



Authoritarian cities go global

Andrew Grant

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BOOK REVIEW

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Globalized Authoritarianism: Megaprojects, Slums, and Class Relations in Urban Morocco by Koenraad Bogaert, Minneapolis, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2018, pp.384, Hbk. \$112.00; Pbk. \$28.00, ISBN: 9781452956701

The Geopolitics of Spectacle: Space, Synecdoche, and the New Capitals of Asia by Natalie Koch, Ithaca, USA: Cornell University Press, 2018, pp.210, Hbk. \$45; ISBN: 9781501720918

When “global” and “spectacular” are used to describe cities, visions of the great urban centers of North America, Europe and East Asia typically come to mind. But travelers to cities less well-known to those in the Global North, such as Baku, Casablanca, and Astana might be surprised by how these cities share attributes with more well-known global cities. In these places, architecturally stunning skyscrapers of glass and steel punctuate expansive waterfront developments. These cities impress visitors with apparitions of wealth, cosmopolitanism, and economic progress and seek to upend stereotypes of regional backwardness and stagnation. As the authors of the books discussed in this essay suggest, these unlikely spectacular cities play key roles in the political practice of the contemporary authoritarian states where they are found. Furthermore, they have much to tell us about how cities mediate political power and create the conditions of contemporary capitalism.

Both Koenraad Bogaert’s *Globalized Authoritarianism* and Natalie Koch’s *The Geopolitics of Spectacle* focus on how stunning urban transformations have the power to remake political relationships between rulers and ruled. Bogaert studies cities in Morocco and Koch several of the capital cities of Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and Southeast Asia. As Koch suggests, commentators and even scholars often look upon spectacle and grandiose megaprojects in authoritarian states as curiosities that confirm stereotypes about the regimes of authoritarian states as oppressive, wasteful, and vulgar in taste. In this view, such rapid and large-scale urbanization efforts are curios that have little to say to wider questions of urban development and politics. Yet as both authors show, urbanization has transformed and strengthened the regimes of the states that build them, changed the subjectivities of the people who inhabit the cities, connected cities and host states to the global economy in new ways, and shifted regional geopolitical imaginaries. Furthermore, the entwinement of these cities in a larger global urban fabric means that phenomena found in them can also be found in liberal, democratic contexts.

Bogaert is a political scientist whose project began from an attempt to understand the dynamics of democratization in Middle East and Northern African (MENA) countries. In his book’s preface, he explains that a focus on urban placemaking helped him move beyond teleological discussions of these states’ arrested but allegedly inevitable evolutions towards democracy. Instead, he found the creation, in place, of new “contexts of power” that joined together the Moroccan regime with private stakeholders and allowed for territorial redistributions of power that enabled the continuity of authoritarianism (pg. 41). Koch, meanwhile, is a political geographer interested in how illiberal states use spectacular urbanism to maintain political power. She proposes a “geopolitics of

spectacle” by which capital cities come to be both symbols and tangible materializations of state promises of economic development. The effects of spectacular capitals reach not only populations that live within them, but across national territory and regional space. This is because they operate through the root metaphor of synecdoche. Synecdoche uses the part (the city) to speak for the whole (the national territory) and, Koch argues, operates at a deeper cognitive level than the tropes and associations that critical geopolitics scholars typically analyze. Understanding synecdoche allows scholars to understand the regional relevance of spectacle because it highlights the unspectacular others against which the spectacle takes on its brilliance.

Both authors critique approaches that use ideal types and essences. Instead they want to know what the political work of urbanization does in the specific contexts they study. For them, a practice approach better highlights how the urban works, and studies of practice yield better results for comparative political studies than state-centered approaches that reduce themes such as spectacle and regime adaption to particular state typologies and their tendencies (cf. Cavatorta 2005; Kenez 1985). For Bogaert the focus is on cities as neoliberal projects through which “class practices” are used to realize elite goals of wealth accumulation, population management, and regime continuity. A focus on class allows Bogaert to view the Moroccan royal family and its allies as deeply imbricated in neoliberal economic arrangements that draw cities including Tangier and Casablanca into global capitalist markets. This is spatially manifested in “neoliberal projects” that take place in special administrative zones and bring a glitzy, polished look to new urban developments that sidestep regular political processes. Such urbanization effectively cuts elected political officials out of the development process and disenfranchises the urban poor. The state benefits insofar as it can attract higher rents, European tourists, and international investors. It also allows the regime to deploy new forms of government to manage the spaces of the urban poor, such as the National Initiative for Human Development, which expands state knowledge of slum spaces while aiming to make the poor “self-reliant” and “entrepreneurial” (171). By following these “class practices,” Bogaert paints a picture not of an authoritarian regime ruling its population through heavy-handed discipline, but of a regime partaking in, and co-creating, neoliberalism and neoliberal urban subjects.

