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# Rethinking Socialist Space in the Twentieth Century

*Edited by* Marcus Colla · Paul Betts



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# What, Where, and When Was Socialist Space in the Twentieth Century?

*Marcus Colla and Paul Betts*

In order to create a socialist society, the existence of the material and social premises (in the form of an extremely high level of development of production, the abolition of classes and the socialization of all the tools and means of production) is not enough. What is also needed is a cultural revolution: man must be completely re-made, for which purpose the conditions of living and forms of human existence must be radically changed.

Leonid Sabsovich, Soviet Urban Planner, 1929<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Z. L. Zile (1963) 'Programs and Problems of City Planning in the Soviet Union', *Washington University Law Quarterly*, 29–30. See also C. E. Crawford (2022) *Spatial Revolution: Architecture and Planning in the Early Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press) 8.

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There is maybe a touch of irony in the fact that international observers gave meaning to the collapse of Soviet-style state socialism through the notion of the ‘End of History’. Though few theses have been so comprehensively analysed and rejected as Francis Fukuyama’s idea that the demise of socialism in Eastern Europe marked a final realignment of history’s tectonic plates (enormous events, it seems, demand an enormous explanation), what was perhaps most ill-fitting about the ‘End of History’ designation was its temporal orientation. For, arguably, the more global revolution<sup>2</sup> that took place in 1989–91 was not temporal, but spatial. After all, the seemingly limitless micro-revolutions that broke out across the socialist world ultimately revolved around the autonomy of civil actors in reclaiming urban space. So sprawling and complex were these events that the traditional explanatory tools of the historian seem ill-quipped to explain them: when we cast our gaze over the whole expanse of activity that convulsed the Soviet-aligned world in the late 1980s, we see not chronology, cause and effect, the neat unfolding of events in time—but radical simultaneity. At the macro-scale, meanwhile, the demise of the Soviet Union signalled a new spatial order. ‘Not only’, Karl Schlögel reminds us, ‘had an empire fallen apart, the space known as the Eastern Bloc had disintegrated as well’.<sup>3</sup> And with the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc collapsed an entire mental geography arranged around the spatial categories of ‘East’ and ‘West’: a geography that had become all but naturalised in the global geopolitical imagination. At the same time, the post-1991 convergence of the post-Soviet and post-socialist space with ‘the West’—a process precipitated by Mikhail Gorbachev’s summoning of a ‘common European home’—upended the ‘East–South allegiance’ that socialist leaders had for so long cultivated in the name of anti-imperial solidarity.<sup>4</sup> From the micro to the macro, the end of Soviet-style state socialism in the twentieth century was brought about by—and triggered—a revolution of space.

At first glance, then, our historical understanding of socialism in the twentieth century seems burdened—if not downright distorted—by the historian’s elemental disposition to privilege time over space; as if history

<sup>2</sup> J. Mark, B. C. Jacob, T. Rupprecht and L. Spaskovska (2022) *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

<sup>3</sup> K. Schlögel (2016) *In Space We Read Time: On the History of Civilization and Geopolitics* (trans. G. Jackson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 8.

<sup>4</sup> P. Betts (2019) ‘1989 At Thirty: A Recast Legacy’, *Past & Present* 244:1, 299.

unfolds, as the geographer and urban theorist Edward Soja polemicized about neo-classical economics, ‘on the head a of a pin, in a fantasy world with virtually no spatial dimensions’.<sup>5</sup> Without due attention to the spatial dimensions of socialist life, we are wont to miss one of its most critical aspects—indeed, an aspect that proved central to the transformations that, in the case of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, ultimately brought the whole edifice crashing down. Reimbuing the spatial into our understanding of twentieth-century socialism offers the possibility to see that history differently. By taking an expansive approach to the notion of ‘socialist space’, this volume aims to explore the possibilities of traversing the scales of spatial thinking, and the role of space in socialist thinking, practice, and policy.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF SPACE

So, what does it mean to reimburse ‘space’ into the study of history? What types of space might legitimately fall into the historian’s purview? Is ‘space’ of greater service to us as a category of analysis or as a historical subject in its own right? And does the historicization of space in the end amount to nothing more than a re-throning of the temporal over the spatial? These types of questions are not new. Even if one agrees with the (questionable) notion that ‘spatial thinking’ played only a peripheral role in historical scholarship up until the end of the twentieth century,<sup>6</sup> the so-called spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences has now been with us for over a generation. Drawing on a range of innovative methods and conceptual frameworks developed by philosophers, anthropologists, and—above all—critical geographers, the work that has resulted from this focus on the spatial has transformed our understanding of the manifold ways in which space is produced and navigated by historical actors.<sup>7</sup> ‘Spatial history’ is both ‘broad’ and consciously

<sup>5</sup> E. W. Soja (1989) *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso), 32.

<sup>6</sup> F. B. Schenk (2006) ‘Der spatial turn und die Osteuropäische Geschichte’, *Themenportal Europäische Geschichte*; <https://www.europa.clío-online.de/essay/id/fdae-1374>.

