Rethinking the post-socialist city

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ABSTRACT

Research on the post-socialist city remains weakly connected to global urban debates. This contribution argues that a comparative research agenda can help the post-socialist city to overcome its isolation and to engage with urban theory (rather than simply supplying case studies for such). New comparative urbanism suggests that mechanistic, “genetic” comparisons may fail to offer new avenues for research, while “generative” comparisons that involve cities from across the globe can create spaces for conversation. Following this, there may be at least three areas of dialogue around the research on the post-socialist city. Firstly, protean post-socialist processes offer a harsh test for urban theories if they seek to claim global relevance. Secondly, the diversity of transition outcomes challenges the variegation of the liberal capitalism thesis because the latter has geographic limits. Thirdly, the emerging new state capitalism requires analytical scrutiny of its variants, including state-led and illiberal forms currently dominant in China and Russia.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 November 2021
Accepted 30 June 2022

KEYWORDS

Post-socialism; neoliberalism; post-socialist city; urban geography; comparative urbanism

Introduction

Recently, the post-socialist city has attracted a new wave of scholarly attention. Critical reflections suggest that “research on post-socialist cities has yet to escape from the periphery of contemporary urban theory” (Ferenčuhová & Gentile, 2016, p. 492). Scholarship on the post-socialist city has been described as regionally bound, dealing predominantly with region-specific issues but having less to do with current global concerns. Although the term “post-socialist” itself is not regionally bound, it is often used in an essentialist way to signify the alleged distinctiveness of cities located in Central and Eastern European (CEE) and the former Soviet Union (FSU), thereby making them a territorialized phenomenon of limited relevance for international urban theory (Tuvikene, 2016). Current theorizing “reproduces the illusion of “post-socialist” difference, prompting a perennial state of exception for cities such as Riga and Odessa” (Gentile, 2018, p. 1140). Such criticism leads to questions of whether the current theorization of the
post-socialist city is adequate, and how more appropriate theories may be advanced. Can inquiry into the post-socialist city make a greater contribution to urban theory, progressing beyond case studies located in former socialist countries? How can studies of post-socialist cities become more relevant for the broader community of urban scholars?

So, what can the “post-socialist city” bring to debates on urban theory? Perhaps, unsurprisingly, the “unique offer” stems from the historical path of state socialism and what followed. Countries formerly under communist dictatorships can offer a test for Western theories reliant on the selective geographies of the urban. Secondly, research in the post-socialist context can offer critical reflections on the dominant concept of variegation (of liberal capitalism) because post-socialist transition has produced a variety of outcomes, of which liberal capitalism is one. Finally, the post-socialist city reminds us of the diversity of current capitalism and the need to analytically approach its state-led and authoritarian forms. To develop a discussion along these lines, the paper will critically reflect on current conceptualizations of the post-socialist city and, following the current debates on comparative urbanism, will identify key themes for future comparative research.

Developing broader comparative agendas

The current (self)criticism of scholars of post-socialist cities suggests that the impact of scholarship on urban debates remains limited. The flow of knowledge from the West to the “rest” is presumed to be unidirectional: “theory development is considered the prerogative of a dominant Anglo-American academic complex and (peripheral) post-socialist urban studies on this topic struggle to “speak back” to that hegemonic core” (Borén & Young, 2016, p. 589). Established Western centers of knowledge production export theory to the world; transitional countries are hence seen as having little to offer global “theory markets” (Ferenčuhová & Gentile, 2016).

On the one hand, such limited engagement is caused by “distinct disciplinary traditions” entrenched within the social sciences, which have classified the world into “developed” and “less developed countries,” “transition,” “emerging,” and “post-socialist” economies, associated with fragmented conceptual, analytical, and policy perspectives (Pike et al., 2017, p. 48). On the other hand, the responsibility for lack of engagement also lies, in part, with scholars of the post-socialist city, who “are not terribly good at designing or communicating research with a view of reaching out beyond our loosely defined community of post-socialist urban scholars” (Sjöberg, 2014, p. 300). To reverse these trends, urban scholars should “appropriate theorization of the urban from anywhere” (Robinson, 2016, p. 653) in an attempt to contribute to urban theory from the experiences of a variety of world cities.

