Book Discussion

M. Laszczkowski, *"City of the Future": Built Space, Modernity and Urban Change in Astana* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 179–80.

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A Timely and Vivid Masterpiece

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This book truly epitomizes 21st-century scholarship in the social sciences: itwas written in the English language, by a Polish researcher, in a German institution, with European funding, drawing on extensive fieldwork in Kazakhstan.

Laszczkowski's monograph is based on a doctoral dissertation defended in 2012. In many ways, it is exemplary. First, any early-career researcher must salute the academic achievement that is producing a PhD thesis in just four years. Second, formally speaking, the volume is of reasonable length, which is also a real challenge for researchers. Third, the author offers an extremely rich balance of theoretical arguments and empirical contributions, supported by poetic prose. This generates admiration: in globalized academia, we all need to master the *lingua franca*. Mateusz Laszczkowski's book reads not only as an academic work, but also as a captivating narration of how people react when their lives and environment are subject to deep change. Through observations of the evolution of people and places in Astana, the author demonstrates that between the all-too-often-opposed groups of powerful elite and rural citizens, there are plural strata which together comprise the Kazakhstani urban population (a group that constituted more than 53% of the total population in 2015, according to the CIA World Factbook).

This book opens stimulating debates in many fields of academic endeavor: urban studies, post-communism, Central Asian studies, etc. In truth, though the author may claim to be an anthropologist—a claim borne out by his virtuosic ethnography—I am convinced he is above all a *social scientist*. Hence, the book can serve as the perfect companion to post-graduate studies in many fields, because its methodology is brilliant, clear, transparent, and utterly reflexive. No doubt it will become a major reference text on many syllabito come.

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The reader is caught in the midst of fascinating stories and compelling arguments. The structure allows us to grasp multiple times, plural spaces, and thus numerous modernities. Chapter 1 explores the discrepancies between the visual and the practical sides of Astana. As he does throughout the whole book, Laszczkowski follows people and gives the reader a chance to walk around the city. Chapter 2 illuminates the urban/rural entanglement by following the stories of five individuals whose lives are deeply intertwined with that of the city. It is an excellent means of transcending the popular debate, which sets up an opposition—framed in pejorative terms—between *mankurt* (Russified Kazakhs who have presumably lost their roots) and *mambet* (their allegedly backward Kazakhophone countrymen, the local equivalent of "rednecks"). Chapter 3 engages with the remnants of Soviet urbanism, seen through the intimate experiences of the inhabitants of Tselinograd, the city that would become Kazakhstan's capital, Astana. Chapter 4 describes how groups of people come together and distance themselves from other groups during public spec- tacles organized in city squares. Here, Laszczkowski revisits social divides in a very original way. Chapter 5 is a brilliant demonstration of how *dvor* (the court- yard) is central to the fluctuating border between public and private conceptions of place-making. Disorderly material change, involving a constellation of actors, is blatantly demonstrated here. The chapter also illustrates both the Latin phrase *in cauda venenum* ("the poison is in the tail") and the English "last but not least": the author explains how playing a game that requires personal engagement with the city can serve as perfect participant observation. Here, *venenum* is not the negative poison, but the positive remedy (the greek *pharmakon*). Anyone picturing the use of ethnographic methods and wondering how to make sense of them should study this piece.

Moreover, this book is timely for at least three reasons. *Primo*, Kazakhstan held the international exhibition Expo Astana 2017 about "Future Energy" (sic). This volume is the ultimate *vademecum* for all visitors, be they Kazakhstani citizens, Indian professionals, or Italian students.

Secundo, though several doctoral dissertations written in Western universities (at least two in the us and two in Europe) have examined Astana as both an object of enquiry and a research field in various disciplines (geography, anthropology, political science), Mateusz Laszczkowski is the first of these researchers to issue a monograph. As stated in the "acknowledgments," the author, Alima Bissenova, Natalie Koch, and I form a joyful quartet of "astanalogists;" we did our PhDs at practically the same time (circa 2007–2013).

