

On the margins of urban society? Inequalities and the differentiation of social space in a metropolis of the modern age – St. Petersburg 1850-1914

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The social question has returned. And in its wake the interdisciplinary dialogue between the social and historical sciences has intensified, after it had been comparatively subdued in the last few years because of the prevailing historiographical trends to apply cultural-historical aspects. These conclusions could be drawn under the impression of the reactions to the 47th *German Historians' Congress* seen in the comments and features of the press. This convention took place in Dresden in 2008. In fact, by choosing »Inequalities« as the overall topic, a motto had been chosen that like nothing else was qualified to build a bridge to sociology and its related disciplines. At the same time, this motto referred to presently ongoing processes of increasing social polarizations. Everywhere catchwords like precarization, gentrification or the crisis on the financial markets and their social consequences were connected with a rediscovery of the social question by the guild of historians – hence »Hard facts for harsh times« (Bollmann 6.10.2008), as it was put to the point by the German newspaper *taz*? And consequently a change from cultural-historical approaches to a return of social history, as could be read frequently?

A look at the program of the Dresden convention makes it clear quickly that such a turnaround is out of the question, as the vast majority of sections have continued to put the focus on cultural-historical aspects, the analysis of symbols, habitats and discourses. In addition, the question should be raised whether such a rigid confrontation of social history on the one hand and cultural history on the other hand is truly the right way

to advance understanding. Or would it be more fruitful to look upon the respective advantages and shortcomings and thus come to a modification and improvement of existing approaches: to link »hard facts« (to use the same term as above) with the lately widely accepted progressing knowledge of looking upon processes of historical ways of perception and creation of meaning? In this context, Christoph Cornelißen has spoken of a »return of social history«, which will surely be no longer the old history of the labour movement and organization. We will rather see a »new social history« which will take into account the numerous turns of recent years, among others the »latest steps towards a history of space« (Cornelißen 2008).

Doubtlessly, it is nothing new to demand a combination of cultural- and socio-historical approaches. Looking at the international discourse, it quickly becomes clear that critical voices become louder, turning against too extensive a claim of interpretation of the Cultural Turn and demanding concepts for a cultural-historically expanded »New Social History«. This has especially been happening in the English-speaking part of historical science since the mid 1990s.¹ Here, the focus has been and still is on the perpetuation of the socio-critical impetus, which formed the basis of social history, and on the apprehension that the broad and explanatory perspectives of historical science could be lost in the course of cultural-historical microstudies: »History's priorities became refocused by centering the discipline's established subject matters; by claiming the neglected contexts of the personal, the local, and the everyday; and by allowing historians to better face questions of political subjectivity. But why should the earlier concerns of social historians be forgotten, as opposed to fruitfully reengaged? Why should embracing the possibilities of microhistory require leaving macrohistory entirely behind?« (Eley 2005: 199).

1 As representatives there are to be named: Corfield 1996; Halpern 1997; Bonnell & Hunt 1999; Eley 2005, as well as the correspondent discussion of his theses in the forum of the *American Historical Review* 2008; Pooley 2005.

In comparison to this, the German discourse is still at the very beginning of its possibilities. After a time of convergence between historical and social sciences in the 1960s and 1970s and the subsequent dominance of cultural-historical approaches, only recently there have been voices demanding the return of the social under an expanded perspective.² My project is connected to these considerations, as its focus is more strongly directed on the social question through a concurrent examination of structures, action and social space, without abandoning any cultural-historical cognitive progress.

The history of industrialization and urbanization can certainly be called a classical field of »old« social history (according to the differentiation used by Cornelißen). Legions of studies on the growth of towns, the development of their populations and the relevant social questions have been carried out on the assumption that social processes can be seen first and more pronounced – like under a magnifying glass – in the towns. For a long time the geographic focus was on Western Europe, mainly Great Britain, whereas the urban history of Eastern Europe experienced a more wide-spread interest among western researchers as late as in the 1970s and 1980s (Bater 1976; Bradley 1985; Hamm 1986; Hildermeier 1986; Brower 1990). At the same time we see a voluminous Soviet historiography dealing intensively with social differences at the end of the Tsarist Empire, from which valuable information can still be gained even today. It is, however, generally influenced by collectivistic and teleological interpretations of Marxist-Leninist ideology.³

Since 1991, the research of urban history in the Russian Empire has experienced a marked upswing which here shall be represented by the key word »local society«. Guido Hausmann (Hausmann 1998; 2002), Lutz

2 As a combative representative there is to be named: Maderthaner & Musner 2007; additionally there is to be mentioned the Annual Seminar of the *Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology* 2009 that was followed by the foundation of this journal: Introduction 2010.

