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BOOK REVIEW

Reuben Rose-Redwood, Derek Alderman and Maoz Azaryahu (eds).

The Political Life of Urban Streetscapes: Naming, Politics, and Place

New York, NY: Routledge, 2017.

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The Political Life of Urban Streetscapes: Naming, Politics, and Place, edited by Reuben Rose-Redwood, Derek Alderman, and Maoz Azaryahu, is a valuable collection of empirical essays written by the authors with a considerable expertise in various fields of social sciences. Throughout, it reflects the historical development, theoretical expansion, and contemporary condition of critical urban place names studies. As an emerging subfield of cultural geography, critical toponymy explores new areas of spatial relationships between power, society, and landscape.

This collection highlights the role, functions, and magnitude of the urban place naming practices as the symbolic spatial strategies of political power adopted by the governing authorities in different parts of the world. A wide repertoire of themes presented in the volume is focused on distinct aspects of the politics of street naming. Namely, the contested toponymic legacy of colonialism and post-colonialism, the toponymic dimension of nationalism, the urban place names metamorphoses during the transition from socialist to post-socialist socio-economic model, the toponymic politics of commemoration related to the questions of social justice, and the place naming practices as a source of symbolic capital for the privileged social groups would exemplify these themes.

The introduction starts with the historical retrospective of the critical toponymic scholarship. The editors specify that this field of study has arisen since 1980 as a result of a critical shift from the traditional toponomastics focused on linguistic approaches and encyclopedic toponymic classifications toward the critical analysis of the spatial politics of place naming and socio-political processes involved in creation, transformation, and revision of toponyms. Noteworthy, the introduction emphasizes three theoretical approaches that have a direct impact on critical place names studies: a semiotic prospective on commemorative urban toponyms as the symbolic elements of a city-text; an urban toponymic system as a cultural arena of conflicts and resistance that involved privileged and historically marginalized social groups; the role of the toponyms in everyday life of the urban residents and the production of the urban streetscape as performative space.

The following sixteen book chapters consist of various case studies which analyze the urban place names systems in different geographical regions and chronological periods through the prism of the underlined theoretical approaches and themes. This collection gathers some classic works published at the dawn of critical

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toponymy in the 1990s and revised by their authors (K. Palonen, B. Yeoh, M. Azaryahu). Additionally, several previously published papers have been included in this collection concurrently with some unpublished works which ultimately forms a comprehensive, diverse, and vibrant assortment of urban toponymy scholarship in one volume. The editors conclude the book with their personal reflections on contemporary challenges and future prospective of critical urban toponymy.

There are also two small details that would not affect the quality of this rich collection, but are worth our attention. Interestingly, the objects of the analysis in the majority of works in this volume are the names of the streets. Probably, it might have been helpful to expand the scope of research and include the names of buildings, bridges and other elements of infrastructure, public transit stations, airports, stores, and businesses as the empirical material. Such “onomastic intervention” into the critical toponymy might have revealed some new contexts, relationships, and correlations between the dynamic urban toponymic landscapes and political power. One more point is related to the Chapter 11 and the concept of the “politics of toponymic continuity” precisely outlined and elaborated by the authors (D. Light and C. Young) on the examples of Romania and other post-socialist states. Actually, in case of Minsk, Belarus, a significant number of Soviet era toponyms is connected to the World War II. In fact, it has strong references to the emotional trauma of the Belarusian people during the war were the nation lost up to one third of the population. Thus, this segment of urban place names reflects not only past and current political agendas of the authorities (p.187). Correspondingly, it reflects specific “emotional relationships” (p. 199) between the general public and toponyms based on the historical emotional trauma, creating favorable environment for the “toponymic continuity”.

Undoubtedly, this volume is a remarkable and beneficial contribution to a growing body of work in the vigorous field of critical toponymy. The book should be of relevance to cultural, historical and urban geographers as well as urban historians, linguists interested in socio-onomastics, and other social scientists. Equivalently, it would be an excellent addition to the reading list of cultural geography and urban geography courses.

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