But if this book is, as I argue, the epitome of 21st-century scholarship, it must nuance the asymmetry induced by the English academic *logos*. Kulshat Medeuova and Aigul Zabirova, both Kazakhstani scholars, are the original

"astanalogists," as demonstrated by their early publications in Russian. Hence, I would here like to contextualize the novelty of Laszckowski's book within a broader framework. Seminal endogenous papers were published years before we envisaged our "astanalogical" enquiries. That makes these two scholars far more than the supportive colleagues that we have publicly recognized them to be, as they paved the way for our own research. Thus, I think we must integrate their work into any report on the state of the art. In the introduction, how- ever, the author does not mention Zabirova's paper on Astana as a "catalyst of change" (2002), nor Medeuova's on the "birth of a simulacrum" (2004). I must confess that in my own publications, I too have tended to minimize Medeuova's and Zabirova's contributions; it is time for this to change.

Tertio, this monograph is timely because the social sciences, having experienced several fruitful "turns" (reflexive, spatial, multi-disciplinary, post-colonial, post-human, digital, etc.), might be undergoing a new one, which is perfectly illustrated here. Laszczkowski's book advocates, if I may, for a "material-constructivist" turn, intended to cope with messiness—or even chaos. On the epistemological level, it seeks (in my view) a convincing and stimulating balance between the constructivist phenomenology established by Berger and Luckmann (the realm of ideas), on the one hand, and the pragmatist stance put forward by Searle or Hacking (the realm of concrete things), on the other. To that end, it underscores the heuristic salience of polymorphic urban change. In so doing, Laszczkowski transcends numerous binary divides which pertain to 20th- (and even 19th-) century scholarship: time and space, the individual and the collective, local and global scales, microscopic or macroscopic phenomena, discourse and practice, ordinary and exceptional features, rational and sensitive approaches, etc. As a virtuosic ethnographer and an ingenious social scientist, he traces constantly evolving and competing aspirations, creative behavior, unexpected consequences. In other words, this book argues in favor of a very subtle conception of space, which is all about the entanglement of the self, the social, and the material. Laszczkowski's book demonstrates the political salience of incertitude, proliferation, coincidence and improvisation. To that end, he offers the reader a meticulous account of personal lives, public celebrations, courtyard initiatives, and original game playing, He generously (and in an orderly fashion!) engages us with his social theory of messiness.

Finally, from a political science standpoint, this book revisits a major question about the ways in which power must be understood. Should it be framed as a relational concept (domination/resistance patterns), a physical notion (energy–capacity) or a cosmic process (everlasting interaction between order and chaos)? Mateusz Laszczkowski must be thanked for extending these debates in our global academic village.

Urban Change in Astana: Practical, Ethnographical, and Theoretical Challenges

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As the title of the book suggests, *The City of the Future* is about imagining and perceiving the future that the relocation of the capital—combined with the rapid development and construction of Astana—has evoked and is continuing to evoke in the residents of Astana, both those who migrated there after the relocation of the capital and those who have lived there long-term. It is one of the few anthropological books on Kazakhstan to concentrate on change and the new order emerging at the level of daily life—what the author himself terms a "quotidian normative discourse"1 about what it means to be urban, modern, and successful in contemporary Astana. The book is a rich ethnographic study based on 13 months of fieldwork in 2008 and 2009. In it, the author relates stories he gathered, conversations he had with locals, and his impressions of the people he encountered. He also puts forward many theoretical perspectives on the city, development, modernization, and post-Soviet transition. The book presents a clear ethnographic portrait of a key moment in the development of the city; in a rapidly developing and booming city, the everyday history of, say, a path that existed until recently can be easily forgotten, obscured by new buildings, new developments, and new sensitivities about modernity.

The book opens with a vignette—a joke made by one of the informants, Kirill, whose biography we learn later and who juxtaposes the fantastic buildings of Astana with the steppe. The joke seems to hint at the opposition between the steppe (the bearer of the natural and the rural) and newly built Astana (the civilizational and urban), an opposition that I would say is overdrawn through- out the book. Taking this joke as his point of departure, the author states that "among Kazakhstani citizens, the developments [in Astana] triggered fascinations, hope, and enthusiasm, but also disbelief, skepticism, and sarcasm. Kirill's joke above expresses that tension between enchantment and doubt."2 This one sentence nicely encapsulates the work of the whole book, which oscillates between describing two feelings—hope and disenchantment—depending on

1 M. Laszczkowski, *"City of the Future": Built Space, Modernity and Urban Change in Astana* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 81.

2 Laszczkowski, "*City of the Future*," 4.

which informant's view we take or what mood we find a particular informant to be in.

