

Book Review: The Geopolitics of Spectacle: Space, Synecdoche and the New Capitals of Asia by Natalie Koch

In The Geopolitics of Spectacle: Space, Synecdoche and the New Capitals of Asia, Natalie Koch critically explores the 'spectacular urbanism' that has recently come to characterise a number of Asian capitals, with a particular focus on Astana, Kazakhstan. Through its accessible writing style and use of lively anecdotes, the book will encourage readers to become critically informed spectators of some of the world's fastest emerging cities, finds Kristin Eggeling.

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

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In *The Geopolitics of Spectacle: Space, Synecdoche and the New Capitals of Asia*, Natalie Koch takes her readers on a journey to critically explore the 'spectacular urbanism' that has come to characterise the urban landscapes of a number of Asian capitals over the past few decades, with a particular focus on Astana, Kazakhstan. By spectacular urbanism, Koch refers to those 'high-rise cities [...] bustling with life and brimming with gleaming skyscrapers and ultramodern infrastructure' that 'have become iconic of [...] Asia's] state-led modernization agendas and increasing integration with the world economy' (1). The overall aim of her book, Koch writes, is to explain the 'apparent convergence' around similar forms of spectacular urbanism in Asia's new capitals spanning from post-Soviet Central Asia (Astana, Ashgabat and Baku), to the Arabian Peninsula (Abu Dhabi and Doha) and East Asia (Naypyidaw and Bandar Seri Bagawan), by asking 'What makes a city spectacular and for whom?' (2).



While Koch acknowledges early on that spectacular urban development is not new, either as an expression of politics in general or as an observable phenomenon in Asia in particular, she argues that a 'decidedly *geographic* approach' is needed in order to understand how capital cities as 'visual displays of urban modernity' work in and across time and space (3-4, emphasis in original). To make the scope of the project more manageable, Koch focuses her analysis on state-sponsored – or 'statist' – spectacles in Asia's resource-rich, competitive authoritarian states, where autocratic regimes use spectacular urban development as a 'political technology' (12) to 'craft a particular image of the state and themselves as modern and beneficent' (17).

The Geopolitics of Spectacle consists of six chapters (four core chapters framed by an Introduction and Conclusion), which Koch uses to build up the two main strands of her argument: (1) that urban spectacles rely on 'the metaphor of synecdoche'; and (2) that urban spectacles are inherently relational. Developing the idea of the urban spectacle as synecdoche is the main component of Chapter One, 'Approaching Spectacle Geographically'. Readers already familiar with Koch's work, or those trained in classical rhetoric, will recognise synecdoche as a figurative device in which 'the *part* is imagined to stand for the *whole*' (28, emphasis in original).



Image Credit: Central Downtown Astana ([Ken and Nyetta CC BY 2.0](#))

In this chapter, Koch argues that when President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan argued in 2010 that ‘the modern Astana is Kazakhstan in miniature’, he was relying on synecdoche to legitimate the spectacular urban expansion of the capital city. In the context of urban development, this ‘mental trick of synecdoche’ results in a ‘geopolitical claim’ (33), which suggests that:

the capital city of a country is representative of the entire country, that the modernity expressed there is found everywhere, and that the government’s largesse is indicative of its beneficence across its lands and towards all its residents (28).

In turn, Koch understands this claim as highly politicised, as synecdoche gives ‘concrete form to ideological narratives’, and ‘asserts narrowly enacted political agendas as unfolding over an entire territory’ (35). Yet, unmasking the partial and political depiction of cities through spatial synecdoche is only the first step for a critical research project on the spectacle of urban space. To understand the political work of urban spectacles, Koch further invites her readers to think about *who* is in the position to impose a figurative reading of urban space, *when*, *where* and *for whom*?

These questions are the guiding principles of Chapters Two-Four, where Koch develops the idea of spectacles as relational. These chapters are filled with Koch’s original research insights and go beyond the dominant approach in the existing literature (see, for example, [Anacker 2013](#) or [Koeppen 2013](#)) of studying spectacular urbanism in Asian capitals through an elite-centred, top-down lens. Still close to this approach is the analysis presented in Chapter Two, ‘From Almaty to Astana – Capitalizing the Territory in Kazakhstan’, which explores how the geopolitical imaginary of Astana as a flourishing capital enacts, normalises and legitimises the ‘idea’ and ‘effect’ (50) of the new and independent Kazakhstani state following the break-up of the Soviet Union. In particular, Koch uses Chapter Two to substantiate an argument that Astana’s spectacularism confirms and constitutes centralised arrangements of power in Kazakhstan, and that the capital has been a ‘centrepiece of the Nazarbayev regime’s state-building agenda in the independence era’ (72).

