The City, Contested Identity, and Democratic Transitions

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The thus-far disappointing results of the all-too-flawed transition from authoritarian socialism to democratic polities over the past decade or so are beginning to prompt a re-examination of how to think about the nature of democracy. Assumptions rooted in the previous decade's relatively successful transformation of statist authoritarian regimes in Latin America and Southern Europe have somehow proved themselves inadequate in Central and East Europe as well as Central Eurasia. Extensive policy debates and theological disputes have pointed to insufficient per capita income, the absence of clearly defined ownership rights, impaired judicial systems, inadequate political structures, and technically defective privatization plans and economic policies as having contributed to the replacement of dysfunctional authoritarian systems with dysfunctional political economies that are somehow neither authoritarian nor democratic.

It would be foolish to dispute the importance of such factors, and I will not do so in this article. Rather, I will explore another dimension of what it means to become democratic, a set of issues that does not deny the importance of the concerns that have dominated our debates thus far so much as it shifts our attention to a different realm all together. I seek to redirect attention from what is taking place in people's behavior to what is taking place in their minds. More specifically, in this article I will direct attention toward new identities and modes of thought that must arise for a democratic transition to become complete. I will do so through a consideration of urban and community myth and history.

The problem of identity is especially troublesome in postsocialist states, as communist ideology had become so transparently discredited and disbelieved that it had long stopped providing meaningful markers for how people thought about who they were. Perhaps even more problematic for building a democratic polity,

Soviet-style socialist ideology demanded an identity of interest between the total-
ity of society and the Communist Party–dominated state. In its purist form, no
legitimate interests existed separate from those of the party-based regime. That
is why Hungarian party boss Janos Kadar's shift in rhetoric during the 1960s,
from the notion of a regime that believed that "those who are not with us are
against us," to one that recognized that "those who are not against us are with us,"
proved to be a transformative alteration in Hungarian politics. The denial of mul-
tiple interests in society necessitated the denial of multiple identities.

But societies were far more complex than Soviet-speak, and, party rhetoric
aside, both multiple interests and multiple identities existed throughout the Sovi-
et world. The inability of communist regimes to create concepts, language, insti-
tutions, and identities predicated on the reality of such diversity ultimately con-
tributed to their implosion across a dozen time zones. One major transitional task
thus becomes the creation of new ways of thinking about society that recognize
and accept difference. This undertaking is now especially pressing throughout the
former Soviet Union and much of East and Central Europe; it has also been inte-
gral to other democratic transitions elsewhere.

From this perspective, building a vibrant democracy requires more than just
changes in institutional arrangements. Rather, democratic transitions require
nothing less than changing ingrained habits of thought and action. Citizens of
democratizing regimes must begin to think differently about the nature of the
political game and the nature of power, moving away from the hardball politics
of what the Soviets used to call *kto kogo*—literally "who whom"—toward more
compromise-oriented and inclusive political mechanisms. That shift requires not
only citizens but, perhaps more important, political elites to develop a new sen-
sibility about the nature of power. Decision makers at all levels and in all spheres
need to think differently about how one goes about mobilizing resources and
defining shared goals. Politicians must accept complexity and remain humble in
their ambitions, as success is transitory and financial resources are finite. In other
words, the politically active population must move beyond a shopping list of spe-
cific policy proscriptions to reconsider how they think about statecraft. Herein
lies a fundamental challenge of democratic transition, because such transforma-
tions require an internal, psychological conversion that seems not to have taken
place throughout much of the formerly socialist world.

The inability to reorient one's views toward more democratic modes of action
and discourse is partially a product of the collective failure to institutionalize
democracy in the past. However, beyond formal organizations, the Bolshevik
attempt to eradicate collective memory eroded long-term pluralistic dispositions
in many socialist societies. Soviet-style binary understandings of power became
embedded in collective memory as much as in legal statute. New pluralistic leg-
ends and memories must be nurtured if viable democratic politics is to emerge.

Why the City Matters

Precisely because acceptance of diversity and variety is so essential to democrat-
ic transformations, cities and urban culture play an especially important role in

creating democratic societies. Obviously, there have been democratic societies that have not been urban. At this moment in history, however, the urban experience can play an essential role in promoting the sorts of changing identities and psychologies that must accompany democratization, because it is precisely in cities—and especially in large cities—that the existence of a plurality of interests, identities, communities, and individuals cannot be denied.