3 Cf. with regard to St. Petersburg, among others Kruze 1958; 1961; Semanov 1966.

Häfner (2004) and others have shown developments of structures of civil society in the form of liberal local public and municipal self-government. Through this they have confronted Dietrich Geyer's dictum of the 18th century Russian society being a »governmental affair« (Geyer 1966) with the image of a society as a local affair.

As important and welcome as this discussion may undoubtedly be, it is also clear that it covers only a small part of the urban population of the empire. Only a small percentage of the inhabitants of the towns have taken part in the formation of a local society, comprising city dumas, the press and public representation. When applying such a perspective, a large proportion of the inhabitants is not taken into consideration or is, if at all, seen as the object and recipient of public welfare. An indication of this is the reappearing statement in scientific literature that the towns of the Russian Empire were split up into a rich, modern »bright« centre on the one hand and poor »dark« fringes governed by rural traditions on the other hand.

In the meantime, this impression has been enlightened in some instances (among others Zelnik 1971; Bonnell 1983a and 1983b; Bradley 1984; Steinberg 1992; Neuberger 1993; Frank & Steinberg 1994; Engel 1994; Goehrke 2003; Rustemeyer 1996; Rustemeyer & Siebert 1997). On the whole, only a few studies can be found where members of the lower classes, the inhabitants of the poor quarters of the towns are regarded as active participants. This is where my project sets in, by attempting to shed light on the »dark« peripheries of the towns. In other words, I want to look at the social question in municipal areas of the Russian Empire. Structural factors shall be combined with individual actions and the formation of social space.

The concept of »social space«

The category of »space« is undoubtedly one of the winners of the last few years among the fields of research in the historical and social sciences. The »spatial turn« has often been dealt with and has made us more aware of numerous social spaces beyond a traditional understanding of space. I am under the impression that this term has sometimes

simultaneously been made into a kind of label in the debates among historians, by remaining at the undoubtedly important understanding that spaces are not just there but are continually created by people – without considering further reflections and differentiations. Compared with this, I think that the aspects recently developed by spatial sociology seem to be more promising. Particularly the *Centre of Research Excellence URBAN RESEARCH* at the *Technische Universität Darmstadt* has made highly interesting theoretical reflections aiming at a new spatial sociology to begin with, but which can also be put to good use in historical science.

The joint starting point of the different projects was and is the aim to overcome the dualism between natural space and social space which has dominated research debates on spatial theories for a long time. To bring it to an ideal-typical point, we find two opposite opinions as to the formation of space. On the one hand, we have the followers of an absolutistic concept of space, among others strongly influenced by the geographer Friedrich Ratzel. It is based on the image of space as a container that has an effect on the objects in it but which cannot be influenced by the objects. At the other end of the scale we have a line of research, created by Émile Durkheim and Georg Simmel, of a relativistic concept of space emphasizing the primacy of social order, understanding physical space as a consequence and not as a prerequisite of social organization and power structures (Dünne & Günzel 2006: 289-303, 371-376).

In contrast to this, starting out from the conceptions of Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, Martina Löw has developed a concept of space founded on action theory which she called »relational« (Löw 2001). It is based on the assumption that spaces are developed, perceived and continually constituted anew or altered. On this understanding, spaces are »relational arrangements [(An)Ordnungen] of living beings and social goods« (Löw 2001: 271) at certain locations. The dualism between natural space and social space is abolished, in favour of a single »social space of interactions« (Dünne & Günzel 2006: 302).

Consequently, this means that there can be several spaces at one location depending on the perspective of the acting participants who use this

respective space and that this is not only true for concrete physical spaces but also for nonphysical spaces like associations or cognitive maps. Löw takes up the differentiation earlier made by Michel de Certeau. He defined a »location« as a »momentary constellation of fixed points«, in contrast to »space« which he described as a »network of mobile elements« (Certeau 1988, cited in Dünne & Günzel 2006: 345). »As a whole«, as Certeau put it »*space is a location with which you do something*« (Certeau 1988, cited in Dünne & Günzel 2006: 345, italics in the original).

