preconditions, culture, and contingencies. It has been suggested that “transformation(s)” is a more nuanced vocabulary to analyze the processes of post-socialism (e.g. Pickles and Smith 1998).

While this is an accurate critique, the downside has been that – coupled with descriptive, often empiricist and positivist tendencies in much of the emerging post-socialist academic geography – this new tradition has resulted in the topic being dominated by the narrative of the idiosyncrasies of post-socialism, including the diversity of contextually specific trajectories emerging from the juxtaposition of politics, culture, history, and other legacies and exigencies. The “transformation” thesis has just gone too well with the empiricist tradition of “area studies,” while the very teleology of transition has not been scrutinized on its own terms – as an ideology – it was rather reduced to the presumed Washington Consensus’s technocracies. The most interesting accounts here had to consequently come from outside the discipline of post-socialism itself, such as Naomi Klein’s *Shock Doctrine* (2007).

Many scholars now express their discontent that the literature on post-socialism is inadequately appreciated by the wider academic world; it is either little engaged with in terms of the broader understanding of global urban change or just imports ideas already well-rehearsed elsewhere without feeding back to inform the broader debates (Sjöberg 2014; Ferenčuhová 2016). Some searches for the relevance of the post-socialist experience in the wider world have, for example, flirted with post-colonialism, thus also subjecting transition to the ideas radiating from the world’s other corners – even if with inconclusive results as to whether post-colonialism and post-socialist are indeed good bedfellows (Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008; Hladík 2011; Moore 2001).

I believe there is a much stronger potential in the “post-socialism” subject to influence wider scholarship given its phenomenal experiences of radical societal change. However, in order to achieve this we must revert the tendencies of rejecting imagining transition as a holistic teleology or ideology. There is a need to step back from ascribing everything to the idiosyncrasies of change and to see

the forest through the trees to fully appreciate the emergent co-constitution of parts and the whole; that is, to more explicitly critique *transition as a totality*, as an ideological hegemony, however particularized it may be at varied scales of concrete material experiences and co-constituted by these experiences and their agency (cf. Giddens 1984).

I will discuss this more in the next section, but first a word of caution: this should not be read as simply another guise of neoliberalism, especially if the latter is taken as an all- and self-explanatory narrative. While transition has been part and parcel of neoliberalization, it nevertheless has a specific context at play – the communist ideology alternative to capitalism – and hence transition has been by far more far-reaching and dogmatic than the operations of neoliberalism elsewhere. It is even naïve to assume that the neoclassical thought and pro-growth competitive agenda underpinning the execution of neoliberalism elsewhere were the only benchmark for designing and implementing the project of transition. Gowan (1995) argued that transition was not so much an economic mission as a chance to reorganize the geopolitical balance of power in favor of the hegemony of Western capital. According to Burawoy and Verdery (1999), neoclassical economics only happened to exhibit the right excuse of this morality by insisting that markets could spontaneously create a good world once the old one was first destroyed.

Contrary to the previous adjustment and liberalization reforms in the Global South or pro-market development-oriented “transition” in China, transition in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has specifically targeted *the social constitution* of the affected nations. This point is exemplified by Wedel (1998, 21) who, reflecting on the differences in the Western approach toward reforms in the Second and Third Worlds, indicates that the reform project in CEE has been not so much about exercising economic development as about exorcizing the heresy of communism:

The Second World had been “misdeveloped,” not “underdeveloped” as the Third World, pundits said. Aid to India, as an example, tended to be couched mainly in terms of economic growth, not institutional and social change. But exorcizing the legacies of communism in the Second World often required changing the very nature of recipient institutions, including those of banking, industry, international trade, social security, and health care.

Transition has been a more dogmatic and, one can say, geo-ideological version of applied neoliberalism – in other words, quite a different beast, which as such requires more than the universalizing prose of neoliberalization. The geo-ideology of transition is, however, bigger than the “Second World” – transition has been a project of *planetary* significance, transforming, for example, the internal political economy of the West itself, as much as that of the Rest. This wider relevance of transition, beyond the geographies of ex-socialist states, is important for the understanding of the recent global transformations more widely. I will now turn to outline this function of transition.

