

Roth, Klaus; Brunnbauer, Ulf (Hrsg.): *Urban Life and Culture in Southeastern Europe. Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*. Münster, London: LIT Verlag 2007. ISBN: 978-3-8258-9903-5; 365 S.

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In exploring socio-cultural changes brought about by the processes of urbanization and modernization in 19th and in particular 20th century South-eastern Europe, the contributors focus on the urban experience, gender and ethnic relations in urban settings, as well as social topography, urban planning and urban-rural relations. The rather gradual processes of modernization in South-eastern Europe were intensified after World War II by the socialist ideologies and systems. Thus the main focus of the volume relates to the post World War II social changes and post socialist times. The volume, edited by Klaus Roth, Professor of European Ethnology, and Ulf Brunnbauer, Professor of History, consists of 22 articles, originally presented at the conference under the same title and organized by the „International Association for South-east European Anthropology“ in Belgrade, Serbia, May 2005.<sup>1</sup> The articles are divided into 6 chapters, as follows: urban structure and planning, architecture; urban – rural relations; social topography, ethnic and gender relations; urban culture, urbanity; and popular culture in the city.

Urbanization is dealt with as a historical process extending from nation-building to post socialism. The „urban“ is presented as a place of modernization, a site of marginality, resistance or contested territory, or a reminder to address debatable questions regarding collective responsibility or guilt as portrayed in the case of Women in Black's silent anti-war protests at the square in Belgrade (Orli Fridman, pp. 291-304). Not only is urban space an ideologically determined site, it is also a place where meanings actively ascribed by various people, their interactions and memories are articulated. It is relevant to note that socialist places are perceived in such a manner – as an arena for negotiations (Cristofer Scarboro, p. 79). The same as people do not consider historical dates and breaks as total ruptures, but rather sites which connect

past and present in specific ways. Special attention is drawn to migrations from rural to urban areas, as well as to experience post socialist transformations with reference to nostalgia and various ways in which people shape their memories. Urban places are presented as social and cultural constructions filled with symbolic implications and impossible to think out of historical or temporal dimensions. Urbanity is located in various settings (town, region, city square or street, pub, rave club or business enterprise), whilst as a part of popular culture it is depicted in graffiti, music, or mass media.

The question posed by several researchers is how urban lives or phenomena (for example cremation in Serbia by Aleksandra Pavičević, pp. 251-262) are being constructed in informal everyday discourses. Scholars analyzing everyday lives and practices in South-eastern Europe have been for a long time almost exclusively rural-oriented and focused on pertinent relations. The volume's analyses of urban production, lives, and identities, together with the role of ethnicity, gender, and class provides a wide range of aspects and thus significantly contributes to the new wave regarding South-east European studies. Heterogeneity of papers is welcome as it confronts different disciplinary views, methodological approaches as well as analytical vantage points. Unfortunately the issue on common differences, similarities, and arguments characterizing the process in the region remains unaddressed. The volume lacks a more detailed introduction text, which would surf between various analytical points and positions linking different aspects, methodologies, and empirical results. Rather than binding the volume, various categorizations, concepts and terminologies make it incoherent in several ways. Papers vary from descriptive notes to well structured analytical studies, they differ with regard to topics, regions (the majority of presented cases is from Serbia), as well as temporal or historical frame. They are very unbalanced in length (from 4 to 31 pages) and number of references – a discrepancy which cannot remain unnoticed. The applied articles, which are focused on urbanism and preservation, provide actual answers, together with political programs which offer solutions for a future development. On the other hand, more analytically oriented articles point to political processes, hierarchies, and power relations in the construction of urban lives and identities.

While many contributors tackle the topic on a

<sup>1</sup> The volume is a sequel of volume No. 9, in which some papers on the topic presented at the conference had already been published.

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spatially limited case study on a smaller town or a region, Maximilian Hartmuth's paper on transforming Ottoman towns in the Balkans into modern European cities (explained as integral part of the cultural policy of De-Ottomanisation) remains the only multi-sited study based on a comparative regional analysis (pp. 15-33).

Urban-rural relations play an important role in constructing social identities and marking socio-cultural transformations in South-eastern Europe. However, the excessive weight given to such binary oppositions might be debatable. Bipolarities between urban – rural, center – periphery, global – local introduce two static entities which reproduce and enhance dichotomies, and by way of that overlook interactions and mutual constitutions. Some scholars in the book warn of such connotations. By examining local responses and experiences of the „urban“ and the „rural“, we note that they cannot be considered as total opposites. As a matter of fact, the rural is part of the urban (Konstantina Bada, p. 102; Mirjana Pavlović, p. 164). In a variety of settings, the conceptions of rurality or the country have been symbolic materials used for shaping local critiques of the urban or the capitalist. Urbanity and its connotations (together with cultural and modern) have served as a major source of political identities and positions formation (Ivana Spasić, p. 225). Thus some authors point to the (mis)use of urban and rural in political communication. By contesting the established idea that the radical right party in Croatia 1924-1945 was supported by the rural and uneducated population, Rory Yeoman proves how rural and urban were used in political ideology and in the process of party's legitimization. The resentment of the city was of a symbolic nature, as the city was perceived the embodiment of liberal capitalism. On the other hand, the party strived to improve the rural economic and social life by way of importing modern urban ideas (pp. 109-140).

It is important to consider the ways in which the rural is perceived and conditioned by the political and symbolic demands of the urban present, as well as the political and economic character of the gendered social relations linking the country and the city.<sup>2</sup> Based on contemporary anthropological conceptions, such insights display embedment of power relations and hierarchies, pointing to nego-

tations between various interpretations aimed at legitimizing positions of certain interests/groups. Nevertheless, such approaches often are confined to analyze mere political rhetoric, and ignorant of local stories and understandings of urban by people „living it“. Revealing a broader understanding of the politics of urbanity, Ivana Spasić's article draws our attention from political ideology to experiencing urbanity in non-institutionalized everyday discourse and life in Serbia (pp. 211-227).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned points of criticism, the value of the actual empirical material cannot be overlooked. The multi perspective aspect, in particular the emphasis given to situations and relations that form people's views or experience of urban life, gives the volume a rather distinct anthropological character. The volume is a relevant vantage point for those interested in urban life, social and cultural transformations in the 20th century South-eastern Europe.

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<sup>2</sup> Compare Ferguson, James, *The Country and the city on the Copperbelt*, in: Gupta, Akhil; Ferguson, James (eds.), *Culture, Power, Place. Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, Durham 2003, pp. 137-145.