

Book Discussion

Review of Natalie Koch, *The Geopolitics of Spectacle: Space, Synecdoche, and the New Capitals of Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

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Revisiting State Spectacle Through the New Capitals of Asia

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In his 1975 work *Discipline and Punish*, French philosopher Michel Foucault declared that statist spectacle had lost its relevance and been replaced by more contemporary modes of governmental control through biopolitics.¹ The unique forms of spectacle that have emerged across the resource-rich capitals of Asia since the 1990s—as described by Koch in her engaging new book— demonstrate that this could not be further from the truth. Although state-led practices of punitive spectacle may have subsided over the decades, large-scale urban development campaigns and event-based spectacle have risen dramatically, particularly in Asian capital cities, introduced by governments in an effort to increase economic success and bolster ruling party notoriety. *The Geopolitics of Spectacle: Space, Synecdoche, and the New Capitals of Asia* therefore comes as a welcome opportunity to revisit the topic of spectacle and improve our understanding of the geographical manifestations of these formations.

The book is fairly succinct and tightly packed, containing six chapters over 194 pages, including the introduction, conclusion, and end matter. Two chapters focus primarily on Kazakhstan, contrasting the capital, Astana (Chapter 2), with the North Aral Sea (Chapter 3), an area neglected by the government that Koch terms an “unspectacular other.”² Taken together, these two

1 M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 216–217.

2 For Koch, a city “is only ever spectacular over a defined space, for certain individuals, and in contrast to specific images and experiences of the *unspectacular*” (N. Koch, *The Geopolitics of Spectacle: Space, Synecdoche, and the New Capitals of Asia* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018]), 3.

chapters show how life beyond the privileged center of Astana is burdened by social marginalization, particularly as a result of the effects of ecological degradation on human life, which are experienced as a form of slow and silent structural state violence. By considering Astana and the North Aral Sea region as a pair, the social costs of capital city spectacle and spectacle's power to operate through synecdoche are effectively shown.

When thinking about this tension between spectacle and its “unspectacular others,” I wondered if there might be room to also consider “*spectacular* others”—such as public protests, dramatic building failures, and ineffective event hosting—as points of comparison to state-sponsored spectacle in capital cities. How such unsanctioned “*spectacular* others” might further dictate the development of spectacle in capital cities could be an interesting area for future research building on Koch's ideas. Similarly, by defining the forms of spectacle in capital cities, the book considers both physical objects (engineering mega-projects, ultra-tall towers, or iconic buildings) and events like parades and festivals. And the cases show various examples of how these two forms can reinforce and support one another. Although this interdependency between object- and event-based spectacle is present in the book, we hear less about exactly how the two forms are interacting or the balance between them. Are new events being used to refresh older iconic city spaces, for example? How might new digital technologies such as projection mapping and led lighting be working to bring event-based spectacle even closer to its physical forms?

The recognition that spectacle is spatially delimited and has multiple temporalities starts to point in interesting directions when one considers how spectacle is experienced within cities with complex layers of history. In Koch's book, Astana is convincingly contrasted with the North Aral Sea region (NAS). Yet elsewhere in the work of Koch and other Central Asian scholars, Astana's new Left Bank is contrasted with the more immediate geography of its “unspectacular” Right Bank.³ This is in line with Koch's observation that unspectacular others “take an infinitely varied number of forms and unfold at many different scales and temporalities” (p. 4). The book therefore highlights important areas for future research by regarding these scales of “the politics of neglect in the

3 See, for example, V. Buchli, “Astana: Materiality and the City,” in C. Alexander, V. Buchli, and C. Humphrey (eds.), *Urban Life in Post-Soviet Asia* (London: UCL Press, 2007); N. Koch, “The Monumental and the Miniature: Imagining ‘Modernity’ in Astana,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 11, no. 8 (2010): 769–787; N. Koch, “Urban ‘Utopias’: The Disney Stigma and Discourses of ‘False Modernity,’” *Environment and Planning A* 44, no. 10 (2012): 2445–2462; M. Laszczkowski, “*City of the Future*”: *Built Space, Modernity and Urban Change in Astana* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016).

periphery” (p. 92). In addition, it prompts us to consider what might be learned about state approaches to spectacle based on the proximity of their unspectacular counterparts and about the *variety* of scales of “unspectacular others” that states decide to use.