Moreover, Martina Löw has introduced two notions describing the constitution of social spaces, thus making an analysis possible: spacing and synthesis. By »spacing« she understands that social goods and/or people are placed or place themselves in space. This leads to the above-mentioned »relational arrangements«. These arrangements alone do not create social space – it needs people to make these arrangements become space through processes of perception, imagination and memory. This is what she calls synthesis (Löw 2001: 158).

At the same time, it is important that more attention than seen in some recent cultural-historical studies has to be paid to the fact that the continuous constitution of social spaces does not take place in a vacuum. The structure of spaces depends to a decisive extent on the prevailing specific social conditions, and not each individual has equal opportunities of taking part in their formation by means of spacing and synthesizing.⁴ By introducing the term »habitus« and different types of capital that are available to the acting parties involved to a varying extent, Pierre Bourdieu developed suitable analytical tools for grasping these inequalities (Bourdieu 1998, in Dünne & Günzel 2006: 354-368). With regard to the specific area of the »town«, it is necessary to ask which other prerequisites are required – besides plain physical presence – in order to participate in the constitution of urban spaces. »You can show physical presence in a residential area without actually living there in the strict

4 Cf. on the criticism of such a blind »culturalism« towards the social question Maderthaner & Musner 2007.

sense of the word; namely, you lack the means tacitly taken for granted, e.g. you lack a certain habitus« (Bourdieu 1991: 31).

Moreover, as was pointed out conclusively by Markus Schroer, turning away from spatial determinism should not be followed by spatial voluntarism (Schroer 2006: 175). Even if space is understood to be constantly negotiated, developing spatial areas do not lose their influence on the persons acting in them. Spatial areas come into being through actions and their relevant conditions, the meaning and value people place on them (Schroer 2006: 176; Gunn 2001). This statement is taken up within the scope of my study in so far as I will not only deal with the constitution of spatial areas in the sense of the concept of relational space as defined by Martina Löw, but I will also pursue the question to which extent certain spatial areas exert an influence. Hence I agree with Schroer who has said that it cannot be our aim to arrive at the one and only concept of space, but to let this depend on each particular problem in question. Most studies – this is also true for an investigation of social space in St. Petersburg – have to deal with a variety of different spaces. Thus it follows that we need different concepts of space for an analysis.

Moreover, it does not suffice to mark every neglected space with a minus sign without examining its interior structures. Such a perspective, as correctly criticized by Loïc J. Wacquant as an »exotization of the ghetto« (Wacquant 1998: 203), excludes that we see power structures, self-organization and disputed areas also at and within the peripheries. To avoid this, the supposedly clear divisions between in- and outside, between centre and periphery, between ghetto and gated community are not to be taken for granted, but should be made subject to analysis. »The homogeneity of quarters is due to a view from the outside which does not account for the differentiations inside. [...] The assertion of homogeneity ignores individual fates and differences that are hidden behind the general pictures of homogenous quarters. When undertaking the effort to look more closely, we realize how little the pictures we have of underprivileged districts, ghettos, favelas and banlieus have to do with the real lives of their inhabitants« (Schroer 2006: 249).

This is not meant to belittle existing differences and inequalities and to make them disappear in the most colourful panorama. In accordance with Loïc J. Wacquants, it will rather be my aim to show how the people ›from below‹ deal with these inequalities by way of social and cultural practices; this way I intend to shed light on the heterogeneity and individuality behind the facades: »The inhabitants of ghettos must therefore be seen as active participants. They have to be described more closely so that their habits and ways of living do not only appear as derivatives of forces which can ›automatically‹ be ›measured‹ by structural conditions, but will also be seen as a result of their active confrontation with outer and inner social powers which cross and mould their world« (Wacquant 1998: 203; cf. on this in detail also Wacquant 2008: 128-144).

Poverty and social spaces in the metropolis: St. Petersburg and the international context

Now, what meaning do the above outlines have for my project? To demonstrate this, I have chosen a very preliminary division into three great headings. This way it is possible to present surveys of central problems. Rather than keeping the contents of each section apart, they are based on each other and are closely connected in the sense of an understanding of social spaces as caused by actions and their conditions. Above all, but not exclusively, my study will deal with St. Petersburg in the years from 1850 to 1914.