However, I find that the book often gives more weight to people's impressions of the city, utterances, and jokes (which operate at a certain discursive level but can also be a part of their identity performance) than to people's plans, actions, and achievements or failures (which exist at another level). In Chapter 2, for instance, we find out more about Kirill, who followed the love of his life from Almaty to Astana, got married, found a job and housing, and settled in Astana, yet still has reservations about the project of Astana (which can be observed in his jokes) and looks down on people with "rural" back- grounds, mostly those from the south of the country with "rural" skills. The actual rurality or southern origin of the people he looks down upon is never ascertained, calling to mind how much misrecognition can be involved in the "cultural style" distinction the author is making.3 This is one of the problems of ethnographic work: the commentary and interpretation of what people say might not always explain what they do and, in the case of this book, how theyrationalize their own engagement with Astana.

Throughout the book, several such accounts are left without much commentary and context, which is requisite to understand the situated-ness, impression-ness, and transitory conversational mode of the views we hear in comparison to individuals' life practices and the direction their lives are taking. If we find Kirill, who has already established a life in Astana, skeptical and ironic in his discourse about the city, we also find other informants, who have not yet achieved much, full of dreams and hopes—perhaps because they are either young students or recent university graduates, a particularly aspiration- al group mesmerized by everything new and shiny, or "modern." (Bakhytgul, Olzhas, Bella, and Ainura fall into this category.) Still other informants (like Sputnik and Margarita) are particularly dismissive of rural migrants who flock to public spaces for celebrations. The things they say sometimes ring superficial and biased, which is fine—it is their view to put forward—but the more informed reader wishes there were more discussion of empirics to elucidate whether what informants say actually corresponds to reality or rather pointsto specific identity politics.

For instance, Ainura's assertion that the Agrarian University was only for "*zachmorennye kolkhozniki*" (wretched low-class villagers)4 while the Eurasian University was for the elite perhaps had to do with her own aspirations to break away from everything rural and "agricultural," but should be qualified

3 Laszczkowski, *"City of the Future"*, 60.
4 Ibid., 76.

in order not to be misleading. The Agricultural Institute is one of the oldest higher educational institutes in Kazakhstan (it was established in 1957) and was the best that Tselinograd had to offer for a long time, with state-of-the-art research facilities and an *ostepenennye* ("degree-accomplished") faculty second only to that of the Almaty Agricultural Institute. The Eurasian University, meanwhile, grew out of the regional pedagogical institute, one of many such establishments in the republic. Since attending the Agrarian University, Ainura has most likely changed her view of the institution and her life has presumably taken a different direction, but the reader does not learn of this. It seems that there is a gap not only between the real and imagined Astana (which the author aptly describes), but also between what people say when they perform their own desired position in society and what they actually do in the long-term.

This constant construction of the conflicting opposition between the rural and urban is the main thread running through the whole book and I wonder if there could have been more contextualization of most informants' devaluation and denigration of everything rural. These anti-rural attitudes, like Kirill's statement that "car-building is not the same as sheep-herding"5 or Sputnik's comments about a "*mambet*…who has grown up in the countryside where there's nothing but sheep"6 are the product of a very particular time, place, and subjectivity; they are not universally shared across Kazakhstan.

In fact, as I argue in my recent article, the connection and exchange and synthesis between the rural and the urban was particularly strong in Soviet Tselinograd. Many professional institutions and industrial facilities in Tselinograd depended on the countryside, as the purpose of their existence was to provide services to the *kolkhozy* and *sovkhozy* that surrounded the city. After all, Tselinograd was "appointed" the center of the Virgin Lands campaign. The consumption and life cycle patterns of many households (and this holds true not only for Tselinograd, but also for many cities across the former Soviet Union) were intimately connected with the countryside: meat, dairy products, and vegetables were obtained from villages and considered better quality than anything that was sold in "state" supermarkets. Children were often sent to the countryside, vacations were spent there, and many people had fond memories of *kolkhozy*, *sovkhozy* and *auldar.* As such, though it is possible to find people like Kirill, who looks down upon rural skills as inferior and unworthy, and Bakhytgul, who clearly wants to break away from her rural origins (although in the end she does not), there are also people who value and hold onto their

5 Laszczkowski, "*City of the Future*," 70.
6 Ibid., 58.

rural identities and rural practices while living in the city and engaging in either industrial or technocratic labor.