The totalizing nature of transition

A starting point is to understand transition not simply as a technocratic project envisaged by the neoliberal teleology, which in fact collapses into various transformational exigencies, but rather appreciate transition as, above all, both *ideological and totalizing*. It is ideological because it is based on particular assumptions and worldviews, particular philosophies of economic and political development. It is totalizing because whatever your ideological predispositions you cannot escape it – it is all-encompassing. Indeed, transition has been one inescapable compulsion that has fundamentally transformed the life and circumstances of *all people and places in post-socialist societies* – irrespective of their existing situations, aspirations, or individual or collective choice.

The totalizing reach of “transition” does not mean that everything can be reduced solely to the level of totality; it rather needs be understood through the Lefebvrian conceptualization of totality as *synchronously co-present levels of social practice* in which “one level mediates the other” and can dominate the other (Goonewardena 2008, 127). Lefebvre ([1970] 2003) discusses three such levels: the macro-level, the mixed/urban level, and the micro/private level of social reality. To Lefebvre, these are not so much scalar levels in traditional hierarchical imaginaries, but rather tools with different granularity to jointly understand forces construing modern society, so that each of these “levels” can be traced, for example, at the scale of the city.

The macro-level of social practice involves “the most general, and therefore the most abstract, although essential, relations, such as capital market and the politics of space” (Lefebvre [1970] 2003). It is the level of “society, the state, global power and knowledge, institutions, and ideologies” ([1970] 2003, 89); it is the level of political power that “makes use of instruments (ideological and scientific)” to modify “the distribution of resources, income, and the ‘value’ created by productive labor (surplus value)” (Lefebvre [1970] 2003, 78). The micro-level involves the practice of everyday life, such as housing and habiting, typically seen as “somewhat more modest, even unimportant” ([1970] 2003, 80) but in fact representing the very orientation of ideology, if not the whole purpose of society. The mixed/urban level is then defined as a critical level of social practice that mediates between the distant and immediate/everyday order of social reality and ensures the mobilization of the urban as a productive force in capitalist society. This understanding of the mediating, mixing role of the urban is central to my notion of urbanization of transition to which I shall return later; but for the moment, I want to focus on the totalizing aspect of transition.

One can argue that the totalizing tendencies of transition make the whole world more totalitarian, advanced democracies included. To many thinkers in political economy (e.g. Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Georg Lukács), “democratic” societies were already more totalitarian than those societies explicitly branded as totalitarian, for the totalitarian means and methods in the former are

typically less explicitly political and are therefore more easily concealed. According to Marcuse (1964, 3):

By virtue of the way it has organized its technological base, contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian. For “totalitarian” is not only a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests. It thus precludes the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole. Not only a specific form of government or party rule makes for totalitarianism, but also a specific system of production and distribution which may well be compatible with a “pluralism” of parties, newspapers, “countervailing powers,” etc.

Transition effectively serves as the closure of global pluralism by neutralizing “actually existing socialism” as an alternative point of reference, thus extolling capitalism as the only viable universal system – as most vividly expressed by Fukuyama’s (1992) “end of history.”

Since transition is based historically on a particular form of capitalist ideology – neoliberalism – it has just pushed the world further into the triumph of neoliberalism. The closure of socialism as an alternative can explain why the expectations of many about the end of neoliberalism and the installation of a system modeled after Keynesianism following the crisis of neoliberalism of 2007–2008 turned out to be premature, if not entirely naïve (for some discussions, Smith 2008; Birch and Mykhnenko 2010; Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010; Stiglitz 2011; Aalbers 2013). In this light, “the strange non-death of neo-liberalism” (Crouch 2011) is not that strange at all: there is simply no longer an alternative vision in sight with which to imagine an alternative future – or, indeed, *a future* as such, distinctive from the endless spiral of the present at this end (or side) of history.

Is it not rather disturbing to see how well the words of Marcuse above resonate with those below by Doreen Massey half a century later (2015, 35, 36)?

