

*Siarhiej Liubimaŭ*¹

URBAN STUDIES AND THE ISSUE OF INNOVATIONS

Постсоветские столицы: Минск, Вильнюс, Баку (2009). Под общей редакцией Й.Терборна. Минск. : Издательский Центр БГУ, 270 с.: ил.

THE BOOK UNDER REVIEW SHOULD BE REGARDED as an expression of a relatively new trend in the academic environment, the essence of which is in the fact that the phenomena of cities and urban development become an increasingly popular subject, beyond the traditional studies of urban fabric in the stream of urban planning, architectural approaches and styles, archeological layers of cities, etc.

This trend of the last three decades is frequently referred to as a “spatial turn” or “return of spatial imagination” in social sciences and humanities. Its preconditions, as well as potential and already existent effects were thoroughly grounded historically and clarified in the late 1980s in a classical book of geographer and urban planner Edward Soja (1989).

Generalizing this new disciplinary disposition in a few sentences, it's worth to mention the three major innovations. Firstly, participation of representatives of various disciplines in the debates on functioning of urban systems significantly weakens the autonomy of the terms “city” and “space” in analytical schemes and theoretical models. Secondly, the weakening of autonomy implies that space (including the urban space) – is neither an effect, nor a reflection, and nor a container for social process, but one of the aspects of this process. In such case, interdisciplinary studies are necessary for the maximum versatile evaluation of the role of built environment in the common process of social transformations. Thirdly and finally, the increased sensitivity towards the city as a means of socio-spatial organization and the increasing number of research ventures on this issue require better grounded answers to the question of what is urban in relation to non-urban.

In traditional studies – institutionally and ideologically placed into the horizon of modernization – the city was usually opposed to the village and hence was constructed as a relatively discrete stage of development embodied in space. In the new system of knowledge, the city is regarded rather in the context of changing relations with the other methods of spatial organization: region, locality, nation-state, district within a city, territorial unit, world system, etc.

This somewhat expanded introduction is needed here in order to understand from what angle I suggest to regard the book “Post-Soviet Capital Cities:

¹ Passport spelling: Siarhei Liubimau, in Belarusian: Сяргей Любімаў

Minsk, Vilnius, Baku”. It is difficult both to argue with this publication and to evaluate its significance from the point of view of one specific academic discipline. The authors themselves argue that their research is made “*on the crossing of sciences: sociology, political science, urban studies, partially architecture and psychology*” (p. 4), although it would be logical to include history here as well (Citarenka: 43–67; Šyrakanava: 67–100) and cultural studies (Zilinskaite: 207–217).

When getting acquainted with the book under review, a question of innovations and legitimacy of interdisciplinary urban studies arises. While the first part of the edition offers relatively consistent research schemes and purposes, the following three parts are composed of rather fragmented material, which rarely follows the theoretical purposes defined in the first part and, moreover, not always justifies the research findings postulated there (in case of this book, it is difficult to talk about research in singular).

The publication poses a question of the political role of capital cities in post-Soviet states (p. 7), while specificity of transformation of the “former political space” of these cities is formulated as the subject of the research (p. 6). At the same time, the publication lacks any distinct definition of political space (in relation to other types of space), as well as a categorical explanation of why the capital cities are qualitatively different from other types of settlements. Both terms are used rather descriptively and in an undisciplined manner, which makes their operationalization impossible. As a result, the use of the notions frequently remains on the level of non-critical knowledge in the vein of statements like: “*Capital is a political symbol of the nation and a ‘cultural representation’ of its society*” (p. 25).

And further on: “*A capital city is always an implemented manifestation of political power. Being at the intersection of culture and power, the symbolic and the real in social life, incorporating the elements of sacred and urban architecture, a capital city creates, expresses and maintains not merely force and power, yet rather the collective identity, emerging under the impact of the force and power embodied in the city. A capital city shapes and demonstrates national identity ordered in a certain way which represents an identification of the city residents with their capital, perceived as an impressive symbolic embodiment of national self-consciousness, national people’s pride*” (p. 34).

This passage shows that the authors of the book have certain difficulties with separation and coordination of the terms “political”, “state” and “national”. And these difficulties are aggravated by the necessity of the next step – coordination of these concepts with the category of “space”. In this sense, the book suffers much from ignoring the results of previous studies on the peculiarities of capital cities (in relation to non-capital cities). Overlooked

is the variety of capital cities, which are very much different in terms of the organization of power, their role in nation-building, etc. The similarity of capitals' significance assumed in the book can be questioned by the examples of contemporary Berlin (in relation to Munich and Frankfurt), Warsaw (in relation to Kraków), Rome (in relation to Milano). These cities represent different modes of "capitalness", which are identified in the result of their comparison.