Overall, the book examines the operating logics, impacts, and effects of spectacle as a geopolitical tactic through the consideration of seven divergent capital city cases, including Abu Dhabi, Ashgabat, Astana, Bandar Seri Begawn, Baku, Doha, and Naypyidaw—many of which have been less covered in existing scholarship on Asian urban development. The book’s case selection is structured as a typology of regimes in non-democratic and resource-rich states in Central Asia, East Asia, and the Arabian Peninsula. While these are not covered to the same extent as the Kazakhstan case, the book has much to offer on its other studied cities. For example, in Chapter Four we learn how there is a different representational economy at play in the spectacular urbanism of Myanmar and Brunei, where states possess the resources to produce dramatic capitals but seemingly lack the desire to participate in the production of iconic city images for international circulation.

For scholars interested in governments’ wide use of spectacular architecture and urban development in capital cities but frustrated by the evasiveness of existing literature on the topic (such as the work of Guy Debord),⁴ Koch’s book provides a refreshingly concrete theoretical framework for understanding spectacle in a non-Western, non-democratic context. Somewhat ironically, it is Foucault’s work on practiced-centered analysis⁵ that provides the foundation for Koch’s revised theorizing on the continued relevance of spectacle today. The book is further innovative in its methodological approach, which directly tackles the shortcomings of conventional area-based analyses fixated on commonalities across case studies, rather than their divergences. By making a case for divergent-case comparisons, Koch is able to break away from the all-too-often default comparison of Central Asia with its former Soviet counterparts, a comparison that may not always be the most relevant. By widening our understanding of suitable cases for comparison, the book opens new channels for framing Central Asian research in other disciplines.

A final strength of the book is its capacity to set the stage for a larger critical research agenda regarding the role of spectacle worldwide in capital cities.

4 G. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983 [1967]); G. Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London: Verso, 1998).

5 “Practice-centered analysis seeks to avoid reification while simultaneously preserving the relativity of any particular technology by embedding it in a particular time and place” (Koch, *The Geopolitics of Spectacle*, 12).

Given Koch's versatile theoretical framework and her elucidation of the relationship between spaces of spectacle and their "unspectacular others," there is much room to extend the book's discussions into new territories and elaborate on some of the book's less-discussed case studies, such as Bandar Seri Begawn, Baku, Doha, and Naypyidaw. Koch's attention to the ephemeral nature of spectacle and how people's impressions of it "may shift over the course of their life, or even the course of a day or week" (p. 103) likewise suggests that there are exciting areas for future scholarly exploration.

Conceptualizing Power and Space Beyond Astana

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With *The Geopolitics of Spectacle*, Natalie Koch, a true master of conceptual texts on Astana, presents us with a long-awaited and important book on urban development in non-democratic contexts. The text is like Astana's urban reality itself: complex and multi-layered, diving into many ideas and inspirations while simultaneously straightforward and clear in its intentions. It is thought-provoking. At the outset, Koch establishes an ambitious goal—to understand what "spectacular urbanism" can tell us about "place, power and political geography." The book is a complex web of different and well-thought-out conceptual debates, case studies, Koch's own intense fieldwork, and spatial discussions so vivid that one can almost imagine them while reading the text. To lift the curtain on my conclusions, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in urban development, spectacular cities, or power in non-democratic regimes, but it is also for all those who specialize in political geography, political science, or Eurasian studies more broadly. Now let me explain why.

