
Book Review

Grubbauer, M. and Kusiak, J. (2012) (eds) Chasing Warsaw: Socio-Material Dynamics of Urban Change since 1990. Frankfurt/New York: Campus/Verlag.

My copy of the book – Chasing Warsaw: Socio-Material Dynamics of Urban Change since 1990, has experienced several changes of location and searches for inspiration. Shabby covers, hand notes in different colours, and a travel-stained front edge, might tell a not less compelling and dynamic story than the printed pages themselves.

Edited by Monika Grubbauer and Joanna Kusiak, *Chasing Warsaw* gathers twelve articles and essays by young established, mostly Polish researchers, sharing perspectives from sociology, cultural theory, architecture, urban studies, anthropology, philosophy as well as an essay by Karl Schlögel, with the aim to explore and address the particularly intense dynamics of urban change since 1990, a distinct nexus of different modes of urbanism.

Structured in four parts, the book treats Warsaw as a profound example of a post-socialist city where difference has become the core of identity and it tries to trace and describe the ongoing transformations and processes creating these differences. As stated in the *Introduction*, the book is about ‘intense urban change in the context of post-socialism and not about post-socialism in its urban aspects’ (Grubbauer, 2012: 13), therefore it tries to avoid reducing post-socialism to a chronological category, a ‘transition narrative’, or orientalize it by offering cultural explanations that ‘establish new boundaries of exclusion (...), legitimize violence (...) or acquire an almost mystical quality in terms like ‘mentality’, ‘nature’ or ‘soul’ (Grubbauer, 2012: 18).

The book searches and calls for new ways of theorizing and analysing post-socialist urban realities and conditions, intends to go beyond ‘area studies’ and aims to contribute to wider urban debates by examining ‘how global urban changes might be understood when viewed from the ever transforming (Warsaw)’ (Grubbauer, 2012: 15). So although the subjects in the book are widely dispersed in terms of disciplines and approaches, the common ground here is the dedication to explore the ‘intrinsic logic’, as well as the practices, patterns and manifestations of change and continuity in post-socialist Warsaw.

For this purpose, the first section of the book (*Post-Socialism and the Dynamics of Urban Change*) scrutinizes the relation between post-socialism and urban change on a conceptual level. *Monika Grubbauer* provides an overview of the current debates about post-socialist cities and suggests theoretical and methodological expansions to make the research findings on the post-socialist urban condition more accessible for urban research in general. *Regina Bitter* reflects on the distinctiveness of the socialist city and on the specific conditions of urbanization in Central and Eastern Europe that structured the socialist urbanization, as well as on more recent urban development processes.

The second section (*Urban Form and Representation*) offers an overview and examples of Warsaw's recent transformations in terms of architecture and urban development as well as of collective imagination. Here, *Magdalena Staniszkis* provides a historical analysis of processes, changes and continuity of urban planning and development in Warsaw, paying particular attention to the most recent phenomena of post-socialist urban transformation (urban sprawl, shrinking of open spaces, development of hypermarkets, underdevelopment of public spaces, revitalization of brownfields and townscape changes). *Jacek Gądecki* continues by exploring the phenomenon of enclosed and gated housing estates as a 'crucial and most visible sign of post-socialist urban and social structure' (p. 109), drawing on discursive analysis of 'life behind gates, focusing on social profiles, cultural and lifestyle choice and preferences' (page 110). *Dominiak Bartmąński* finalizes the section by looking at how 'the city is narrated, perceived and imagined' (p. 133) using a socio-semiotic approach to urban studies.

The third section (*Social Practices and The City*) explores the rootedness of different phenomena, processes and social practices in the city's history and their materialization in urban space. *Włodzimierz Karol Pessel* analyses disorder in public space by looking at the social form and historical institution and structure of refuse and waste management, drawing on rich empirical data from the author's research. *Aneta Piekut* continues by analysing the hidden worlds of Warsaw's immigrant community, looking at their everyday practices and infrastructure as well as their involvement in various social spaces in Warsaw. And *Joanna Kusiak and Wojciech Kacperski* finalize the section by reflecting on the emergence of 'citizen cafés' in Warsaw, highlighting the selective participation in such an 'urban fashion' and conflicts arising in the creation of this 'new urbanity'.

The fourth section (*Metropolitanism*) opens up local perspectives to address various problems of contemporary global urbanism as seen from the vantage point of Warsaw. The section starts with *Roch Sulima's* chapter on Warsaw's famous "Stadium-Bazaar", discussing the functional role and semantic aspects of voids, borderline spaces and encountering 'the Other'. *Kacper Pobłocki* analyses the cultural phenomena of *Warszawka*, exploring the 'relationship between Warsaw and the outside world' (p.271). *Joanna Kusiak* finalizes the section and the book by scrutinizing and breaking down the concept and the *zeitgeist* of post-socialist transformation - 'chaos', both in global urban studies and daily lives of Warsawians.

Although textually dense, and demanding spatial thinking and understanding of the political-economic processes and dynamics as well as the problems associated with post-socialism, the book attempts to enliven, enrich and experiment with the academic language to develop an appropriate language to capture post-socialist Warsaw and describe the current state of affairs. Therefore, some might point out that the book lacks analysis of, and focus on, political and national institutions and governance. Some may question the exemplary role and focus of Warsaw for theorizing post-socialist urban realities and conditions, while others, preferring a more structured, sturdy and factual approach and ways of representation, might at times feel disturbed by the experimental attempts to grasp the 'intrinsic logic' of a post-socialist city.

However, *Chasing Warsaw* is an inspiring book for those who agree that ‘city life in post-socialist Europe has not been sufficiently analysed beyond the context of area studies, in terms of global urban change’ (Grubbauer, 2012:14), and who try to keep up with contemporary spatial research as well as with issues concerning academic knowledge production.

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