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Socialist worldmaking

My work with the concept of socialist worldmaking began with a question: how to understand the global dimension of architectural exchanges between the socialist states and the newly independent states during the Cold War? While these exchanges were informed by specific concepts and imaginations of the 'global' (Stanek, 2020), the dominant uses of this term in architectural history and urban studies today cannot capture its understanding by architects, planners, and managers of construction companies from socialist Eastern Europe and their counterparts in the decolonizing of Africa and Asia.

Until recently, worldwide mobilities of architecture and their impact on urbanization processes during the second half on the twentieth century have been addressed mainly from two perspectives. The first among them can be called 'world cities' or 'global cities' research (Robinson, 2016), largely based on world-systems theory. By dividing the capitalist world economy into centers, semi-peripheries, and peripheries, this research classified cities according to 'their mode of integration with the world economy' (Friedmann and Wolff, 1982: 329).

In response to this restrictive framework, scholars pointed to other ways in which cities, in particular those in the Global South, become nodes of global connections (Ong and Roy, 2011). They found allies in various strands of postcolonial urbanism, or studies of the consequences of the colonial encounter for the production, representation, and lived experiences of spaces (Jazeel, 2019; Simone, 2001). Further impulses came from studies of racialized capitalism and feminist or queer geographies, in particular in subaltern contexts (Blunt and Rose, 1994; Peake, 2016).

Socialist Eastern Europe has been largely absent from either perspective. During the Cold War, world-systems scholars did not conclusively agree on the position of the socialist countries in their theoretical framework (Navarro, 1982; cf. Müller, 2020), and by the 1990s most world-systems urbanists interested in Eastern Europe moved on to study the capitalist expansion in the region (Bradshaw, 2001). In turn, Eastern Europe has appeared on the radar of postcolonial urbanists only during the last decade, with scholars seeking to deterritorialize concepts derived from socialist and postsocialist urbanism (Tuvikene, 2016) so as to bring them into wider conversations, including those about urbanization in the Global South (Hirt et al., 2016; Ferenčuhová, 2016). Global cities research and postcolonial urbanism have only slowly begun to absorb scholarship by political, economic, and cultural historians who showed how socialist Eastern Europe had engaged with the decolonizing countries in Africa and Asia (Ginelli, 2018; Sanches-Sibony, 2014; Dragostinova, 2021), and how actors from the region had participated, albeit in an uneven and liminal manner, in globalization processes since the 1970s (Gutman, 2011; Mark et al., 2020).

The concept of *socialist worldmaking* helps to advance these debates. My work on this concept begins with the historical materialist writings about *mondialisation* by the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre. Neither a simple translation of the English 'globalization,' nor an alternative to it, Lefebvre's *mondialisation* pointed at the world as a historically specific dimension of social practices, of which the Anglo-American term 'globalization' captured just some. Lefebvre (2009) discussed *mondialisation* as central to urbanization processes around the planet, and argued that practices of producing space were informed by alternative imaginations of the world, which were often contradictory and competing. The concept of *mondialisation* tunes into recent debates on the 'worlding' of cities (Ong and Roy, 2012; Simone 2001) by drawing attention to the multiple visions, imaginations, and experiences of the world, and to the ways in which negotiations, conflicts, and sometimes synergies between them informed urbanization processes in specific locations.

Lefebvre's comments may be usefully juxtaposed with the concept of *mondialité* introduced by the Martinican writ-

er and scholar Édouard Glissant. Writing during and after the Cold War, Glissant theorized the world beyond its expansionist concepts inherited from the colonial period to reconceptualize a historical condition when 'the thrust of the world and its desire no longer embolden you onward in a fever of discovery: they multiply you all around' (1997: 195). From the vantage point of Antillean literature, Glissant theorized the assembling of worlds within and against political and economic regimes, starting with colonialism and the plantation system.