Comparative urbanists have long argued that urban research needs a broader comparative agenda (Kantor & Savitch, 2005) and that urban research should avoid “parochial universalism in which the (academic’s) home town stood for the world” (Jacobs, 2012, p. 909). Jenifer Robinson has developed a powerful argument for “ex-centering” current urban theory from the West, and facilitating exchange and engaging with non-Western scholars (Robinson, 2011) and has identified two strategies for comparative enquiries. While “genetic” comparisons trace “the strongly interconnected of often repeated urban phenomena,” a “generative” comparison strategy is open to a variety of cases with a view to “generate and revise concepts” (Robinson, 2016, p. 6). A more
A cosmopolitan form of knowledge production is attractive for all, as it facilitates dissemination of knowledge, cross-fertilization of ideas, and encourages mutual learning.

Such an expanded version of comparative urbanism creates avenues for re-conceptualizing the post-socialist city and developing better connections with international urban debates, and possibly contributing to their development. Although post-socialism is conventionally associated with the experiences of specific countries, it has been argued that a more “deterritorialized” reading of post-socialism (i.e. as a phenomenon not bounded by nation-state borders or contained within specific geographical regions, current or historic) would create new avenues for reflection on post-socialist experiences from diverse comparative perspectives (Gentile, 2018; Tuvikene, 2016). Such comparisons, involving the Global East, North, and South, are thought-provoking not least because various world regions now face similar developmental challenges.

Broader international comparison should be an overarching theme in research on cities in the Global North, South, and East, helping to overcome the current “colonial” structure of knowledge production (Edenson & Jayne, 2012; Robinson, 2011). Comparison-inspired theorizing can help overcome simplistic binaries such as “market vs. state.” The post-socialist city should avoid measuring itself against the “supposed normality” of the “Western” city (Gentile, 2018). Instead, such compassions should create space for applying theories across different geographical contexts and provoke thinking on theorizing cities located within diverse political and institutional conditions.

Therefore, I suggest that three are (at least) three areas where research on post-socialist cities could engage more with international urban theory and contribute to its development. Firstly, the messy dynamic of post-socialist change may stimulate reflexive thinking on the existing dichotomies in understanding the urban (e.g. “continuity vs change,” “social vs physical,” “state vs market”). Secondly, the variegation thesis has become a powerful framework for explaining processes such as neoliberalization (Peck et al., 2009). Nonetheless, its universal applicability across various political contexts and policy situations raises critical questions (Robinson et al., 2022). Thirdly, the manifold emerging forms of economic governance remind us of the diversity of modern capitalism and the need to analytically engage with its variants beyond the liberal core, including state-led and authoritarian forms prominent in post-socialist countries (Kinossian & Morgan, 2022).

Post-socialist change

The dynamics of post-socialist change can be better understood through contrast with Western societies. Despite recurring crises and social challenges, during the postwar period, the advanced capitalist democracies have been “remarkably resilient and effective” (Iversen & Soskice, 2019, p. xi). In sharp contrast, after the “fall of the wall,” countries emerging from communist dictatorship experienced disintegration of their political systems, economic meltdown, and social crisis. Post-socialist societies were initially at the vanguard of market reforms and Westernization; however, such enthusiasm subsequently gave way to growing skepticism and disillusionment (Krastev & Holmes, 2019). Such “convulsions” can stimulate critical reflections on the existing dichotomies (such as “state vs market”) and structuralist thinking that inform current conceptualizations.
The idea of a “capitalist revolution” as a radical, unidirectional, and irreversible change path towards the market, which informs earlier accounts of post-socialism (Åslund, 2007; Sachs & Warner, 1995), now seems to be at odds with the existing diversity of transition outcomes. Rather than treating transition as an inexorable and irreversible shift to a market economy (often understood in terms of the “Washington consensus” frame), it should be viewed as a reiterative process of both radical and gradual adjustments leading to a number of possible national variations (see Lane, 2007; Peck & Zhang, 2013). The implication for conceptualizing urban change is that such evolving and contingent forms of capitalism create unstable political and institutional environments that entail periods of rapid reform, retrenchment, reversal, and further reforms, whereby emerging conditions interact with the legacies of the socialist past.