It is one of the ghastly ironies of the present neoliberal age that we are told ... that much of our power and our pleasure, and our very self-identification, lies in our ability to choose (and we are indeed bombarded every day by “choices,” many of them meaningless, others we wish we didn’t have to make), while at the level that really matters – what kind of society we’d like to live in, what kind of future we’d like to build – we are told, implacably, that, give or take a few minor variations, there is no alternative – no choice at all.

Neil Smith (2009, 51) argued that:

One of the greatest violences of the neoliberal era was the closure of the political imagination. Even on the left, perhaps especially so, the sense became pervasive that there was no alternative to capitalism.

Smith attributes this loss of political imagination to three factors: (a) the collapse of state socialism; (b) defeat of anti-colonial movements; and (c) defeat of the revolts of the 1960s. One can further argue that out of these three, the first is most significant, as it is state socialism that was very much a key factor underpinning the other two, including anti-colonial movements and inspiring in different ways the revolts of the 1960s.

The end of communism has consequently prompted many to talk about a post-democratic world. As Žižek (1994, 1) argues, before the collapse of socialism, [E]verybody was busy imagining different forms of the social organization of production and commerce ... today as Fredric Jameson [2003] perspicaciously remarked, nobody seriously considers possible alternatives to capitalism any longer ... it seems easier to imagine the “end of the world” than a far more modest change in the mode of production.

This closure of the alternative economic and ideological imagination by transition uncovers the full extent of its totalitarian nature. There is no longer an intellectual point of reference from where to (out)source an alternative imagination – transition has discredited state socialism into a “post-political” consensus. Hardt and Negri (2000, 245) in their *Empire* quote US President Truman saying in 1947 the following: “At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life.” Now even authors such as Swyngedouw (2010), when speculating about how the idea of communism can be a social alternative, are derogative of the experiences of the “actually existing socialism,” thus further disempowering its history from the future and subscribing themselves to the very post-political, post-democratic consensus they critique. It seems more convenient for them to imagine a disconsensus over climate change than over recent human history.

As many post-socialist scholars demonstrate, things got worse under transition as it has been experienced – the economic collapse and marginalization, the rise of poverty and inequality, class division, the loss of prospects and hope for better life for many, uneven development, environmentally and ethically destructive consumerism, inter-ethnic conflicts and intolerance, the loss of social cohesion – to mention just a few. If things have gone worse, does it mean they were better under state socialism? This only logical extension to the explicit reflections about the elements of superiority in the social organization under state socialism is, however, more or less a political taboo – exactly because of the totalizing, collective schizophrenia of transition. I recall here my conversation with one of the high-profile ideologues of the Russian reforms, still a prominent mastermind behind economic policy-making in Russia, who, when I asked him about his opinion of the large human cost of shock therapy in Russia in the 1990s, replied pompously: “to me everything is justified as long as there are no longer communists in power.” It seems that this fundamentalism is more than corrupt ethics – it is the currency of transition.

Davidow (1976, 238), an American journalist writing about the Soviet city, complained from within the cold war: “A half-century of unremitting anti-Soviet, anti-Communist propaganda has created an atmosphere in which there is one *unforgivable sin* – to portray Soviet life and communism favorably” (italic in original). As Hardt and Negri (2000, 278) further recognize,

In the capitalist world, the massive cold war propaganda and the extraordinary ideological machine of falsification and misinformation prevented us from seeing the real

developments in Soviet society and the political dialectics that unfolded there. Cold war ideology called that society totalitarian, but in fact it was a society criss-crossed by extremely strong instances of creativity and freedom, just as strong as the rhythms of economic development and cultural modernization.

This is not to suggest that academic work shies away from problematizing the new hegemony; revisionist accounts that reengage with the history of state socialism and challenge the Western-centric imaginaries over socialist “pastness” are not that uncommon, even in the West (for a recent interesting example to that point see, Imre 2016). But on a general level, it is safe to generalize that transition has rendered the “sin” that Davidow (1976) refers to – perhaps “ideological mist” is a better wording – an unquestionable truism, even without the repressive apparatus of the cold war state.