The fortress founded by Peter I. in 1703 under the name of Sankt-Piter-Burch in the northwest of the Russian Empire quickly became the second metropolis of the empire besides Moscow. Like other Russian towns this settlement, which was soon called St. Petersburg, experienced a tremendous increase in population as a result of the abolition of serfdom in 1861 and the rapid growth of industrialization at the end of the 19th century. The number of its inhabitants quadrupled between 1850 and 1914 and amounted to more than 2.2 million at the beginning of the First World War.⁵ This town, located on the river Neva, differed from

5 The literature on the history of St. Petersburg is clearly much too voluminous to be adequately dealt with here. For this reason I would like to

other urban centres of the Tsarist Empire in respect of its role in domestic and foreign affairs. Being the capital and residence, it was the administrative centre of the Empire and at the same time since its foundation »a laboratory of modern age« (Schlögel 2002) where new ideas and social utopian visions were to be realized. Accordingly, changes in Russia in modern age could first and most markedly be noticed in St. Petersburg. Of course, this is also true for the increasing aggravation of the social question from the middle of the 19th century onwards.

The time covered by my project ranges from 1850 to 1914. This period of time makes it possible to cover several central political events in a phase of rapid urbanization. It is intended to compare the conditions seen before and after the abolition of serfdom in 1861 as well as before the municipal reform of Alexander II in 1870 and the following developments. Under the municipal statute of 1870, care for the poor as part of urban welfare became the responsibility of the local government (Bautz 2007). This leads us to the question of in how far we see consequences under the aspect of social space. Further important landmarks which shall be examined as to their effects are the municipal reform of Alexander III in 1892 as well as the first Russian revolution in 1905 (with a focus on St. Petersburg: Surh 1989). Scientific studies often see the latter as a phase of acceleration followed by an aggravation of social differences. This statement shall be examined as to its importance for questions of social space. In how far can we notice a stronger division between rich and poor areas e.g. in the years before the First World War? And what are the effects the events of the revolution have on the actions of the ordinary people of the town, on their perception and adoption of social space?

refer to the bibliography of the National Library of Russia: Rossiyskaya Natsional'naya Biblioteka 1989ff.: *Literatura o Leningrade – Sankt-Peterburge*. Bibliograficheskiy ukazatel' knig, zhurnal'nykh i gazetnykh statey na russkom yazyke, Sankt-Petersburg, as well as to the continuously updated online data bank: *Elektronnye katalogi Rossiskoy Natsional'noy Biblioteki*. *Literatura o Sankt-Peterburge*: <http://www.nlr.ru/poisk/>. A recently published introduction to the history of Petersburg is to be found in Kusber 2009.

1914 was chosen as the final year of my investigations as I have realized that a further extension up to the years of Soviet rule would simply exceed the scope of my study, as highly interesting as this time may be (cf. for the [post-]Soviet time amongst others Staub 2005). The outbreak of the First World War 1914 as well as the revolution of February 1917 and the days of ›Red October‹ led to fundamental changes of municipal structures, so that the period of time examined was restricted to the beginning of these upheavals.

Structure and space. A social topography of St. Petersburg

An investigation of the differentiation of social space has to include a survey about the relation between the development of urban spatial areas (spaces) and the social question if the aspects of inequality are to be considered. Accordingly, the first part of my study will deal with the social topography of St. Petersburg and its development from 1850 to 1914. The development and changes of internal differentiations in urban space in the course of the years will be examined, based on parameters such as accommodation, the development of rentals and infrastructure (public transportation, sewage systems etc.).

On the one hand, such an analysis can make use of already existing research results. Here James H. Bater has provided an important pioneering work with his study *St. Petersburg. Industrialization and Change*.⁶ Moreover, there is a wide range of contemporary publications discussing extensively and in great detail the development of urban space in the Russian Empire from the 1860s onwards. This is true for the liberal periodical *Gorodskoe delo* as well as for periodicals dealing with the problem of welfare, including the *Vestnik blagotvoritel'nosti* and medical journals writing about sanitary standards, hygiene and the causes of existing problems such as the *Archiv sudebnoy mediciny i obschestvennoy gigieny* in the years of 1865 to 1917 (published under varying names). Moreover, an evaluation of the local press will be carried out. Newspapers such as *Petersburgskiy listok* offer a good insight into details of urban life in St. Peters-

6 Bater 1976; also Steffens 1985; about the challenges of a social topography of St. Petersburg: Limonov 1989.

burg and are an interesting source owing to their more widespread distribution.