The authors work on the issue of political power with the same degree of descriptiveness and lack of sensitivity to significant distinctions. The question of specificity of the political structure of the three states under analysis is not really raised; the book merely assumes that the political power in the three analysed countries changed in 1990-1991. The main conceptual source for comparison between the Soviet and post-Soviet space is the idea of de-synchronization of a relatively homogeneous Soviet space after the collapse of the USSR (p. 4-5), with a reference to the article of N. Milerius from the book "P.S. Landscapes: Optics of Urban Studies" (Milerius, 2008).

The roots of the outlined shortcomings can be found in the article written by the coordinator of the research Göran Therborn, which presents the book's concept in a most abstract form. Therborn justifies the necessity of studying capital cities as a certain type, referring to the studies of global metropolises (carried out by Friedmann, Sassen and Taylor),² i.e. on the research perspective of urban political economy. At the same time, the authors of the book, at least Therborn himself, justify their own research project by criticizing the approach of urban political economy due to two main reasons. Firstly, this approach is concentrated exclusively on economic (here we should also add infrastructural) factors. Secondly, it distorts the city / state relation, underestimating the latter in its explanatory models (p. 16). As for the second point, it is necessary to point out that Therborn refers mainly to the earlier works on the issue of interrelations between city and state as two different forms of social organization, not touching upon later and more complex studies (for instance: Brenner, 2004; Sassen, 2007; Scott, 2005).

The first point of the criticism seems to be more important, yet more problematic. Therborn writes about a "meaningful built environment" as a base subject of urban studies (p. 17), which pretty straightforwardly refers to Weberianism and overlooks various interim discussions and arguments that made urban studies an interdisciplinary research area. The proposed approach presupposes a significant autonomy of culture (in this case, symbols and meanings) in the explanatory models of social change, and thus loses to the contemporary urban studies in sensitivity to spatial configurations, which deal not only with coding and decoding, but also with the issues of production and use of space.

² Namely: Friedmann, 1986; Friedmann, 1995; Sassen, 1991; Taylor, 2004.

Remarkably, in Therborn's terms "*city is a built environment of certain size and density, with the boundaries that should not bother us*" (p. 17). The very fact of the lack of question about where a city ends and other forms of socio-spatial organization (region, village, district within a city, nation-state, etc.) start, as well as what they differ in, is another instance of a too mechanical interpretation of space. Working with the concept of city in this particular fashion, Therborn shows that spatial structures have a social meaning and carry political symbols. At the same time, he does not consider in what way the studies of capitals will be different from those of non-capital cities, weakly urbanized loci or the entire territories of nation-states, whose built environments also have social meaning and are included in the symbolic order of politics.

There is also an even more problematic point concerning justification of the research project in general. Urban studies are presented as opposing the city as either a locus or a focus of research (p. 14). Therborn regards this division overwhelming, although the essence of contemporary urban studies is defined precisely by the necessity to overcome this opposition, which was discussed already thirty years ago in a book by a Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1980).³

Therborn writes that the book "Post-Soviet Capital Cities: Minsk, Vilnius, Baku" is directed to viewing a city precisely as a focus, literally – toward viewing "*cities as cities... as specific objects of research*" (p. 15). On the one hand, we should mention an insufficient precision and analyticity of this definition. On the other hand, it is necessary to say that the research presented in three chapters of the book only partially follow Therborn's orientation. Thus, Kabiak and Rubanaŭ (pp. 118-127), as well as Liebiedzieva (pp. 127-139) construct a city precisely as a locus of research.

An example of a successful attempt to work on the subject of a city from both perspectives is the article of A. Šyrakanava (pp. 67-100), which – to a certain degree together with the article of Zilinskaite (pp. 207-217) – seems virtually the only legitimate attempt in the book to work with the issues of urban dynamics in an innovative interdisciplinary perspective.

The articles can clearly be divided into groups. Firstly, there are compilations of already existing material on the issue, with minimal generalizations (Citarenka: 43–67; Vosyliute: 153–182). The last article uses the space for argumentation very uneconomically: the diverse data used in the text represents facts of different kinds, which are not really connected by a single reasoning line. What, for instance – according to the author's idea – do the survey results of Visaginas⁴ youth in relation to their own city represent in

³ It should also be noted that Therborn's discussion of this opposition as the key one for the project, with no reference to Hannerz's book, provokes certain questions.