Thinking with Lefebvre, Glissant and others (Getachew, 2019; Mbembe, 2021), I understand *worldmaking* as a dimension of social practices that refer to various, competing, and normative visions of worldwide exchange and collaboration. They are worldwide in the sense that they encompass the whole planet, or that their potential for deterritorialization and reterritorialization is not restricted to any specific place. *Worldmaking* may be practiced in incommensurable and yet intertwined ways. In Glissant's analysis, some global visions come with claims to universality, conveyed by antagonistic Cold War era discourses about the 'worldwide commercial market,' 'universal defense of freedom,' 'the proletariat's final role,' and 'permanent revolution' (Glissant 1997: 152, 178). Glissant contrasted them with subaltern practices of conceiving and assembling the world, notably in colonial and postcolonial contexts: by fragmentation rather than by claims to coherence, by a constant reinvention and renewal rather than by accumulation, by strategic opaqueness rather than by transparency.

Within the framework offered by Glissant, *socialist worldmaking* need not be seen as a uniform, master-minded project. I use this concept instead to study the historically specific, multiple, evolving, and often antagonistic ways in which the world was practiced by institutions and individuals from socialist countries and their counterparts in Africa, Asia, and South America during the Cold War. Their study requires scholars to pay attention to the official discourse of socialist internationalism, which the Soviets and Eastern Europeans often contrasted with other competing practices of *worldmaking*, notably with the Western-dominated globalization. But the concept of *socialist worldmaking* also accounts for every-

day encounters between Eastern Europeans, Africans, and Asians in the course of which the official narrative of socialist internationalism was negotiated, confirmed, refuted, or transgressed (Stanek, 2020; 2021).

Socialist worldmaking was established and sustained by a variety of institutions, political discourses, systems of foreign trade, modes of technology transfer, and situated everyday experiences of collaboration and competition among actors on the ground. Between the 1950s and the end of the Cold War, *socialist worldmaking* was differentiated by ruptures between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia (1948), then China (1960s), as well as by evolving geopolitical interests and economic priorities of particular socialist countries and their counterparts in Africa and Asia. Under Khrushchev, the Soviets and their satellites offered free or subsidized assistance to decolonizing countries as part of the 'competitive coexistence' with the United States and their Western allies. During the later decades, many socialist countries emphasized their mercantile aims. In particular, in the wake of the 1973 oil embargo and the debt crisis that followed, many Eastern European governments signed preferential trade agreements with several countries in the 'Third' world in the hope of acquiring convertible currency.

The motivations of the newly independent countries to enter such collaborations were equally varied, reflecting the uneven and unequal positions of the countries involved. They ranged from southern Comecon members (Mongolia, Vietnam, Cuba) dependent on Soviet resources, to countries pursuing independent variants of socialist development, such as Ghana under Nkrumah, Iraq under the Baath party, or Chile under Salvador Allende. Even the governments of countries whose elites were hostile to socialism, such as Nigeria and the Gulf states, used resources supplied by socialist countries for state building and economic development, while guarding their sovereignty in domestic and foreign policy. Straddling gift diplomacy, technical assistance, and preferential trade agreements, *socialist worldmaking* often reflected opportunistic responses to geopolitical openings and economic expediencies.

Image 1 Friendship Monument, Zaisan Mount, and the view of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. A. Khishigt and others (1971-1979). Photo by Ł. Stanek, 2018.

Image 2 National Theatre, Lagos, Nigeria. S. Kolchev (design architect) for Technoexportstroy (Bulgaria), 1977, photo Ł. Stanek, 2015

Socialist worldmaking remained between the descriptive and the normative. But between the 1950s and the 1980s, it produced frameworks of interaction and exchange of very real things, among them architectural designs, construction materials and technologies, urban standards, academic curricula, and research methodologies. While these exchanges rarely fulfilled the socialist promise of a new type of space, they did make a difference. They made a difference in the sense of having a huge impact on people's everyday lives, by providing economic opportunities, training, housing, social facilities, and infrastructure. But they also made a difference in a more literal sense: that of differentiating urbanization processes beyond the consequences of the colonial encounter and the hegemony of global capitalism. From Accra to Baghdad, from Lagos to Abu Dhabi, from Algiers to Ulaanbaatar, these differences continue to be reproduced today, beyond their original association with 20th century socialism, and often in unexpected ways.

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