Based on these findings, Chapters Three and Four each broaden the geographic focus by first looking at the Astana spectacle through the eyes of the residents of the impoverished and structurally neglected North Aral Sea Region; and then by comparing Astana to other spectacular capital cities in Asia. This ‘zooming out’ effect allows Koch to build her second main argument – that urban spectacles are necessarily relational, and that spectacular capital cities necessarily rely on ‘unspectacular Others’ to establish their spectacular appeal.

Focusing on Kazakhstan's own 'unspectacular Others', the reader follows Koch around streets and kitchen tables in Kazakhstan's Aral Sea region in Chapter Three and thus learns about how the 'unspectacular periphery' is not a mere backstage to or side product of spectacular geopolitical imaginaries, but that the two need and produce each other. In Chapter Four, the geographic lens stretches outside Kazakhstan and compares contemporary instances of urban spectacles in Central Asia, the Arabian Peninsula and East Asia. Here, Koch moves beyond pointing to the similarities in the glass-and-steel surfaces of the various capitals, and argues that, in each context, the relationship between the spatial and the political needs to be understood against a unique set of background conditions.

Comparing Central Asia and the Gulf, she argues that while 'the cities in both regions may operate through many of the same aesthetics and spatial imaginaries', different 'local demographic, territorial, and political-economic configurations influence how foreign observers and citizens alike interpret [the cities'] justness and locate their unspectacular Others' (134). While 'the Other' for the capitals of Central Asia are the states' own pasts and peripheries, 'the Other' in the Gulf are large numbers of expatriate and foreign worker residents, who are systematically and legally excluded from the spectacles they create. The emerging capitals of East Asia, moreover, are introduced as relying on a similar logic of 'intense concentration of the state's resources in the hands of a small elite' (140), also evident across Central Asia and the Gulf. What is different, however, is that cities here are neither made for international display nor particularly oriented towards domestic audiences, but stand as examples of grandeur and order in contrast to former capitals as well as informal and decisively 'non-urban' settlements (5, 140-44).

In the sixth and final chapter Koch manages to weave together the various strands of her argument, and concludes that approaching spectacle geographically means approaching it as a context-dependent phenomenon. Spectacle, in other words, has no 'inherent logic' (151), and needs to be seen as an embedded 'technology of power' at all times and in all places. In many ways, this argument leaves the reader hungry for more. Koch herself opens up new avenues for research on *The Geopolitics of Spectacle's* final pages in relation to the possibility of cross-regional scholarship as well as the desirability of looking beyond the state as the main unit of analysis in international relations research. While not all of these avenues can be explored in the book's 159 pages, *The Geopolitics of Spectacle* still has the potential to speak to a wide audience. In the end, by successfully linking diverse key words such as 'urban renewal', 'city planning', 'new towns', 'Asia' and 'the spectacular' to the study of 'politics', the book will be of interest to students and scholars working in geography, urban studies, international relations, sociology and comparative politics, with the added advantage of providing rich insights into empirical cases that remain on the margins of debate in these fields. In addition, the book has the potential to draw in a broader, non-academic audience interested in the politics of urbanisation.

Alongside its interdisciplinary nature, the book can moreover be read as a culmination of much of Koch's work as a political geographer over the last decade and a half. While *The Geopolitics of Spectacle* is Koch's first monograph, readers familiar with her scholarship will find traces of previous arguments published in [Political Geography](#), [Central Asian Survey](#) and [Area](#). Yet, the book offers more methodological and conceptual depth as to how Koch carried out her research (see especially the Acknowledgements, xi-xiii and the introductory sections of Chapters Two-Four), and on how she develops the concepts of urban spectacle, space and synecdoche for future research both within and beyond the new capitals of Asia.

With its accessible writing style and lively anecdotal interludes, *The Geopolitics of Spectacle* invites critical thinking about the often alluded to, yet seldom critically assessed, discourse of the 'theatrical' or '[false modernity](#)' of Asian cities in [popular Western media](#). Reading Koch's book will therefore not only teach us much about political geography, but will also train us to overcome 'intellectual laziness' (21) and become critically informed spectators of some of the world's fastest emerging cities.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.