Reports and records of central governmental and local authorities are just as important. In addition to the *National Library of Russia*, there are above all the *Central State Historical Archive of St. Petersburg* (*Tsentral'nyy gosudarstvennyy istoricheskiy archiv Sankt-Peterburga*) and the *Russian State Historical Archive* (*Rossiyskiy gosudarstvennyy istoricheskiy archiv*). The records available at these archives provide useful information of the processes of decision-making and measures taken by a great number of organizations from central governmental institutions like the *Ministry of the Interior* to bodies of local municipal self-administration and committees dealing with specific problems concerning the development of urban space, such as the sanitary committee and local police.

Furthermore, maps, drafts of town planning and contemporary photographs can be put to good use. Mainly the cartographic department of the *National Library* offers manifold and informative material showing the general expansion of the town as well as specific aspects like the extent of public transportation or the state of the sewage system over all of the years in question. Above all, the *Central State Archive of Cinema, Photographic and Phonographic Documents* in St. Petersburg (*Tsentral'nyy gosudarstvennyy archiv kinofotofonodokumentov Sankt-Peterburga*) is an important address to turn to for relevant photographic documentation. The collections of this archive do not only give an impression of the structures of certain parts of St. Petersburg at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century but show in an exemplary way the usage of locations such as market places and courtyards by the people living there.

Based on such a social topography of the town, the next step will be a closer look at certain aspects. Among others, it will be examined in how far we find indications for a segregation of urban space in St. Petersburg.⁷ How close or far apart were the poor and the rich, which role did further differentiation categories like gender or ethnicity play and how

7 On the term of segregation cf. Häußermann & Siebel 2002; von Saldern 2006: 4.

strict or flexible were those boundaries? The respective starting point of St. Petersburg was different from comparable metropolitan centres of Central and Western Europe. Owing to the geographic location of the town and insufficiently developed public transportation, large-scale suburbanization, so typical for London in the 19th century for instance, did not take place in the Russian capital. Mainly in the centre of the city no strict dividing lines can be drawn between poorer and richer areas. Social differences can often be found in one street or even in one house. Bäter therefore spoke of a »three-dimensional segregation« (Bäter 1976: 379) as a typical feature of St. Petersburg: besides a given limited spatial differentiation it was not the least a question of height: A great number of the poor inhabitants of the town were either found in the basements or the attics of the houses, whereas it was seen as a sign of prosperity when people lived on the so-called *beletage* which was generally found on the first floor.

At the same time, however, a diachronic perspective illuminates processes reminding us of corresponding contemporary developments in big western cities, which can also be observed today in many places. From the turn of the century onwards, for instance, there is an increase in the number of articles on the so-called »housing problem (question)« (*kvartirnyy vopros/zhilishchnyy vopros*) (cf. Pazhitnov 1910a and 1910b; Gorodskoe delo 1912a; Polupanov 1913 among others). We read about the general conditions of most of the flats and the insufficient number available, but mention is also made of a process known today under the notion of gentrification:⁸ an upgrading of housing and increased rentals in the city centres, leading to altered structures of the population living there. New prosperous people moved in, while the former inhabitants, who could no longer afford the rents, were pushed out.

In view of the above-mentioned relatively small area of St. Petersburg, the question arises how this development took place. Subject to the still ongoing thorough evaluation of my sources I can give two preliminary

8 Cf. on the term of gentrification among others Friedrichs 1996; Holm 2010.

answers: On the one hand, a displacement process occurred within the town boundaries, i.e. a certain percentage of the inhabitants moved from the city centres to the fringes of the inner city (Pazhitnov 1911). On the other hand, the people making use of the night asylums (*nochlezhnyye doma*) and other shelters for the homeless changed. In addition to the very poor, who had already frequented these places for a long time, low-paid hired labourers, craftsmen and similar workmen were more and more unable to use any other kind of accommodation (Karaffa-Korbut 1912).