About a century ago, a seemingly new urban form—the giant industrial city— came into being. Very large cities had been around for some time, of course. The giant city, as Anthony Sutcliffe has reminded us, "has been a component of human civilisation for several thousand years."[1] But these new "metropolises" horrified many observers. The speed of their growth, the ease of their communications, the mobility of their populations, and the "tense standoff between bourgeois and proletarian values"[2] appeared to be unprecedented. Traditional social, political, and cultural institutions collapsed under the weight of uncommon challenges.

The openness and accelerated pace of urban expansion differed from the slower and more organic growth of medieval and early modern towns.[3] Metropolitan expansion often placed burgeoning industrial towns at odds with the surrounding countryside and national governments. Metropolitan societies everywhere were becoming increasingly diverse—and fragmented.[4] Sustaining a civic consciousness beyond group identity in an age preoccupied with speed and velocity was— and remains—no humble task. Indeed, the communist regimes that have now collapsed were, in large part, themselves consequences of the failure to succeed at precisely this assignment.

The new metropolis was so large and differentiated that no single social, political, economic, or ethnic group could dominate local politics for long. The giant city was not "a discrete historical actor." As Peter Hall has noted in his monumental history *Cities in Civilization*, the issue is not merely that great cities are large. Bigness implies complexity. Big cities, according to Hall, not only have more people living in them, but also "contain so many different kinds of people, different in birthplace and race and social class and wealth, different, indeed, in every respect that differentiates people at all."[5]

Social groups in these new giant cities were forced to choose their ground carefully, moving to protect interests only in those areas that really mattered for their survival or well-being. A new era of metropolitan pluralism began to take shape, disrupting previous understandings of power and political efficacy both locally and nationally. Municipal politics became at times a forced accommodation of competing private interests precisely because the metropolis had become so contentious.[6] Politics required a spectrum of accommodation as policy choices could no longer be reduced to simple either/or choices. The cost of not accommodating others was too frightening to bear, as would become painfully apparent for many in Russia following the collapse of the imperial regime in 1917. It is precisely the consequences of that particular collapse and the predominance of binary politics that today's post-Soviet democratic transitions must seek to remedy.

We can explore this legacy through an examination of conflicts over identity in several cities in the former socialist world, in relation to Barcelona during the

post-Franco transition, and to Washington, D.C. Washington, of course, is the single city in the United States that still does not have fully democratic home rule; the Constitution grants Congress, and not local residents, exclusive jurisdiction over the federal city.

In November 1999, then-Washington, D.C., councilwoman Charlene Drew Jarvis articulated one strategy for confronting urban diversity in the popular local monthly *Washingtonian* magazine. Jarvis advocated creating a civic consciousness that would be sufficiently broad to accommodate and honor a multitude of competing neighborhood realities. When asked how the down-at-the-heels African American neighborhood of Shaw might peacefully absorb an influx of upscale, primarily white residents, Jarvis pointed to what she saw as the soothing effect of a shared history for "tamp[ing] down the friction, at least between blacks and whites."[7] Jarvis continued, "Many black residents know the history. Now white residents who come into the community want to learn."

Jarvis's scheme to encourage conversations about a fractured past is hardly the only one that has been employed for dealing with the contradictions of impacted diversity. Another model has been for a dominant group or culture to simply ignore or denigrate the contributions of others in their own version of the local "story." Many histories of Washington, for example, have merely used that which is local as a distant backdrop for their voluminous and detailed discussions of national leaders and City Beautiful planning projects. They disregard, for example, the achievements of Dr. Charles Drew (Councilwoman Jarvis's father, who discovered the uses of blood plasma), Benjamin Banneker (who, together with Pierre L'Enfant, initially surveyed the new federal district in 1791), both the significant African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar and the prestigious public high school named in his honor, as well as the overtly racial aspects of congressional suspension of D.C. home rule in 1871 under the guise of reining in "Boss" Alexander Robey Shepherd's robust spending habits. Such editing away of D.C.'s vibrant racial and ethnic communities has resulted in a body of writing about Washington history that remains far less textured and complex than the city itself.

Much of the Washington story will sound disturbingly familiar to those who know the urban histories of the former socialist world. As tortured as Washington's experience has been at times, the scars of unresolved history cut even deeper on the European continent. Europe, it seems, has much more history with which to contend. That is nowhere more the case than in the countries of the formerly socialist world, which contain within their borders the sites of some of Europe's most grotesque atrocities. That history helps to explain why postsocialist transitions have not conformed to Western theories with textbook clarity.