Koch’s focus is on urban spectacle as a practice itself. She contends that spectacle as a metaphor is crucial to understanding how politics operate in unequal resource-rich authoritarian states. This means that scholars need to take spectacle as a practice and geographical political technique seriously. Where spectacles occur matters because of the relative notions of progress and prosperity that they conjure. Moreover, they should not be studied to see if they are unqualified propaganda successes, but to see how they influence the psychology of their intended audiences. The characters in Koch’s book are conflicted by the economic inequality that underlies the rise of, and is concentrated in, their capital cities. Yet they remain impressed by the spectacle of developmental promise that these cities represent. Drawing from Clifford Geertz (1980) and Paul Veyne (1990), she argues that these cities therefore work to “enchant inequality,” to deploy spectacle as a political technique to distract attention away from uneven development and towards the splendor of the center: “By critically interrogating the geopolitical imaginaries that underpin these injustices, we find that they can be glossed over and ignored by ordinary citizens when they are taught to focus on the spectacles at the center and think synecdochically about them as positive symbols” (154). When images and stories about spectacular capitals circulate, the cities have a far reach. They can fill national citizens and expatriate workers with pride and make them feel that they too can participate in social and economic progress. The end result is a depoliticization of spectacular economic progress that bolsters ruling regimes by impressing those that gaze on their capitals from afar.

As both authors focus their attention on political practices, they both grapple with how to conceptualize power. Bogaert critiques the king-like power “holding” perspective that preoccupies many MENA scholars. Instead he combines a relational reading of Marx with Foucauldian theorizations of distributed power and agency. This allows him to make the case that urbanization is an unequal class project used to extract wealth from relationally lower classes, while also arguing that the regime is attempting to solve governmental problems related to capitalist crises by distributing power to private actors, some of whom are situated outside of Morocco. In the sixth chapter Bogaert follows the resettlement of the urban poor to make room for neoliberal projects. He argues that the expansion of private property and the extension of loans and microcredit to a growing segment of the population deepens unequal capitalist relations. In interviews with private contractors that build structures, assess the poor urban population, and collect taxes, Bogaert demonstrates the governmental and organizational drive to encourage the desire for a new way of life among the urban population. Elsewhere, he cites the “voluntary contribution” program of King Mohammed VI to show how people have been drawn into a consensual extractive relation with political elites to fund the world’s second largest mosque. As power circulates between state actors, private contractors, and a population empowered to be partake in an emerging neoliberal urban milieu, the entire enterprise remains a “class strategy” designed to strengthen the regime.

The accounts of agency and subjectivity in these books are similar in that they both draw from nuanced understandings of Foucauldian regimes of governmentality. Yet they also have remarkably different perspectives on what agency and subjectivity look like in the political contexts of urban spectacle and neoliberal megaproject that they respectively study. In Koch’s discussion of Kazakhstan, for example, the capital city of Astana serves to distract attention from processes of slow violence in rural portions of the country, such as environmental problems around the Aral Sea. The collapse of the Soviet economy is still felt in the Aral region and many people are dissatisfied with the lack of local opportunities. The state even occasionally uses violence against striking oil workers. Moreover, the money that the rural resource extraction economy does generate is syphoned off to pay for the construction of Astana. Yet remarkably, Koch finds little overt criticism of the state: “For these individuals, the capital city development scheme more or less *is*. They actively take advantage of the opportunities it has opened up, but otherwise tend to refrain from reflecting critically on what conditions have made its spectacular rise possible, and at what cost” (148). The members of the rural population she interviews instead hope for a more gradual development to reach them, while in the meantime taking pride in national publicity about Astana’s alleged global visibility, as well as Astana’s relative superiority to other regional capitals.

Bogaert’s perspective is darker. His quotations of non-elites reveal a bitterness and cynicism about being left out of the new exclusive urban neighborhoods. Bogaert writes that neoliberal urban development is “a class project in which the poor have no right to placemaking” (244). Neoliberal projects have deprived lower classes of their ability to create urban places through democratic participation or to partake in the everyday sociality they enjoyed in their pre-resettlement neighborhoods. The authors’ differing perspectives raise questions about the relative importance of the role of imagination and material realities in urban spectacle. Koch tends to flatten economic inequalities within capital cities (with the exception of the Gulf, where Koch discusses class difference among foreign workers) to emphasize geopolitical imaginaries. Bogaert attends little to imaginaries beyond their fetishistic roles in consumerism, marketing, or justifying redevelopment.