The heydays of Keynesianism still provide inspirations – for some of its remarkable social achievements, although, of course, Keynesianism itself was created with reference to the competition with the “actually existing socialism.” But through the ideological mist that transition has made, even for critical intellectuals the (hi)story of actually existing socialism is now closed. This is despite that for many of those who experienced state socialism – the quick history of which in most countries will be soon surpassed by the length of “transition” – those experiences remain an important point of reference: not the totalitarian totality of socialism, but the dimensions of social justice and freedom it offered – freedom from needs, from inequality, from consumerism, from exploitation, from uncertainties, from becoming an outcast, from violence, and so on and so forth – above all, freedom to have a dream about freedom. However, as Žižek (2002, 2) claims, now “we ‘feel free’ because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom.” As Boyer (2006) vividly shows in his analysis of the East/West divide in the united Germany, the Western epistemic communities systematically derogate any memory about state-socialism’s superiority as the inferiority of backward “Ostalgie”; by marginalizing it, the West is able to keep sole control over the country’s future. How cannot this remind us of Orwell’s famous: “He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past” (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*). But these are exactly the geo-ideological terms of transition on which the East is incorporated into the Occident.

The spatialization of transition and subsumption of legacy

The totalizing nature of transition does not eliminate the importance of seeing how it is contextualized and mediated on the ground, including the micro/private level of social reality in Lefebvrian conceptualization. Indeed, it is by generalized contextualization that the totalitarian status of transition as ideology is achieved in practice, is materialized, as it penetrates all spheres and displaces alternatives. Transition is not simply radiating from some commanding heights and spreading across different cultures; it is also articulated and contextualized from within the societies themselves on which it is imposed.

Stenning et al. (2010, 3, 4) rightly argue that neoliberalism is “domesticated” through engagement in everyday life’s economic practices:

[A] focus on the mundane practices of economic life enables a detailed understanding of how neo-liberalism is understood, negotiated, contested and made tolerable in homes, communities and workplaces; how neo-liberalism is lived in articulation with a host of economic, political and social others; and how those practices are themselves involved in the remaking of neo-liberalism.

It is here, in the realm of *practiced* transition, that we can talk about the conversion of the *totalizing* ideology into *particularized* transformations. However, this is essentially an ordered, hierarchical process – the ideology of neoliberalism-*cum*-transition is inescapable, as it subjugates and modifies pre-existing terms of social order, the meanings and dynamics of social and economic relations, changing not simply institutions, regulations and property rights, but the state of mind, consciousness, and the way of life. Domesticating neoliberalism is simultaneously the neoliberalization of the everyday, the appropriation of the everyday by capitalism and using it as the raw material, conduit, or agency of its expansion. Transition is not simply domesticated by local practices, it subsumes them in the first place.

This can be conceptualized as “the spatialization of transition” – its materialization in specific contexts and workings over pre-existing practices. Transition is spatialized, like other hegemonic ideologies. Here, one can again invoke the Lefebvrian argument that “every society ... produces a space, its own space” (Lefebvre [1974] 1991, 31). As Harvey (2006, 78) notes:

Capitalist activity is always grounded somewhere. Diverse material processes (physical, ecological as well as social) must be appropriated, used, bent and re-shaped to the purposes and paths of capital accumulation. Conversely, capital accumulation has to adapt to and in some instances be transformed by the material conditions it encounters.

Through the process of spatialization, transition allows the new regime to alienate pre-existing legacies from their ideological history. As we argued elsewhere, capitalist practice feeds on the legacies of state socialism, making them the infrastructure, and often the agency, for its own expansion (Golubchikov, Badyina, and Makhrova 2014). As a result, transition may reveal variegated forms. At face value, those forms may be similar in appearances to the previous (socialist) forms – and may even be confused as “socialist” in function; indeed, scholars of post-socialist geographies even identify a specter of urban forms – from “pure socialist” (still little affected by transition) to “pure capitalist” (totally transformed or created by transition). But this is wrong.