The Geopolitics of Spectacle offers fresh approaches to studying existing concepts, such as "spectacular urbanism" and "Astana" itself. In fact, the book goes far beyond "Astanology," as the study of Astana is sometimes described in the community of those who research this city; it is about the development of capital cities across Asia and the effects of these developments on a wider polity. In order to understand why and how spectacular cities are made, why some countries choose to pursue spectacular urbanism and others do not, how these cities influence people, and how people influence the development of spectacular urbanism, one needs to look beyond the "sensational" approach to

place and its context. Koch does an exceptional job of not singling out Astana as a sensational space or cacophony of different urban styles, avoiding treating it as an “absurd city” or conglomerate of all possible architectural forms, as it is often branded in wider media discourses.

It is true that Astana has become an exceptional case study for numerous academic and non-academic discussions, as well as for blunt stereotypes. The urban study of Astana has become its own sub-field; it has the potential to transform into a full-fledged field once it overcomes repetitive attributions and descriptions of golden buildings, enormous squares, and a futuristic vision. For her part, Koch pulls off the feat of writing about *Astana beyond Astana* itself, taking a “bird’s-eye view” of Astana but going beyond descriptions of its ordered avenues, huge squares, and what some believe to be masonic connotations. Instead of making Astana an example, the book’s approach is to drill down into the city’s context in order to understand how and why this place matters to elites and to the masses, to those who dream about Astana and those who are completely apathetic toward it. This approach makes it possible to see the bigger picture and draw broader comparisons that lead to strong conceptualizations far beyond Central Asia.

In this attempt to move past *Astanization*, however, Koch rejects engaging fully with other scholars in the field, with the exceptions of Mateusz Laszczkowski (author of the “*City of the Future*”: *Built Space, Modernity and Urban Change in Astana*, 2016), Edward Schatz, and Adrien Fauve. Although I am not a proponent of making long lists of everyone who has tried to make Astana “empty” and “sensational” in academic texts, the absence of other potential voices and views, especially of *local* scholars like Alima Bissenova and Kulshat Medeuova (both based in Astana) who have studied urban development in Astana and beyond, was rather surprising.⁶

Local voices are, however, very present in the chapter “From Astana to Aral,” where Koch utilizes two sets of fieldwork conducted a decade apart. Residents of the small town near the Aral Sea imagine how Astana looks and feels; they dream of visiting the expo 2017 pavilions, an aspiration shared by many citizens of Kazakhstan who live outside the capital. This is a great chapter full of local accounts and the author’s own conceptualizations. Koch’s approach to interviewing local residents in Astana, Aral, and elsewhere is fresh and adds to the discussion. It would be great to hear more of these accounts in the future, since it feels like President Nazarbayev’s is often the dominant voice in other books and articles. The Aral chapter is exceptional and definitely makes an

6 Both Bissenova and Medeuova are, however, mentioned in the acknowledgements.

important contribution to “seeing Astana from afar” from a constructed or real “periphery.”

Furthermore, *The Geopolitics of Spectacle* draws important comparisons between Asian cities and other cities in Kazakhstan. It also offers great conceptualizations in the broader interdisciplinary literature, from geography to social theory. Readers should thoroughly enjoy these discussions of what “authoritarianism” means and how “illiberalism” can be studied across cases labeled as democratic and non-democratic. The book takes a very refreshing stance on these powerful binary perspectives, critiquing media approaches that are too hasty in building up the notion of authoritarianism, which needs to be revisited and clarified. *The Geopolitics of Spectacle* opens the door to wider discussions on this matter that will hopefully inspire many more scholars to study “authoritarianism” critically and from different positions and stances, using diverse data, models, and field sites and drawing various comparisons. Koch offers a grounded methodological exploration for how these comparisons can be done and why Kazakhstan (or Astana) is too conceptually significant to be confined to the realm of “area studies.”