⁴ A city in North-East part of Lithuania – *ed.*

the article about Vilnius? Besides, the adherence to the approaches of Henri Lefebvre and Doreen Massey postulated in the introduction, remains absolutely declarative: the article does not interpret the development of Vilnius in the context of social changes. These changes are by default taken as a frame, into which “postcard stories” from the life of the city are simply inserted. Sometimes, the arbitrariness of the way in which historical examples are embedded into the ready-made theoretical schemes, goes beyond all limits. For instance, a passage from the English summary of the article by Vosyliute runs: *“The author describes the situation in 1610, when 4700 houses and 10 churches were burned out. This phenomenon demonstrated that medieval Vilnius represented a model of risk society. According to A. Giddens, the climate of risk and stability can often change, although the current population of modern societies are more secure than earlier. This concept relates to Vilnius”* (p. 218).

The second group of the articles represents studies with interesting conclusions, which, however, touch upon the issue of specificity of cities and urban environment only indirectly (Liebiedzieva: 127-139; Kabiak, Rubanaŭ: 118–127). For example, Liebiedzieva notes and tries to explain shifting from the “deficient consciousness” in the consumption practices of Minsk residents (Liebiedzieva: 127-139). It should be said that such articles lack comparative (Liebiedzieva; Kabiak, Rubanaŭ) or historical (Kabiak, Rubanaŭ) perspective as a base for interpretation of the received data, which leads to rather blurred line of argumentation. Thus, Liebiedzieva, who builds her research around the opposition of material / post-material orientations of consumers, writes: *“...As a rule, young residents of Minsk are more likely to accentuate post-material ideas and values in comparison to elderly ones”* (p. 131). At that, the English summary goes as follows: *“For example, the younger generation of Belarusians supports materialistic value orientations that differ from the patterns in Western European states”* (p. 151), although this issue is not raised in the article at all.

The third group of the articles is more (Hryščanka: 100–118) or less (Kasparaviene: 192–207) successful attempts to describe the attitudes of Minsk and Vilnius inhabitants to their cities. Unfortunately, it is difficult to review these articles in detail due to the lack of research methodology and due to the lack of generated and operationalized concepts.

The articles of Rubanaŭ (pp. 139-149), Abdullaev (pp. 222-240), Faradov and Parfenova (pp. 244-256) can hardly be called academic ones. Rubanaŭ simply outlines the main provisions of the master plan and orientations for strategic development of Minsk, which does not make any sense without a comparative perspective and clarifications. This, and also Abdullaev’s article (review of the history of Baku, which in its content resembles a tourist booklet), provoke a question about the target audience of this publication. In the latter case, uneconomical use of the text should also be noted: six pages out of

seventeen are quotations of the speeches of builders, academics, bureaucrats and politicians at the round table dedicated to the problems of urban planning in Baku. Furthermore, some of the quotes from that round table can be found in the article by Faradov and Parfenova too.

The already mentioned article by Šyrakanava (pp. 67-100) discusses the issues of centralization and constant reconstruction of Minsk as the key features of the Belarusian capital, where “*an ‘abolition’ (Aufhebung in Hegelian terms) of the cultural specificity for the sake of formal (yet not neutral) language of the urban space takes place*” (p. 75). The article pays a lot of attention to toponymy as the most evident way of inserting the urban space into a broader symbolic order. Nevertheless, most of the article’s conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of the politics of memory of Belarusian authorities, without focusing on the phenomenon of city as such.

The author’s argument about a relatively strong cultural influence of Minsk on the country’s population with no analysis of the facts of this influence outside the capital is not quite clear. The potential for development of this thesis can be found in comparing Minsk to other Belarusian cities. Today, the Belarusian model of space utilization and functioning of the local authorities presupposes a considerable degree of similarity between national and city levels of decision-making. As a result, the capital city differs from other Belarusian cities rather in quantitative than qualitative terms.

Finally, rather descriptive articles of Zilinskaite (pp. 207-217) and Sayfutdinova (pp. 256-266), in accordance with the general idea of the book, discuss the tendencies of saturation of built environment of Vilnius and Baku with cultural meanings and, hence, allow us to find out something new about these cities.