<sup>7</sup> On the exaggerated character of the designation ‘spatial turn’, see *ibid.*

interdisciplinary.<sup>8</sup> Lacking ‘clearly delineated boundaries’,<sup>9</sup> its effect is to give historical depth to the realisation that, in the words of the geographer Doreen Massey, ‘space is socially constructed’ and ‘the spatial is socially constructed’.<sup>10</sup> But its essence consists of a very simple plea: as Konrad Lawson, Riccardo Bavaj, and Bernhard Struck put it, ‘Spatial history is not merely one among many “hyphenated” fields. It does not aim at further compartmentalization. At its very core lies a heightened sensitivity to the spatial dimensions of history *in general*’.<sup>11</sup> ‘The “spatial turn”’, adds Schlögel, ‘means no more than a heightened appreciation of the spatial side of the historical world—no more, but also no less’.<sup>12</sup> At the very least, ‘thinking spatially’ draws us away from ‘container’ thinking about the spatial categories we use in everyday historical practice—most obviously, but far from exclusively, that of the nation-state, especially since socialist thought, engagement, and policies always challenged the borders of traditional nation-states.<sup>13</sup> It helps us to grasp the historical varieties and contingencies of space: how it is encountered, produced, imagined, perceived, represented, appropriated, navigated, manipulated, contested, differentiated, and naturalised.

As this overview suggests, neither the practitioners of ‘spatial history’ nor those who concern themselves more generally with the history of space can be collectively classified as a ‘school’ or ‘movement’. Nor are they bound together by a common methodology or even, in fact, any shared theoretical frameworks or assumptions.<sup>14</sup> Yet there are nonetheless very few fields of historical research that cannot be—and have

<sup>8</sup> Witness Schlögel’s boast that the ‘sources of the spatial turn are prolific, and the river they feed is mighty—mightier than the dams and barriers of the disciplines’; Schlögel, *In Space we read Time*, xx. On breadth, see S. Rau (2019) *History, Space, and Place* (trans. M. T. Taylor. London and New York: Routledge), 5–6.

<sup>9</sup> K. Lawson, R. Bavaj and B. Struck (2021) *A Guide to Spatial History: Areas, Aspects, and Avenues of Research* (Wrocław: Olsokhagen), 1.

<sup>10</sup> D. Massey (1993) ‘Politics and Space/Time’ in M. Keith and S. Pile (eds), *Place and the Politics of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge), 146.

<sup>11</sup> Lawson et al., *Guide to Spatial History*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Schlögel, ‘Spatial Turn, at Last’ in Schlögel, *In Space we Read Time*, 46.

<sup>13</sup> On the nation-state and the spatial turn, see S. Sassen (2000), ‘Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global: Elements for a Theorization’, *Public Culture* 12:1, 215–232.

<sup>14</sup> N. Baron (2007) ‘New Spatial Histories of Twentieth Century Russia and the Soviet Union: Surveying the Landscape’, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 55:3, 374.



not been—enriched through due attention being directed towards its spatial components. Spanning all number of spatial registers, historians of gender have long understood the power of space in influencing social relations and reproducing hierarchies and power asymmetries.<sup>15</sup> At the macro-scale, climate awareness and the increasing intellectual energies channelled into the notion of the Anthropocene in recent years have sharpened our attentiveness to the nature of interaction between humans and their environments: no longer regarded as merely the passive backdrops to historical action, the spaces around us are now recognised as powerful forcefields and agents in their own right.<sup>16</sup> History’s ‘global turn’, meanwhile, has helped ‘denaturalise’ some of history’s traditional spatial categories,<sup>17</sup> bringing closer attention to, on the one hand, the historical creation of borders, regions (both ‘sub-national’ and ‘supra-national’), and imagined geographies, and on the other, to those actors and processes whose historical significance derives precisely from their mobility and border-crossing.<sup>18</sup> Domestic and ‘private’ spaces have also proved productive fields of research—not least in the history of state socialism, ostensibly driven as it was by an ideology that demanded the revolutionary upheaval of ‘traditional’ family structures and the entire

<sup>15</sup> Key texts in feminist geography include D. Massey (2005) *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge, UK: Polity); Doreen Massey (2005) *For Space* (London: Sage). See also C. Osborne and B. Kümin (2013) ‘At Home and in the Workplace: A Historical Introduction to the “Spatial Turn”’, *History and Theory* 52:3, 305–318.

<sup>16</sup> Or, in Reinhart Koselleck’s terminology, they have gone from being ‘metahistorical pre-givens’ to ‘historical pre-givens’; see Koselleck (2018) ‘Space and History’ in R. Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories* (trans. S. Franzel and S.-L. Hoffmann. Stanford: Stanford University Press), 29.

<sup>17</sup> N. Standen (2019) ‘Colouring Outside the Lines: Methods for a Global History of Eastern Eurasia 600–1350’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 29, 63.