In one of the chapters, Koch specifies this further: “The stories recounted here may feel exceptional and far from the personal experience of many readers, but the case of Kazakhstan has much to teach us about power, technologies of government, and subjectivity in many other corners of the world” (p. 105). This is true, Koch argues, because in both liberal and illiberal states and contexts (a binary she convincingly criticizes earlier in the book), “people invariably work opportunistically,” using state-led projects and developments to pursue their own interests and goals. The citizens of Kazakhstan are no exception: they are constantly in the process of negotiating, responding to, and encountering different layers and dimensions of “state” and “power,” and the city and its developments constitute just one example of this complex process. Spectacle and synecdoche, which are discussed in great detail in the book, offer valuable insight into the study of power and how cities are not fixed in space but are constantly remolded, transformed, changed, and redone. Again, Astana is a great example of these constant push-and-pull processes and can serve as a broader basis for study. After all, every city—including Astana—is a living space for its dwellers, who make it their own. Cities are also lively spaces of constant change and re-appropriation by their dwellers. I hope there will soon be more research that shifts the focus away from spectacular cities conceived as “empty” streets, empty containers of space-ness, and fixed symbols of political might or fixated slogans of empty ideologies—as this book convincingly demonstrates, the reality is a lot more complex. No city is frozen or fixed; Astana’s urban communities are shifting and molding what is seen as set in

the stone, steel and shiny structures of governmental buildings. The growing communal areas transformed by locals into spaces of interaction, like the new bridge that opened in summer 2018 and the growing art spaces of local artist communities that rapidly occupy Astana and make it their own, are telling. These developments, just like Natalie Koch's excellent book, bring hope that Astana can transform beyond just *Astana*.

The Geopolitics of Spectacle is a rich and meticulous study that deserves full praise and a space on the bookshelf. It is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand power and how it works.

Spectacle and Its Others

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Spectacular cities attract attention from journalists, lay audiences, and scholars alike. The sheer volume of diverse publications dedicated to cities like Doha, Dubai, or Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, testifies to this. The tone of this writing usually ranges from unqualified awe over these architectural wonders to cunning remarks about their exorbitant price tags and Potemkin-village quality. "Critical" writers often fall back on exoticizing clichés. Asian capitals are described as phony and as materializations of the bizarre tastes and perverse architectural fantasies of oil-rich Oriental despots. Natalie Koch's new book, *The Geopolitics of Spectacle: Space, Synecdoche, and the New Capitals of Asia*, distances itself from the fascination with spectacular cities while simultaneously moving beyond facile "critique." Koch invites us to take spectacular cities seriously as *technologies of government* (p. 12). She asks, "What can they teach us about place, power, and political geography?" (p. 2). How do spectacular cityscapes shape local and regional politics? What, by analyzing those cityscapes, can be learned about the nature of political authoritarianism and its taken-for-granted other, liberal democracy? These are extremely pertinent questions that are too rarely asked.

Koch examines how spectacular cities are constructed to establish particular relationships between those who govern and those who are to be governed. She also stresses that, like any technology, urbanistic spectacle can be used by various actors for various ends, with varying degrees of success. It may generate unforeseen effects and contestations. Key to the political workings of

spectacular cityscapes, Koch argues, is synecdoche—the literary trope where a part represents the whole. “Exemplary capitals”⁷ stand for their entire countries, projecting visions of prosperity and might. The empirical questions that Koch opens up are for whom, to what extent, and under what conditions the synecdoche holds, and what follows when it does not.

The scope of Koch’s analysis is broad. While Astana is the pivot of her work, she offers a comparative view of six other Asian capitals: Ashgabat (Turkmenistan), Baku (Azerbaijan), Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), Doha (Qatar), Naypyidaw (Myanmar), and Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei). Koch highlights these seven cities’ commonalities, but she also makes a strong argument for the importance of their differences. All seven cities are located in nondemocratic, resource-rich states. They have been built or have transformed rapidly through centralized planning on an unprecedented scale. All seven stand in stark contrast to their social and material contexts and display the generosity and benevolence of regimes where structural violence and extreme socioeconomic inequality often otherwise prevail. But Koch argues that spectacular urbanism works differently across time and space. For instance, Astana, Ashgabat, and Baku are meaningful against the background of their mundane hinterlands, the Soviet past, and the respective countries’ poorer neighbors. In contrast, the capitals of the small but hyper-rich states on the Arabian Peninsula operate as “global” hubs of commerce and finance, attracting laborers from across the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and, increasingly, Africa. Their spectacle thus works on a different, transnational scale, capturing imaginations across regions beyond the territorial boundaries of any one state.