Furthermore – in the sense of space as being in a constant bargaining process as outlined above – it shall be examined which private and governmental organizations as well as institutions were involved in this process and how this had a part in the physical shape of space. In how far were certain spatial formations the result of certain norms or targets that were to be enforced?

The discussion about the conversion of the Petersburg Haymarket can serve as an example. The Haymarket (actually literally translated Hay Square, *Sennaja ploshchad'*) was situated in the centre of the capital and originally served as a trading place for hay and firewood. In the course of the 19th century it became one of the biggest markets for foodstuffs in the city (Jahn 1996). At the same time it was a place of poverty, around which many of the urban slums were found, thereby presenting a sanitary problem for the whole town. Against this background, a discussion started in the 1860s about in how far it would be useful to re-organize this ›wild‹, primarily undeveloped square by building four big metal market halls. For twenty years this discussion went on between numerous local and governmental institutions such as the *duma* of St. Petersburg, the administrative authorities of the town and the *guberniya*, the *Ministry of the Interior* and even the Emperor himself. The various points of view recorded in detail in the respective files range from a support of the intended re-construction to a total rejection. Quite different reasons were given for the latter attitude. In addition to opinions demanding a complete clearance of the area and promoting the idea of moving the market to another place, we find urgent appeals that any interference with the structures of the Haymarket would entail an interference with

the habitats of its population and would endanger the social function the market had all the same.

In the end the market halls were built and inaugurated in 1886. For my project this debate provides an interesting example. It shows the participants in the constitution of public space and their individual intentions and that the relevance of places such as the Haymarket as social spaces was already a topic at that time. Moreover, by evaluating autobiographical texts the impression of these changes on the people living there who did not take part in the discussions at that time shall be brought to light.

Acting and space. Social spaces ›from below‹

So far, the focus has been on the structure of space. Based on this, we will now move on to the question of how spaces are created by the acting of the people living in them. How did the poor people of the town cope with the conditions of their environment? How did they solve their existential daily problems? How much did the structure of space restrict their actions and in what way did each of them take possession of urban space and create social spaces? In how far did they transgress boundaries, either on purpose or unintentionally by cultural and social practices and therefore challenged, in terms of Schroer, supposedly clear dichotomies by everyday actions? And how far can the sources at hand provide information about ›voluntary segregation‹ as it is controversially discussed in recent publications of municipal sociology (Heitmeyer 1998; Häußermann & Siebel 2002; von Saldern 2006: 4): the creation of urban boundaries by the poor themselves, for instance with the intention of staying ›among themselves‹ in certain areas?

These questions will be viewed from two sides: individual and joint actions. For an analysis of individual actions, autobiographical texts will be used which have partly been published or are additionally available in the collections of handwritings at the libraries. They were mainly written by rural migrants commuting between the surrounding countryside and St. Petersburg or settling in the city for good.

As an example of a retrospective view of the city, here we see the reminiscences of Spiridon Drozhzhin (1848-1930), later known as a peasant

(*poet-krest'yanin*), who was born in a village of the *guberniya* Tver' as the son of a serf and his wife. He came to St. Petersburg at the age of twelve (Poet-Krest'yanin 1884) and stayed mainly in the third ward of the Spasskaya borough for more than a decade, hence in an area of the city which included the Haymarket. He led a life of poverty, frequently changed the rooms he stayed in or, being homeless at times, even slept in the streets. He eked out a living by taking over frequently changing jobs at numerous pubs.

At the time of his arrival in St. Petersburg Drozhzhin was able to read, owing to the teachings of his grandmother as well as lessons at a village school. However, his knowledge of writing was only rudimentary. From his reminiscences we can learn how he started making use of the corners of the city in which he was living in the true sense of the word.⁹ He gained further knowledge by teaching himself. In 1865 he registered at the *Publichnaya Biblioteka* (today's National Library) and started writing poems. For a long time, however, his life was dominated by material misery. From the turn of the century onwards his popularity increased and he could free himself from his former way of life (*Zhizn' poeta-krest'yanina* 1915).