It is hard to find any concept that is more widely used and yet so frequently abused in the post-socialist scholarship as “legacy” (and “path dependence” as its extension). At first glance, post-socialism is all about legacy – at the end of the day it is the history of socialism that makes post-socialist spaces so unique. Socialist spaces are “remembered” for their distinctive “appearances” such as, for example, the uniform residential high-rises, large collective public spaces, or monumentality in urban design. But even where not unique in form and function, “socialist

geographies,” such as socialist-era industrial landscapes and built environments, are categorized as “slow-to-change socialist legacies.” Continuities here tend to be over-emphasized to the fetishism of legacy and neglect the fluid nature of legacies themselves. The historicity of post-socialist geography is then mystified by these “legacies” so that the very process of post-socialist transition is imagined along the binaries of “legacies vs. change” – the less legacy that remains, the further transition (into capitalism) goes. Even the rapidly escalating patterns of uneven spatial development and social inequalities are also ascribed to this “path-dependent” process, so that, for example, the degree of embeddedness in socialist era conditions which places are more or less successful in the market economy.

However, legacy is never fixed in the past, it is rather interpreted, co-produced by the present. The understanding of transition as totalizing helps to better see that. Once (neoliberal) capitalism is imposed by transition on the formerly socialist geographies (including their productive assets, infrastructure, housing, but also everyday life more generally), it assigns a particular meaning to “legacy,” which would have been different should the very same legacy have been embraced by a different regime. Rather than being an independent constant, socialist legacy is subsumed by capitalism and is alienated from its own history to become conducive to the capitalist processes themselves. Legacy is an important factor of change, but it is mediated by, more than it mediates, transition.

We have previously conceptualized this mutual but hierarchical embeddedness of capitalism and socialist legacy as “the hybrid spatialities of transition” (as opposed to path-dependent transition), which, according to Golubchikov, Badyina, and Makhrova (2014), represent “strange geographies” that function according to the tune of capital but often conceal their capitalist nature with “legacies,” even though the latter have quintessentially been alienated from their ideological, institutional, and economic history. Hybrid spatialities represent the mutual containment and reconciliation of otherwise highly contradictory tensions between the spatial ideologies of state-socialism inscribed into the previously egalitarian landscape of economic geography and those of neoliberalism with its anti-egalitarian and exploitative effects.

In other words, the social and physical conditions of cities and their fortunes may seem to depend on their geography and legacy, but the root causes of their crises or otherwise are in the existing socio-political system – which twists, distorts, or recreates the meanings of the inherited landscape in its own image. This is why when under state-socialism the geographical differences served the egalitarian project of equalizing development, under capitalism, as Harvey (2010, 290) contends, even minor inequalities “get magnified and compounded over time into huge inequalities of influence, wealth and power.”

Urbanization of transition

Through the process of spatialization, transition allows capitalism to penetrate all pores of social life and transform it. But this is importantly mediated by urbanization (broadly understood). Usually the focus of post-socialist urban scholarship is only on how cities are changing in response to their exposure to capitalism and to associated social and politico-economic changes, leading to particular forms of post-socialist urban transformation. However, it is very much urban experiences themselves through which transition has taken its practical contours and disciplining power and by which it produces new social structures and relationships.

As a starting point, let us consider Brenner and Theodore's argument (2002, 28):

[C]ities are not merely localized arenas in which broader global or national projects of neoliberal restructuring unfold ... [C]ities have become increasingly central to the reproduction, mutation, and continual reconstitution of neoliberalism itself ... [C]ities have become strategic targets for an increasingly broad range of neoliberal policy experiments, institutional innovations, and politico-ideological projects. Under these conditions, cities have become the incubators for many of the major political and ideological strategies through which the dominance of neoliberalism is being maintained ...