The pattern of urban people proudly maintaining rural practices has been noted by many scholars, most famously by Hoffman in his *Peasant Metropolis* and more recently by anthropologists like Nancy Ries and Jeremy Morris.7 Former urban *Tselinogradtsy* and even current residents of Astana continue to have many rural habits, from the Soviet practice of having *dachas* where people grow strawberries and raspberries and make jams for the cold months to the traditions of *sogym* (slaughtering a horse or cow for the winter) and drinking *kumys* in the summer. More importantly, the grain industry around Astana and northern Kazakhstan (obviously a product of the Virgin Lands campaign), as well as animal husbandry, continue to be important to the economy of the city and the country as a whole. This cannot help but encourage appreciation of the "rural" in Astana, despite the city's glass and bentonite facade.

Another spatial-social conflict that runs through the whole book seems to appear between the so-called Right Bank, a former space of Soviet modernity, and the Left Bank, the locus of post-Soviet modernity. I sometimes find this opposition extremely exaggerated. Yes, there are visible spatial differences between the Right Bank and the Left Bank. Yes, the Right Bank is "more Slavic" (though the majority of the Right Bank is still Kazakh, there are more "Slavs" there than on the Left Bank). Obviously, there are no *khrushchevki* or Stalin- and Brezhnev-era buildings on the Left Bank but, at the same time, there are quite a few new buildings on the Right Bank, a result of so-called "*tochechnaya zastroika*" (nodal construction). The Right Bank is neither a museum of the Soviet-era "Virgin Lands" campaign nor a Slavic ghetto; it is incorporated into the city plan and an inalienable part of the city that, thankfully, has not undergone much destruction (in contrast to the controversial demolition of *khrush-chevki* in Moscow).

The identity of *Tselinogradtsy* is not "under threat"—in fact, many new and hipster developments in today's Astana, like the Tselinniki Café in the Congress Hall (formerly the *Dvorets Tselinnikov*) or Klava Davai Bar (located near the old railroad station), are connected to Tselinograd; they self-consciously evoke Soviet nostalgia and play an important part in the construction of the "global" image of "new Astana." More visibly for the new cityscape, many architects

7 See D. Hoffman, *Peasant Metropolis: Social Identities in Moscow, 1929–1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); N. Ries, "Potato Ontology: Surviving Postsocialism in Russia," *Cultural Anthropology*, 24, no. 2 (2009): 181–212; J. Morris, "Notes on the 'Worthless Dowry' of Soviet Industrial Modernity: Making Working-Class Russia Habitable," *Laboratorium*, 7, no. 3 (2015): 25–48.

of current Astana are *Tselinogradtsy*—V. Laptev (the architect of the new National Museum building, Radisson Hotel, Ministry of Finance, and Ministry of Agriculture), A. Chikanayev (one of the architects behind the Highest Court building), V. Gladkikh (Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Agriculture), and others. These individuals, who have left their mark on the architectural development of both the Right Bank and the Left Bank, come from Tselinograd's academic and research institutions, including from the architecture department of the "*kolkhoznyi*" Agricultural University.8

Needless to say, Astana is no longer Tselinograd, nor can it be—demographically, the city population reached one million this year, according to the official census. The city has grown tremendously, and this growth has been accompanied by ethnic and cultural change. Mateusz Laszczkowski's book contributes to our understanding of this rapid change in the decade of the 2000s, but the change continues. People who considered themselves migrants just yesterday might think of themselves as natives today, having moved from what the author metaphorically calls the "waiting room" of modernity to the "real modernity" with modern housing, modern living conditions, etc. But even then, the "imagined Astana" and the "real Astana" would not be the same. As one of the students in my class noted on the notion of the "Astana fairy-tale" presented in an article by Laszczkowski: "The dream is still a dream even when you achieve what you dreamed about—your dream job, your dream apartment, your dream love/family—because real life does not work like a fairy tale, thereis no happy-ever-after."9

An Elusive Future

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I am not an anthropologist, nor am I a scholar of urban spaces. It is thus with some hesitation that I offer my perspective on Mateusz Laszczkowski's delightful book about place-making in Astana. Happily, this is a book that speaks loudly and clearly across disciplines, provoking much thought as it moves

