Reviews


Let it be said at the outset: this collection of thirteen articles on how cities are branded was a kind of ‘fun’ read once I got past my initial astonishment and accepted the editors’ claim that “the most prominent ‘brand guru’ on the circuit,” Simon Anholt, may have gotten on to a useful bandwagon (7). As the founder of Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands, Anholt holds that a “brand image” of a country or a city is important to “its national reputation” to “future prosperity and progress” (see Anholt, 21 September, 2011. Current Affairs Podcast, the Business Radio Station, retrieved, 13 February, 2012). Also serving as policy adviser to governments, Anholt has institutionalized the branding of places as a necessary strategy for boosting their economic, political, and cultural charm to appeal to tourists, migrants, and international corporations. From this point of view, the humanitarian concern with the pain caused to cattle by branding, in addition to the critique of branding as a device for exploitation publicized by Naomi Klein in No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies (New York, 2000), appears to be outmoded.

The thirteen chapters of this book are divided into five parts: An Introductory section with three chapters is followed by “Branding the City: Selling Contradiction for Global Advantage” (Part I), “Idea of the City: Cinematic Futures and the Grounds of the Present” (Part II), and “Family Histories: The Remembered City” (Part III), and a philosophical Coda (Part IV).

In the introduction, the editors explore “Processes of Cosmopolitanism and Parochialism” in an attempt to lay out a framework for the remaining chapters. The central issue articulated by the editors is whether branding cities advances cosmopolitanism or parochialism. They, along with all the contributors, assume that branding cities is both necessary and beneficial. In descriptions that vary from quasi-ethnography to historical narratives, most of the writers do refer to cosmopolitanism and parochialism and show that they are far from being opposites. While most places work on how to define their ‘brand’ with an eye to the cosmopolitan (in the sense of round-the-world) acceptance and appreciation, they do this by highlighting parochial attractions and values. Consequently, branding may often lead to conflicts of interest.

The three chapters on branding London neatly illustrate alternative possibilities and potential conflicts. Two were written by social policy experts whose research focuses on issues of migration. In the one, included for an unclear reason in the cluster of the three introductory chapters, Hatziprokopiou (14-27) focuses on new migrants and the diverse ways in which they remain strangers while attempting to learn to belong. “London’s Chinatown” by Sales, d’Angelo, Liang, and Montagna (Part I, 45-58) describe how Chinatown confronts a three-pronged dilemma.
First, it is in London but shares only partially in what can be called an English lifestyle. Second, it is a kind of showcase that serves as an attraction to visiting tourists. Yet at the same time, the Chinese immigrants who live in Chinatown by choice are attempting to carry on their lives in a congenial community. In contrast to these chapters, Christopher Lindner’s “London Undead” analyzes uncanny overviews of the city in poetry (Wordsworth from Westminster Bridge), in the 2002 film, 28 Days Later, and in the tourist attraction, The London Eye. As a professor of English literature, Lindner shows that “the voyeuristic fantasy of the empty [of people] city exerts a powerful hold over the cultural imagination …. a fascination derived not only from the oddly compelling experience of estrangement, but also from the perception of beauty involved in that aesthetic encounter ... a strange yet beautiful vision of the everyday metropolis caught between the living and the dead” (103-4).

Most of the chapters describe the diverse elements that influence the branding of a city. Kosick’s study on Berlin stresses the opportunities for mobility that are available to tourists and migrants alike because it is such a culturally diverse city. As Roodhouse (‘Understanding Cultural Quarters in Branded Cities’, 75-88), explains, however, branding often involves the actual creation de nihilo of cultural quarters that emphasize the openness of given locations to strangers of all kinds and thus supply opportunities for clashes. The revival of a cultural quarter that recalls the past of Jewish communities and their revival that emphasizes cosmopolitanism in Shanghai today is described as the outcome of a rather complex historical narrative by Jakubowicz (‘Cosmopolitanism with Roots: The Jewish Presence in Shanghai before the Communist Revolution and as Brand in the New Metropolis’, 156-171). Dealing more generally with branding in China, Yi Zheng (‘A la Mode: the Cosmopolitan and the Provincial’, 172-186) shows that cosmopolitanism and parochialism meet in the contradictory approach to fashion that prevails. Fashion is a field with a strong tradition, but there is also a curiosity and even a longing for acquiring everything contemporary. Looking at textiles, Donald writes about stripes and their significance in remembering her elitist textile-producing family in a cosmopolitan Liverpool and defining the low status of ‘convicts’ in Australia.

