

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Applicant

RNDr. Robert Osman, PhD.

Habilitation thesis

Crip Cities: Nonlinear Temporalities of Post-socialist City

Reviewer

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Before receiving an invitation to prepare a review of the habilitation thesis, my knowledge of Robert Osman's work was based on past reading of several articles to which he contributed (of those appended to the habilitation thesis, these are two marked as 5.6.1.1 and 5.6.2.5). I was intrigued by these articles' highly original approach to researching post-socialist society, including the chosen methodology. However, I am almost certain that I have not yet cited any of the habilitation candidate's publications, as neither the city nor temporality, as conceptualised in these publications, were central themes of my research. However, for good reasons, I accepted the invitation to prepare an opponent's review of Robert Osman's thesis. I first met Robert Osman while preparing a contribution for the panel "Western geographical theories in Czech geography and the decolonisation of geographical thinking", which he co-organised at the 2024 conference of the Czech Geographical Society held in Ústí nad Labem. For me, this panel was the most rewarding experience of the conference. I therefore expected his habilitation thesis to be an inspiring read, promising new perspectives and impulses for my research. I am pleased to be able to say that my expectations were more than fulfilled.

Reflecting on the thesis, one thing I truly appreciate is the author's openness in sharing with the reader the difficulty of retrospectively contextualising ten of his publications into a broader, coherent framework and in locating the cause of this unsatisfactory state in the projectification of Czech science. I consider the ability – and willingness – to critically reflect and contextualise one's own work in the wider scheme of things to be an important, and in the Czech academic environment, unfortunately, rarely attempted, endeavour. Science determined by funding sources leads not only to the difficulties in constructing a habilitation thesis, as vividly related in Box 1. A more important consequence of this model of science funding is that it largely prevents long-term focus on a research topic, especially in situations where the topic is one whose importance, for whatever reason, grant agencies and other funding sources fail to recognise. Box 1 very clearly describes how, under these conditions, an author with the ambition and ability to build social theory may encounter obstacles resulting from the economic model of Czech science. It also hints at this model's destructive consequences for the production of social theory seeking international impact. Incidentally, Doreen Massey, a prominent British geographer frequently cited in the habilitation thesis, had few externally funded projects during her career and, within the economic model of science in which she operated, certainly did not have to seek them. Nevertheless—or rather because of this—her work has remained a long-term inspiration not only for Robert Osman.

The focus and conceptualisation of the habilitation thesis show that the author is well aware of the limitations imposed by the academic system in which he works. The articles included in the habilitation thesis represent research and publications of a very high standard. The impressive citation rates of

these articles also testify to their high calibre and influence on relevant discussions. At this point, I would like to speculate a little. On page 6, the author states that by linking three theoretical approaches—the post-socialist city, postcolonialism, and crip temporalities—he attempted to clarify the connections between the ten publications in the appendix, which may not, at first sight, appear obvious. In addition to that, I believe that Robert Osman has reached a stage in his academic career where he is striving to work with social science theory in a way that transcends its use as a mere starting point or interpretative framework for research. This is the predominant form of working with theory in the ten publications that are appended to the habilitation thesis. I would like to assume that the habilitation thesis was grasped by the author as an opportunity to use his previous research on the temporality of the post-socialist city to develop his own distinctive theoretical contribution with the potential to inspire and shape the theoretical frameworks for the wider scholarly community. This habilitation thesis is an important and well-considered step in this direction. Reading it is a powerful experience; halfway through, I began to feel the need to recall when I last encountered such a thought-provoking text. I considered several books, but ultimately settled on “The Theory from the South: Or How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa” by John and Jean Comaroff and “Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Sciences” by Raewyn Connell.

My overall evaluation of Robert Osman’s habilitation thesis is unequivocally positive. This is not only because I share with the author several sources of inspiration, such as Jennifer Suchland’s ideas on evolutionary time (p. 27) or Jennifer Robinson’s ideas on the dislocation of modernity (p. 19). Equally inspiring to me are Doreen Massey’s views about the “progressive sense of place” and the claim that places do not always have to be victims of globalisation (p. 39), which are ideas that can be productively applied to research in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe. I also find his call to consider time in a non-linear and therefore non-modern sense (p. 41) inspiring. Together with my co-author Lucie Sovová, we explored cyclical time in relation to household practices in a post-socialist city in this year’s *Geoforum* article. We know, therefore, that the importance of the four seasons and harvest time can be used to analyse the food system not only in the case of South American indigenous cultures, but also of Brno households.

I appreciate the author’s effort to base his argumentation not only on widely cited Western geographical and other social science authorities, but also on the ideas of authors from Central and Eastern Europe, such as Joanna Mizielińska and Robert Kulpa (“sequential” time in the West and “coincidental” time in the post-socialist space; p. 44). He makes equally productive use of Kateřina Kolářová’s observations on the parallels between the mainstream characteristics of the post-socialist city as a deviant, sick, backward city in need of therapy and rehabilitation on the one hand, and the categories used in relation to people with disabilities on the other (p. 55).