European historians and mythmakers have often employed quite different strategies for telling the story of one or another community within a given city. All too many European storytellers—like some of their counterparts in Washington, D.C.—have proceeded as if their own group led a self-contained life, one that has been sealed off from others who may be either more or less powerful. The result can be a set of civic identities that undermine democratic governance—which is why all of this matters to democratic transitions.

From Multiethnic to Monoethnic Cities

To illustrate this point, we turn our attention now to one community that has been relatively successful in pursuing the creation of a democratic polity: Prague. Even "Magic Prague," as Angelo Maria Ripellino has called the city, reveals many of the contradictions associated with less-successful transitional countries.[8]

As Peter Demetz persuasively revealed in his 1997 extended essay about the city, *Prague in Black and Gold*, local residents have rarely shared a common civic vision.[9] American historian Cynthia Paces explores such divisions within Prague in the context of one of nine fundamental regime shifts that took place in the city during the twentieth century—the one that occurred in November 1918.[10] That month's pitched battles over public art in Prague's Old Town Square pitted Czech nationalists against reminders of Austrian "hegemonic culture," such as the baroque Marian Column. The ascendency of nationalist conceptions in the city was reflected in the popularity of a new Jan Hus Memorial. The Hus monument was part of a much larger effort to reinterpret the past in a way that elevated Czechs above other national groups for whom Prague had long served as an important cultural center: Austrians, Germans, Jews, and Italians, among others.

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The Roman Catholic Marian Column and the Protestant Hus Memorial had managed to coexist for three years during World War I, gazing at one another across the Old Town Square. By late 1918, however, radical nationalists smashed the column's crowning statue of the Virgin Mary on the square's stones. Their actions marked a culmination of a several-decades-long process through which multiethnic Prague became defined as a "Czech" city.

Such a reading, from among contending interpretations of Prague history, gained influence after 1918 as the city became the national capital of the new Czechoslovak Republic. Prague's civic life became an instrument of nation-building under the first republic. The cataclysm of the Second World War, followed by four decades of harsh communist rule, turned Prague into a predominately monoethnic Czech town. The task following the 1989 Velvet Revolution, of re-creating a democratic aquarium out of the overboiled fish stew of Nazi and Soviet occupation, required reclaiming democratic notions of statecraft and a new democratic identity. The rediscovery of diversity values in community history has played out in scholarship, museum exhibition halls, battles over historic preservation, political campaigns, and debates over city planning. This retelling is a critical aspect of Prague's relatively successful postsocialist democratic transition.

To return, then, to the issues raised at the outset of this article, a successful democratic transition requires not only the establishment of a parliament and the

conduct of free elections, but also coming to terms with an antidemocratic past. The difficulty throughout much of the postsocialist world is that the region is full of monoethnic urban communities that were once home to dynamic, multiethnic, multireligious, and polyglot societies, but which have forgotten their own diverse histories and democratic community traditions.

Rebuilding Identity by Rebuilding Monuments

Simply observing that history must be retold does not solve the problem of retelling it either in Prague or in Washington. Agreement over an appropriate response does not come easily. The postsocialist world is full of renamed streets and rebuilt monuments and cathedrals. From Yuri Luzhkov's massive Cathedral of the Redeemer in Moscow to Kyiv's rebuilt St. Michael's Cathedral, from Warsaw's reconstructed town square to historic Tbilisi's new "old" churches, a long-lost history is being re-created stone by stone. Yet the task at hand is hardly ever so simple as establishing an elected parliament or rebuilding a church. In Riga, for example, Soviet-era buildings are being torn down to make room for the reconstruction of German medieval guildhalls, to create a Latvian identity in a city that is still nearly 60 percent ethnically Russian.

The phenomenon of rebuilt buildings—especially religious buildings—is so widespread throughout the postsocialist world that it helps us begin to understand what is different about these transitions. Streets are renamed and monuments are put up and taken down during any number of regime changes. But the desire to rebuild symbolic buildings stone by stone points to an absence of ideology and identity following the enforced destruction of collective ideas and ideals under socialist regimes. Herein lies part of the answer to why postsocialist transitions have been different, and why some of the results appear aberrant in light of Western social science theory. Postsocialist regimes must rebuild collective meaning. Nationalism becomes one means for doing so. The diversity of urban communities contains an alternative and perhaps more hopeful base.

