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DISSERTATION RESEARCH PROPOSAL:[1]

The Production of Space in Osh, Kyrgyzstan**:** Geographies of Urban Development and Change

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I.   INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

This project seeks to understand how the processes of 1) producing urban space and 2) of (re)creating an urban style of living are intertwined and co-constitutive in Osh. It views three sets of actors as responsible for producing space in Osh: residents of Osh; the (Soviet and post-Soviet) state and municipal authorities; and international aid agencies. These actors produce space in different ways: through the practices and styles of everyday urban living (Osh residents); through ideology, nationalist discourses and infrastructure investment (the state); and as agents of neoliberal transformation and the global circulation of ideas about citizenship, identity and development (aid agencies). I argue that the production of space in the city—the making of *the urban*—occurs through ongoing articulations between these activities, and therefore this project will make theoretical contributions to urban and cultural geography by describing and theorizing the ways in which different space-making activities interact and articulate with one another.

Drawing on the social theorist Henri Lefebvre and his impact on geographic inquiry, I ask how space is produced from above and from below, by the "unconscious" and deliberate daily activities of residents, as well as by the state and by global development institutions (Elden 2004). This theoretical framework on the production of space requires an understanding of how the different kinds of urban life in Osh are intertwined with one another. It also requires an understanding of how daily lives in a quickly changing built environment are related to other processes of spatial production at the state and global scales. While the 2010 rioting and physical destruction of parts of the city was a pivotal point in the production of new urban spaces and new urban practices in Osh, I also seek to understand longer-term historical processes of producing the city, especially as they relate to the Soviet period of influence, the period of early independence and ongoing nation building activities. Specifically, the project seeks to understand three hierarchically nested questions:

1. How have Osh resident's histories, experiences and concepts of what it means to be urban informed their identities and styles of living today? What kinds of spaces and places are produced through their constructions and imaginings of history and urban identity, and how have they changed over time?

2. How are the macro processes of a) nation-building, and b) international circulations of knowledge and development practice, producing urban identities, spaces and experiences in Osh today?
3. How do these ways of producing urban space (by residents, the state and international bodies) relate to one another? What can we learn about the urban when viewing the social production of space as multiply authored?

II.   BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Thinking with the urban

Being an urban dweller has a particular meaning in postsocialist cities. Urban development in the Soviet period was not just about economic restructuring, it was *the primary means* of creating a new and progressive kind of society. The urban was at once seen as an undesirable product of capitalist and even feudal relations, and it held out the possibility for a new spatial arrangement of society. These were hotly debated topics in the 1920s and 1930s, when city planners aimed at creating an "antiurban" that would mirror anti-capitalist society (Ruble 1990), and these theories were applied equally to Soviet policies in Central Asia's cities (Alexander et al. 2007; Stronski 2010) as they were in metropolises like Moscow, Leningrad (Ruble 1990), Sevastapol (Qualls 2009), Warsaw (Grubbauer and Kusiak 2012) or utopian industrial towns built from scratch, like Magnitogorsk (Kotkin 1997). Moreover, so-called "second cities" in the union republics (large, non-capital cities) were no less the subject of Soviet development and transformation projects than "first cities," competing for resources but also having more freedom to maneuver outside of officially sanctioned plans (Shagoyan 2011). Soviet ideology was materialized through investments into cities, and Soviet planners were inspired by Marx's views of the city as the locus of revolution and radical political and social change. A Soviet city's General Plan was therefore as much an ideological tool for achieving a desired social outcome as it was an economic plan. Importantly, this was broadly understood by Soviet citizens and city residents, who understood themselves as urban dwellers participating in a great transformation of life and politics. The city was viewed as an expression of the legitimate social relation between people and the state, expressed through its physical infrastructure (Alexander et al. 2007). On the other hand, there was an explicit tension in socialist urban life between ideology and the pragmatics of actually living. Soviet urban dwellers did not uncritically accept the changes happening in cities, and while overarching ideologies of Soviet development and progress were tied to the experience of living in the city, housing shortages were common and communal living a source of endless frustration (Utekhin et al. 2006-2008). Moreover, the General Plans were almost never fully realized, and by the 1930s most cities in the Soviet Union were declared de facto "socialist cities" even if they had not fully attained the goals set forth in their General Plan. This, in part, explains Lefebvre's observation that the Soviet Union failed to achieve a new kind of urban society:

> Change life! Change Society! These ideas lose completely their meaning without producing an appropriate space. A lesson to be learned from Soviet constructivists from the 1920s and 30s, and of their failure, is that new social relations demand a new space, and vice-versa (Lefebvre 1992: 59).