This understanding echoes Lefebvre ([1970] 2003), to whom, as I noted before, the urban plays a key role in mixing, mediating between the macro-dimensions of the social order and the micro-reality of everyday life. The production of urban space thus contributes to hegemony by fusing the immediate realm of lived space with the larger social order. Here, the production of space is not limited to the projection of regimes and ideologies onto the urban, but it is part of the production of social relationships:

The urban phenomenon and urban space are not only a projection of social relationships but also a terrain on which various strategies clash. They are in no sense goals or objectives, but means and instruments of actions. (Lefebvre [1970] 2003, 87)

Lefebvre ([1970] 2003) argues that the latest stages of capitalism are characterized by a transition from industrialization to urbanization as the totalizing social "episteme." As Prigge (2008, 49) explains this:

It is no longer the *industrial* and its disciplines focusing on capital and labor, classes and reproduction that constitute the episteme (the possibility of knowing the social formation), but the *urban* and its forms focused on everydayness and consumption, planning and spectacle, that expose the tendencies of social development ... Compared to homogeneous industrial space, urban space is differentially constituted. This heterogeneous structure predestines urban space to clarify contemporary social forms.

This understanding can also be traced in the analysis of demand-side urbanization in much of David Harvey's work on the urbanization of capital and urbanization of consciousness (Harvey 1985a, 1985b, 1989). In *Consciousness and the Urban Experience*, Harvey (1985a, 262) notes:

Individuals draw their sense of identity and shape their consciousness out of the material bases given by the individualism of money, the class relations of capital, the limited coherence of community, the contested legitimacy of the state, and the protected but

vulnerable domain of family life. But they also do so in the context of how these material bases intersect within a produced urban milieu that institutionalizes and reifies the social and physical patterning of all such human relations in space and time. The urbanization of capital – so vital to capitalism's survival as a dominant mode of production and consumption – entails a particular configuration of these different loci of consciousness formation.

Post-socialist transition too is aligned with the epistemic transition from industrialization to urbanization as the locus of consciousness formation. While the logic of social development under socialism was much bound to industrialization (social and spatial regulations were contingent on the industrial), post-socialism makes a transition to consumption and urbanization (social and spatial regulations are contingent on the urban). As Russian political philosopher Sergey Kara-Murza (2005) suggests, the rapid processes of privatization, focused on the socialist-era industrial sector, were succeeded by more far-reaching processes of the consolidation of capital over, and colonization of, the domain of the everyday, of the domain of the urban. Indeed, under the conditions of de-industrialization (also underpinned by the break-up of former supply chains), the urban domain offered new, wider, and more sustained opportunities for accumulation strategies. The processes of the subsumption of the pre-existing materialities and practices have become more focused on everyday life and urban space rather than on productive assets.

Although the focus of socialist development was on the real sector of production, the city of socialism (at least where socialism took its advanced forms, such as in Soviet Russia) played the very important role as a social(ist) contract – providing quality of life to working people in exchange for their labor in the production process. This philosophy has been antagonistic to the capitalist logic of private profit maximizing (as opposed to collective value maximizing). To all the discussion whether cities of communism and cities of capitalism were different or not too much (Andrusz, Harloe, and Szelenyi 1996; Hirt 2013), the former were tightly bound to very different philosophies.

Making the urban dance to the tune of capitalism and alienating the inherited social and urban forms from socialist ideology (that had either generated them or previously appropriated them from the pre-socialist regimes) creates serious ruptures with the previous philosophy of the city.

Under socialism, value extracted from more productive agents was re-invested in less productive sectors and also financed vast (often unproductive in capitalist sense) public expenditure, so that the return on re-invested capital was often partial, but the potential was being accumulated for the long-term development of social and economic capital. In contrast to that system, the new regime *is* indeed based on the ideology of maximization of profits, reduced public budget, and shortened investment horizons.

Through the commodification, financialization, and revalorization of housing, real estate, and other urban assets – strategies sought by both markets and regulations – urban space is very much reduced to the operation of capital. Social

inequalities, injustices, and uneven development are naturalized by their mystification as the “natural conditions” of the circulation of money and commodity and people’s divergent skills and luck in acquiring personal wealth to accommodate themselves at different levels of consumption. Denouncing and de-legitimizing the practices of state socialism as an “unnatural” experiment, national and urban regimes of post-socialist transition can only legitimize their push of neoliberalization and austerity politics even further than the collective memory of the welfare state allows governments in Western Europe.

