

Analysis of Power Interventions into Public Space as a Tool for Research into Cities in Non-Democratic Regimes (Sociological-Historical Approach)*

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vol. 12, 2023, no. 2, pp. 89–98

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33542/CAH2023-2-05>



According to the prominent sociologist Henri Lefebvre, space is an instrument of power. Every state regime strives to use space for social control through various interventions. While in democratic regimes the use of public space is the result of by majority-accepted interventions, in non-democratic regimes these are power interventions usually based on ideological starting points, not generally accepted by society. On the contrary, interventions into public space are becoming one of the tools for implementing state ideology into the consciousness of society. In their research on public space, German sociologists Walter Siebel and Jan Wehrheim defined its four basic dimensions – legal, functional, social and material-symbolic. Interdisciplinary sociological-historical research of interventions into each of these dimensions seems to be a suitable analytical tool in understanding the relationship between public space and the state regime, the conclusions of which allow a detailed understanding of the nature of individual non-democratic (authoritarian or totalitarian) regimes typical for twentieth-century Europe, as well as transnational ideological connections. In the article we introduce our interdisciplinary socio-historical approach on the example of the authoritarian para-fascist regime of the Slovak state (1939–1945).

Keywords: Public space; Non-democratic regimes; Twentieth century; Research approach.

During the twentieth century, the world experienced significant urbanization, manifested not only in the increase in the number of cities, but also in the redefinition of their meaning for society. While in 1900, around 15 percent of the world's population lived in cities, with a total of 12 cities with more than one million inhabitants, in 2018 there were 467 cities with more than one million inhabitants and 33 cities surpassed the 10 million population threshold. Globally, more people have lived in cities than in rural areas since 2011.¹ In Slovakia, a process of urbanization was taking place over the past century, albeit with less intensity than in most European countries. In the interwar period, the population of Slovakia lived predominantly in the countryside, dominated by villages with a population of 500–1,000 inhabitants. Towns generally had fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. Only the towns of Prešov, Komárno, Trnava, Nové Zámky and Nitra had more than 20,000 inhabitants in 1930. Košice and Bratislava

* This article is an adapted and updated version of the first chapter from the book *Disciplinované mesto* (Disciplined City, Košice: ŠafárikPress, 2021). It was written within the implementation of the project APVV-19-0359.

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1 See: *The World's Cities in 2018*.

crossed the 70,000 and 120,000 thresholds respectively. The cities, although in the case of Slovakia mostly smaller in terms of population, were natural centres of socio-political, economic and cultural events, which significantly multiplied their importance.

There is also no doubt that the last century was marked by the struggle of democracy against authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, based on communism or fascism and their ideological and political derivatives. The socio-political development on the territory of Slovakia today was influenced by such regimes during more than five decades of the twentieth century. Due to the support of the aggressive foreign policy of Nazi Germany and as a result of the persistent internal political crisis of Czechoslovak parliamentary democracy, marked, among other things, by a long-standing resignation to a mutually acceptable solution to the position of Slovaks and Czechs in a common state, the Hlinka Slovak People's Party (HSĽS) seized power in Slovakia in October 1938. This party had its roots in the political Catholicism of the late nineteenth century. In the interwar period, its Christian-Catholic roots and their characteristic social programmatic foundations were gradually complemented, even overwhelmed, by nationalist and anti-Semitic political views, which naturally caused a significant part of the functionaries and members of the People's Party to sympathize with fascist Italy or Nazi Germany. After the break-up of Czechoslovakia and the declaration of the Slovak State on 14 March 1939, the HSĽS consolidated the established state regime and its power. The representatives of the ruling regime used all available instruments to implement the ideological premises of the new statehood into society, and thus to achieve its real, imagined or forced acceptance by the country's population. They therefore attempted to control the public and the private life of every individual. After taking power, the authoritarian regime installed by the People's Party perceived the city as the epicentre of unwanted liberalism, individualism and materialism in worldview terms, yet it could not deny the real significance of cities. Starting immediately after the autumn of 1938, steps were implemented at the central and local level that were to be directed not only towards the seizure and consolidation of power in the sphere of the (self-) administration of the cities, but also towards their overall functional transformation in accordance with the ideological and world-view premises of the regime.

In our research over the past few years, we have been analysing and interpreting various aspects of authoritarianism, including its relationship to public space and the instrumentalization of public space on the example of the para-fascist Slovak state, 1939–1945. Resulting from these efforts was a brief 2021 publication titled *Disciplinované mesto* (Disciplined City).²In the book, we presented our own approach to public-space research based on close links between history and sociology.