The idea of material and institutional legacies also needs critical reflection. Soviet legacies exist in various forms and spatial contexts. Soviet spatial structures proved to be extremely stable, compelling Stephen Crowley to acknowledge that Russia’s economic geography “remains significantly unchanged close to three decades after the collapse of communism” (2021, p. 73). The case of Russia also demonstrates that economic structures and political mechanisms appear to be mutually reinforcing, because maintaining the distorted (from a market economy perspective) industrial and settlement structures requires centralized power and redistribution mechanisms. A conventional idea of the legacies of state socialism implies durable causal relationships between past and present institutions, regimes, and beliefs. However, the idea of legacies as mere obstacles or structural conditions that slow progress does not reflect their variegated impact on modern regimes. Legacies do not simply stand in the way of reforms but are instead interpreted and co-produced by the current actors (Golubchikov, 2016, p. 10). They can be reinvented, repurposed, and redeployed to serve new interests and functions, thereby modifying new regimes of urban development.

As post-socialism emphasizes the role of structural changes, it tends to orient research towards their implications for various aspects of the “urban,” such as governance, planning, and development patterns. Following that logic, local processes are “derived” from macro-level structural changes. For instance, the mainstream conceptualization of the post-socialist city seems to divide urban transition into discrete (albeit interconnected) elements such as institutional transformation, socio-economic and political change, and urban change (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012, p. 46). Such approach treats causality as unidirectional and sequential, implying that the sources of change lie in economic and political environments, to which cities then “respond.” When applied to cities, such conceptualization can be overly rigid, because “cities co-evolve with their economic environments, and the process of adaptive change help determine the environment to which they must adapt in future” (Sunley et al., 2017, p. 385). Such conventional “dual model” of urban transition (“driving force” vs. “recipients”) needs to be revised in favor of a more dynamic model based on the notion of the co-evolution of cities and their economic environments.

Comparative urbanists have criticized current urban theory for its parochial nature (Jacobs, 2012; Robinson, 2006; Ward, 2010). Many concepts have been developed to analyze processes within specific geographical and historical contexts and then applied as a universal yardstick to various cities. It has been suggested that urban theory
developed in the West reflects rather limited experiences of industrial centers in advanced capitalist economies (Schmid et al., 2018). Reflecting on such limitations from the experiences of post-socialist cities can help to avoid misleading conclusions.

For instance, the concept of “urban entrepreneurialism” once appeared as one of the tenets of modern urban theory (Harvey, 1989). It describes changes in behavior of city managers, caused by the dissolution of a stable fiscal base; consequently, managers had to engage in entrepreneurial activities, searching for new sources of growth and private investment. However, this view lacks sensitivity to the post-socialist context, whereby the loss of stable income had different implications. City managers in Russia engage in negotiation with regional authorities to secure access to state funding for urban development projects that, during earlier socialist times, came largely from industrial budgets. In other words, their “entrepreneurialism” has been state-oriented (Kinos- sian, 2012). Research on Chinese urban and regional development also indicates the significance of “state entrepreneurialism” (Shen et al., 2020; Wu, 2020).

The proliferation of “global urbanism” in post-socialist cities is viewed as evidence of the arrival of neoliberalism in the East (Golubchikov, 2010, p. 630). However, such mega-projects often say more about political ambition than of burgeoning markets, good investment climate, or a strong role of private capital. State actors may at times embrace the phraseology of a “free market,” but at the same time employ authoritarian practices to promote specific interests or projects (Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2019). The intimation of global urbanism or attempts to replicate other aspects of Western modernity should not lead to the conclusion that such superficial similarities are commensurate with genuinely liberalized economic and political conditions.