At the scale of the city, new urban consumption-based semiotics lubricates class transformation. While socialist societies were relatively egalitarian and structured mostly according to merit and profession, the new society demands new class consciousness – new etiquettes, ethics, and esthetics, new semiotics for distinguishing social position and status. High levels of income inequality are registered everywhere under post-socialism; however, income per se is not a sufficient factor of class division and true social inequality. More significant is how income translates into life chances, consumption “freedom,” and social privilege. Here, it is the consumption of urban space and segregation (including through gentrification and suburbanization) that complete this translation. For example, informed by the symbolic meanings of what locations and types of housing are “prestigious” or not, housing markets differentiate income groups, who are now in search of defining and securing their own class status (Badyina and Golubchikov 2005; Golubchikov and Badyina 2006). Spatial formations thus work as a medium to transform income inequalities into social status – consuming space is what sustains social reproduction and iterates classes today, more than, for example, industrial-era production-based class struggle. This is a mechanism of the establishment and reproduction of dominance in the urban society of consumers, more aligned with Weber’s vision, rather than a product of more explicit class struggle under industrial capitalism, as in Marx’s teaching.

All this, of course, changes the *raison d’être* of the city. Rather than being a vehicle for spatial equalization and redistribution, for a purposeful evolution of social consciousness towards “a fair and egalitarian society,” the post-socialist city has become a dividing and divided experience – with increasing social and economic disparity and polarization at both inter-urban and intra-urban scales. It is not only that the principle of the egalitarian re-distribution of wealth was replaced with the neoliberal principle of self-reliance, but the new regime has also created preconditions for the extraction of wealth from the large majority of people and places and its re-concentration in the hands of the select few (people and places).

Conclusions

While studies of post-socialist cities demonstrate much appetite and aptitude in investigating various aspects of urbanization under the profound and radical politico-economic changes experienced under transition, there is still much room

to reveal how post-socialist urban space has been an intensive and oft-cruel battlefield – over ideas, powers, social, economic, and political practices, identities, symbolism, understandings, and meanings. There is still much room to reveal the appropriation of urban space through various mechanisms – privatization and commodification, investment and disinvestment, violence and conformity, resistance and resilience, negation, interrogation and negotiation, location, relocation and displacement, exclusion and segregation, new representations of space, and new spaces of representation. There is still much room to reveal different agencies in these rapid and complex processes – state, markets, and people – in their different embodiment, organization and identification.

What is particularly missing from the current urban debates is a meta-narrative that would match the significance and extent of the meta-change in question. Extant studies focus on forms and appearances of urban processes rather than on the new ontologies of the urban, which may be understood not simply as a reflection or projection of new institutional and social order but as a key mediating instrument that “mixes” the ideological and the everyday and thus renders the new totalizing ideology its concrete practical contours and control over the production and reproduction of social relationships.

My intention in this paper has been to start problematizing the relationships between transition and the urban. To this end, I debated the importance of revisiting transition on three key levels, which in their cumulative co-construction offer a better understanding of the centrality of the urban in the spectacular post-socialist dynamics. Firstly, at the level of ideology, it is important to understand transition as a totalizing doctrine, which completes the subjugation of the whole world to capitalism and firmly crowns neoliberalism as the only global order. Like the rise of state socialism in the twentieth century, transition is a process of planetary reach and significance that has already radically changed the destinies of peoples, irrespective of whether living within or outside the spaces of (post)socialism. Secondly, at the level of practice, it is important to properly account for the spatializing effects of that ideology – which is not simply “domesticated,” but subsumes pre-existing practices altogether, alienates them from their own ideological history, and recasts them under the exigencies of capital(ism). Thirdly, at the level of the urban, while urban change is usually portrayed merely as a projection of larger societal changes, the urban needs to be seen the central stage through which the societal change is mediated; new meanings, social relations, and class divisions are construed; and through which transition achieves its practical, corporeal completeness.

Cities are actually an important social framework and material locale for the production and reproduction of the new relationships of (neoliberal) capitalism, including class (trans)formation and the production of uneven development. The urbanization of transition is thus a fulcrum of social and spatial regulation. In other words, urbanization is a major institutional dimension of transition, not simply its playground.

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ORCID

Oleg Golubchikov  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7355-0447>

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