Theoretical background

In considering the nature of the regime that ruled Slovakia between 1938 and 1945, Zuzana Tokárová's work *Slovenský štát: Režim medzi teóriou a politickou praxou* (The Slovak State: The Regime between Theory and Political Practice, 2016) served as a basic starting point. In it, the author analysed the regime in terms of its characteristics and manifestations. Based on the results of her analysis, she classified the regime in the classical political science typology of Juan J. Linz. According to Tokárová, the People's Party Regime:

2 FOGELOVÁ – PEKÁR, *Disciplinované mesto*, 198.

cannot be understood as explicitly totalitarian, although it did exhibit markedly anti-democratic features, even with steadily deepening totalitarian tendencies. In many ways, the regime corresponded to the key characteristics of authoritarianism, whether in terms of limited political pluralism, leading ideology or political mobilization.³

In her conclusions, the author drew attention to the fact that the quoted definition of the character of the regime was confirmed, among others, by heterogeneity in the political elite with lesser representation of professional politicians, by imperfect state ideology, and by present but lower political mobilization of the masses as compared to in totalitarian regimes, which is to say, by factors with a significant potential for operating in the public space. Hence, it was evident that for a better understanding of the People's Party regime it proved significant to examine the urban public space, as it is a place in which the regime is capable of not only passively manifesting itself externally, but also a place that the regime, through various tools, actively used to influence the population, for example, in order to inculcate its ideological assumptions in society. The People's Party regime did not possess a sophisticated ideology, but it is possible to state that it saw its foundations in three pillars: Christian-Catholic, national and social, all three of which it tried to present externally.

The dynamics of social conflict in the time of the Slovak state's existence, based on the above-mentioned pillars, had their root at the end of the nineteenth century, when, in the words of the Slovak historian A. Hruboň, the People's Party's cultural code was being formed. An image of the enemy began to emerge, which in the conditions of interwar Czechoslovakia was represented by political rivals and opinion opponents of the People's Party. The events of the late 1930s acted as a catalyst, especially for the younger, more radical generation of party members, and brought about a growing sympathy for fascism among a part of the HSLŠ membership, manifested rhetorically and, after the seizure of power, also in actions.⁴ The above-mentioned observation is important from the point of view of a comprehensive interpretation of the People's Party regime and its classification not only within the typology of undemocratic regimes, as Tokárová presented, but also in the analysis of its relation to fascism. In this respect, it is now clear that the regime's interventions were neither accidental, nor forced, nor exclusively based on an outside model.

A possible premise for pondering how the People's Party regime manifested itself externally in public space and how these manifestations can be interpreted, or what they reveal about the character of the regime, is the understanding of space in the theory of the French thinker Henri Lefebvre.⁵ Building on Marxist philosophy, Lefebvre characterized, very simplistically summarized, (urban) space as a social product that primarily reflects social relations, and which is constituted not only by physical but also by imaginary social boundaries. As Ceri Watkins writes:

3 TOKÁROVÁ, *Slovenský štát*, 236.

4 In detail: HRUBOŇ, *Prečo slovenská historiografia a spoločnosť*.

5 Lefebvre stands as a good choice for this paper because, besides his complexity and obvious content consonance, he was also a thinker who already reflected the contemporary reality of the 1940s. Moreover, he was a neo-Marxist, so he worked with the same premises of thought that the non-democratic regimes of the twentieth century operated with – in a negative or positive meaning.

The epistemological foundation of Lefebvre's theory is his positing of a spatial triad, which utilises three considerations of space, in order to make lucid the complexities of everyday life. He suggests that space is fundamental to our lived experience of the world, and that every experience is comprised of three interrelated aspects of space: representations of space (conceived space), spatial practices (perceived space), and spaces of representation (lived space).⁶

According to Lefebvre, space is an instrument of power. It is the site of conflict between creators and users, resulting in the state's or ruling regime's attempt to use space for social control through centrally adopted and hierarchically applied power measures.⁷

Lefebvre's works are strongly theoretical and extremely complex in scope. For practical historical research and a better grasp of a more narrowly defined topic in the form of the interventions of the People's Party regime in the public space in the three selected cities, it is therefore necessary to reach for a more effective means, that is, one of the theoretical bases, or analytical tools at a meso-level, reflecting broader political theories in relation to the regime, and broader sociological theories in relation to space.

Public space and its dimensions

Nowadays, public space is perceived on two basic levels – physical and socio-cultural – and in their mutual interaction. There are many definitions of public space. Most of them have a common overlap in that they perceive public space as multidimensional, normative and reflective of the relationship between the private and public spheres. Roughly simplified, a public space is one to which people normally have free access, is generally regulated by a public institution in accordance with valid norms accepted by the majority, and has a non-private character, such that people who do not know each other meet there.