**Beyond variegation?**

There is a tendency to employ “neoliberalism” as a meta-narrative, supposedly capable of explaining every aspect of urban change – both in the West and in the East. Such applications fail to adequately define neoliberalism, yet tend to infuse it with explanatory power (Gentile & Sjöberg, 2020). Although “stretching” the concept in such ways allows a broad range of “deviant” cases to be included as regional varieties of neoliberalism, it also bears a risk that such “ever-changing non-definition of neoliberalism” may dilute selection criteria and lead to stylizing various local processes as elements of a major megatrend (Le Galès, 2016, p. 168). Neoliberalism-centered narratives tend to fashion explanations around the idea of the primary role of capital accumulation and exchange, but if taken for granted, at the expense of possible alternative explanations of state–market configurations at various spatial, institutional, and temporal settings.

It has been argued that a more critical view is required of the “variegation” of social processes such as neoliberalization as being the main explanatory frame for urban outcomes. Rather than taking variegated neoliberalization for granted, researchers should pay attention to the diversity of actors, motivations, and policy situations that shape urban development (Robinson et al., 2022, p. 7). Parnell and Robinson (2012) also claim that “existing theories and critiques of urban neoliberalism are ill-equipped for the task of illuminating the conditions of poorer cities, especially those that have weak (local) states or those where the link between urban political elites and capitalist elites are not formalized in the conventional (democratic) electoral and quasi-corporatist
politics of the local state” (p. 600) – indicating that the concept of neoliberalism has geographical limits.

Scholars of the post-socialist city have used neoliberalism as a powerful narrative to frame post-socialist transition as an “Eastern branch” of the global process of neoliberalization and globalization (Golubchikov, 2016; Stenning et al., 2010; Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008). In order to shoehorn political authoritarianism into a neoliberal narrative, authors frame cases such as Russia as “authoritarian neoliberalism,” suggesting that the state uses authoritarian methods to facilitate market expansion and function (Büdenbender & Zupan, 2019). This appears to be in line with Peck et al. (2009) argument that neoliberalism in practice entails “a dramatic intensification of coercive, disciplinary forms of state intervention in order to impose versions of market rule” (p. 51). However, the tendency to take this model as pre-given for all world regions deserves more critical reflection. While Peck et al. (2009) claim that neoliberalism needs a coercive state to establish the market rule, the presence of a coercive state does not necessarily mean that its powers are used to achieve the dominance of the market rule. As cases in China and Russia demonstrate, the state can exercise an extreme selectivity with regard to which elements of market it is prepared to tolerate and to what degree. That applies to specific sectors (banking, e-commerce), geographical spaces (special economic zones), as well as the fate of individual entrepreneurs (e.g. Jack Ma in China and Mikhail Khodorkovsky in Russia). Again, one may argue that Peck and Theodore (2019) conceptualization of variegated neoliberalism as “conjunctural, cohabitative, and combinatorial” (p. 251) can accommodate a variety of cases including authoritarian states but such cases appear to be at odds with the key assumption that neoliberalism represents “a distinctive kind of valorization and liberation of capital” (Brown, 2018). It appears, that authoritarian state instrumentalize capital rather than liberate it.

The existing critique suggests that the variegation (of neoliberalism) thesis should be approached with caution (Parnell & Robinson, 2012; Robinson et al., 2022). While neoliberalization can be an appropriate frame to explain institutional and policy change in advanced market economies, the use of neoliberalism as a “default narrative” to explain change in post-socialist societies has certain limitations, because in countries such as Russia the state remained the dominant actor and the institutional infrastructure for a market economy (competition, property rights, private ownership) has never been fully created, even though the state may allow selective application of neoliberal rules and governance styles (Kangas, 2013, p. 304). Attempts to expand the conceptual boundaries of neoliberalism into the East must recognize that this is arguably incompatible with situations in which markets are subjugated to what in some cases can be a predatory and kleptocratic state (Åslund, 2019; Belton, 2021; Harding, 2021). Such states, rather than expanding the rule of markets, expand their own control over resources and the economy, creating an inverted notion of state capture (Kinossian & Morgan, 2022) and, curiously, the notion of “Russia’s actually (non-)existent neoliberalism” (Kuteleva et al., 2022).