8 See P. Meuser (ed.), *Architectural Guide of Astana* (Berlin: DOM Publishers, 2015).

9 See M. Laszczkowski, "Shrek Meets the President: Magical Authoritarianism in a 'Fairy-Tale' City," in M. Laruelle (ed.), *Kazakhstan in the Making: Legitimacy, Symbols, and Social Changes* (Lanham, md: Lexington Books, 2016).

through such topics as Astana's rapid construction; migrants and migration; the perspectives of long-time residents; the poetics of public celebrations; mundane place-making in the courtyard; and a peculiar active urban game called Encounter. The thread that runs through these chapters is, as Laszczkowski writes, "that change occurs as a disorderly, largely indeterminate process that involves multiple, partially connected projects, coincidences and improvisations."10

Among its many strengths, *City of the Future* provides a welcome reminder of two analytic follies to which some accounts of Central Asia succumb. First, we are sometimes tempted to take the pronouncements of policymakers at face value. We should, of course, take their pronouncements *seriously*. After all, it matters what Nazarbayev decrees because his words have real power—to inspire or compel, as the case may be. Likewise, it matters what the local *akim* declares because it is likely to generate real-world effects. Yet the modes of social and political interaction that are produced do not emerge, fully formed, from the words of a leader, no matter how powerful he may be.

Thus, Nazarbayev's decision to create a new capital city in Tselinograd (now Astana) generated quite real material and symbolic effects. Yet creation is an ongoing process that involves not just a powerful president, policymakers, investors, bankers, construction companies, and urban planners, but also construction workers, pensioners, young urbanites, and migrants. With so many social actors involved, it is no accident that the creation of Astana never ends. There is—*pace* many normal approaches to the issue—no outcome, *per se*, so much as there are ongoing transformations. Thus, the "future" invoked in the book's title is aspirational, elusive, and polysemous. Via Laszczkowski's terrific account, we are treated to the antidote to transitology's teleologies about the supposed inevitability of neoliberalism-driven prosperity and individual liberty. Lived experience (who would have guessed?) is far messier than the neat-and-tidy analytic frameworks we often deploy.

Second, just because change occurs in ways that belie the best-laid plans of policymakers does not mean that change has "failed" to occur. On the contrary, most major societal transformations occur by fits and starts, with uneven effects and myriad unintended consequences. Laszczkowski's ground-level perspective accords us a front-row view of how these major societal transformations unfold.

City of the Future is thus a welcome book on a meta-theoretical level, providing an important corrective to much research. But it does more than this;

10 M. Laszczkowski, *"City of the Future": Built Space, Modernity and Urban Change in Astana* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 179–80.

it also offers a wealth of important and empirically grounded insights about lived experience in Astana, exploring "the heterogeneity of place-making practices in Astana through foci on a range of everyday experiences …"[11] Taking us through the "poetics of quick accomplishments,"[12] with its echoes of Soviet- era campaigns, from the historical memory of long-time residents (so-called *Tselinogradtsy*) to the messy forms of interaction that occur in the old city's courtyards, *City of the Future* expertly focuses our gaze on important dimensions of Astana's emerging social landscape.

For all its attention to the ground level, *City of the Future* is as interested in the unusual as it is in the mundane. Chapter 4 covers the government-sponsored public celebrations that punctuate post-Soviet Kazakhstani existence, and Chapter 6 covers an unusual urban game played largely by young people, who apparently play it precisely to transcend the normal. These are fascinating topics in their own right, but one cannot help sensing a missed opportunity to explore the relationship between the ordinary and the extraordinary as it is lived on the ground in Astana.

Like any terrific book, *City of the Future*'s ability to stimulate discussion also has limits. First, while Laszczkowski shows awareness of his own positionality, he does not discuss methods or methodology extensively. We know that he rented an apartment in Astana, but we do not know much more about this arrangement or how it influenced what he experienced in Astana. We know that he had better contacts with Slavs than with non-Slavs, but we do not know why this is the case or what to make of this fact. Nor do we generally learn which aspects of his own background or positionality provided particularly useful analytic leverage on his topic.

Second, some descriptions are "thick," while others are thinner. Thus, we learn a great deal about the *Tselinogradtsy* in Chapter 3. But this is largely via their life histories; we see much less of their lived experience. By contrast, in Chapter 6 Laszczkowski plays the classic participant-observer in the ongoing game of Encounter. Yet we learn far more about the game than we do about the individuals playing it.