The main specific instrument of our research was the analysis of four dimensions of public space. They were formulated by sociologists Walter Siebel and Jan Wehrheim. They sought the essence of urban public space in the dichotomy between the private and public spheres, and therefore focused their interest on the research of specific features – dimensions characterizing urban public space in contrast to the private sphere. Although the way of life in the city (urbanity) and the public space itself were investigated in a context different from the topic of this paper, the universality of the defined dimensions and their compatibility with the aforementioned premises make them a suitable analytical tool for finding answers to questions about the instrumentalization and intervention of the People's Party regime into the public space.

Siebel and Wehrheim divide the specificity of public versus private space into the following four dimensions (specific features):

1. Legal dimension – public space is governed by public law, which also defines the power to determine who can use public space and for what purposes.
2. Functional dimension – the public space of the city is, in terms of its function, intended to be a place for the implementation of commerce and the exercise of

⁶ WATKINS, *Representations of Space*, 209.

⁷ GOTTDIENER – HOHLE – KING, *The New Urban Sociology*, 74–76.

politics (as opposed to the private sphere, which is dominated by, for example, the production, education or leisure function).

3. Social dimension – public space is a “scene” (as opposed to “backstage”), a place of stylized, reserved behaviour and anonymity.
4. Material-symbolic dimension – public space is also defined by a number of architectural and urban elements that signal its accessibility or exclusivity. Through their appearance, materials and symbols, they emphasize or clarify the legal, functional and social distinction of public space from the private sphere.⁸

Siebel and Wehrheim add that the relationship between urban public space and the private sphere is not static, but continuously evolving, which is also reflected in the changes of the four dimensions, or their meaning, their relative proportion or the blurring of the boundaries between them. Changes in this relationship are linked to legislative interventions,⁹ which are, of course, most pronounced during regime changes. Moreover, the non-democratic regime, in its inherent desire to control both society and the individual comprehensively, attempts to eliminate the boundaries between the public and private spheres in a targeted manner, which is served by interventions in both the private sphere and the various dimensions of public space.¹⁰

a) The legal dimension of public space

In examining the interventions of the People’s Party regime into the most dominant legal dimension of public space, our attention has been focused on: 1. what steps – at the central or local municipal level – were taken by regime representatives to secure their legal authority to regulate both access to and use of public space, and 2. how this authority was exercised. In this context, legal and historical analysis of contemporary legislation and its changes from the point of view of its form as well as content is not sufficient. Research has also focused on the actors of the changes under scrutiny. In the legal and historical analysis, and interpretation of regulations, the fact applies that today’s conception of public space and civil rights was formed only after the Second World War, so the regulations from the turn of the 1930s and 1940s cannot meet the qualitative and content parameters that are considered the standard today, whether in the sphere of public space or civil rights. The starting point for the research on actors, mainly studied at the local urban level, was the theory of elites. A more detailed characterization of it, based on the classical works of Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto and Robert Michels, can be found in a recently published study of one of us:

Under the narrower label of urban political elite we understand a relatively small cohesive social group whose members share common values and interests. In the hands of its members, political authority is concentrated, enabling them to influence the course and future direction of local socio-political development following their own interests. Members of the urban political elite hold the highest positions in the municipal government. They have executive or regulatory competences within their political space and therefore actively

8 SIEBEL – WEHRHEIM, *Öffentlichkeit und Privatheit*, 4.

9 SIEBEL – WEHRHEIM, *Öffentlichkeit und Privatheit*, 4–5.

10 Public space policies are, of course, common in all regimes. In non-democratic regimes, however, they do not conform to the will or opinion of the majority. As such, they are not the product of social consensus, but the expedient actions of the ruling regime.

participate in or are very close to political decision-making on major issues of social development (not only political, but also economic, cultural, etc.). They monopolise their position. Opposite to the urban political elite stands a large mass of politically passive people – the inhabitants of the city, who are more or less eliminated from the decision-making process, and are directed and controlled by the elite.¹¹