<sup>18</sup> D. Mishkova and B. Trencsényi (2017) ‘Conceptualizing Spaces within Europe. The Case of Meso-Regions’ in W. Steinmetz, M. Freedden and J. Fernández-Sebastián (eds), *European Conceptual History in the European Space* (New York: Berghahn, 2017), 214. Some key studies from Eastern Europe include I. Neumann (1998) *Uses of the Other: The “East” in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press); L. Wolff (1994) *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press); M. Todorova (1997) *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford UP). On ‘territoriality’ see C. S. Maier (2016) *Once Within Borders Territories of Power, Wealth, and Belonging since 1500* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press).

notion of the ‘private sphere’ as so many obsolete bourgeois relics.<sup>19</sup> In fact, socialism generated its own understandings and practices of public and private that far exceeded liberal conceptions, and recent years have seen increasing scholarly interest in how these terms and practices of public/private took form in socialist regimes that ostensibly had done away with them.<sup>20</sup>

The intellectual origins of the spatial turn in history are manifold. Analysing the interconnectedness of the great transformations that took place in the discipline of history around the turn of the century, Matthias Middell observes that the ‘return of space’ helped to build ‘a bridge between the methodological debates that had been taking place since the 1980s with the observations about the reconstitution of the historical research object “Europe” and the desire to find a connection to the discussion about globalization’.<sup>21</sup> Above all, however, the late twentieth-century spike in scholarly interest in concepts and notions of space has been associated with postmodernism.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in his seminal 1991 work *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson

<sup>19</sup> L. H. Siegelbaum (ed.) (2006) *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan); M. B. Smith (2009) ‘Khrushchev’s Promise to Eliminate the Urban Housing Shortage: Rights, Rationality, and the Communist Future’ in M. Ilić and J. Smith (eds), *Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev* (New York: Routledge), 26–45; P. Betts (2010) *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford UP); L. Attwood (2013) *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia: Private Life in a Public Space* (Manchester: Manchester University Press); K. Malaia (2023) *Taking the Soviet Union Apart Room by Room: Domestic Architecture before and after 1991* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

<sup>20</sup> M. Garcelon (1997) ‘The Shadow of the Leviathan: Public and Private in Communist and Post-Communist Society’ in J. Weintraub and K. Kumar (eds) *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 303–332.

<sup>21</sup> M. Middell (2008) ‘Der *Spatial Turn* und das Interesse an der Globalisierung in der Geschichtswissenschaft’ in J. Döring and T. Thielmann (eds), *Spatial Turn. Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften* (Bielefeld: Transcript), 109. The term ‘return of space’ derives from Jürgen Osterhammel, ‘Die Wiederkehr des Raumes: Geopolitik, Geohistorie und historische Geographie’, *Neue Politische Literatur* 43 (1998), 374–397. See also M. Middell and K. Naumann (2010) ‘Global History and the Spatial Turn: from the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalization’, *Journal of Global History*, 5:1, 149–170.

<sup>22</sup> D. Bachmann-Medick (2016) *Cultural Turns. New Orientations in the Study of Culture* (trans. A. Blauhut. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter), 211.

made the connection between spatial thinking and postmodernism almost programmatic:

We have often been told ... that we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic, and I think it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism.<sup>23</sup>

Jameson echoed a claim of Michel Foucault to the effect that if the ‘great obsession of the nineteenth century’ had been ‘history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis, and cycle’, then the ‘present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space’.<sup>24</sup> Foucault argued that a ‘devaluation of space ... has prevailed for generations’, with the consequence that space had been ‘treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile’ while time, ‘on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic’.<sup>25</sup> Both Jameson and Foucault shared the belief that the death of the grand narrative, and of the future-oriented assumptions that underlay it, had been prefigured by a radical reorientation in the relationship between space and time.<sup>26</sup>

One might be tempted to disregard the arguments of Jameson and Foucault as classic expressions of postmodern iconoclasm. But there is nevertheless something compelling—and consequential—about the claim that ‘high modernist’ thinking was characterised more by temporal than spatial concerns. Arriving at the issue from a very different intellectual tradition, the German historian and theorist Reinhart Koselleck directly

<sup>23</sup> F. Jameson (1991) *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso), 16.

<sup>24</sup> M. Foucault (1984, October) ‘Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias’, *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* (orig. 1967. Trans. J. Miskowicz); <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>. M. Foucault (2007) ‘Questions on Geography’ in J. W. Crampton and S. Elden (eds).

<sup>25</sup> M. Foucault (2007) ‘Questions on Geography’ in J. W. Crampton and S. Elden (eds), *Space, Knowledge and Power. Foucault and Geography* (orig. 1967. Trans. C. Gordon. Aldershot: Routledge), 177. On the gendered character of the time/space dualism, see Massey, ‘Politics and Space/Time’, 146–151.

<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in the discipline of history, the newfound interest in questions of memory and heritage, as captured in Pierre Nora’s notion of the *lieu de mémoire*, seemed to reaffirm the centrality of ‘place’; P. Nora (1992) (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire* (3 vols., Paris).

addressed the apparent absence of spatial thinking in historical practice in a 1986 lecture entitled ‘Space and History’. ‘Faced with the formal alternative of space or time’, he argued, ‘the overwhelming majority of historians opted for the dominance of time, though this dominance was not very theoretically grounded’.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the foundational belief that space is by and large impervious to historicization can claim an old pedigree. A tradition associated with Vico held that that which humans did not create—including the space around them—must remain beyond the scope of human understanding. It was an idea that continued to characterise historical thinking, be it of an idealist or a materialist character, well into the twentieth century.<sup>28</sup> Even more influential was the historicist assumption that change over time occurred *through* and *to* individual societies and cultures, which remained bounded in fixed space.<sup>29</sup> Historicism is indeed a heavy inheritance, warning us that losing sight of our temporal axis might prompt us to treat historical units as unchanging—one step away from essentialising.<sup>30</sup> By this reasoning, the world of historical time is one of flux, while the world of historical space—unless *subjected* to that of historical time—is one of stasis.