Critics of the meta-narrative approach also suggest that urban scholarship may benefit from focusing more on “the concrete specificities of state rule and economic practice” and “contingent and conjunctural outcomes of post-socialism” (Pickles, 2010, p. 136). While structure-induced conceptualizations capture transformative processes, they pay limited attention to the mechanisms and agency behind such processes (Gunko et al.,
Various forms of state intervention in urban development (via planning policy, provision of infrastructure and services, and housing construction) play a strong transformative role but are not market-driven and hence can hardly provide evidence for growing neoliberalization. State actors have profound impacts on policy formulation, allocation of state funding, structuring of coalitions, and shaping formal and informal governance arrangements (Wu, 2018).

The current critique indicates that the variegated capitalism thesis has become an orthodoxy and is often applied “by default” to analyze processes in countries where markets are controlled if not subjugated by the state. Hence, rather than taking the “actually existing” arguments concerning neoliberalism as a default frame, research on post-socialist cities would benefit from closer attention to the “actually existing” governance mechanisms, policies, and institutional changes that shape post-socialist cities.

**New state capitalism**

While “new state capitalism” appears as a global phenomenon pertaining to various political regimes, in post-socialist countries its variants are characterized by the dominant role of the state. These emerging forms of economic governance indicate the need to analytically engage with its variants beyond the liberal core, including state-led and authoritarian forms, such as China and Russia. In addition, there are countries such as Venezuela, Egypt, Eritrea, Nicaragua, Angola that are not single-party states, but they all dabbled with various forms of socialism, and share institutional problems and developmental challenges. Despite now being “post-socialist” they still retain mixed economies that are not fully liberalized. They have abandoned socialism but have failed to fully adopt free markets. So, the supposedly “inevitable” neoliberalism fails to materialize in any conventional sense there.

These debates challenge the perception of change as a “clear-cut” shift from one system to another, as well as dichotomies such as “state vs market.” Although the entire soviet system witnessed rapid collapse during the early 1990s, the successor states have subsequently followed different paths. This diversity of development paths entails not only differing pace of reform but also the possibility of reversal. Even within the EU, which in 2004 and 2007 was expanded predominantly through the accession of CEE countries, some member states (former members of the socialist bloc) now reject what in the 1990s appeared as attractive and universal liberal values, and have seen a return towards political authoritarianism and economic nationalism.

The new state capitalism produces mixed and variegated results based on partial liberalization of development regime at selected scales and territories. Recent studies on state-led urban projects in Russia demonstrate how the state experiments with pilot projects in order to institutionalize and formulate new regional development policies (Kinossian, 2017; Zupan et al., 2021). Such projects provide mixed evidence of both selective neoliberalization and changing palettes of state intervention, but also in redefining the role of the state in economic development.

Since the collapse of socialist planned economies, and following the subsequent initial period of market expansion, post-socialist states have developed sophisticated institutional settings, regulations, agentic capabilities, and motivations. The literature on urban and regional governance in China can offer inspiring thought and cases to
advance research on cities in CEE and the FSU. For instance, Wu (2018) describes the rise of “state entrepreneurialism,” with the Chinese state assuming entrepreneurial functions and now using both planning and market mechanisms to achieve its strategic goals (p. 1395). In what appears as a dramatic reversal of the entrepreneurial model common in the West, China’s “state entrepreneurialism uses market instruments made available through institutional innovation to extend the state’s position into the market sphere and maintain state power. Rather than being replaced by market power, state power is reinforced by its use of market instruments.” (Wu, 2018, p. 1396). According to Wu (2022), land financialization in China takes place under state-controlled capital market and land monopoly “rather than neoliberalisation or financial deregulation” (p. 9).