Drozhzhin's reminiscences can be taken as an example of the creation of social spaces by the poor, of how they were perceived by them and of how in the long run it was possible for them to profit from the »dynamics of social identities in the Late Russian Empire« (Kaplunovskiy 2006). A comparison with other autobiographical texts »from below« will show in how far it was possible to rise in society as well as the limitations in this respect. This raises not least the question about the impact of further differentiating categories on socio-spatial patterns. For instance, the places frequented by persons like Drozhzhin showed a strong patriarchal structure. For this reason it will be important to set the reminiscences of male authors against the perspectives of female writers (cf. also Breckner

9 Living in the corner (*ugol*) of a room was a wide-spread phenomenon among the very poor inhabitants of St. Petersburg and a significant indication of the existing housing shortage, cf. Goehrke 2003/2005.

& Sturm 2002). The same is true for an adequate account of ethnicity. In a multiethnic country like the Russian Empire and in a city like Petersburg this is of central importance.

At the same time, the notes of Drozhzhin provide an account of his perception of a number of spaces ranging from his everyday surroundings to his nightly walks on the grand boulevard of Petersburg, the Nevskiy Prospect. On the one hand, these descriptions provide an individual insight into urban space and its totally contrasting aspects. On the other hand, a comparison with further corresponding texts can also provide an answer to the question of in how far certain effects of space are evident. Above all, the Nevskiy Prospect should provide an interesting example of this, as a place leaving hardly anybody without his own individual associations on his first visit. Accordingly, it will be examined in how far parallel views can be found in the perception of the boulevard. This would confirm the thesis established by Schroer that there are certain »spatial arrangements« with »inherent images and assessments« attached to them by the people (Schroer 2006: 177).

A further important role in shaping the images adhering to certain places is played by contemporary journalism. The development of mass press following the reforms of Alexander II and of literature dealing with the »plebs« of Petersburg since the middle of the 19th century contributed to an »imaginary geography of the ›other« Petersburg« (Jahn 2010: 122), having repercussions on the actions of the people. Above all, the study by Helmut Jahn, dealing extensively with this process of social imagination of poverty, provides many interesting observations in this respect which will be considered in my work. This includes, for instance, the wide-spread image of Petersburg as a town of social dichotomy, one pole being the Haymarket while on the opposite side we find the Nevskiy Prospect. Against this background, texts like those written by Drozhzhin provide interesting insights, as he was a traveller between both »worlds«.

In addition to looking at individual actions, further investigations shall be carried out as to the patterns of social spaces constituted by collective efforts. The above-mentioned process of gentrification may provide insights into the question whether – besides being subject to displacement

– the people who could no longer afford to live in the centre of the city also took actions against it. An answer is provided by the relevant contemporary periodicals reporting not only about increasing rentals but also about the growing number of housing associations (Pazhitnov, K. 1910a; Gorodskoe delo 1912a and 1912b). Tenants cooperated in order to acquire flats in a joint effort in order to manage them by themselves on decidedly improved terms. The foundation of such housing associations was not only limited to St. Petersburg from the turn of the century onwards, but was also seen in quite a few Russian cities from the 1850s onwards (Pazhitnov 1912). This shows how people responded actively to social polarization by taking possession of social space through collective actions.

The foundation of housing associations was however largely restricted to the middle classes. This was already a topic at that time. Only those people who had already lived in a rented flat and owned a certain amount of capital were able to take advantage of this. As a rule, those who lived in the corners, in the basements or in the streets could not take part. Hence it follows that it has to be elucidated in how far joint actions by the very poor took place or whether their traces remain isolated and are lost in the daily struggle for survival.

An example of such a collective adoption of space »from below« are graffiti as found in »Vasya's Village«. »Vasya's Village«, being a slum on the Vasil'evskiy Island in Petersburg, was one of those places which came into being by the displacement of poor people to the outskirts of the city. The *Malen'kaya gazeta* took this occasion to publish a series of reports on life in »Vasya's Village«. Among others, reference was also made to numerous texts and illustrations on the walls of the buildings (Yashkov 1915), showing either the poor people themselves or also the owner of these establishments who was depicted as a greedy person forcing them to pay their rents.