By virtue of their enterprise, then, historians may well privilege the temporal over the spatial. But this is hardly akin to the claim that they have ignored the dimension of space altogether: historicising space, after all, is not the same thing as spatializing history. A well-known reference is Frederick Jackson Turner’s late nineteenth-century idea of the frontier as central to understanding the drive and character of American history,

<sup>27</sup> Koselleck, ‘Space and History’, 26.

<sup>28</sup> A genealogy of the distinction between human and natural history is laid down in D. Chakrabarty (2021) *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 26ff.

<sup>29</sup> David Harvey made a similar claim about social theories, which, in his view, ‘typically privilege time over space in their formulations. They broadly assume either the existence of some pre-existing spatial order within which temporal processes operate, or that spatial barriers have become so reduced as to render space a contingent, rather than fundamental aspect to human action’; D. Harvey (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell), 205.

<sup>30</sup> A number of German historians working on space have drawn a link between the scholarly reticence to take space seriously and the Nazi associations of pre-war geopolitical thinking; see for example Osterhammel, ‘Die Wiederkehr des Raumes’; Schlögel, *In Space We Read Time*, xv; C. Dipper and L. Raphael (2011) ‘“Raum” in der Europäischen Geschichte: Einleitung’, *Journal of Modern European History* 9:1 (2011), 27–41; Osborne and Kümin, ‘At Home and in the Workplace’, 308.

as space worked to replace time as the key to interpreting the dynamics of ‘manifest destiny’.<sup>31</sup> Fernand Braudel’s *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l’Époque de Philippe II* (1949), arguably an even more influential example, might be seen as a kind of homage to the motto of the sixteenth-century cartographer Abraham Ortelius that ‘geography is the eye of history’.<sup>32</sup> Consciously constructed around a ‘dialectic of space and time (geography and history)’, Braudel’s ambition was to chart the unfolding of his history on several vastly differing temporal and spatial scales.<sup>33</sup> And yet, as Sigrid Weigel points out, the effect of Braudel’s celebrated tripartite division of history’s temporal layers is that space and time in his work ultimately come to ‘constitute a continuum in which time increases to the extent that space recedes’: the greater the pace of historical change, the more obscure the spatial dimension becomes.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, even while acknowledging that Braudel ‘has done more to change our notions of space and time than any other historian of the twentieth century’, Peter Burke remarks that although the ‘geohistory’ of *The Mediterranean* ‘is not totally immobile’, its author ‘fails to show it in motion’.<sup>35</sup> However admirable the ambition, Braudel failed to arrive at a full synthesis of historical space and time.

These kinds of critique point just as much to the challenges that inhere in integrating the temporal and the spatial in history as they do to Braudel’s own interpretative shortcomings. But, in pointing out the relatively traditional perspective on geographical thinking held by even as creative and wide-ranging a historian as Braudel, they help at the same time to emphasise what *was* really novel about history’s ‘spatial turn’. In

<sup>31</sup> F. J. Turner (2008 [1893]), *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (London: Penguin).

<sup>32</sup> See R. Mayhew (2017, 7 April) ‘Context is Everything’, *Times Literary Supplement*.

<sup>33</sup> F. Braudel (1972) ‘Preface to the Second Edition’, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Vol 1 (2 Vols. London: HarperCollins), 16. On the relationship between Braudel’s work and Henri Lefebvre, see Ľ. Stanek (2011) *Henri Lefebvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 53ff.

<sup>34</sup> S. Weigel (2009) ‘On the “Topographical Turn”: Concepts of Space in Cultural Studies and Kulturwissenschaften. A Cartographic Feud’, *European Review*, 17:1, 194. See also Eric Piltz, “‘Trägheit des Raums’”. Fernand Braudel und die *Spatial Stories* der Geschichtswissenschaft’ in Döring and Thielmann, *Spatial Turn*, 74–102.

<sup>35</sup> P. Burke (2015) *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929–2014* (2nd ed. Cambridge and Malden: Polity), 46.

a 2007 review essay, Nick Baron (a contributor to this volume) explained the novelty of the ‘new spatial history’ thus:

Since its disciplinary inception, history has been attentive to spatial phenomena such as borders, boundaries and frontiers, population distributions and migrations, and the formation and re-formation of urban and rural landscapes. The new direction integrates this long-standing historiographical sensitivity to spatial patterns and processes with a more recent cultural historical emphasis on the contingency and mutability of the concepts, codes and signs by which we “read” and “write” the world.<sup>36</sup>