Third, I would have loved to see the chapters put into direct dialog with each other. Each chapter is well written, often brimming with insights, and always deploying theoretical literatures for analytic leverage, yet Laszczkowski's theoretical engagements are eclectic rather than sustained. I kept imagining that if he had included a limited set of *dramatis personae* who would appear and reappear in every chapter, the reader would make productive links between

11 Laszczkowski, "*City of the Future*," 13.

12 Ibid., 38.

chapters that are otherwise hard to make. Yet individuals in *City of the Future* come and go, and some potentially enduring and portable insights never materialize.

Fourth, while the book's focus on spatial relations is most welcome, it comes at some cost to viewing how individuals are linked to each other socially. Ethnic and sub-ethnic identities, gender identities, religious affiliations, and emerging class cleavages all make the occasional appearance, but only at the margins. It is entirely possible that Astana residents live as more atomized individuals than do their counterparts in other areas of Kazakhstan, but if so, this is itself an important finding that deserves explanation.

Finally, the book proceeds as an impressionist painter would, capturing crucial contours without spending inordinate time on details. This is a great strength, since if one wants a linear account of Astana and its urban development, there are myriad books put out by Kazakhstani presses that cover these essential facts. Yet it is also a limitation; this reader, at least, sought more signposts—more sociological or historical facts—to locate and make sense of the claims being put forward. For example, how many people would be aware of the game Encounter? It is difficult to gauge its sociological significance if we do not know about other "fringe" engagements that occur in Astana and/or how visible this particular one is. What proportion of the population consists of migrants, and what do we know about how they are spatially distributed throughout the city? Answers to these questions would lead in directions different from Laszczkowski's, but his analysis naturally gives rise to them. Without answers, the line between testimony by interlocutors and analysis by the author can be elided. Thus, for example, we do not know if the quotation marks around "City of the Future" in the book's title mark testimony from an interlocutor or signal that Laszczkowski does not share this characterization of Astana.

This is a book that is tremendously faithful to the facts, grounded as it is in top-notch fieldwork. Only once in the manuscript did I spot a questionable claim. Laszczkowski writes, "With the passage of nearly two decades, the post-Soviet state had consolidated [and] nationality relations were more or less settled …"13 Kazakhstan did not (and, one hopes, will never) break out into interethnic war, but the phrase "more or less settled" seems to require greater specificity. After all, we have unfortunately seen occasional episodes of interethnic tension in Kazakhstan over the past 25 years. Moreover, in 2017 we find ourselves in the midst of a global political shift in which nods to ethnic belonging have given way to embraces of outright chauvinism. Kazakhstan's "nationality relations" may seem more or less settled today, but it is far

13 Laszczkowski, "*City of the Future*," 125.

too soon to declare—as did the USSR under Brezhnev—that the question has been "solved."14 It is unfortunately much easier to imagine the repoliticization of identity ties than their obsolescence.

None of this takes away from an essential fact: this is a well-grounded and deeply considered book about how Astana is lived. It is a book that will no doubt stimulate much discussion, not only in the academy but also among Astana residents themselves, should a Russian or Kazakh-language translation be made available. I hope it will.

A City of Multiple Futures: Response to the Reviews

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Astana, the post-Soviet capital of Kazakhstan, is a unique city. At the same time, it can be said to represent in concentrated form many of the complexities that characterize urban life more broadly in this post-modern globalized age of intensified translocal connections across all sorts of distance. What makes it unique is, to some extent, its location in a post-Soviet context. This dimension renders Astana different from cosmopolitan—or, in Aihwa Ong and Ananya Roy's phrase, "worlding"—cities elsewhere in Asia, which have received more attention from anthropologists, geographers and other social scientists. Yet Astana stands out against its regional background precisely by virtue of its cosmopolitan outlook and ambition. It is unique as a specific bundle of forms, ideas, images, practices, and aspirations of the most diverse provenance. Some are Soviet legacies; others can be traced further back into the specific history of this particular location. Still others are traveling elements, borrowed from Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Dubai, Moscow, Las Vegas, or indeed from any of the multiple, ungraspable, elusive Erewhons of a globalized imagination.