The remaining chapters in Part II discuss post-World War II films and the branding of Rome (Shiel, ‘Branding the Modernist Metropolis’, 105-122) and Nantes’ struggle with its search for effective branding (Marshall, ‘Nantes’s Atlantic Problem’, 123-136).

All told, the book is well written and, as I note above, entertaining. However, even when I reread the introduction and the ‘Coda’ by the philosopher Jeff Malpas, I must admit that I was still puzzled as to the theoretical basis for putting these chapters together in this way and what the term “branding” adds to the mixture. Although the book is listed as the second volume in Routledge’s series entitled “Advances in Geography,” none of the chapters deal seriously with any geographical issues. And there is good reason. Among the contributors, there are students of the media, sociologists,
social policy experts, an English literary scholar, and a cultural anthropologist; not one is identified with geography as a discipline. Perhaps it is all to the good that from this book one cannot conclude that marketing cities is anything more than trying to make money on tourism. Since there is no convincing theorizing of ‘branding’ offered, it is possible to read the book as advice for urban policymakers (like a how-to manual), and the rest of us can enjoy the read, while learning implicitly about the potential negativity of neo-liberal trends in local policies.

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This edited volume explores the themes of multiculturalism and competing claims to urban spaces in Russian cities. Published as part of Berghahn Books’ Anthropology of Space and Place series, the collection is a welcome addition to existing literature on post-Soviet Russian cities, which has tended to focus on macro-level issues of regional development and capital accumulation, rather than on social divisions, spatial segregation and individual negotiations of city space (see for example the collection edited by Axenov, Brade and Bondarchuk, The Transformation of Urban Space in Post-Soviet Russia, London 2006).

The volume includes contributions from researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds, including human geography, sociology and anthropology; each of the nine case studies featured is based on empirical qualitative research and focuses on “a group, a phenomenon or a space that is a constituent part of cultural diversity” in Russian cities (13). The aim of the book, as stated in the introductory chapter, is to explore two dimensions: first, how city authorities manage cultural diversity, and how this diversity is reflected (or not) in the image of the city they promote; second, how different cultures are inscribed in urban space, and what strategies are used to navigate, inhabit
and claim urban space by different marginalized or subaltern groups, including migrants from China, Africa and the former Soviet Union, lesbian women, youth subcultures and street beggars (3). In fact, most of the case studies privilege the second dimension, focusing on the ‘everyday’ social and cultural practices used collectively and individually to navigate and appropriate urban space.

The preface and introduction chart the evolution of the book, which originated as one offspring of a broader research project on urban cultures in Berlin and Moscow at Humboldt University, Berlin. A workshop organized in Moscow in 2005 at the Russian State Institution for the Humanities brought together researchers from Russia, Germany and nations further afield, and one of the collection’s undoubted contribution is that it makes available to an English-speaking global audience valuable new research on urban Russia. The introduction effectively introduces the aims and scope of the book; however, I would have liked to have seen more in-depth discussion of current debates on global cities, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism. While Gdaniec argues that multiculturalism is ultimately a Western concept, and therefore not a useful paradigm to explore cultural diversity in Russian cities, she nevertheless emphasises the difference between ‘Western’ cities, where cultural diversity is valued and marketed as cultural capital, and Russian cities, which fail to implement multicultural policies and merely tolerate diversity. Gdaniec does not acknowledge well-rehearsed critiques of multiculturalism, such as Žižek’s famous reading of multiculturalism as ‘the cultural logic of multinational capitalism’ that co-opts and commodifies difference without fundamentally challenging social exclusion (see New Left Review no 1/225, Sept/Oct 1997); a more critical discussion of multiculturalism, however, would have been useful here to fracture rigid juxtaposition between Russia and ‘the West’.