Summing up, the authors write that analysis of the spaces of Minsk, Vilnius and Baku makes it possible to reconstruct three strategies of “*reorganization of space in capital cities*” (p. 26). In the case of Baku, it is the “*strategy of constructing a global city*” (p. 26); in the case of Vilnius, it is the “*European strategy*” (p. 28), and, in the case of Minsk, it is a combination of the rhetoric about heroic Soviet past of the World War II period and the independent present of the Belarusian nation (p. 37). It can be stated that only the formulation of the Minsk model is conceptual enough, and that specific research efforts are required for its generation. Besides, the very process of such generation can be found only in the second (the strongest of the three) part of the book, devoted namely to Minsk.

The conclusion on Vilnius (in the way it is presented in the book) does not require the work of three researchers. And for what reason the authors classify Baku as a global city – without discussing the studies of global cities and without (re)constructing the definitions – remains unclear. The strategy of building a global city is naively explained as an attempt to “*create (or*

maintain and strengthen) a contemporary image of the city, which would be in no way inferior to other 'global cities'. Buildings and monuments which can be considered as the new symbols of such cities are under construction: banks' headquarters become higher than cathedrals; the new infrastructure and space of the offices in the city center occupy the best locations; hotels and supermarkets have widely known names and are not different – in terms of service and offer – from similar 'world cities' in Europe, Asia and America” (p. 26).

It is indicative that in this fragment (same as in the articles about Baku), there is absolutely no data about the number of workplaces created with the help of the international capital, about the number of tourists visiting the city, and about the significance of the financial sector, while the word “airport” is never even mentioned. The comparison of Baku with Astana (but for some reason not with Vilnius) based on the fact that, according to the authors, “*business functions as a supranational subject of the power*” (p. 26), makes the situation even more confused. At the same time, an interesting and significant fact that Baku is currently developing without any master plan is not carefully and critically analysed in the perspective of the book's concept. This fact remains a social and political, but not a research problem. Here it would be promising to try to answer the question on how the specificity of Baku and its representation as the state capital (i.e. rather as the focus of research) correlates with the specificity of land utilization in the city (i.e. as rather in the locus of research) which is set by international players too. It would also be good to get the answers to the questions about how this influences and transforms its capital status or what actors and instruments (in the absence of the master plan) retain the city in the stream of symbolic representation of its nation-state.

In general, the postulated intention to compare the three capitals lacks both a conceptual prism and an actual effort. In many respects this problem occurs due to insufficient density of conceptualizations of urban environment, which results in the lack of an integral interpretative scheme of the authors. Besides, indicators which would make it possible to grasp the way in which symbolic ensembles found by authors in urban landscape influence human behavior and purposes are rarely discussed, although this influence is constantly supposed and postulated. In the majority of cases, the articles are too encyclopedic.

Based on the above, the book can be considered as an attempt to intensify the interest to the city as a subject of research. Yet it can also be attributed to a number of projects partially discrediting urban studies as field of complex interdisciplinary balance. In any case, it can hardly be called a solid and innovative product in the field of urban studies.

REFERENCES

1. Brenner, N. (2004) *New State Spaces. Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood*. UK: Oxford University Press
2. Friedmann, J. (1986) "The World City Hypothesis", *Development and Change*, 17-1: 317-331.
3. Friedmann, J. (1995) "Where we Stand: a Decade of World City Research", in P. Knox and P. Taylor (eds), *World City in a World-System*. Cambridge.
4. Hannerz, U. (1980). *Exploring the City. Inquiries Toward an Urban Anthropology*. NY: Columbia University Press
5. Sassen, S. (1991) *The Global City*. Princeton
6. Sassen, S. (2007) *A Sociology of Globalization*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
7. Scott, A.J. (2005). *Regions and the World Economy. The Coming Shape of Global Production, Competition and Political Order*. Oxford University Press
8. Soja, E. (1989) *Postmodern Geographies. The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London: Verso
9. Taylor, P. (2004) *World City Network*. London
10. Milerius, N. (2008), "Synchronization and Desynchronization of the Present and the Past in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Space," in P.S. *Landscapes: Optics for Urban Studies*. Vilnius: EHU, 37-62.
Милерюс, Н. (2008) "Синхронизация и десинхронизация настоящего и прошлого на советском и постсоветском пространствах", в P.S. *ландшафты: оптики городских исследований*. Вильнюс: ЕГУ, 37-62.