The social production of urban space

The ways that the urban serves as a conceptual vehicle for Osh residents (Liu 2012) reflects Lefebvre's vision of urban space as a social reality constructed as much by thought as by architects, planners and engineers (Lefebvre 1996). Lefebvre envisioned a new kind of society emerging in cities, in

which the urban would be a place of encounter between different ways of living, where the use value of space would dominate over exchange value (the commodification of space). The city would become an "oeuvre" of creativity, a work of art authored by citizens rather than the state. For Lefebvre, the city reflects what lies above it—ideologies, the state, global capitalism and, we might add, neoliberalism—but it is not a mere replication of what lies above (Elden 2004). The urban was, for Lefebvre, the central intermediary between the forces of state capitalism and the everyday, such that social conflict and struggles are irreducibly spatial in nature (Shmuely 2008). Lefebvre's view of the production of space and the role of the urban as the spatial manifestation of social struggle opens up a way of thinking about Osh that moves beyond most of the literature on postsocialist cities.

It is important to move beyond a view of Osh as a geography of violence and fear, for Osh is more than just a spatial container for memories of violent riots. *The urban in Osh is a fundamental way of thinking about oneself and one's future.* Based on fieldwork conducted before the 2010 riots, Liu (2012) argues that urban identity for Uzbeks in Osh—centered on the social life and physical form of the mahalla—is essential to Uzbek conceptions of self and one's place in Kyrgyzstan more broadly: "Urban place was something to *think* with." Liu continues,

> Uzbeks living in Osh treat urban places as frameworks for making sense of the world and potentially for acting on it. They *think with their city* in certain moments to make sense of their perplexing post-Soviet situation, characterized by their uncertain place in the world. They interpret their predicament through the concrete spaces of everyday urban life… In other words, how we dwell in space matters in how we conceive of the world (p. 13).

The importance of urban space to identity is not new in Central Asia. In 19th century pre-revolutionary Central Asia, families that settled in the river oasis towns of the south traded tribal and kin-based affiliations for neighborhood-based communal commitments that adopted "school-Islam," or cultural Islamic practices based on *adat* (rather than sharia) (Geiss 2001). (There is an interesting paradox between conceptions of mahallas as "traditional" and opposed to the modern developments of the city (Liu 2012: 186), and simultaneously urban,[2] since "urban" is most frequently interpreted as a modern way of living that stands in contrast to "traditional" forms. This point may fit well with postcolonial understandings of the urban, discussed below.)

However, we would be amiss if we did not also consider the experiences of Osh's Kyrgyz citizens in terms of what it means for them *to be* "urban." The majority of Osh's Kyrgyz citizens settled in the city's newer *mikrorayon* districts during the Soviet period, first as part of forced sedentarization programs, and then with migration rising in the 1980s as Khrushchev relaxed many registration policies, and accelerating further with the collapse of the Soviet Union (Megoran 2013). As relative newcomers to the city from the mountainous and rural countryside, Osh's Kyrgyz residents arrived in search of education, economic opportunity, and an urban way of life. Thus, while mikrorayon and mahalla consist of very different physical environments and lived experiences, they similarly serve as indexes for thinking about and exercising concepts of identity, belonging in the nation, and imaginations of a prosperous future. Moreover, both of these urban forms—mahalla and mikrorayon—are no less the objects of state and international development initiatives that alternatively aim to build the nation, and to create economic opportunity in the name of "preventative development" and conflict mitigation.

Postcolonial approaches in urban geography and development

Studies of postsocialist cities have not contributed much toward broader debates about the urban (Grubbauer 2012), but the latter has recently been re-invigorated by calls to approach the study

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[2] Central Asian cities were "dense agricultural settlements interwoven with basic urban functions" (Krader, cited in Geiss 2001).

of the urban from a postcolonial framework (Jacobs 1996; Robinson 2006; Roy and Ong 2011). These calls seek to look beyond the prototypical western model of the city and to elevate the experiences of cities in Asia, Africa and Latin America in developing theories and models of urban change. But if, as Grubbauer argues, the urban experience of Central and Eastern Europe is missing from this new postcolonial framework for urban studies, the experience of Central Asian cities is certainly also a part of the lacuna. Like much of the "second world," the postsocialist city is admittedly hard to place in theoretical terms. Postsocialist cities are often viewed as hybrids, in between economic orders. There is a teleological transition paradigm underlying most postsocialist urban studies—cities are seen as being on a path towards the modern European city, moving away from the old socialist organization of the past and towards western capitalist models of the city. These assumptions underlie most analyses of suburbanization, gentrification, and privatization in postsocialist cities. Scholars of the postsocialist urban are torn between the narratives of legacy and transition, and frequently try to embrace a view of both. In so doing, they ignore key insights by scholars who view postsocialism as an epistemological break with a socialist logic of economy and politics (Verdery 1996; Hann 2002; Humphrey 2002; A. Stenning 2005; A. Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008; Alison Stenning, Rochovská, and Świątek 2010) rather than just a chronological periodization. Furthermore, there is also a lingering question in the postsocialist urban literature about when the experience of socialism will finally cease to have explanatory power. As a result, Grubbauer argues that postsocialist urban studies grapple with an unresolved tension between continuity and discontinuity with the past, and that they are doubly isolated from wider urban theories as well as theories that view postsocialism as an analytical lens similar to postcolonialism, rather than simply a force of history (Hann 2002; Chari and Verdery 2008; A. Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008). Both of these fields have turned recently to postcolonial frameworks.

