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An urban geopolitics
(or, the perils of using the city to rebrand the state – and Europe)

Luiza Bialasiewicz

Over the past decade, the term ‘urban geopolitics’ has entered the policy as well as academic lexicon. In an op-ed piece published in the summer of 2012, Saskia Sassen prognosticated the emergence of a new sort of ‘urban geopolitics’, noting that from tackling environmental questions to countering the threat of terrorism, in the decades to come it would be urban actors and city networks that would become key geopolitical actors and sites of geopolitics. ‘Major cities will not replace any of the other geopolitical actors,’ she argued, ‘but they will play a role, both as actor and as the site for major challenges.’

In Sassen’s work, just as in the writings of most other commentators deploying this term, the city becomes a geopolitical actor as/when it takes on what are considered the ‘hard’ geopolitical roles of the state: the defence of boundaries, the securing of territory, the management of flows of people and goods. And European cities are, indeed, increasingly doing all of these things: from the adoption of urban anti-terrorism strategies (e.g. London for the 2012 Olympic Games), to the roles that many cities have been forced to take in order to face sudden mass arrivals of migrants (e.g. Rome in the summer of 2015).

But geopolitics is not just about the management of space and populations. It is equally importantly about representing spaces and populations; about telling stories about what spaces are (and, even more importantly, what they should be), and about who belongs where. In that sense, the growing popularisation of the term ‘urban geopolitics’ only partially engages the various ways in which European cities today are, indeed, becoming geopolitical actors. Such discussions frequently fail to pay heed...
to the powerful ways in which cities have begun to craft distinct ‘geopolitical imaginations’ not just for themselves but also for their constituent states – and what this might mean for the refashioning of identitary narratives in today’s Europe.

Geographers have long analysed such spatial imaginations, highlighting how they have been fundamental to sustaining, for instance, the visions of European colonial empires and their claims to territories in Africa or Asia, framing these latter as part of an extended motherland/patrie. Yet such imaginations are never only about claims to space; they also recount a particular narrative about who the people of a state are: a ‘chosen’ people, the paragon of democratic virtue, the embodiment of civilizational progress etc. In other words, geopolitical imaginations tell a particular story about a state, its past, its present, and its future mission/destiny (in ways very similar to nationalist myth-making, but it is important to separate and distinguish the two).

What happens when cities suddenly take on this task? In a number of recent European urban policy documents, cities are being given just this role: in the latest EUROCITIES calls for an Urban Agenda for the EU, cities are seen as the key ideational sites for the shaping of an ‘inclusive European identity’, and should play a ‘key role in combatting racism and discrimination’. The 2015 Vienna Declaration by the Mayors of the EU’s Capital Cities invokes cities as ‘a major pillar supporting the concept of a united Europe’. Cities today should be shining examples of what Europe is and especially, what it should be; they should tell a particular story about the European project.

This role assigned to – and actively seized by – cities is not entirely new. Its best known recent examples can be seen in the attempts by cities of the former Soviet Bloc to restyle themselves as ‘fully European’ following the collapse of the communist regimes after 1989. Whether in Krakow, Prague or Budapest (or in part even in cities further East, such as L’viv), the 1990s witnessed a both discursive but also very material and physical rebranding of these cities’ urban landscapes. The key impetus of such
rebranding was the assertion of these cities’ full Europeanness, full belonging to a ‘European urban experience’ from which they had been ‘kidnapped’ by the Iron Curtain and 40-some years of state socialism.

How was such rebranding accomplished, allowing for these cities’ geographical ‘drift’ from Eastern Europe to Central Europe, to Europe, as various commentators in the early 1990s noted, tongue in cheek? Part of it relied, of course, on a discursive rewriting of their urban histories, just as the national states were busy rescripting their national founding myths and pantheons. This included both rehabilitating events and figures that may have been suppressed by state socialist regimes, but also attempting to reconnect these urban histories to wider European developments and trajectories. In many parts of Eastern Europe, this included new attention to common legacies of European imperial formations, the Austro-Hungarian one in particular (‘We were all the same Imperial subjects once upon a time’, sighed Habsburg nostalgics from Lviv to Budapest to Prague).