A properly geographic approach to spectacular cities, Koch contends, considers these cities in their spatiotemporal contexts. Spectacle is only made spectacular when it stands apart against some *unspectacular* background. This might sound straightforward, but it is in fact Koch’s own valuable intervention, brilliant in its apparent simplicity. Recent social scientific literature on contemporary political spectacle has generally focused on the internal relations of spectacles—take, for instance, Laura Adams’s rightfully celebrated book on national holiday shows in post-Soviet Uzbekistan⁸ or my own work

7 C. Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

8 L. Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

on the architectural transformation of Astana.⁹ In contrast, Koch supplements what she calls “the view *from* Astana” with “the view *of* Astana” (p. 5) from the environmentally and socioeconomically devastated Aral Sea region, on Kazakhstan’s remote western periphery. This allows her to show how the display of prosperity in Astana and the drab realities of living on Kazakhstan’s impoverished margins do not merely stand in mutual contrast but in fact “produce each other” (p. 103). Such a perspective also enables Koch to examine how the Astana spectacle works politically in multiple ways. For some residents of the Aral Sea region, Astana is genuinely enchanting. It inspires pride in the country and its leadership, as well as hope for personal and collective improvement. Others respond with apathetic resignation, indifference, or more or less veiled criticism. In any case, by focusing attention on the architectural forms, the spectacle depoliticizes rule and economic inequality and offers a way to channel grievances in a non-antagonistic manner without challenging the established relationships of power.

That comparison constitutes by far my favorite chapter in *The Geopolitics of Spectacle*, full of excellent ethnography. Koch insists on calling her approach geographic. At the same time, her work is a perfect example of truly transdisciplinary social science. She combines such methods as discourse analysis and statistical surveys with ethnographic prose that is rich in detail, thickly contextualized, and simply beautifully written. Her key theoretical references include Michel Foucault and literary scholar Kenneth Burke alongside anthropologist Clifford Geertz, and Koch’s book is in conversation with anthropology, political science, and feminist critical cultural theory as well as her own discipline of political geography.

I am a little less convinced by some of Koch’s arguments than others. For instance, I absolutely agree with her point that citizens’ desire “to live a normal life” and disengagement from “politics” are fundamental to the perpetuation of authoritarian (as well as liberal post-democratic) rule.¹⁰ But where Koch seems to suggest that national holiday spectacles such as Astana Day are deliberately designed to encourage absenteeism as a form of political passivity (e.g., on p. 68), I begin to wonder if the ruling elites in Kazakhstan and their official impresarios really are such Machiavellian masterminds. Similarly, where Koch

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

10 Cf. C. Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004) and L. Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

claims that Asian and African labor migrants in Qatar and the UAE “are often extremely proud of their adopted home” (p. 133) and happily partake in public displays of nationalistic sentiment, waving Qatari or Emirati flags, I require more evidence to be convinced. Is it not the case, the devil’s-advocate anthropologist within me whispers, that these laborers said what they thought they were supposed to when interviewed by an American researcher with possible connections to their powerful “hosts”?

More generally, Koch’s treatment of Astana seems to be out of proportion with her exploration of the other case studies. This is not just a matter of the length of discussion dedicated to each of the seven cities. Reading the book’s comparative chapter, I had the impression that the author had far less data on hand for some cities, especially Naypyidaw and Bandar, than others, causing her interpretation of the Southeast Asian capitals to come across as less convincing. For example, the concept of spectacle seems stretched in the case of Naypyidaw. As Koch notes, “Naypyidaw was not designed to serve as a visual icon for international—or even domestic—consumption” (p. 141). The city was built in secret and remains largely empty, as access and settlement are strictly regulated and limited to select groups. Perhaps a different analytic key is needed to explain the multilane thoroughfares in a city with almost no cars. Might not political economy, for instance, have more traction here than semiotics?

