

Commentary

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The slow construction of the urban civilization: the socio-historic distances in the reading of an urban form.

The post-Soviet city is generally envisioned as a city in transition, on a more or less direct course towards the market city. This observation recalls the reconstitution of the residential property stock through privatizations, the redefinition of the individual in countries shaped by collectivist references, the post-national reconstitution of the economy and the political structures (Dressler, Gatti, and Perez-Agote, 1999). L. Kogan's approach suggests that we need a deeper analysis in the shaping of 'urban civilization' and the construction of urban policies, to change the way we look at the construction of urban permanence.

Since the 1970s, L. Kogan has taken a stand on the difficulties for creating an urban mentality, in the face of the linear schema of the growth of production and the expansion of new towns linked to the industrial system (notably in the Urals). He notices the distinction between the processes of urban civilization and the construction of urban policies.

The studies on the quality of urban life, notably the investigations into the priorities of Muscovites and urban policy, demonstrate the attachment to neighbourhood and the gradual construction of an area of familiarization below government strategies.

It is impossible not to see that, today, the Muscovites are attempting to make their urban environment more familiar and more accessible. After having become inhabitants of their own private, separate apartment, and today often even the owners of their accommodation, people wanted to enlarge the process and to extend it into certain parts of the town and their immediate urban environment.

(Kogan 1995).

On a broader scale, to create an urban mentality we must understand the urban form as linked with the processes of mobility and of monetary exchange (Simmel). We must investigate and emphasize the concrete problems of fitting out towns (the price of cheap gas, the standard of transportation) and the recurrent problems concerning the status of housing accommodation. But L. Kogan and the situation of the Russian towns underline the long-term historical difficulties of the Russian expansion, the cultural tensions and the distance of the local civilizations in the face of legal and state order.

The re-examination of Moscow twenty years after these investigations and ten years after the change of political regime underlines the impact of the residential patterns on the outskirts (dachas and the 'new cottages' for the nouveaux riches) before the federal power came back on the municipal and local spheres. But persistent problems remain: the integration of urban communities and the reinforcement of the bases for the urban co-ordination. In this transitory situation, a distance to the big structures and a new pragmatism without regulation has dominated. The

Russian elites were involved in an evolutionary and empirical approach, with some difficulties for perceiving the synthesis of the problems.

L. Kogan once again implacably emphasizes the strong contradictions between the level of civilization attained (education, industry, research) and the dimension of the problems to be solved, that is, the pertinent political structures, the model for development. 'We must become truly aware of our real place in developed modern urban civilization and make a diagnosis of the "weakness" in our history' (Kogan, 1996). Democratization and civilization do not seem to go as a common process. This reflection brings up a methodological invitation to make an analytical distinction between social change, the political system, and the form of urban mentalities, following the approach advocated by G. Gurvitch and P. Sorokin in the 1930s and the 1950s.

The covert problems concern the migratory pressure in the capital city. The definition of a stable ('homeostatic') model in the Plans of the 1930s and the freezing of building projects by the municipality of Moscow have reinforced the idea of a status quo in central (gorod) Moscow and of an endogenous urban quality of life. The satellite towns defined as systems of employment and cheap places for housing were implicitly to absorb the pressure of immigration from the countryside. The only novelty could be the flexible employment and the extension of the problems of poverty, relating to the housing status. This demographic inversion, underlined by Haeringer, questions the evolution of the centre in relation to expansion at the periphery. We can state that this urban administrative structure remained permanently in place with the central Moscow (1.5 million inhabitants) and the Greater Moscow (8 million inhabitants in 1996).

The successive transformations in the town focused on the commercial city and the expansion of the property patrimony. But the double ring between the city centre and the satellite towns pushes the social problems out of the centre, outside the imperial city. This conservation in the space of power raises a problem for the new classes and their living space, as well as for the social classes on the periphery.

There exist also the norms of contemporary European civilization acknowledged throughout the world. As dwellers in the Eurasian area, we also belong to that civilization. Many Asian countries have overtaken us, on the standard of the European civilization. We must not close out the civilizing process for ourselves . . . Our towns were created by very few urban-citizens . . . Today, we must construct a civil society with a huge shortage of urban-citizens . . .

(Kogan, 1996)

Power and citizenship are fitted into the urban form.

We can underline the importance of cross-cutting the internal insights and the external insights in the reading of a town. Beyond apparently homogeneous globalization, L. Kogan's viewpoint, his research into urban-citizens here and now, are invaluable to us. The permanency of the urban form stays in its capacity to absorb social problems and changes, a mode of management for social problems.

Such a diagnosis does not, however, overlook the related, globally integrated problems of the post-Soviet city: money, individualism, social polarization. It emphasizes the Western analysis focused between the local orders and the global laws of the new economy, the new financial, monetary, and information circulation.

'Today existence is stretched along the hierarchy of the global and the local; with global freedom of movement signalling social promotion, advancement and success; and immobility exuding the repugnant

Commentary

odour of defeat, failed life and being left behind. Increasingly, global and local acquire the character of contrary values, values most hotly coveted or resented and placed in the very centre of life dreams, nightmares and struggles . . . The good life is life on the move; more precisely, the comfort of being confident of the facility with which one can move in case staying on no longer satisfies. Freedom, has come, to mean above all, freedom of choice, and choice has acquired, conspicuously, a spatial dimension.
(Bauman, 1998: 121).

Constructing the specific character of the urban order and the urban civilization is still more difficult, but also more valuable.

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Translated from the French by Juliet Vale

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