From a formal point of view, the author’s effort to make it easier for the reader to navigate and work with the text is commendable. A very strong point of the habilitation thesis is its refined formulation, where complex arguments are presented in a comprehensible and accessible way. Great care has also clearly been taken to link the individual chapters and subchapters.

In the following part of the review, I will focus on several more critical comments and questions. On page 12, there is a list of cities—Chicago, London, Berlin, Paris and Los Angeles—that are presented as sources of a paradigmatic model of knowledge about the Western city. These cities certainly differ in many ways, but in all cases, they are cities with millions of inhabitants. However, nowhere in the habilitation thesis do we learn which cities are examples of the paradigmatic model of the post-socialist city and why. That is, unless we consider Brno and Ústí nad Orlicí, which implicitly offer themselves for this role. What exactly are the characteristics of a post-socialist city, apart from the fact that it allegedly lags behind the Western city and is vainly trying to catch up with it? The habilitation thesis devotes many pages to a discussion of the post-socialist city without telling the reader what type of city—in

terms of size, function, urban form, etc.—to imagine. Related to this is the problem of the use of the terms post-socialism and a post-socialist city as interchangeable throughout the thesis.

State socialism in Eastern Europe took significantly different forms in individual countries, and the Romanian version was considered fairly extreme even in other countries of the Eastern Bloc. For this reason, it would be useful if the author placed Katherine Verdery's observations about the Romanian city and socialism in a critical context. Otherwise, the reader may get the impression that the description of everyday life in socialist Romania is representative of Eastern European socialist societies as a whole.

I agree with the author's criticism of the tendency of Western geography and other social sciences to associate post-socialist cities only with negative characteristics. In my work, which does not necessarily concern the urban environment, I encounter this tendency constantly — social practices that are framed as positive, innovative, and progressive in a Western context take on completely opposite connotations when studied in an Eastern European environment. At the same time, however, it should be noted that this orientalisation is not only committed by Western scholars studying cities or other topics in a post-socialist context. Geographers and other scholars from this region have also been guilty of self-orientalisation, and the author could have mentioned this.

Does urban theory have to be linked to innovation (p. 19)? What is the general relationship between theory and innovation, according to the author?

In the first decades after the 1989 - 1991 turning period, "ideological antioxidants" (p. 23) did not originate only in "pro-business circles"; the background of these tendencies was much more diverse, including many segments of academia, and in many instances, this is still the case today.

One of the strengths of the habilitation thesis is the boxes and the way in which they are used. They offer thought-provoking material and unusual, but epistemically productive, perspectives. However, I would prefer their clearer incorporation into the main text. Often, their introductions and explanations of their function are missing. The aforementioned Box 1, but also other boxes, especially 2, 3, 4, and 7, are an inspiring reading experience. They illustrate and elaborate on the arguments in the main text in an imaginative and original way. Without wishing to contradict Lefebvre, I would argue that Box 3 "Non-visual imagination" offers the possibility of incorporating time into the imagination even without sound. Some students imagine a family house surrounded by a garden. From the garden, it should be only a short step to the specific cyclical temporality of the garden.

While reading Box 2 "The non-modern city" I was reminded of Fernando Domínguez Rubio's book "Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum" and his interpretation of the tendency in Western culture and science to attach great value to innovation, change, and novelty, combined with an inclination to consider the maintenance of what already works, restoration, and care for what already exists as uninteresting and useless. In both cases, of course, there is a connection with implicit temporality, where the future associated with innovation has a disproportionately higher value than existing maintenance and care.

The beginning of the second paragraph in section 2.9 "A number of review studies have already examined..." is not a sentence; the verb is apparently missing. This seems to be an isolated case that escaped the proofreader's attention.

On p. 38, I began to get the impression that the text is often structured quite clearly and linearly according to authors rather than by debates, topics, or questions. Although the three main chapters engage with important but also distinct topics, within each chapter, the text often slips into a fairly

chronological presentation structured by individual thinkers. I am not sure whether this was the author's intention, and I can only guess the extent to which this structure mirrors his "Time Geography" Master's course. Occasionally, the author also succumbs to an excessive reliance on one author in longer passages; the most striking cases are Jennifer Robinson and Doreen Massey.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence can be found in the main body of the text above.

Conclusion

Robert Osman's habilitation thesis is a successful attempt at synthesising three distinct theoretical approaches that at first sight do not readily lend themselves to this exercise for the purpose of temporalising the post-socialist city. I consider this original and creative approach to be auspicious, not only for the habilitant's further professional career, but also for the development of critical urban geography in an international context.

The habilitation thesis entitled "Crip Cities: Nonlinear Temporalities of Post-socialist City" by Robert Osman **fulfils** the requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Social Geography and Regional Development.

For me, reading Robert Osman's habilitation thesis and preparing this review was, at the same time, a challenging and enriching experience. Among other things, I gained a new perspective on my recent work from the point of view of the theory of temporality and a number of impulses for future research. There is a strong likelihood that the number of citations of Robert Osman's articles in my future publications will increase dramatically.

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Signature: 