Another difference in the books that has consequences for the authors’ theoretical frameworks and findings is their differing temporalities. While both Bogaert and Koch

are critical of regimes' conjuring of economic progress as an apolitical consensus to justify urbanization schemes, the different historical contexts that urbanization occurs within bear upon the reception and outcomes of these developments. Bogaert dedicates his second chapter to narrating Morocco's history in terms of a shift from developmentalism to neoliberalism. During the 1970s, state developmentalism was dominant, and Morocco used money made from a strong global phosphate market to create public investments that supported the national population. In 1983 rising debt and falling receipts from phosphate sales led to Morocco adopting a structural adjustment policy that made conditions hard on the urban workers. Drawing from conceptual divisions highlighted in the work of Peck and Tickell (2002), Bogaert characterizes this period as that of roll back neoliberalism marked by spatial disciplinary techniques, such as violent crack downs on urban unrest triggered by workers' reduced entitlements and the creation of monumental public spaces that are easily securitized. Roll-out neoliberalism occurred at the turn of the 21st century, when the royal family began sharing more power with democratically elected politicians and began the neoliberal practice of state as entrepreneur, eventually inviting companies based in France, Morocco's former colonizer, back in as private investors. This is a temporal narrative that makes sense in the former colonies of Western Europe and thus has much comparative potential for studies of Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. It also buttresses Bogaert's argument that the regime is adapting its governmental techniques to crises within capitalism.

In Central Asia, however, the Soviet Union was the colonizer, and time has been experienced and narrated differently. Koch demonstrates that the governments of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan have based their legitimacy on being strong paternalistic regimes that care for their people and are committed to staving off the period of "chaos" that ensued in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union (125). Much of the imaginary strength of the geopolitics of spectacle is derived from leaving behind the out-moded Soviet-era urban form and embracing a newer, more global vision of the spectacular. Koch argues a sense of relative progress in relation to both the period of chaos and the Soviet Union is necessary for understanding the appeal of spectacle and its relational character. Narratives of colonialism, developmentalism, and capitalism are less fruitfully applied to Post-Soviet states, which currently mix developmentalism with capitalism and which have experienced fewer capitalist crises. The framework of popular understandings of traumatic time and progress away from it applies well to states like China, whose ruling party also emphasizes its role in bringing economic development and in vanquishing pre-Communist chaos. Koch also discusses the need to develop spectacular geographical imaginaries that attend to different contexts. For instance, Abu Dhabi and Doha work to enchant a global population of potential expatriate workers. Koch warns that spectacular synecdoche also risks being stretched too far and may fail to excite target audiences, such as in the case of Myanmar's largely empty capital.

Both books use a variety of empirical sources to make their cases. Speeches, interviews with key actors, and analysis of architecture and visual imagery serve to anchor elite visions and to give insights into overarching strategies. While both authors are interested in how regular people are impacted by and respond to elite urban designs, the attitudes and choices of non-elite populations are less prominent in the books. Bogaert offers a few anecdotes, mostly of people angry about or defiant of urban redevelopment. Koch concentrates interviews with non-elites in a rich chapter on views of spectacular Astana from economically devastated villages near the desiccated Aral Sea. Where Bogaert highlights an angry and disenfranchised urban subaltern subject, Koch illustrates that the rural population has a variety of opinions about Astana. Yet Koch argues, drawing from Alexei Yurchak (2006), that most people don't want to risk criticizing the state. They want to live a "normal" life and therefore come to

partake in the spectacular metaphor that makes progress in Astana appear to be progress for the entire country. The disparity between the clarity of elite urban visions and the mixed reception of urban spectacle among general populations suggests the continued difficulty in theorizing subjectivity across different contexts of urbanization. Another recent approach has been proposed by Emily Yeh (2013), who argues that Chinese urbanization in Lhasa has led to contradictory consciousness among Tibetan populations who both criticize urbanization as a political ploy but also come to desire and depend upon the benefits that it claims to bring. These studies all highlight the different ways that urbanization attempts, not without contradiction, to spectacularly mask political and economic inequality.

These books provide compelling visions of what urban practices can do politically. Both authors bring years of fieldwork experience and regional expertise that make their books strong contributions both to their respective disciplines of political science and political geography as well as urban studies more broadly. Their theoretical findings are deployable in contexts beyond Asia and MENA and are a welcome addition to the growing political geographic literature on urbanization.

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Andrew Grant
Center for Asian Studies, CU-Boulder
 angr2662@colorado.edu

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