These are my quibbles. Nonetheless, *The Geopolitics of Spectacle* is a remarkable book. It displays a clarity of argument and intellectual as well as political audacity that are the hallmarks of top-notch social scientific scholarship. Koch shakes up received notions of “spectacle” and the “political.” She demonstrates that spectacle is never an isolated phenomenon but is rather entangled in mutually constitutive relations with its various unspectacular “Others.” She challenges simplistic liberal understandings of power and agency that presume that by not participating in state-orchestrated spectacles, citizens “resist” dominance, as if they could simply step out of the “system.” She shows instead how indifference (which might stem from genuine boredom with the official spectacle) is a “form of submission ... crucial to the smooth running of a paternalist social order” (p. 67). Ultimately, Koch de-exoticizes authoritarian spectacle and draws our attention to overlap between what is usually thought of as distinct types of political regimes, authoritarianism and liberal democracy. For while the forms of spectacle vary, is it not the case, as she suggests, that the contemporary political systems of the United States and most countries in Europe similarly rely on the disengagement of a large proportion of citizens content with their roles as spectators and consumers?

Unboxing Central Asian Studies

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A few weeks ago, I had coffee in Dubai with a young Emirati woman conducting ethnographic research with UAE citizens living in the city. At under 10%, Emiratis represent a tiny fraction of the total population of Dubai—a city that has famously been crafted around tourism, spectacle, and the unexpected. In the Western media, Dubai is perhaps the most heavily referenced example of Asian “boom cities” of the last few decades, and its built landscape is constantly described as though it were little more than the fantastical stage of a theatrical performance—to be viewed and consumed by foreign audiences, but not properly inhabited by real people. I had recently read a blog post by this young scholar about her city, in which she expressed frustration about the way that Western media accounts of Dubai are so dismissive of it as some sort of fantasy, despite the lived experiences of the city’s 3 million residents. Since I now primarily conduct research in the Gulf states, I got in touch with her and we started an email exchange. I shared with her my article on the very same topic, but about Astana, which she had read before we met.¹¹ As we sat drinking coffee in a bustling cafe near the Dubai Media City, not far from where the stunning palm tree-shaped manmade island Palm Jumeirah juts out into the sea, she asked me how I first became interested in the narrative of artificiality about the cities of Asia.

I told her about an experience I had had around 2010 while talking with a close friend in Astana. We had been discussing how foreigners view and write about Kazakhstan and Astana. As we stood overlooking the city at the large window in her apartment in the “Triumph of Astana” (*Triumf Astany*) tower, I expressed my annoyance at the recurring themes in Western press coverage about the city, which consistently positioned the place as something from the world of Disney or the Jetson’s, implying that the city is somehow false—a “mirage” in the steppe. She had noticed the trend, too, and she turned to look at me and said emphatically, “But I don’t understand. My life is *real*.” From where we stood, life was indeed real. Yes, there were many technical problems with

11 N. Koch, “Urban ‘Utopias’: The Disney Stigma and Discourses of ‘False Modernity,’” *Environment and Planning A* 44, no. 10 (2012): 2445–62.

the building she lived in, and yes, she was frustrated with her government job, and yes, she had not originally wanted to settle in Kazakhstan's new capital. But her life was real, as were the buildings she lived and worked in, as well as the parks and waterfront walking paths we would stroll around together. Parts of the city were carefully planned and others less so. But its spaces and the lives of its residents were indeed *real*. Nearly 10 years later, sitting in Dubai, my Emirati colleague nodded her head and said, "Yes, I completely empathize with your friend in Kazakhstan."