Shen et al. (2020) show that the “state” represents a range of trans-scalar state agencies, state-owned corporations, and governments using formal and informal powers to mobilize resources for urban development projects (p. 1652). From this perspective, analysis of urban development projects transcends the “urban” research agenda and enters discussion on the nature of state–market relations, contributing to developing a more nuanced and conjunctural understanding of global capitalism from the post-socialist or the Global East perspectives.

**Conclusion**

Three decades after the collapse of state socialism in CEE and the FSU, countries formerly under communist dictatorships have taken different transition paths leading to a variety of outcomes, thereby suggesting numerous potential spatial and institutional settings of the post-socialist city. Although there has been a renewed interest in the topic, the debates remained regionally bound and did not make much impact on the development of urban theory. The fact that the boundary-reinforcing term “post-socialist” is still in use is indicative. Hence, the main intention of this contribution has been to discuss how research on the post-socialist city could become more interesting for wider audiences and possibly contribute to the development of urban theory.

This can be achieved by promoting a comparative agenda and identifying common themes for mutual reflection, including from the position of experiences of the post-socialist city, which are currently marginalized in broader debates. Rather than presenting the post-socialist city as a homogenous, coherent category and emphasize the similarities (defined by territorial boundaries, shared past, the specificities of urban form or architectural style, etc.), research would benefit from a more nuanced understanding of the evolving institutional arrangements, governance mechanisms, and policies that underlie the constant adaptation of nations, regions, and localities (post-socialist or others) to changing economic and political environments.

The diverse outcomes of post-socialist transitions challenge the orthodoxy of variegation, which claims that (all) world regions respond to global processes, such as neoliberalization and financialization, by generating localized versions of global capitalism. This approach is relevant for regions where markets are a dominant form of economic organization.

However, in other regions, neoliberalization may be an exception rather than the norm. In states where transition has so far failed to deliver democracy and a market
economy, neither was the previous institutional organization completely dismantled nor were new, market-friendly regimes and institutions properly established. Indeed, they also demonstrate “variegated” outcomes, but those would instead be explained by the action of a dominant state that allows market mechanisms within selected economic branches, institutional formats, or geographical localities. In that sense, research on the post-socialist city could contribute to a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of variegation, which should include not only global capitalism (as a default option) but also authoritarianism and statism.

As growing research on “authoritarian state capitalism” and the “entrepreneurial state” shows, authoritarian states use institutional innovation and borrowing: development corporations, special economic zones, and infrastructure-led development are now common practices. However, the co-opting of such market mechanisms should not be uncritically accepted as evidence of the systemic transformation of authoritarian states. Rather, they demonstrate a spatially and temporary selective use of market mechanisms that the dominant state “tolerates” as long as they deliver planned results. Such cases show the need for analytical and conceptual grasping of such market–state “symbiosis,” revealing its contradictions and conjunctural nature.

Reflecting on urban theory through the position of the post-socialist city can help to rethink our understanding of the post-socialist city, as well as challenge the conceptual assumptions of urban theory, develop cross-disciplinary connections, and develop more refined urban debates. Scholarship on post-socialist cities can help to explore the heterodox, variegated, and evolving nature of modern capitalism as well as the variety of roles that the state can play in economic development (from policy formulation to implementation of specific projects) under conditions of a multi-scalar polity. It should also respond to current and future urban problems and challenges, including economic inequality, polarization, environmental crises, and the consequences of economic restructuring – problems that are common to diverse world cities and regions. It should shift the focus of attention to the diversity of institutional arrangements, governance mechanisms, and policies that shape cities in former socialist countries, and explore ways to support economic activities and make market economies work better for more people.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the editors for their support and the two anonymous reviewers for the constructive comments made on the previous versions of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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