The book makes for an enjoyable read, and the case studies offer unique insights into how cultural difference is negotiated in the cities of Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Novosibirsk, and Sochi. The case studies illustrate the construction of urban space as racialised, gendered and sexualised, competing claims over urban space, different entitlements to public visibility, and the strategies used to navigate the city landscape, or collectively carve out subcultural spaces. 

Interesting themes cut across different contributions: for example, Dixon’s chapter on Chinese space in Saint Petersburg highlights how Chinese restaurants reproduce the commodification of the ethnic ‘Other’ in the gentrified city centre, while also embodying the threat of new immigration for many Russians (28-45); similarly, Kosygina points out that migrants from the former Soviet Union are racialised as ‘non-Russian’ and ‘Oriental,’ but that racialisation may result in both exclusion, through discriminatory practices by law enforcement agencies and inclusion, through racial stereotyping that facilitate migrant employment in ‘Oriental’ restaurants (54-60). Brednikova and Tkatch’s chapter explores concept of ‘home’ for migrants from the former
Soviet Union, highlighting how limited economic resources, overcrowding, and long working hours mean that home is understood not as a private and safe space that is worth investing and spending time in, but rather as a shelter chosen on the basis of functionality and convenience (70-93). Sarajeva’s contribution addresses the themes of private and public, and safety and comfort through lesbian appropriations of Moscow’s urban spaces. She points out that lesbian space remains largely invisible in the city landscape, but that it is precisely this ambiguous in/visibility which allows lesbians to socialise in and appropriate very public spaces; conversely, overt and politicised claims to urban space exemplified by the Moscow Pride are met with violence from law enforcement agencies and hostile right-wing groups, but also with resistance from within the gay and lesbian community, as increased visibility results in risks of unwanted exposure and homophobic violence (138-163). Like Sarajeva, Kosterina and Andreeva also consider competing claims to public space in their investigation of the Fun Box, a meeting place for an informal youth group (tusovka) in central Sochi. The chapter discusses, among other things, the construction of symbolic boundaries between the tusovka’s ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ along ethnic, class, and gender divisions: indeed, members of the tusovka identify as ethnic Russian, whereas Armenians, Georgians, and Abkhazians are portrayed as aggressive working-class thugs who might be physically or verbally violent towards members of the ‘progressive’ Fun Box tusovka (124-133).

The volume is a well-integrated collection of chapters, which explore new perspectives on urban life in post-Soviet Russian cities, addressing the themes of multiculturalism, socio-spatial divisions and competing claims to urban space. It will be of interest to Russian studies scholars, as well as to urban studies researchers within the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and human geography.

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As pointed out by Alla Sokolova in her article “Evreiskie mestechki pamjati: lokalizacija shtetla” (Jewish lieux de mémoire: localization of Shtetl, 29-64), for the children, the grandchildren, and now the great-grandchildren of those who left the traditional Jewish world of villages from “Russia” and emigrated to the United States, France or Israel, the shtetl is a mythical place on an imaginary map. To a large extent, the idealized representation of shtetl life on a wide territory corresponding to the former Pale of Settlement at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century was encouraged by Jewish populists driven by Rousseauist and Tolstoian conceptions of “the good wild man” and the necessity of going back to nature to find the mysterious energy of the Jewish people, its culture and its folklore. The most famous representative of this movement was the writer, journalist and ethnologist S. An-Sky, who, between 1911 and the beginning of the First World War, made ethnographic expeditions in Podolya and Volhynia. At the same time, for the assimilating German and French Jews, the shtetl on the boundaries of Ukraine symbolized the refusal of the ephemeral and the active preservation of Judaism and Jewish values. After the Shoah, the shtetl was apparently nothing more than a still place, a dead place which only remained in Chagall’s paintings or in musicals like “Fiddler on the Roof.”