These conversations, stretched over times and spaces I never could have predicted, are simultaneously distressing and heartening. They are distressing because these two young women are still repeatedly reminded in the dominant Western discourse—notably, one that they aspire to master and employ to improve their countries and their own lives—that they are *other*, that their lives are in some way fictional or that their cities are a farce. Yet just as I experienced as a researcher traveling to Astana and Dubai, their daily realities were a constant reminder of the fiction of this fiction-narrative: the people, the material forms, the noises, the colors, the tastes, the emotions, the aspirations, and the disappointments were all real for me, them, and millions of others. The persistence of dismissive narratives about Asian cities in the Western media and popular imagination is stunning, but it is also why I am heartened—and why I have embarked on this long introduction in response to the reviewers' comments on my book, *The Geopolitics of Spectacle*. So much of my academic career has been built around a commitment to de-exceptionalizing the places where I work that I can imagine no higher praise than when Mateusz Laszczkowski writes that I have managed to "de-exoticize" spectacle or when Diana Kudaibergenova notes that I am successful in "not singling out Astana as a sensational space or cacophony of different urban styles, avoiding treating it as an 'absurd city' or conglomerate of all possible architectural forms, as it is often branded in wider media discourses."

This was truly the most challenging task in writing my book, since the subject matter itself—spectacle—is predicated on a logic of exceptionalism and, in many ways, exoticism. How could I write critically about the spatial, temporal, and affective characteristics of the "spectacular" in a way that did not simply reaffirm what the spectacle itself is designed to do? How could I simultaneously acknowledge the seduction of celebratory spectacle as a broader logic and as one that an individual can truly feel and *live*? And how could I respectfully unite my trained analytical gaze with the experiences of people whose lives had intersected with mine, in some cases only for moments and in others for years? Laszczkowski and Kudaibergenova both note the unevenness of these ethnographic encounters with scholars and other interlocutors

in Kazakhstan and each of the other six case countries I discuss. And they are correct: the encounters that informed my book were deeply uneven over the course of 10 years of research and I know they are imperfectly represented in the pages of my book. Regarding the other case countries, I had traveled to each of them and had countless enlightening conversations that would no doubt have strengthened the book. In the end, though, I simply felt too shy about my ability to speak for others in these contexts, with which I did not have such extended and intimate experience as with Kazakhstan.

My hope in writing the chapter comparing this case with others in Asia was precisely what Suzanne Harris-Brandts points out: “In widening our understanding of suitable cases for comparison, the book opens new channels for framing Central Asian research in other disciplines.” As I note at the outset of that chapter, I see the explorations in Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, the UAE, Qatar, Myanmar, and Brunei as suggestive rather than definitive. I truly hope that this and some of my other work leaves young and established scholars alike with something of a thirst to learn more—and to consider the ways they might undertake “unexpected comparisons”¹² in their own research. I had been inspired for so many years by Kate Brown’s remarkable article, “Gridded Lives: Why Kazakhstan and Montana are Nearly the Same Place,”¹³ but was constantly perplexed by the fact that more scholars had not sought to take such an innovative and insightful approach to Central Asian studies. So while the chapter comparing Kazakhstan with other countries with spectacular capital city projects was only a small gesture in this direction, I am heartened to see the glimmers of new scholarship on ties between Central Asia and the Gulf states, as well as striking cross-regional comparisons beyond the usual suspects.¹⁴ As Harris-Brandts notes, there are so many exciting directions to take this work and I look forward to seeing much more of it in the future.

12 G. Myers, “From Expected to Unexpected Comparisons: Changing the Flows of Ideas About Cities in a Postcolonial Urban World,” *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 35, no. 1 (2014): 104–18.

13 K. Brown, “Gridded Lives: Why Kazakhstan and Montana are Nearly the Same Place,” *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 1 (2001): 17–48.