Postcolonial geographies address ongoing struggles "over geography as both discourse and discipline, and investigate the intersections of place, politics and identity in colonial and postcolonial contexts (Blunt and McEwan 2002)" In urban geography, this has led to a focus on understanding *who* produces knowledge about the city and how the right to knowing and thinking about the city produces conceptual and physical space. Jacobs' (1996) study of contemporary conflicts over space in London and Australia challenges the idea that the "edge" of Empire is always on the physical margins of cities and regions, and argues that space and place are discursive sites where power is contested in postcolonial as well as colonial times. Postcolonial urban scholars are also committed to letting the voices of marginalized and subaltern peoples be heard, and they refuse to essentialize urban identities and difference. Nevertheless, privileging resistance and subaltern agency often fails to acknowledge the ambivalences, contingencies and complications of urbanization processes (Ong 2011), and this recognition leads to a call for studies that seek out the ways that narratives are crafted, worlds made and futures imagined across uneven geographies and multiple temporalities (Roy 2011). In seeking to understand the plurality of actors involved in producing the urban in Osh, and in the inherently historical approach to understanding the production of space in Osh, this project aims to meet this call.

III. RESEARCH STUDY DESIGN

This project will take place over 10 months, from mid-October 2015 to mid-August 2016. The vast majority of the research will be conducted in Osh, with some time in the capital, Bishkek. The project will utilize four data collection instruments, which will allow the researcher to triangulate information across multiple sources: Semi-structured interviews, Participant-led city/neighborhood

tours, participant observation and NGO affiliation and archival research. There are four target subject populations of the study

1. Residents of Osh (N=130)
2. State and municipal authorities (N=30)
3. Urban development professionals (N=40)
4. Staff of international aid organizations (N=40)

Data collection instruments:

1. <u>Semi-structured interviews</u> will be conducted with the four participant categories listed above. All interviews will seek to understand the participant's sense of Osh's history, its significance within Kyrgyzstan, and their visions for the city's future. Residents of Osh will be selected to achieve an equal number of people across all 13 districts of the city (10 from each), as well as an equal mix of gender, age and ethnic representation.

2. <u>Participant-led tours</u>: The PI will arrange participant-guided neighborhood and city tours with residents of Osh. The aim is to conduct 8 walking tours with residents in each of the 13 administrative districts of Osh, plus 15 tours with urban development professionals. In total, 119 (104 plus 15) walking interviews will be conducted. Data will be collected that allows for comparison of experiences across the 13 districts, as well as across dwelling and neighborhood type (e.g. mahalla vs. mikrorayon, ethnically mixed vs. ethnically homogenous, new vs. old), as well as by gender, age and ethnicity.

    Following previous work on the walking interview method and mobile ethnography (Sheller and Urry 2006; Leon and Cohen 2005), I will instruct city residents to take me on a tour of the city or their neighborhood that will give me an impression of their daily life, as well as an understanding of Osh's history and significance. Participants may choose to go by taxi or minibus across the city at the researcher's expense. I will ask participants to explain why they chose to take me to each place and why we took the particular route chosen. As we move through the city together, I will ask participants to narrate their memories and experiences of the neighborhood, describe their personal histories in the city, how the built environment has changed over time, and to share their opinions about where the city is going in the future. By placing the researcher and participant in the landscape under study and encouraging them to move through it together, interacting with people and places along the way, the walking interview method acknowledges and encourages the co-production of space and knowledge. It also allows the participant to take a more active role in the research and data collection, while movement through it helps generate spontaneous, richer conversations and data (Anderson 2004; Evans and Jones 2011).

3. <u>Participant observation and partnership with local NGO</u>: I will partner with a grassroots NGO, "Youth of Osh," which has agreed to provide me with institutional and logistical support. I will observe Youth of Osh's ongoing "Urban Forum" and "8-13" programs, both of which are related to engaging citizens in urban planning and thinking about the future of Osh. I will join in the organization's planning events for these programs, attend conferences and other public events, and join in meetings with urban development professionals when possible.

4. <u>Archival research</u> will be attempted in Osh and Bishkek to examine official plans for Osh city development, and to gather information from news publications about the history of urban development policies and property reform. The importance of the General Plans for social policy has survived into the post-Soviet period, although the General Plans of Osh (and Bishkek) are not publicly available.