

Methodology Lab: „Spatialising Culture. Methods and Approaches to Studying Space“

Veranstalter: Research Area 7: Global Studies and Politics of Space, Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture, Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen

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In the last several decades, there has hardly been a concept that has penetrated social science and humanities in a more profound fashion than that of space. This has prompted many scholars to subscribe, as well as to contest the advent of the so-called „spatial turn“, arguably one of the most popular and prolific „turns“ in postmodern academic world. While investigating production, negotiation and acquisition of tenuous and fungible spaces has been an overarching goal of the numerous researchers, the application of the ever-growing theoretical scholarship on the peculiarities of selected case-studies has remained rather a problem. Moreover, the disciplinary differences and plurality of methods often pose additional obstacles in approaching the notion of space. Therefore, the methodological workshop attempted to pick up precisely on these demands, giving opportunity to doctoral and early post-doctoral students to reflect on their own projects in the group of fellow researchers coming from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, yet sharing the theoretical and methodological reliance on space and related concepts (place, landscape, region, scale).

Such conceptually-driven and interdisciplinary approaches fit well with the research orientation of the organising and hosting institution. Regarding the structure of the methodological lab, four thematically conceived panels were chaired by invited expert discussants (representing diverse fields such as sociology, anthropology, literature studies, political science, geography and history), who commented on previously circulated methodology-oriented papers, thus offering hands-on advice on applying specific theoret-

ical models and methodological tools on particular types of empirical material. In their papers and presentations, participants were encouraged to refrain from overt dwelling on discipline-specific and topical particularities of their projects, but to truly focus on the way they utilise particular theories and methodologies in their work. Experts / discussants opened their respective panels with short initial statements, introducing the basic theoretical approaches to specific concepts, possible methodological tools, as well as examples from their own research, including problems and challenges faced when approaching the field.

The first panel, which revolved around migrations and borders was chaired by ANDREAS LANGENOHL (Giessen), who reflected on his study of town-twinning in Hessen, and different methods he used to grasp both the institutional level of translocal linking and the more intimate sphere of individual interpersonal connections. KARL-HEINZ GMEHLING (Usti nad Labem) then discussed the literary techniques of constructing the relationship between real and imagined spaces in the literature of exiled Czech-German writers, and the role of migratory experience for that process. KIM KANGLER (Duisburg) focused on problems associated with analysing peculiar source material such as TV footage, whereas MIKHAIL GARDER (Moscow) presented his ethnographic approach to mapping the movement and interactions of homeless people in Moscow. MINA IBRAHIM (Giessen) also dealt with ethnographic methods, however using them to counter the established narratives of victimisation of Coptic communities in Egypt by exploring „sinful“ places visited by Copts as a way to escape the religiously moulded identitarian norms.

Much of the research on space is concerned with urban spaces, so the issue of city life and urban materiality merited a separate panel, opened by MATEUSZ LASZCZKOWSKI (Warsaw), who elaborated on his ethnography of the post-socialist construction of Astana, and ambivalent response by local populations to urban restructuring. AGNES DUDYCH and ADAM GORKA (Košice) presented the urban development of Košice from two rather different method-

ological perspectives, conventional discourse analysis of archival material and recently popularised 3-D modelling, respectively. Although each of the two approaches offered valuable insights, they admitted that additional methodological refinement is needed to grasp the lived world of urban dwellers. ELVIRA KHAIRULLINA (Valladolid) also stayed within the socialist world with her archival study of tramline construction in different East European metropolises, while LAURA MENEGHELLO (Siegen) analysed the interplay of infrastructural innovation and representations of modernity on the example of pneumatic postal tubes in 19th century Europe. KSENIA ELTSOVA (Moscow) discussed the possibilities of using internet websites for studying social stratification processes in contemporary societies.

ANDREAS DITTMANN (Giessen) introduced the perspective of geographers regarding the emergence of the spatial turn and the proliferation of scholarly works by non-geographers dealing with space as both object and method of analysis. He also emphasised the importance of map-making and cartography for modern politics, and the ways in which power-relations imbue such supposedly neutral scientific practices. GERRIT LANGE (Marburg), on the other hand, pointed out the importance of physical landscape and natural settings to ritual practices and identity politics through his case-study of southern Himalaya region. OMER SHARIR (Michigan) reflected upon methodological difficulties to derive information on spatial arrangements and material settings from scattered archival documents on the example of his research on Zionist colonisation of Palestine during the British mandate.