The rehabilitation of shtetls as authentic places to live began in the 1970s with the publication of Shmuel Gordon’s writings, generally considered as the pioneer of neo-shtetl literature. The stories and essays about Jewish families who returned to their shtetls in the Podolian part of Ukraine and continued to preserve the pre-Holocaust way of life have widely contributed to the rediscovery of the traditional Jewish world. However, the main books about the way of life and the dwellings of the Jews in the small villages of Podolya and Volhynia were published in the 1990s and at the beginning of the twenty-first century with, for example, L.V. Sholokhova’s books (Phonoarchive of Jewish Musical Heritage, Kiev, National Library of Ukraine, 2001), about the Jewish tunes and songs collected by the musicologist Julii Engel during the expeditions organized by An-Sky. Research has continued with the publication of two important studies: Arkadii Ze’er’s Evrei sovetskoi provincii: Vitebsk i mestechki, 1917-1941 (Jews in the Soviet countryside, Vitebsk and Shtetls, Moscow, ROSSPEN: 2006), and A. Shternshis’ book, Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the

Compared to these recent books, *Shtetl* XXI cent has a much more optimistic approach, which is illustrated by the surprising, oxymoronic association of the two words “shtetl” and “XXI.” For everybody, including the scholars who participated in the writing, the shtetl did not belong to the present time any longer, and even less to the future. It was a dead place, a place of memory. But during expeditions made between 2004 and 2007 in the areas of Balta, Tulchin, and Mogilev-Podolski, the contributing historians and ethnographers to *Shtetl*. XXI century witnessed the vitality of a Jewish life that had been miraculously preserved. If the quality of a book is to be judged by its ability to surprise and fascinate the reader, then *Shtetl*. XXI century is indeed an excellent book. The title and the content of the articles succeed in deconstructing preconceived, and often inaccurate, ideas. This revisionism is particularly true with A. L’vov’s article on “Mezhetnicheskie otnoshenija…” (Interethnic relationships), which convincingly resituates rumors on the Jewish use of Christian blood for the preparation of matsa (azym bread) for Pessah within a wider context of relationships between Jewish and non-Jewish neighbors. Likewise, two articles give a new light on some familiar topics: V. Dymshits explains why Jewish graveyards usually look derelict in “Evreyskoe kladbishche, mesto, kuda ne khodjat” (Jewish Cemeteries, Places Not to Be Visited) (135-159) and M. Khakkarajnen’s essay “Mestechko vospominaet o proshlom” (*Shtetel Remembers the Past*, 159-177) shows how the small Jewish craftsmen who, during the Soviet period were considered as asocial elements, became its emblematic representatives by an irony of history, despite the prestige of knowledge and education in Jewish culture.

The other articles deal with other engaging topics, like V. Fedchenko and A. L’vov’s chapter on Jewish birth rites, origin and nobility (ikhes), or the socio-economic importance of wedding and engagement rites in (226-261). Others focus more on the folklore, be it traditional, like the legends about the bad eye and the curses (M.Kaspina, 219-226), the songs in Yiddish (D. Gidon and V. Fedchenko, 261-279), or an unstudied field like urban folklore “Slovar’ lokal’nogo teksta (Dictionary of a particular text, 186-219). This article is related to A. Sokolova’s essay, which presents very clearly the lexical, geographical and historical differences between the words shtetl, village (selo), town (gorod) and mestechko (the Russian “equivalent” of shtetl).

However, in spite of the quality of each article, the book as a whole is disappointing on account of the discrepancy between the title and the content of the articles. The reader expects a description of a Jewish Atlantis, a territory where the Jewish population would have kept its culture despite the sovietization and passing of time. But the book concerns at most fifty or one hundred families, many of them elderly women and men, who recollect the maranisation of Spanish and Portuguese Jews and their subsequent loss of all links with Judaism. Of particular note are inhabitants’ references to literary works rather than to a reality of daily life.
in the shetl. Some of the scholars who have collaborated in this book quote Jewish writers, particularly Sholem Aleychem and Isaac Babel, qualified as a “mysticator” by V. Dymshits a few years ago (Narod knigi v mire knig, Petersburg, 2002, p. 1-6). If literature is a kind of mystification—and what else can we expect from literature?—then I do not understand the necessity to confront reality and literary creation, which is what is done in some articles.

Despite my remarks and criticisms, I enjoyed reading the anthology. I have been surprised, puzzled, seduced as well by the photographs and the maps enabling time travel. Maybe the trip is not to a twenty-first century shetl, but to one of the nineteenth or twentieth century; still, it is a beautiful trip.

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