

B. A. Thesis Review

Anna Bezhanova. *Political Squatting as Alternative Commons: The Case of Post-Socialist Cities*. Prague: Faculty of Humanities, 2024, 58 pages. Supervisor: Bohuslav Kuřík, PhD

The thesis by Anna Bezhanova explores the topic of political squatting in the area of Central and Eastern European Countries (CEE Countries). Anna's comparative inquiry consists of secondary data such as thematic articles or interviews with squatter collective members referring to individual squat cases in Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland. Using content analysis Anna seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent does politically motivated squatting constitute an alternative to institutionally mediated public space and revive the ideal of public space as opposed to the ethic of individualism and privatism?
2. How do squatters subvert the public/private dichotomy and how do they negotiate and establish commoning practices?

Anna have successfully compiled and interpreted a wide theoretical background related to squatting terminology and other relevant conceptions for CEE Countries' contexts (political squatting, private public commons, communing, counter-politics as well as important cultural phenomena such as Privatism). Rich theoretical scope fits the aim of Anna's research and enables the construction of an adequate analytic framework. However, I slightly miss contemporary sociological and anthropological conceptions that perceive squatting as a post-human activity (bringing on ontological critiques revealing that dominant/modern society has treated such groups as urban monsters or parasites, e.g. Shaw 2018). This perspective could provide a further theoretical understanding of why political squatting (not only) in CEE Countries has so ambiguous position.

Conceptual problems are to be found in methodological and analytical passages of the thesis. The lack of data/evidence on some of the chosen cases (especially the Slovak and Hungarian squats) causes that some of Anna's answers to research questions seem analytically insufficient. In other words, it is hard to answer how squatters "constitute an alternative to public/private" or "established communing practices" from the very scarce second-hand data. Inductively speaking, if Anna faced such obstacles, why the research questions haven't been changed due to data evidence? Or why the aim was not redirected strictly on two of the richest cases (Czech Klinika and Polish Rozbrat)?

For the discussion: Several passages of the thesis rightly elaborate on the perception of political squatting as a "commoning." Such commoning is emphasized to exist/seek to exist *outside* the public-private dichotomy (p. 26 and elsewhere). From my anthropological experience, territorial "claims" that are commonsensically perceived/labeled/recognized by various actors as private, public, or even as commons or commoning appropriations are in fact deeply interrelated through a meshwork of in/formal practice. I think this should be highlighted and discussed in more detail (see Šmídová 1996, Kärrholm 2012 or Mubi Brighenti & Kärrholm 2020). My understanding of the common property/space is that it is not held by the state it is shared and maintained by a collective but doesn't have to be for everybody. To go further, isn't it a kind of private niche for a certain group of people? How open/inviting, and inclusive are/were those collectives? Isn't the commoning just another

way of appropriating things, spaces, and territories? Anna rightly (but briefly) shows fluid boundaries of previously mentioned domains while referring to Klinika's critique of public ownership and state maintenance (citation of Weldon 2016), however, I would suggest also focusing on the limits of communing (e. g. risk of atomization through autonomisation). Post-autonomous improvisations such as the use of humor in Klinika's public communication or Rozbrat's purchasing of the building should be taken into account (or discussed during the defense) to show the ambiguous influence of contemporary media and capitalist hegemony on squatter collectives.

To conclude. Despite several conceptual and methodological problems, Anna proved the ability to create an outstanding analytical text that meets both the formal and scientific requirements of B. A. theses. I appreciate especially the way Anna dealt with theoretical background and followed the cases of Klinika and Rozbrat.

I recommend the thesis for a defense and suggest the grade 2.

Prague, 20th August 2024

Michal Lehečka

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