The last set of presentations tackled the topics of national spaces, territoriality, and historical regions. STEFFI MARUNG (Leipzig) opened the panel by sharing the results of the Leipzig-based research project *Processes of Spatialisation under the Global Condition*, especially the methodological avenues created by introduction of the concepts of spatial formats and spatial orders. TOM SCHWARZENBERG (Leipzig) introduced the importance, as well as pitfalls, of distinguishing between different scales of analysis, showcased on

the emergence of transnational health practices exercised by citizens of the European Union. SZABOLCS LASZLO (Bloomington) touched the issue of redundancy of area studies in contemporary research and the possibility of using the category of historical regions without ending up with container-like pigeonholes. ZHANNA MYLOGORODSKA (Leipzig) also dealt with processes of discursive construction of regions, but within one country (Ukraine), and how to detect agency of different subjects through such articulations. The spatial analysis of literary sources from the standpoint of *Begriffsgeschichte* was presented by ARNAB DUTTA (Groningen), who dealt with imaginations of continental Europe in the writings of Indian interwar thinkers, as well as by MARTIN BERTHOLD's (Potsdam) analysis of early modern meanings of space and borders, and the implications that historicisation of these concepts can bear fruit for our understanding of spatial practices of bygone eras.

The methodological lab concluded with the roundtable with three expert scholars. The topics discussed included the disciplinary and academic tradition-specific idiosyncrasies in absorbing the wave of spatial theories, by using the example of the belated English translation of Henri Lefebvre's seminal work *The Production of Space*, and the general circumstances that allowed the subsequent wave of theorisation and empirical research to occur. In particular, some common problems and challenges recognized in the majority of the presented papers were discussed, most notably how to transpose the well-known and widely used theories onto diverse kinds of empirical data. The experts urged doctoral candidates not to „apply“ theoretical postulates, but to „use“ them according to their own specific needs and specificities of their topic, avoiding the widespread habit of „namedropping“ endless theories and authors for their own sake, without any pertinence to the actual object of analysis. That way, theoretical tools can become a liberating and helpful means to frame one's research, rather than a claustrophobic container within which the source material has to be confined. Regarding increasing pressure to do interdisciplinary research, it was

pointed out that crossing disciplinary conventions can often yield gratifying results, but to do it properly is a demanding task that should not be taken up without due caution and preparation. The participants also concluded that methodology-oriented workshops like this one represent a welcome opportunity to sharpen one's analytical focus. Especially valuable proved the exchange of useful literature references spanning different disciplines, which prompted participants to establish an internal mailing list that would serve the purpose of recommending relevant and newly published academic publications that might not be known to everyone due to diverse disciplinary orientation and often differing institutional library possibilities.

Conference Overview:

Migrations, borders and minority issues

Andreas Langenohl (Giessen): Introduction and comments

Karl-Heinz Gmehling (Ústí nad Labem): Spatial Constructions in the Literature of German-Speaking Authors of Czechoslovak Origin

Kim Kannler (Duisburg): Visibility of 'Work' and 'the Worker' in Mediated Urban Space

Mikhail Garder (Moscow): Spatialising the Homeless in Moscow: Who are the Spatialised Actors?

Mina Ibrahim (Giessen): „For Where Two or Three Gather“ Contesting the Victimisation of Coptic Christian Spaces in Egypt

Urban spaces in global context

Mateusz Laszczkowski (Warsaw): Introduction and comments

Adam Gorka (Košice): One Picture Equals A Thousand Words. Understanding the Morphological Changes in a Post-Socialist City Using Geographic Information System and Virtual 3D City Model

Agnes Dudych (Košice / Weimar): Urban Development in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s

Laura Meneghello (Siegen): Communication Technology and Imagined Urban Spaces

Elvira Khairullina (Valladolid): Planning Ur-

ban and Transport Models in the Eastern Europe and the USSR: Tramways in Socialist Urban Planning in the 1960-70s

Ksenia Eltsova (Moscow): Digital Spaces of Elitism: Discursive Construction of Social Distinction through lenses of urban space (Case Study of Moscow's Representations in Russian New Media, 2010s)

Environment, landscape and conflict

Andreas Dittmann (Giessen): Introduction and comments

Gerrit Lange (Marburg): Central Himalayan Nāgs as Guardians of Water Resources

Omer Sharir (Michigan): Formation of Settler-Colonial Racial Order on the Frontiers of Zionist Settlement in Palestine 1905-1939

National spaces and territoriality

Steffi Marung (Leipzig): Introduction and comments

Arnab Dutta (Groningen): Culture, Civilisation, and the Borderscapes: The Cultural Geography of Continental Europe in the Bengali Imagination, 1919-45

Szabolcs Laszlo (Bloomington): The World is Open for Play: Critical Assessment of Regions as Units of Historical Analysis

Martin Berthold (Potsdam): Perception of Space and Borders in the Diaries of Christian II of Anhalt-Bernburg

Tom Schwarzenberg (Leipzig): Approaching Contested Spaces of Healthcare: Cross-Border Medical Practices in the European Union

Zhana Mylogorodska (Leipzig): Discourses on Regional Divisions of Ukraine

Roundtable discussion: Andreas Dittmann, Mateusz Laszczkowski, Steffi Marung

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