Astana is made unique by the extremely contingent, impossible-to-repeat configuration of all these heterogeneous borrowings, influences and inspirations under the particular conditions of its time and place. Moreover, as some of the chapters in my book (notably Chapter 3) highlight, the city is also a plurality of overlapping chronotopes, none of which remains static. The accumulated pasts, presents and futures—realized, virtual, dreamt-of, aborted and

14 A.P. Nenarokov and A.V. Proskurin, *How the Soviet Union Solved the Nationalities Question* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1983).

reanimated by diverse individuals and groups—are interconnected and continue to change. In Astana's distinctive cosmopolitanism, the post-Soviet and the cosmopolitan are equally important. This is more or less the complexity I tried to capture while writing *City of the Future*: pasts hard-wired into urban tissue, into the imaginations and bodily dispositions of residents. Traveling forms and blueprints that have a propensity to be transformed, sometimes be- yond recognition, as soon as they touch ground. High hopes and ambitious strategies. Makeshift temporary arrangements. Contingent innovation. The grandeur of architectural vision, and feats of the impossible art of cobbling a life together from whatever comes one's way.

I would like to thank the three reviewers—Adrien Fauve, Alima Bissenova and Ed Schatz—for their praise for my book as much as for their friendly criticism. The reviews point to certain shortcomings of my book, as well as the broader challenges inherent in the task of making *a city*—especially one that is changing as thoroughly and as rapidly as Astana was in the period immediately before and during my fieldwork (conducted in 2008–2009)—the object of *ethnographic* study. I will try to comment on some of the points raised in the reviews.

Let me quickly address one of the simpler questions that puzzles Ed Schatz: the quotation marks in the book's title. "City of the Future" does not indicate testimony from any interlocutor in particular, but was a phrase—a slogan, a sound-bite, a spell—that was widely used in Astana (and in public discourses in Kazakhstan more broadly) to refer to the city. I have no idea where it originally came from. It could be found everywhere, from propaganda posters to official speeches, from the covers of photography volumes to mundane conversations. Depending on who used it and under what circumstances, the phrase took on very different meanings and affective overtones. It could, for instance, be uttered with sincere pride just as much as with pretense, skepticism, or even sarcasm. When used by some of my migrant informants who were struggling to get a foothold in the capital and make ends meet, the phrase conveyed the whole range of their dearest hopes, as well as a wide-eyed awareness of the precariousness of their plans and dreams. This is why I thought it was a good phrase for the title of my book. The quotation marks do not mark my own distancing from whatever "City of the Future" means; rather, they suggest that the meaning of these words must not be taken for granted.

Most of the reviewers' criticisms of the book point to that general condition with which I began: the enormous complexity, heterogeneity and dynamism that characterizes any contemporary city, but was especially intense in Astana at the time of my research. Schatz is right, for instance, to point out the lack of a single master theoretical frame that would organize my book and,

similarly, the (relative) absence of what is usually a classic feature of ethnographic monographs: consistent, "thick," multi-faceted biographical narratives of specific characters, *dramatis personae*, running throughout the individual chapters. This theoretical and empirical eclecticism was a conscious decision I made in the face of the heterogeneity of materials and themes accumulated during my research. The writing of this book was itself a learning experience. One of the most important insights I gained during this process was that no single theoretical framework—Marxist, Foucauldian, post-structuralist, Actor-Network or whatever—can suffice to capture, comprehend and convey the dynamics of such a complex social phenomenon as a city. As an anthropologist, it was natural for me to let the ethnography do its work, and I unapologetically poached from diverse theories, using what felt relevant without a special commitment to any of the available comprehensive theoretical frameworks.

Ultimately, I contend that one fundamental theoretical claim does emerge from my research, and that is the claim for quite a radical notion of social constructivism, albeit in a different sense from the meaning that was well-established by Berger and Luckman. Social realities, cities, and spaces are *socially constructed*, but I argue that this construction is *as much* a matter of knowledge, discourse and imagination as it is a complex process of actual material assembling and reassembling. City space is, as I put it in the book, inextricably material-and-imaginary. Given the heterogeneity of this process of construction and the diverse actors and materials that are involved in it— bricks and glass and steel as much as dreams and words and relationships between people—we need a sufficiently variegated theoretical and conceptual toolkit to even begin picking at the emerging assemblages.