b) The functional dimension of public space

In terms of the analysis and interpretation of the People's Party regime interventions in the functional dimension of public space, the aforementioned interest of non-democratic regimes to control the life of society and individuals comprehensively – i.e. not only to enforce the state ideology and the "correct" worldview in the public sphere, but also to penetrate and control the private sphere – comes to the fore. Siebel and Wehrheim cite as one of the characteristics of the public sphere that it is a site for the implementation of politics. By exploiting interventions in the functional dimension, the People's Party regime attempted to shift the boundary between the public and the private so as to implant politics in various ways in places where it had not belonged before. A typical instrument of intervention in the functional dimension was, following the example of Nazi Germany, the process of subordinating the entire life of society to a single political line, which took place in Slovakia under the leadership of the HSL'S, although not as consistently as in the Third Reich itself. Following the regime's interventions, schools, cultural institutions, associations, religious life etc., became places where politics and the political mobilization of the citizens were exercised. For example, the schools, in accordance with the state ideology, were imprinted with a national and Christian character (they came under the influence of the church, coeducation was abolished, a revision of textbooks was carried out etc.), and manifested in them were anti-Jewish policy (exclusion of Jews from higher education) and subordination to Germany (compulsory German language). Another instrument was the promotion of social housing, through which, during the existence of the People's Party regime, the politics reached households directly. In political discourse, in contrast to during the interwar period, family policies defended from the point of view of nationalism and anti-Semitism, often articulated along Nazi arguments, prevailed over the general socio-political and pro-population aspects of social housing support.

c) The social dimension of public space

Also, when examining the social dimension of public space, it was appropriate to consider some specific theoretical starting points that would allow for a better understanding and explanation of the meaning and consequences of the regime's interventions in it. The characteristics of the social dimension are based on the idea that social behaviour is to some extent a "performance" and that different social relations can be considered as "roles". This idea emerged more prominently in sociology in the 1940s and developed in the 1970s into the form of performance studies, which now allow for the analysis and interpretation of all aspects of human behaviour, including, for example, performance in everyday life or political rituals in public space, tracing not only the "performance" itself but also its relation to the social,

11 PEKÁR, *Replacement of Municipal Political Elite*, 94–96.

political and cultural context.¹² As Philip Auslander pointed out, performance studies were strongly influenced by Lefebvre's works on everyday life.¹³ In relation to urban public space, if people's behaviour in it is the playing of a "role", then the public space itself is a site of "theatrical performance", a place where "actors and spectators" meet, intentionally or accidentally, a place through which they experience social reality and ascribe meanings to it.¹⁴

Powerful social actors understand either intuitively or practically the relevance of this dimension of public space and operate on it. They become, again in the terminology of theatre, the "scriptwriters" and "directors" of a performance taking place in public space. This was no different during the existence of the People's Party regime, which constantly tried to cultivate the impression of its own legitimacy and mass support through staged political mobilization during various ritualized celebrations of holidays, commemorations of anniversaries etc. However, these legitimizing and mobilizing actions were ultimately not equally accessible to all, as the regime clearly defined excluded groups of the population. Inextricably linked to the streets and squares of towns and cities in Slovakia during the existence of the People's Party regime is the tragedy of Slovak Jews. They were first excluded from them, then concentrated there before deportations and, finally, moved through them to the death transports. The above scenes have been preserved mostly in the form of sad memories of Holocaust victims. In times of ongoing war, especially during the passage of the battlefield, the streets became a battlefield.

The correlation between the social dimension of public space and non-democratic regimes is confirmed by recent comparative research on two key totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Among the consequences of power interventions in social structures constructed, inter alia, through the social dimension of public space is the identification of an individual with the state project, which is accompanied precisely by the weakening, devaluation and even destruction of existing social relations. This represents an interest, an objective and a typical feature of undemocratic regimes.¹⁵

d) The material-symbolic dimension of public space

The material-symbolic dimension of public space consists of an extremely varied range of signs that are directly – in their material form or in their conveyed meaning – an instrument of communication. Non-democratic regimes use interventions in this dimension, especially in architecture and urban planning, to redefine the meaning of public space in order to implement their own ideological premises in society and, specifically in the conditions of the non-democratic regimes of the first half of the twentieth century, to fascinate the population with ideas of a great (national) past and a bright future. They are trying to demonstrate their own strength alongside this. Massive interventions in the material-symbolic dimension in the analysed period generally followed immediately after the rise of a regime, supported by funds allocated

12 JOVIČEVIĆ – VUJANOVIĆ, *Úvod do performatívnych štúdií*, 9.

13 These are in particular the three-volume work *Critique de la vie quotidienne I – III* (Paris: L'Arche, 1947, 1961 and 1981). Everyday life was defined by Lefebvre, in simplified terms, as the intersection of illusion and truth, power and powerlessness. See: AUSLANDER, *Theory for Performance Studies*, 123–127.

14 BOYER, *The City of Collective Memory*, 74. Meanings and roles are predetermined, among other things, by the arrangement of public space (i.e. its material-symbolic dimension – see below).