The graffiti at »Vasya's Village« are evidence of the above-mentioned conflict between forced and voluntary segregation. Undoubtedly, a slum is above all the result of economic necessities and displacements, a place where nobody lives of his own volition. At the same time, the graffiti are

also proof of an ongoing process of identification with that area which is regarded as one's own possession threatened by the owner. They are evidence of a process of adopting the respective space and correspond to Richard Sennett's definition of graffiti being »a writing of the underclass« – an openly shown sign of their presence: »We exist, and we are everywhere. Moreover, you others are nothing; we write all over you« (Sennett 1990: 207).

Social spaces in an international context

So far the focus has been on St. Petersburg. The purpose of a third phase is furthermore to evaluate the position of this town in an international context. Vienna and London seem to be suitable objects for comparison. Both of them were seats of royal power and possessed a centralising quality for their countries comparable to that of St. Petersburg for the Russian Empire. Moreover, there are both a series of published sources and recent studies on Vienna and also on London at hand on similar issues as outlined above, thus offering a promising basis for a comparative analysis (cf. for instance White 1986; Maderthaner & Musner 1999; White 2001; Bled 2002; Brodie 2004; Mattl et al. 2004; Fishman 2005; Schwarz et al. 2007; White 2007; Musner 2009).

No doubt, such a comparison, which shall be systematically carried out in all parts of the project and not be reduced to an outlook attached to the main text, is a demanding task and not easy to accomplish. Nevertheless, it will be undertaken for two reasons. On the one hand, such a comparison was an issue in all of the contemporary discussions about the causes of poverty and urban development of inequalities. A perusal of periodicals such as the *Archiv sudebnoy mediciny i obschbestvennoy gigieny* quickly shows that corresponding developments and possible strategies for solving these problems in Central and Western European countries were considered in great detail and that the authors felt that they belonged to this international community of experts. This point of view has to be taken seriously. It should not be hastily assumed that Russia is a singular case which cannot be compared. On the other hand, recent case studies have repeatedly asked for such a contextualization, but so

far mostly in vain.¹⁰ In the absence of comparative investigations of housing problems in the cities, Andreas R. Hofmann has rightly pointed out that it would be »of little use« to proceed per se from the »widespread theorem of a »delayed development« as a putative inherent feature of Eastern and East Central Europe – a theorem that does not lead to relevant findings. This is also, above all, true for an empirical survey of dwelling and living conditions of the urban proletariat. On closer examination, differences between East and West were rather of a gradual than of a qualitative kind« (Hofmann 2006: 226). It remains to be assessed in what way this assumption applies to the processes of differentiation of social spaces. However, there is no way around a comparative analysis unless it is intended to adhere to blurry dichotomies burdened with manifold metaphors such as those of a »European city« and an »Asian« or »Islamic« city (Schubert 2001).

Conclusion

The images we have of the socially deprived quarters of the world are usually very similar. They are the result of a perspective from a safe distance. What we see are largely dull and frequently grey or black tableaux. This process of »perpetuating the same images« (Schroer 2006: 250) can also be applied to Russia – according to the common belief that the world of the very poor of Russian society consisted (and consists) of people resorting to alcohol, violence and excessive religiousness. That is the end to any further questions.

As much as these circumstances can undoubtedly be found in the relevant sources and have determined everyday life in many slums, it does not suffice to stick to this coarse interpretation of the margins of urban society. What is left aside when looking for a confirmation of the well-

10 One of the few exceptions being the current research project of Jan C. Behrends; cf. his discussion paper: Behrends 2007; also conceived with a comparative approach were the two conferences of the *German Historical Institute Warsaw* and the *Social Science Research Center Berlin* »Nation and Modernity. The East European Metropolis (1890-1940)»; cf. the conference reports: Bianchi & Scholz 2009; Westrup 2009.

known impressions is the perception of the inhabitants as individuals, as actively engaged people: »The inhabitants of socially deprived areas are subjected to the traps of the economy in an especially drastic way. Nevertheless they do not stop shaping the social conditions of their lives by a process of a meaningful acquisition« (Neckel 1997: 79).

The aim of my work is to ask – taking St. Petersburg as a model – in how far the socially underprivileged have not merely been the victims of unequal social circumstances but in what way have they also struggled individually and jointly against their situation on the margins of society by interpreting and adopting social space. Consequently, my key approach will be to assess structures and actions at the same time by combining social-historical approaches with recent cultural-historical aspects and in this way to contribute to an actual return of the social question to the academic discourse of historians.

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