
CAT-ferences and the Cities After Transition (CAT) Network

Cities After Transition (CAT) is the largest network of scholars interested in the cities and urban spaces of Central and Eastern Europe and, increasingly, beyond. Initially conceived as a meeting place for urban geographers, CAT gradually evolved into a truly multidisciplinary community of about 300 persons, within which also sociologists, anthropologists, architects and planners are well-represented.

CAT emerged after Thomas Borén (Stockholm University) and I decided to use the Inaugural Nordic Geographers' Meeting (NGM), held in the southern Swedish town of Lund in May 2005, to host a paper session on the 'urban geographies of post-communist states'. What resulted was, in effect, a mini-conference within the conference: Approximately 40 participants, mostly from the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), joined us to take part in a very well attended stream of sessions.

While nested within the NGM, the Lund sessions gradually became known as the 'First Urban Geographies of Post-communist States' workshop. The second workshop retained this name, but by that time (December 2007), the 'CAT network' had emerged as the main label describing the community of researchers that had come together in Lund, and the event (and all following events) came to be colloquially known as the 'CAT-ference'.

The name 'Cities After Transition' carries plenty of potential theoretical controversy within it, not least because it is imbued with a strong sense of teleology relating to the implicit assumption that transition implies a linear evolution ending at a predictable destination. Accordingly, a city after transition would be a city that has, to use Francis Fukuyama's [1989] words, reached the End of History. When Thomas and I discussed under what name we should have baptised the nascent network, which we did while sitting in our cramped room at the Ibis hotel in Lund, our point of departure was a different one. For us, apart from being a simple and catchy abbreviation, CAT merged two core concepts—cities and transition—which discursively situated the network's 'post-socialist' area of interest at the time;¹ perhaps slightly ironically, 'after' was intended to brand CAT as a forward-looking scholarly constellation.

Looking back, our idea had an implicit geopolitical underpinning: The state of 'being in transition' meant being in a state of exception, of otherness in relation to the cities that lie at the core of contemporary theory (London, Amsterdam, New York, etc.). Placing the region's cities as being 'after transition', accordingly,

¹ *Cities After Transition* is also the title of an influential book published 20 years ago and edited by Gregory Andrusz, Michael Harloe and Ivan Szelényi [Andrusz et al. 1996].

would have implied a repositioning of the region within the geopolitical spaces of knowledge production and, consequently, allowing them to emerge from the insular realm of area studies as active contributors to contemporary debates in urban theory [cf. Ferenčuhová 2016]. The three conference sites (Stockholm, Tallinn and the Baltic Sea) themselves spoke to this ambition: The 2007 (2nd) CAT-ference started with sessions held inside the premises of the Stockholm School of Economics. It then continued on the overnight ferry connecting the Swedish capital to Tallinn, Estonia, which was the conference's field trip destination. Finally, more 'floating' paper sessions, as well as the conference's concluding act, were scheduled for the return oversea crossing to Stockholm (see Buzar [2008] for a review of the event).

Since then, successful CAT-ferences have been organised on a bi-annual basis, in Tartu, Estonia (2009), Bucharest (2011), Tbilisi (2013), and Prague (2015), and the number of participants has risen from about 40 in Stockholm to over 100 in both Tbilisi and Prague. In addition, smaller thematic workshops on the urban problems of the Caucasus (Tbilisi 2010) and on gentrification (Łódź 2012) have also been held.

CAT-ference organisers adhere to three main principles, namely, that (1) the participation fee should be kept to a minimum, especially for younger scholars and/or PhD students, and that (2) an overnight urban geography-related field trip should be offered as an integral part of the event, rather than as a post-conference leisure activity. These two principles address central tenets of the philosophy of CAT, specifically, that CAT should welcome anyone at any career stage on an equal standing, and that CAT is as much about socialising and creating a sense of community as it is about discussing the results of scientific labour. Apart from this, CAT-ferences are supposed to be located at least partly within the CEE region, broadly understood.

The next CAT-ference, or more formally the '7th International Urban Geographies of Post-communist States' conference, will be held in both Kiev and Dnipro (former Dnipropetrovsk, renamed in May 2016) between 26 and 29 September 2017. Our host institutions will be the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kiev and the Oles Honchar National University of Dnipro, respectively. Kiev and Dnipro are two very different cities with dramatic recent histories. Kiev is the largest European 'post-socialist' city outside of Russia, and the eighth-largest city in Europe (measured within city limits). It emanates a truly cosmopolitan flair coupled with a strong sense that the city is undergoing a complete societal and ideological remaking as a result of the recent pro-European revolution. While much smaller than Kiev, million-strong Dnipro still is a major European city by any standard. For decades, the city was a synonym for the highest achievements in Soviet rocket science. Today it finds itself straddled along the newly emerged geopolitical fault line between Russia and the West, it is a city where pro-European and pro-Soviet/Russian ideas compete for the population's allegiance, a city divided not culturally, as Samuel Huntington [1993] would have expected, but

ideologically. However, unlike in neighbouring Donetsk, the pro-Soviet/Russian ideas never gained the upper hand.

CAT and the CAT-ferences have now existed for over a decade. During this time, much has happened within the network's area of interest and within urban theory at large. Most importantly, in my view, is that fact that these two realms are no longer detached from one another, and that research on cities in CEE is slowly but surely becoming visible, although it may still have some way to go before achieving the status of symmetrical partner within contemporary theory. As Tauri Tuvikene [2016] explains, 'post-socialist cities' run the risk of double exclusion—from mainstream urban theory as well as from the influential post-colonial critiques levelled in its direction. Jan Nijman [2015: 184] recently described the outcome of such exclusion by referring to the metaphor of empty chairs around the table. While the risk certainly exists, I am not as pessimistic: Over the past few years, scholars of cities in CEE have been involved in a variety of scientific discussions, showcasing an increasing degree of theoretical and empirical sophistication. The CAT-ferences, I dare say, have become a prime locus for these discussions, and you are invited to take part. There is a free chair for everyone.

Michael Gentile
University of Oslo
michael.gentile@sosgeo.uio.no

References

Andrusz, G., M. Harloe and I. Szelényi. 1996. *Cities After Transition*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Buzar, S. 2008. 'Breaking the Waves: A Mobile Conference for a Fluid Urban Geography.' *Cities* 25 (2008): 176–177.

Ferenčuhová, S. 2016. 'Accounts from Behind the Curtain: History and Geography in the Critical Analysis of Urban Theory.' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, DOI: 10.1111/1468-2427.12332.

Fukuyama, F. 1989. 'The End of History?' *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18.

Huntington, S. 1993. 'The Clash of Civilizations?' *Foreign Affairs* 72 (3): 22–49.

Nijman, J. 2015. 'The Theoretical Imperative of Comparative Urbanism: A commentary on "Cities beyond Compare" by Jamie Peck', *Regional Studies* 49 (1): 183–186.

Tuvikene, T. 2016. 'Strategies for Comparative Urbanism: Post-socialism as a De-territorialized Concept.' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, DOI: 10.1111/1468-2427.12333.