15 In detail: FITZPATRICK – LÜDTKE, *Energizing the Everyday*, 266–301.

through state interventionism and central planning, and were popularly interpreted as a tool for economic growth.¹⁶ The American art historian Barbara Miller Lane has formulated three basic sources from which Nazi interventions in architecture and urban planning stemmed, and which were also present, usually to a lesser degree, in other non-democratic regimes, including the People's Party regime. These are: 1. ideological motivation, 2. political propaganda, and 3. actual construction activities.¹⁷ However, when considering the material-symbolic dimension of public space, especially its architectural and urbanistic features, it is essential to understand the socio-political context of the interventions in them, because only in such a complexity can the communicated ideological content be understood and interpreted.¹⁸ Therefore, the object of interest in the analysis of the interventions of the People's Party regime will be not only architectural projects or urban plans, but also ideologically and propagandistically motivated interventions in the form of the renaming of streets, demolishing or unveiling of monuments etc., by which the People's Party regime aimed at shaping historical memory and cultivating collective identity according to its own merits. Following the Italian model, the propaganda-motivated interventions also included sanitary measures, the improvement of transport infrastructure and the aestheticization of cities, presented to the public as a manifestation of the regime's building power.

When contemplating the material-symbolic dimension, there is an important intersection with the approaches of urban semiotics, which, according to Svend Erik Larsen, examines both the signs produced in the city and the specific processes that create the cultural profile of the city. These processes include three sign systems: 1. the built environment, 2. patterns of social interaction, and 3. means of communication. There are two methodological approaches as to their research. The first is the structural analysis of sign systems, which leads to the description of the signs present in the city at a specific time and then to the comparison of different places or time periods. The second approach is a phenomenological analysis, emphasizing the subject's perception of signs.¹⁹ All the aforementioned starting points and approaches of urban semiotics have been, to a greater or lesser extent, instrumental in the analyses in our book, because, to paraphrase Umberto Eco's ideas, seeing the material (architectural) signs of a public space from a semiotic perspective helps in better understanding or even revealing its new functions, and therefore cannot be bypassed.²⁰

Interaction

The People's Party regime, as already mentioned, by its worldview and ideological nature operated with the concept of nation. From the nineteenth century onwards, the nation represented one of the most important collectivities with which the existence of a collective (national) identity was associated. Part of the collective identity is always a link to the past. The current state of knowledge about the relationship between

16 HAGEN – OSTERGREN, *Building Nazi Germany*, 4–5.

17 HAGEN – OSTERGREN, *Building Nazi Germany*, 6. For details see: MILLER LANE, *Architektur und Politik in Deutschland 1918–1945*, 142 ff. The original English edition was published in the USA in 1968.

18 On this, see in detail the inspiring chapter "The Nature of Communicative Space" in VESELY, *Architecture in the age of divided representation*.

19 BOUISSAC, *Encyclopedia of Semiotics*, 624–625.

20 ECO, *Function and Sign*, 57.

collective memory and national identity has been summarized by Kubišová. The author's overview study shows a number of important postulates that must be kept in mind when considering the nature and motivation of the regime's interventions in the public space. It is true of collective memory that it is not unchanging. Its three forms – communicative, cultural and political memory – can be actively shaped. This was done by the People's Party regime, among others, through individual official "remembering" of regime representatives (e.g. Hlinka) at the level of communicative memory; through symbolic codifications in the form of traditions, rituals (e.g. greeting with bread and salt, the use of costumes) at the level of cultural memory; and also through commemorative festivals, mobilizing national narratives, monuments etc. at the level of political memory. As Kubišová points out, these three types of memory are part of the collective identity, in the examined case the national identity, which they create. National identity is based on cultural sources, their interpretation and updating. Cultural sources include, for example, myths of ancestry and origin, sacred homeland, mission, destiny and sacrifice.²¹ As we will show on various examples, such myths were a fixed part of everyday political reality or interventions in public space in Slovakia after the rise of the People's Party regime in the autumn of 1938.

Conclusion

Through the search for intersections between sociology and history and through the application to one specific case, we have attempted to define a new socio-historical approach to the study of public space under the conditions of a non-democratic regime. The basis of our approach is the identification, analysis and interpretation of power interventions in four different dimensions of public space. At the same time, our approach can be very productively combined with other approaches or concepts, as we have briefly shown in the example of collective identity. We are convinced that the use of this approach can not only capture the dynamics of changes at the physical and socio-cultural levels of public space, but also provide a deeper understanding of the nature of the non-democratic regime under study.

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21 In detail: KUBIŠOVÁ, *Kolektivní paměť a národní identita*, 82–111.

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