Nonetheless, however comfortably historians might have absorbed the destabilisation of their discipline’s traditional spatial frameworks, the developments of the past few decades have not translated into a wholesale adoption of the ‘spatial turn’. For better or worse, many empirically minded historians have continued to express caution, even scepticism, towards the spatial turn’s disposition towards dense terminology and disembodied ‘theory’.<sup>37</sup> Their caution is not necessarily misplaced. As Susanne Rau points out, ‘Much too often, scholars write about “space” without precisely indicating whether they mean a spatial configuration, a concept, an idea, or a practice’.<sup>38</sup> Not a few historians have singled out the spatial turn’s relationship to the ‘cultural turn’ when attacking the jargon and loose metaphor to which much research on ‘space’ has allegedly succumbed. Schlögel, for instance, warns of the ‘disastrous misconception’ that “reading a city” is akin to “reading a text”.<sup>39</sup> Pointing especially to the propensity of ‘space’ histories to side-line the very materiality that ultimately conditions spatial experiences and practices, meanwhile, the urban historian Leif Jerram questions whether ‘space’ has actually become ‘a useless category for historical analysis’.<sup>40</sup> For most historical protagonists, Schlögel and Jerram remind us, ‘space’

<sup>36</sup> Baron, ‘New Spatial Histories’, 377.

<sup>37</sup> See R. Kingston (2010) ‘Mind Over Matter? History and the Spatial Turn’, *Cultural and Social History* 7:1 (2010), 111–121.

<sup>38</sup> S. Rau (2019) *History, Space, and Place* (trans. M. T. Taylor. London and New York: Routledge), 124.

<sup>39</sup> Schlögel, ‘Europe, Diaphanous’, 435.

<sup>40</sup> L. Jerram (2013) ‘Space: A Useless Category for Historical Analysis?’ *History & Theory* 52:3, 400–419.

was experienced not as abstraction, but as physical reality. If the ‘spatial turn’ really *has*, however paradoxically, ‘obliterated interest in bricks and mortar’, then it risks marginalising something utterly essential about the historical experience.<sup>41</sup>

## A SPACE OF ITS OWN? SOCIALISM AND SPACE

The history of twentieth-century socialism has not been immune to the reconfiguration of spatial categories that the ‘spatial turn’ heralded. Under the Cold War analytical rubric of ‘totalitarianism’, traditional approaches to socialist space had principally been concerned with the ways in which political regimes sought to saturate their spaces with ideological and political values. The tendency was thus to view socialist space as first and foremost—indeed fundamentally—‘political’. But over the past twenty years or so, this picture has changed dramatically. The Soviet Union has attracted particular attention, and there now exists a large body of publications in several languages that deal explicitly with questions of space in Soviet history.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Eastern Europe ‘has seen much spatially attuned research in recent decades’; a development that is often—if insufficiently—attributed to the sudden remapping of borders that attended the Cold War’s end.<sup>43</sup> An instructive example of the transition between the old and new focuses is the 2002 volume of David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*. Standing at the confluence of ‘spatial turn’-inspired scholarship with the then-fashionable scholarly interest in exploring ‘normal life’ as a lens through which to interrogate state-society relationships under socialism, Crowley and Reid’s book looks at the manifold ways in which Eastern Europe’s socialist states sought to ‘permeate’ even the most quotidian

<sup>41</sup> Kingston, ‘Mind Over Matter?’, 114. By contrast, Nick Baron argues that the ‘new spatial history’ directs ‘attention on the practices that *mediate between* discursive and material space’. It therefore ‘implies seeking to understand how concepts and visions of space are transmitted and then transmuted into material structures that reconstitute the spatial dimensions of reality as it is imagined, seen and lived, and identifying the workings of power, hegemonic or subversive, in enabling or constraining spatial construction and transformation’; Baron, ‘New Spatial Histories’, 400 (emphasis added).

<sup>42</sup> On the Soviet Union see Baron, ‘New Spatial Histories’, 374–400; M. Rolf (2010) ‘Importing the “Spatial Turn” to Russia: Recent Studies on the Spatialization of Russian History’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 11:2, 359–80.

<sup>43</sup> Lawson et al., *A Guide to Spatial History*, 4, 7.

of (mostly built) spaces with ‘ideological meaning’, often producing strikingly dynamic fields of social and political tension.<sup>44</sup>

A more fundamental recalibration of traditional spatial categories has been brought on by the so-called global turn. As histories of the twentieth century—be they European, American or global in outlook—have left behind the clash-of-ideologies master narrative and instead adopted something more attuned to the multi-directional character of global entanglements, the customary spatial frameworks of ‘socialism’ have come to look increasingly elastic. Focussing on the ‘porousness’ of the Iron Curtain—or ‘Nylon Curtain’, as György Péteri memorably reframed it<sup>45</sup>—has facilitated the emergence of a remarkably fertile field of research.<sup>46</sup> Recent work has shown how Eastern Europe worked to give form to its internationalist credentials and professed identity, hosting international youth festivals, scholarly conferences in the arts and sciences, exhibitions, training camps and other sites of exchange and hospitality, much of which was aimed at young people.<sup>47</sup> Those people who fled communist Europe were more complicated, as Soviet defectors for example became sensationalised figures during the early Cold War as symbols of dangerous border-crossing and the need to regulate the spatial contours of state sovereignty.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> D. Crowley and S. E. Reid (2002) ‘Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc’ in D. Crowley and S. E. Reid (eds) *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Oxford and New York: Berg), 3.