The retelling of history itself inevitably becomes a subject of contention in such circumstances. In the western Ukrainian city of L'viv, for example, bureaucrats have manipulated the city's identity by renaming local streets, squares, and monuments, first during the Polish interwar period, then again following the imposition of Soviet rule, and yet another time after Ukrainian independence. Even the most commonplace of urban contrivances—the simple street sign—carries powerful meaning in a city that has been ruled by seven different political regimes in less than a century. Such an overly charged environment nurtures multiple and contending communities. The task of rebuilding a civic identity in L'viv following Ukrainian independence has prompted present-day leaders to look back once again to their city's multiethnic past in an effort to construct a future civic identity that might transcend the Soviet experience. Evidence of their success or failure will be written quite literally on their city's walls.

L'viv's recent encounters with its own past underscore the significance for democratic transitions of attempts to reclaim and to rewrite urban and community histories. Such efforts frequently move along parallel tracks. The physical city

is repossessed by one group or another through selective policies of public and private restoration, preservation, and neglect. The metaphysical city is restructured by a selective retelling of history through tours, guidebooks, textbooks, films, and Internet sites. The pressing demand to legitimate L'viv's post-Soviet political and cultural elites encourages movement away from Soviet-era histories that ignored L'viv's now-extinct ethnolinguistic communities and toward an open embrace of the city's varied pasts.

The complexity of discontinuous civic identity and its relationship to democratic transitions is perhaps most visible in "Faust's Metropolis," Berlin.[11] As Brian Ladd revealed in his 1997 volume on postunification Berlin, *The Ghosts of Berlin*, each new monument in the re-established German capital and every new historical tract raises fresh issues that are as discontinuous as the city itself.[12] Try as Berlin's postunification leaders might to embrace diversity, that recognition does not of itself encourage a merging of stories among those who have lived apart even as they have lived together. Urban planning strategies promoting visual or functional cohesiveness cannot camouflage the wounds of failed diversity in a city with a past as violent as Berlin's.

Tales of Success

Despite such negative examples, it is important to note that a number of communities breaking loose from long periods of authoritarian rule have been successful in their efforts to draw on inclusive local myths to reinforce democratic transitions. Two prominent European examples of such achievement deserve more detailed consideration: Barcelona and St. Petersburg.

Officials in post-Fascist Barcelona appreciated the extent to which the city could synthesize diverse histories and culture and thereby provide meaning for an otherwise socially and ethnically fractured community. Municipal officials pursued every opportunity to enable citizens to take back their city through historic and cultural preservation programs combined with the creation of new monuments, public spaces, and institutions. New public art was to be nonrepresentational so as not to favor any particular set of ethnic, religious, or political symbols. Spectacles, festivals, and especially exhibitions promoted a new democratic spirit and reinforced fledgling democratic political institutions. The 1992 Summer Olympic Games were but one particularly visible manifestation of the local leadership's conscious effort to reinvent Barcelona as a democratic city. Their success, though in constant need of reinvigoration, demonstrates the ways in which new approaches to statecraft can encourage the emergence of democratic identities and modes of thought even in divided communities.

St. Petersburg similarly gives some room for optimism. Petersburgers have remained Russia's most liberal voters to this day, even as the city's mass-based, Gorbachev-era, anti-Soviet democratic crusade has subsided to be replaced by normal urban political conflict. A civic identity linked to deeply felt notions of democracy has grown out of the city's distinctive urban heritage. Petersburg's turbulent history produced powerful images to which local democratic political groups continue to turn in successful appeals to their electorates. Those communal symbols,

in turn, are deeply rooted in millions of personal memories and histories.

By the end of World War II, two distinct realities had come to coexist within the city's official boundaries. The first, and by far the weaker, was that of the historic city center and the prerevolutionary values it embodied. This community became known in unofficial shorthand as "Peter." Around it grew a new Soviet industrial city, representing all the values of the Soviet Union. This sprawling urban moonscape of crumbling, low-grade, prefabricated cement high-rises and bedraggled, undersupplied stores was rightly known in local parlance by the city's official name, "Leningrad."

The two worlds of "Peter" and "Leningrad" stood in opposition to each other, their conflict played out in many cultural, economic, and political wars that remained hidden beneath the cloak of Soviet authoritarian control until Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of glasnost and perestroika brought the tension into the open during the late 1980s. Appropriately, it was through battles over the preservation of historic buildings that "Peter" found a legitimate forum for advancing its war against "Leningrad."