14 For example, A. Del Sordi and E. Dalmasso, “The Relation between External and Internal Authoritarian Legitimation: The Religious Foreign Policy of Morocco and Kazakhstan,” *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2018): 95–116; K. Eggeling, “Brand New World: The Politics of State-Branding in Kazakhstan and Qatar” (PhD diss., St. Andrews University, 2018); S. Sabol, *The Touch of Civilization: Comparing American and Russian Internal Colonization* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2017); M. Stephan-Emmrich and P. Schröder, *Mobilities, Boundaries, and Travelling Ideas: Rethinking Translocality Beyond Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2018).

I am also heartened by the increasing diversity of Central Asian studies scholars today—not just in terms of age, gender, and nationality, but also in terms of discipline. On the latter, I appreciate Laszczkowski’s rebuttal to my claim that my book’s approach is specifically *geographic*. It is true, as he says, that it is fundamentally transdisciplinary. It is impossible to overstate how much I have learned from him and others in anthropology, political science, history, sociology and beyond in over a decade of working alongside one another. And yet, this openness to crossing disciplinary boundaries is something I have always associated with geography—a field that is not only remarkable in its breadth, but has also arrived at a hard-fought (if tenuous) consensus that we value a cosmopolitan approach to social theory, methods, and our own research questions. As I have recently discussed elsewhere,¹⁵ I feel strongly that the sort of intellectual humility that comes with embracing pluralism rather than dogma is something to which all scholars should aspire. Of course, not everyone has the privilege of disciplinary leeway or job security that I now have, so I can only hope that *The Geopolitics of Spectacle* might serve as an example for non-geographers and others with more precarious employment as to why academic boundaries are better transgressed than bolstered. To the extent that scholars can themselves embrace pluralism in all realms of their praxis, research, and daily lives, I also hope that it might translate into a more careful treatment of the “unspectacular Others” I discuss in my book, as well as the “*spectacular* Others” that Harris-Brandts suggests.

Indeed, the relations between the spectacular and the unspectacular are uncannily infinite in their possible configurations. This point seems particularly salient from where I sit now in Qatar—a place that is currently under a sea, air, and land blockade from its regional neighbors, on the one hand, but is furiously preparing to welcome the entire world to view Doha’s glimmering new stadia, roads, and metro for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, on the other. Planners in Qatar had already deployed spectacular tactics in developing Doha when they were awarded the event bid in 2010, but their celebratory approach can no longer be divorced from the punitive spectacle of the Saudi- and Emirati-led blockade of Qatar that began in June 2017. The World Cup preparations are now inextricably paired with the spectacle of a nation that has overcome its regional foes, maintained its sovereignty, and continued on its path to build the most spectacular capital for the most spectacular football tournament to come to the Middle East. There may be lights and cameras and snarky Western news coverage galore, but the city’s transformation is just as real as the

15 N. Koch, “Deep Listening: Practicing Intellectual Humility in Geographic Fieldwork,” *Geographical Review* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1111/gera.12334>.

patriotic pride felt by citizens and non-citizens alike at coming together to make the event happen.

For me, then, the geopolitics of spectacle is ultimately about having the courage to *listen* and to trace these multiple and often contradictory realities. While I sought to ground these perspectives by using the example of capital city projects, I note at the beginning of my book that another scholar might have taken an entirely different tack. With my new project on the geopolitics of deserts, linking the Arabian Peninsula and the U.S. Southwest (and eventually Central Asia), I am hoping to do just this. The desert is an evocative construct, but our comparative work need not be reduced to parallels: when we look closely, we see that individuals forge close material connections through the very narratives scholars are inclined to deconstruct. So while there is a stunning similarity in the way that my Kazakh friend and my Emirati colleague have experienced Western narratives about their cities, I hope that future scholars can move beyond simple critique and ask how these tropes circulate, how they touch down, how they are contested, and how they reward certain actors over others. Just as a geopolitics of spectacle or of deserts offers a particular lens for looking at these questions, I hope that other scholars find even more exciting angles to continue unboxing Central Asian studies.