But such discursive geopolitical reimagining was just one part of the equation. The rebranding of these cities as fully European also required interventions of ‘material geopolitics’: that is, a physical remaking of urban landscapes – the creation of new spaces, but also the rebranding and repurposing of existing ones – in order to tell a new story about the city and its geopolitical identity. The remaking of urban heritage landscapes was key to this endeavour, materializing in concrete built form the ‘truth’ of the new geopolitical narrative about the city’s historical (and thus current) Europeanness.

What should be noted is that such interventions were almost never solely urban endeavours. And here lay their ‘geopolitical innovation’: many such projects were actively captured, supported and promoted by the national states. Their genius? Since a ‘European city’ can only lie in a ‘European state’, these cities’ rediscovered Europeanness also confirmed the post-communist states’ full Europeanness.
There are wider lessons to be learned here, however, for this has not just been a crafty tactic of Eastern European cities trying to become ‘more European’. Across Europe – East, West, North and South – over the past two decades cities have been increasingly deployed as a way of rebranding states and the EU itself. City landscapes and (some) urban populations, and their supposed ‘traditions’, ‘cultures’ and ‘urban modes of being’ have been galvanised to tell new and different geopolitical stories about the state – and about Europe. This ranges from the valorisation of the urban as a site where diversities (religious, national, socio-economic) ‘have learned how to coexist’, or the hailing of cities as places of refuge for new migrant populations, telling a very distinct geopolitical story of cities as somehow inherently ‘hospitable’ (think of the geopolitical stories told about ‘multicultural metropolises’ like Amsterdam, Berlin, London or Paris).

Perhaps the best known – and certainly most extensive – means through which such symbolic story retelling has occurred has been through the European Capitals of Culture programme, first launched 50 years ago (1985), which by now has touched-down in over 50 European cities. The explicit aim of the programme is to ‘highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe through its cities’ and as such ‘celebrate the cultural features that Europeans share’. The theme of cultural diversity is central to the initiative, with cities seen as somehow best able to express and showcase Europe’s diversity and Europeans’ capacity for coexistence.

Yet such initiatives have not been unproblematic, as lofty as the sentiments may be. I’d like to bring in closing one example that has attracted extensive popular and scholarly attention, and that I believe highlights some of the dangers of urban geopolitical agendas. I refer to the rebuilding and rebranding of parts of the Polish city of Krakow’s former Jewish district, Kazimierz, as part of its European Capital of Culture programme in the year 2000, one of the most widely publicised parts of the initiative in the international press. The Capital of Culture initiative’s emphasis
on Krakow’s Jewish heritage was presented as a vital marker of the city’s multicultural and multi-religious past, and thus by extension its European heritage. ‘Multiculturalism’ was popularly seen as a ‘European thing’ by post-communist urban elites, and in the case of cities like Krakow (but also Budapest and Prague), a selective rediscovery of an urban Jewish heritage became an important tool to this end. Beyond the questions raised by the physical interventions into the district’s architecture as part of the Capital of Culture initiative, and the ‘authenticity’ of the reconstructed Jewish religious sites and gathering spaces, what many commentators saw as even more problematic was the sudden ‘valorisation’ of a Jewish past in a city and country where that past had been so tragic – and the use of the urban Jewish past to tell a new, rehabilitated story not just about Krakow, but also about Poland: multicultural, diverse, accepting, and thus fully European (while creating what Ruth Ellen Gruber termed ‘virtually Jewish spaces’ or ‘Disneylands of Judaism’, with no living Jews).

History has taught us the potential perils of state geopolitical agendas. We must be much more careful when vesting such symbolic capacities in cities as well. An urban geopolitics is not by definition necessarily ‘better’ than a national one. The geopolitical identitary stories that cities tell about themselves (or that are told about cities by the national state, or by European bodies and organisations) are not necessarily any less exclusivist, or any less reliant on highly selective versions of the urban past and present. Urban geopolitical imaginations are not by definition any more democratic or pluralist than national ones.

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