<sup>45</sup> G. Péteri (2004) ‘Nylon Curtain—Transnational and Transsystemic Tendencies in The Cultural Life of State-Socialist Russia And East-Central Europe’, *Slavonica* 10:2, 113–123.

<sup>46</sup> For example, see S. Mikkonen and P. Koivunen (2015) (eds), *Beyond the Divide: Entangled Histories of Cold War Europe* (New York: Berghahn); A. Gorsuch (2011) *All This is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford UP); E. Gilburd (2018) *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

<sup>47</sup> G. Tsipursky (2016) *Socialist Fun: Youth, Consumption, and State-Sponsored Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1945–1970* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press); D. Siegfried (2021) *Bogenseer: Weltrevolution in der DDR, 1961–1989* (Göttingen: Wallstein); and D. P. Koenker and A. Gorsuch (2013) (eds) *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Bloomington: Indiana UP).

<sup>48</sup> E. R. Scott (2023) *Defectors: How the Illicit Flight of Soviet Citizens Built the Borders of the Cold War World* (Oxford: Oxford UP) and M. Feinberg (2017) *Curtain of Lies: The Battle Over Truth in Stalinist Eastern Europe* (New York: Oxford UP), esp. 60–87.



Even more significantly, the biggest boom field in the history of twentieth-century socialism over the past two decades or two has centred on encounters and entanglements between the ‘second’ and ‘third’ worlds.<sup>49</sup> Special attention has been paid to the everyday spaces of these encounters between Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and their partners in the developing world, such as the schoolroom, military training camp, exhibition hall, hospital, university seminar, and the travelogue, which were repurposed in the Cold War as select spaces of East–South interaction and mutual knowledge transfer.<sup>50</sup> Such overlapping global spaces have even become the stuff of memory and nostalgia for students and workers from the Global South who were trained and educated in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>51</sup>

And yet, for all the attention given to global mobility and cross-Curtain exchange, we cannot avoid the simple fact that the twentieth century’s state socialist orders demonstrated an unmistakable interest in the mastery of space. This has long been clear to historians of the Soviet Union. Right from the point of the October Revolution, socialist planners were confronted with the question of how best to organise space in a way that would, as Christina E. Crawford puts it, ‘maximalize not only productivity, but also equality and collectivity’.<sup>52</sup> Karl Schlögel goes so far as to argue that one could even ‘describe the history of the Soviet Union as the history of the production of a new space, a Soviet space’.<sup>53</sup> In a

<sup>49</sup> For example, O. Sanchez-Sibony (2014) *Red Globalization: The Political Economy of the Soviet Cold War from Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP); P. Babiracki and A. Jersild (2017) (eds) *Socialist Internationalism in the Cold War: Exploring the Second World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan); J. Mark, A. M. Kalinovsky and S. Marung (2020) (eds.), *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press); L. Stanek (2020) *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton UP); J. Mark, P. Betts et al. (2022) (eds) *Socialism Goes Global The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonisation* (Oxford: Oxford UP); J. Friedman (2022) *Ripe for Revolution: Building Socialism in the Third World* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press).

<sup>50</sup> K. Roth-Ey (2023) (ed.) *Socialist Internationalism and the Gritty Politics of the Particular: Second-Third World Spaces in the Cold War* (London: Bloomsbury).

<sup>51</sup> T. Kuhne, T. Vogel and A. Kahane (2010) (eds) *Ostalgie international: Erinnerungen an die DDR von Nicaragua bis Vietnam* (Berlin: Ch. Links).

<sup>52</sup> Crawford, *Spatial Revolution*, 1.

<sup>53</sup> K. Schlögel (2016) ‘Herodotus in Moscow, Benjamin in Los Angeles’ in Schlögel, *In Space We Read Time*, 417.

similar vein, Cynthia A. Ruder claims that the ‘need to fill a space, to mark one’s territory, carried with it both the burden and responsibility of demarcating space such that it became redolent with the Soviet ethos’.<sup>54</sup>

Of what, then, did this ‘ethos’ consist, and what role does it play in how we approach the notion of ‘socialist space’? The question is trickier than it ostensibly appears. Employing the very term ‘socialist’, after all, denotes a particular set of assumptions about the political character of the entity in question—assumptions which, invariably, map themselves onto how we perceive its relationship to space. As the historical geographer Denis Shaw observed in 1987, ‘The USSR...has been variously described as socialist, state socialist, state capitalist, transitional, bureaucratic collectivist, totalitarian, elitist and industrial-bureaucratic’, and ‘one’s attitude towards these different labels, and towards the social theories which lie behind them, will have a marked influence upon the way one views the character of the Soviet city’.<sup>55</sup> These descriptions, Shaw reminds us, pertain to much more than mere semantics: each of them contains within them certain propositions as to the ‘true’ character of the state in question. To be sure, the kind of sociology that generated the typologies to which Shaw points may no longer have the presence in Soviet studies that it did at the time, but the fundamental point about the relationship between an analyst’s choice of ‘social theory’ and the political assumptions that lie behind that choice remains pertinent. The adjective ‘socialist’, then, should not in any sense be deemed an *essential* description of the space in question. Just as it is not enough to define ‘socialist space’ simply as those spaces over which a hammer-and-sickle flag flew, so too is ‘socialist space’ an insufficient description of these. As Crowley and Reid conclude, ‘If we can use the term “socialist spaces” at all, it is only in relation to the shifting and multi-layered interaction between spatial organization, expression and use’.<sup>56</sup> A socialist space is never *only* a socialist space.