The city's vigorous anticommunist, prodemocratic movement was born in March 1987, when raucous street demonstrations erupted to protest the city authorities' graceless restoration of the once-grand Astoria Hotel and its more déclassé neighbor, the Angleterra. The protests in 1987 proved to be the moment when thousands among the local citizenry found the courage to renounce publicly the economic visions that Soviet planners had formulated for their city. By August 1991, when a revanchist coup threatened Gorbachev's more reformist government, Boris Yeltsin's solitary display of bulldog tenacity atop a Russian tank riveted the world's attention on Moscow. But in St. Petersburg (which would reclaim its historic name in a matter of weeks) something like a third of the entire local population crowded into the square in front of the Hermitage Museum to oppose the coup. Petersburg had become one postsocialist city in which contested identity had found a democratic umbrella.

Urban Civic Identity and Democracy

In considering urban communities in terms of the relationship between urban civic identity and democracy, I have attempted to examine some of the complexity of postsocialist transitions. The issue of contested urban identity casts light on an important aspect of such transformations, namely, how people think about themselves, and even how they reconceptualize power. How do the diverse peoples of great urban communities forge a civic identity that sustains themselves and their neighbors? One initial step must be a retelling of a community's history that is as complex as the community itself. The collective twentieth-century body count of the victims of communal violence in the cities of what is now the postsocialist world demonstrates just how important encompassing myths can be to a society's well-being.

How the great cities of the postsocialist world come to terms with their own diversity, both past and present, will shape the very political institutions so often the object of scrutiny. Thinking about a city is important to better appreciate what

has—and what has not—happened during the past decade's postsocialist transition. This article thus becomes first and foremost a plea to reconceptualize postsocialist transitions, to step out of the models that we have brought to that dramatic process from elsewhere and to focus on some trends common to all postsocialist societies—namely, the need to reconceptualize statecraft to incorporate and acknowledge pluralities of interests and identities. Urban communities, and how they define and organize themselves, constitute one arena in which such questions can become coherent research strategies.

The frightfully important task of community history becomes the arduous mission of identifying a shared civic identity wide enough to embrace all of the varieties that make cities both urban and urbane. This task is also essential for the success of democratic transitions, especially in a socialist world, which in many ways lies at the heart of twentieth-century darkness. Otherwise, no matter what institutional changes are proclaimed from on high, disparate and conflicting groups and individuals will continue to live dangerously apart even as they live snugly together.

NOTES

1. Anthony Sutcliffe, "Introduction: The Giant City as a Historical Phenomenon," in *Megalopolis: The Giant City in History,* ed. Theo Barker and Anthony Sutcliffe (London: St. Martin's, 1993), 1–13. This volume is a collection of essays developed from panels at the International Historical Congress convened in Madrid in 1990, at which the theme of the giant city over time was a major focal point for research.

2. A turn of phrase used by Henry Francis Mallgrave in his introduction to a new edition of Otto Wagner, *Modern Architecture: A Guidebook for His Students to This Field of Art,* introd. and trans. Henry Francis Mallgrave (Santa Monica, CA: The Getty Center for the History of Art and Humanities, 1988), 11.

3. A point made by Peter Hanek in his essay, "Urbanization and Civilization: Vienna and Budapest in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Garden and the Workshop: Essays on the Cultural History of Vienna and Budapest,* ed. Peter Hanek (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3.

4. For a concise and perceptive examination of the reception of industrial metropolises, see Peter Hall, "Metropolis 1890–1940: Challenges and Responses," in *Metropolis, 1890–1940,* ed. Anthony Sutcliffe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 19–66.

5. Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilization* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 612.

6. Carl Abbott, "Thinking About Cities: The Central Tradition in U.S. Urban History," *Journal of Urban History* 22, no. 6 (1996): 687–701.

7. As quoted in Harry Jaffe, "Espresso Town," *Washingtonian,* November 1999, 164.

8. Angelo Maria Ripellino, *Magic Prague,* ed. Michael Henry Heim, trans. David Newton Marinello (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

9. Peter Demetz, *Prague in Black and Gold: Scenes from the Life of a European City* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997).

10. Cynthia Paces, "Composing Urban History and the Constitution of Civic Identities," conference paper, meeting of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Kennan Institute/East European Studies Working Group on Local Urban History, Prague, Czech Republic, 10–13 March 2000.

11. Alexandra Richie, *Faust's Metropolis: A History of Berlin* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1998).

12. Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).