The way that people I met in Astana appear on the pages of my book is likewise a reflection of the uneven, broken rhythms of urban life. Each person might make an appearance in one episode, one chapter of my book, and then perhaps reappear in another, or not at all. This in itself reflects the way urbanites tend to know one another. Besides the few close individuals with whom one has a lifelong relationship, one usually gets to know some people for work, others for leisure, while still others forever remain just faces seen every morning at the same bus stop. Indeed, as Schatz notes, "individuals in '*City of the Future'* come and go"—just as they do in the course of city life. Having said that, I would suggest that there is actually more continuity in my cast of characters than Schatz acknowledges. For instance, many of the players of Encounter who appear in the final chapter are the same young urbanites whom the reader has met in preceding chapters and whose opinions about various aspects of the transformations underway in Astana are the weft from which much of my book is woven.

This sort of fluidity poses a challenge to conventional, positive research methods and other more rigid theories about social construction. Even constructivist academics like Schatz and Bissenova seem to wish for a more formal approach to this kind of research. For example, Schatz would like to know more about ethnic, religious and other predetermined collective identities. But the point I want to make in the book, and do so most explicitly in Chapter 2, is that identities take shape in contingent circumstances and are not very stable. To touch on Bissenova's points about the rural/urban divide, I found in my research that people's "ethnic identity," "class" or actual place of origin mattered less than whether they displayed specific styles of behavior that others recognized as more or less "rural" or "urban." Identities were formed and trans- formed in a back-and-forth of everyday performances and mutual perceptions. Another matter raised in the critiques is the issue of positionality and interpretation. Alima Bissenova expresses concern that my informants' (situated!) opinions might be taken too much at face value and thus misrepresent the "truth" about Astana—that I embraced my Slav/urbanite informants' "mis- recognition" of "rural" cultural styles or that I believed too easily claims that the Agricultural University was "backward" or the narrative opposition between the lively Right Bank and the supposedly empty Left Bank. Yet there is an important distinction between representing my informants' views and actually "believing" them. Indeed, what makes constructivist approaches so useful is that they push scholars away from questions of "truth" and "falsehood." Rather, what matters is that my informants did classify others in the way they did; that their choices in education and other areas of their lives were influenced by the stereotypes by which they were; and that they variously construed the different parts of the city as they did. All these facts had real-life consequences for how any given person navigated the turbulent waters of social life in Astana. I never claimed that any of the particular views reported, such as my informant Kirill's opinion about "rural" people, were "universally shared" in Kazakhstan, in Astana, or even in any larger social group. These views were contingent and sometimes quite idiosyncratic. Contrasting opinions, often voiced by one and the same person, clashed. But the important point here is that the various representations—themselves dependent on a multiplicity of factors that varied from person to person—stimulated people to act in specific ways, and some- times just made them feel suspended in indeterminacy, in an effort to figure out who they were and who they wanted to become in relation to others.

Lastly, the challenge of communicating this contingency and multiplicity is further complicated because, as Bissenova notes, "the change continues." Or, in Schatz's words, "creation never ends. There is…no outcome, *per se*, so much as there are ongoing transformations." Bissenova regrets that we never learn

what happened to the people who appear in my book, whether their aspirations were finally met and whether their opinions about the city eventually changed. Indeed, only a few of the personal narratives in the book even approach such closure (which would in any case be temporary). This is because what the book captures is a prolonged moment of indeterminacy, and I would contend there is tremendous value in capturing that ethnographically.

Most scholars strive to present a tidy narrative, but research is unruly and, as my book illustrates, urban life relentlessly defies our best efforts to order it. In a sense, the book describes a condition that was already becoming obsolete at the time of my fieldwork, let alone seven years later, which is how much time elapsed between the completion of my fieldwork and the moment *City of the Future* was published. For instance, some of my informants who were sarcastic about the perceived "emptiness" of the Left Bank, admitted, upon further questioning, that that perception might already have been a matter of the past; by the time we spoke, sections of the Left Bank were actually quite lively. However, I hope that the lasting relevance of my ethnography of Astana lies in its ability to challenge scholars to reflect on the role of indeterminacy in the unfolding of complex social formations. The three reviewers' insightful comments point to important areas for future research on this continually changing city, and further avenues for such research—avenues that must always lead us beyond the horizon of the predictable—will necessarily open.