For many of the same reasons, it would seem equally self-defeating to limit our understandings of what constituted ‘socialist space’ in the

<sup>54</sup> C. A. Ruder (2018) *Building Stalinism. The Moscow Canal and the Creation of Soviet Space* (London and New York: I. B. Taurus), 2.

<sup>55</sup> D. J. B. Shaw (1987) ‘Some Influences on Spatial Structure in the State Socialist City: The Case of the USSR’ in L. Holzner and J. M. Knapp (eds) *Soviet Geography: A Festschrift for Paul E. Lydolph* (Milwaukee: The University of Wisconsin), 202.

<sup>56</sup> Crowley and Reid, ‘Socialist Spaces’, 4.

twentieth century only to spaces that fell under the rule of self-styled socialist powers.<sup>57</sup> It is, of course, difficult to avoid the state entirely when discussing the twentieth-century history of socialism, but focusing exclusively on state-based designations and state-led practices might lead us to exclude from the horizon of ‘socialist space’ those spaces outside of officially ‘socialist’ countries that may nevertheless have been viewed or intended by historical actors as, in some sense, ‘socialist’. Given the scholarly importance attributed to networks and entanglements (including those of non-state actors) between the ‘socialist’ and ‘non-socialist’ worlds in the twentieth century, the fluidity of meanings and values attached to spatial practices must remain critical to how we apprehend the character of ‘socialist space’ in the twentieth century.

Compounding the definitional problem, to speak of ‘socialist space’ is necessarily also a comparative exercise. And the comparison—be it implicit or explicit—raises important questions about the relationship between capitalism and socialism and their historical emergence as expressions of modern industrial society. Does ‘socialist’ space boast a different form and aesthetic to ‘capitalist’ space?<sup>58</sup> Does it reflect, project, and shape relations of power in different ways? Is it marked by different cycles of time—of faster and slower patterns of urban renewal, for instance? And, for all that, can any differences be said to be *fundamental*: do they derive from *essentially* opposing structures of property ownership, patterns of wealth distribution, and attitudes towards state planning?<sup>59</sup> Whatever the potential pitfalls of holding up something akin to ‘capitalist space’ as the normative benchmark against which ‘socialist’ specificities can be compared, most historians would likely agree that this is a question of degree rather than kind. Even the German planner Ernst May,

<sup>57</sup> The authors are grateful to Nick Baron for the discussion on which these ideas are based.

<sup>58</sup> See here Kate Brown (2001) ‘Gridded Lives: Why Kazakhstan and Montana are Nearly the Same Place’, *The American Historical Review* 106:1, 17–48. The issue is also tackled in L. H. Siegelbaum (2013) ‘Modernity Unbound: The New Soviet City of the Sixties’ in D. P. Koenker and A. Gorsuch (eds) *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Bloomington: Indiana UP), 66–83.

<sup>59</sup> A question taken up in Crowley and Reid, ‘Socialist Spaces’. For some older explorations of this theme in the field of urban history, see R. A. French and F. E. Ian Hamilton (1979) (eds) *The Socialist City: Spatial Structure and Urban Policy* (Chichester, New York, Brisbane and Toronto: John Wiley & Sons); Shaw, ‘Some Influences on Spatial Structure in the State Socialist City’, 201–227.

responsible for shaping the urban re-planning of the ‘New Frankfurt’ in the 1920s and producing that quintessentially ‘socialist space’ Magnitogorsk, remarked in 1933 that ‘in appearance, the socialist city will differ significantly’—*not* fundamentally—‘from obsolete capitalist cities’.<sup>60</sup>

Any discussion of the notion of ‘socialist space’ in history cannot avoid engaging with the oft-cited claim of the French urban theorist Henri Lefebvre that, unlike feudalism and capitalism, state socialism in practice never managed to ‘produce a space of its own’:

A revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses. A social transformation, to be truly revolutionary in character, must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on space – though its impact need not occur at the same rate, or with equal force, in each of these areas.<sup>61</sup>

Such was state socialism’s lack of achievement in the field of space production that Lefebvre even wondered ‘whether it is legitimate to speak of socialism where no architectural innovation has occurred, where no specific space has been created’.<sup>62</sup> Lefebvre was a popular thinker among the 1968 generation,<sup>63</sup> and his seminal work on *The Production of Space*, released in 1974, is shot through with critique of the fact that Soviet-style state socialism had ossified into a static and empty tribute to Lenin’s ideals. That space was also a target of disillusionment should come as no surprise. But, at the same time, Lefebvre also identified what he saw as contrasting ‘approaches to space’ between ‘the Soviet model’ and the ‘Chinese road to socialism’.<sup>64</sup> Whereas the former, he argued, concentrated its energies on accelerating ‘the capitalist process of accumulation’, thus reproducing capitalism’s propensity to privilege productive spaces

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Crawford, *Spatial Revolution*, 212. On Magnitogorsk, see Stephen Kotkin’s (1995) classic *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press).

