13. The Structures of Ideocracy: Space and Hegemony

Look 'round thee now on Samarcand!
Is not she queen of Earth? her pride
Above all cities? in her hand
Their destinies?

(Edgar Allan Poe, Tamerlane)

13.1 Political Spaces

13.1.1 Enduring Patterns

This section aims to systematically depict the main types of spatiality, as well as analysing how the use of spatiality can aid in the creation of ideological hegemony, of social homogeneity and, ultimately, of a distinct teleological narrative which may legitimize communities as well as modern ideocratic polities.

Indeed, the continued survival of a regime, regardless of its nature, but especially so in an ideocracy, is built around the nature of its ideological legitimacy and its method of maintaining or imposing control. Unity or the assumed idea of homogeneity has been instrumental in state creation and the support of a ruling system ever since the beginning of early complex polities in the Fertile Crescent, whereas there are countless cases of states which collapsed because they failed to successfully instil at least a semblance of a common identity, a bond which linked their communities. Religion, law, culture, nationality and the sense of otherness were all used in the creation of state-systems, which – in the European case – developed through a bureaucratic blueprint linking a fallen Empire to an ascendant nominally universal Church and, finally, a national State.

Spaces, landscapes and their political dimensions may be interpreted in three broad ways. Firstly, they are physical reminders of a regime’s power and permanence as well as its ability to discipline, to organize its subjects towards common goals. Secondly, they are temporal indices of recreated pasts and desired futures. Finally, they are symbolic expressions of different notions, ranging from community, sacrifice, liberty or apotheosis. The types of spatiality can fluctuate according to the objectives of the regime in question and according to the traditions typical of the dominant culture or of its political elite. Thus, a festival meant to promote openness or internationalist sentiments, such as World Youth Day or Labour Day will, at least in certain aspects, be performed and interpreted very differently in a liberal democracy in comparison to a totalist ideocracy, even though they will maintain some common means of representation and aesthetics.

In asserting that the state possesses a “simultaneously invisible and omnipresent conceptual location”, Adam T. Smith describes a feature which “provides an effective mask for political practices precisely because it obscures the inherently spatial operations of power

899 Parts of this chapter have appeared verbatim or with modifications in Murariu, “The Political Uses of Spatiality”, 169-188.

900 One example is the Neo-Assyrian Empire and its efforts to turn its conquered subjects into “Assyrians” through the introduction of an imperial culture.

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M. Murariu, Totality, Charisma, Authority,
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‘as an apparatus of domination’ and legitimacy ‘as a representation of that apparatus’”.

To this it could be added that spatiality, in its representation of power, authority and common endeavour, is one of the fundamental aspects in any authority-system, not only when one considers ideocratic regimes. Indeed, it is among the crucial bindings that hold a political edifice together, regardless if its features are centralized, multicentric or decentralized.

For instance, Assyria was one of the earliest polities recorded to create something close to a systematic ideocracy, a complex endeavour which encouraged subjugated elites to become more Assyrian in nature and be part of the Assyrian symbolic universe. Its chief god, Aššur, was connected to the capital itself, to the name Assyria and also to the entirety of an empire whose ruler was the deity’s “high priest”. It was not by chance that the Assyrians built their empire on the destruction or reconstruction of space. The imposition of Assyrian dominance could mean the complete destruction of enemy temples, their careful patronage or, controversially, their conversion through the installation of the so-called “weapon of Aššur”. In all cases, it ultimately meant the symbolic integration in the Assyrian worldview, with its centre in the religious capital and the unique temple of Aššur. Even when serving a multicentric polity like the Achaemenid Empire, the political use of spatiality was crucial for the highly ritualised nature of a peripatetic court and as a symbol of the Great King’s qualities. To use just one example, the particularity of the royal paradises only goes further in demonstrating the different messages conveyed by, and through the use of space:

- The spectacular nature of an exquisite “oasis” in the middle of a barren land
- The coercive message depicting the permanence of authority – a statement of the Great King’s ingenuity and resourcefulness
- The paradise as microcosm of the realm – his control over the land also means his care for the people as Gardener

Whether a regime is traditional-hierarchical, rational-bureaucratic or a complex mixture of factors, spatiality is of even greater importance in the existence of a modern nation state. The territorialisation of a community can be built on the attachment its members feel for specific places, or ethnoscapes, political-cultural landscapes and spaces which aid them in constructing a certain worldview and defining otherness. Another important element for the interpretation of political spaces lies in charismatization of spatiality, including its potential in legitimising and enhancing the position of a regime. Indeed, if precursors are to be found in

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901 Adam T. Smith, *The Political Landscape: Constellations of Authority in Early Complex Polities* (London: University of California Press, 2003) 79. Smith’s work is a very good starting point regarding the debates shaping the field, as well as concerning relevant literature.