<sup>61</sup> H. Lefebvre, (1974) *The Production of Space* (trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell), 4.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>63</sup> M. A. Bracke (2014) ‘1968’ in S. A. Smith (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism* (Oxford: Oxford UP), 158.

<sup>64</sup> Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 421.

over non-productive ones, China was said to evince ‘a real concern to draw the people and space in its entirety into the process of building a different society’, and thus produce a space bereft of ‘uneven development’.<sup>65</sup> Whether Lefebvre was correct in positing this distinction is debatable; but what is surely significant is his sensitivity to the variety of spatial practices that might potentially be embraced under the term ‘socialism’.

One might also question Lefebvre’s reflex to evaluate the success or otherwise of a social transformation solely through its effects on spatial production: a reflex that arguably borders on overdetermination.<sup>66</sup> Yet, whatever the case, Lefebvre’s provocative critique leads us, perhaps inevitably, to question what *makes* a space ‘socialist’. Does the concept of ‘socialist space’ make sense ‘only’ at a discursive level, or must it, as per Lefebvre, point to some kind of material reality? In this respect, Jerram’s complaint about historians’ sloppy usage of spatial categories is pertinent. ‘Far too often’, he writes, ‘knowledge generated from humans ... is read into or onto a space *from knowledge generated elsewhere*, and then read back off the space as if that were the source of the knowledge, and then feted as a new evidential category’.<sup>67</sup> At worst, employing the term without due critical caution risks adopting regime propaganda at face value, assuming that what was produced by the state was necessarily received and internalised by citizens in similar ways. It recalls the recollection of one former Czechoslovak architectural historian of the innovative intellectual work that he and his colleagues had undertaken in the 1970s on producing more humane spaces: ‘It was a verbal world, forming its own enclosed sphere, while the impact on the situation in real life was almost non-existent’.<sup>68</sup>

Whatever the possible pitfalls of such an exercise, in recent years a number of historians have held fast to the reality of ‘socialist spaces’. In

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.

<sup>66</sup> On this point, indeed, Lefebvre is unapologetic: ‘What is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space which it describes, whose vocabulary and links it makes use of, and whose code it embodies?’; *ibid.*, 44.

<sup>67</sup> Jerram, ‘Space’, 405.

<sup>68</sup> Pavel Halík, quoted in V. Rollová (2021) ‘Reality and Program. The Living Environment of the Socialist Person (1864–1975)’ in V. Rollová and K. Jirkalová (eds), *Budoucnost je skryta v přítomnosti: Architektura a česká politika 1945–1989 / The Future is Hidden in the Present: Architecture and Czech Politics 1945–1989* (Prague: UMPRUM), 70.

investigating early Soviet urban planning practices, for example, Crawford makes the case that socialist forms of ownership enabled architects to produce a unique ‘codependence’ between ‘social and spatial forms’: ‘Because the socialist state was client, landowner, and developer, Soviet architects and planners could envision and install spaces that exceeded physical and conceptual boundaries in ways heretofore unseen’.<sup>69</sup> Eli Rubin, meanwhile, has no compunctions in labelling the Marzahn residential complex in East Berlin ‘truly a socialist, and modern, space’.<sup>70</sup> His reasons for this are straightforward: beginning with the assertion that ‘space is and must be understood not as a text or a symbolic category, but as a radically material one’, he argues that complexes like Marzahn represented a conscious effort to produce ‘spaces that were radically new, radically modern, and radically socialist, with no traces of the pre-socialist past’.<sup>71</sup> They were socialist because they were (ideally) self-contained, fully encased in a world that permitted no penetration from the non-socialist outside. Likewise, for Michał Murawski, Warsaw’s Palace of Culture represents a distinctly socialist space in a way that Lefebvre’s resolute focus on the superstructural is incapable of capturing.<sup>72</sup> So successful was the spatial encoding of this building that its socialist identification with city residents has long outlived the demise of socialism, remaining what Murawski calls a ‘noncapitalist enclave’.<sup>73</sup>

Socialist in production, socialist in experience, and socialist in interpretation—these three examples in turn provide three possible lenses through which to analyse the concept of ‘socialist space’ historically, and indeed beyond their European contexts. But to do justice to the breadth and elasticity of ‘socialist space’ as a historical subject, we must move away from the urban environment and begin to think of ‘space’ in more expansive, alternative, and rural forms. Not all spatial thinking, after all, has a paper trail leading back to Lefebvre: when we talk about space and spatial categories in history, we refer to a much wider repertoire of concepts and

<sup>69</sup> Crawford, *Spatial Revolution*, 10.

<sup>70</sup> E. Rubin (2016) *Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space, and Memory in East Germany* (Oxford: Oxford UP), 2.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>72</sup> M. Murawski (2019) *The Palace Complex. A Stalinist Skyscraper, Capitalist Warsaw, and a City Transfixed* (Bloomington: Indiana UP), 24.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*