Bordering on the modern: power, practice, and exclusion in Astana

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Abstract. State-led urban development projects, especially in nondemocratic settings, are conducive to a top-down analytic that focuses on state planners and architects. The goal of this article is to explore how we might decentre this narrative and jointly consider elite and nonelite narratives, through an analysis of discourses of modernity as enacted in and through these statist urban projects. Deploying a practice-based analytic, I explore how notions of 'modernity' are performed and enacted through the exclusionary practices of elites and nonelites alike. Taking the case of Kazakhstan's new capital city, Astana, I examine how the state-led urban modernization agenda simultaneously draws upon and reinscribes a set of interlocking popular geographic imaginaries (Soviet/modern, urban/rural, north/south), and demonstrate how ordinary citizens are not just passive spectators, but active participants, in the political drama of state- and city-building.
Keywords: Kazakhstan, capital city, practice turn, modernity, bordering, urbanism

Introduction

In 1994, only a few years after Kazakhstan became an independent state when the USSR was dissolved, President Nursultan Nazarbayev announced his unilateral decision to move the country's capital city from Almaty to a small town in the north, Aqmola – known as Tselinograd in the Soviet times and renamed 'Astana' (meaning 'capital' in Kazakh) in December 1997 when it officially took over the capital status. As Nazarbayev's pet project, Astana has been an important site for enacting his vision of Kazakhstan's post-Soviet modernity, and his government has spent lavish sums of money to turn it into one of 'the most attractive and competitive capitals in the world' and 'a bright, strong, prosperous city which unites all Kazakhstan's people' (Nazarbayev 2010, 53). The Astana project has arguably been the most important element of the regime's nation- and state-building effort since the country gained independence in 1991. Elites exert tremendous effort to broadcast images of the city domestically and internationally, and representations of Astana accordingly target two audiences: ordinary citizens and foreign observers and visitors. While foreigner observers overwhelmingly treat Astana as a 'utopian' dreamland, this tends to erase the involvement of ordinary citizens in realizing the project (Koch 2012). For average Kazakhstanis, the spaces of Astana provide an opportunity for realizing their aspirations and, in so doing, they enact their own situated visions of modernity. These rhetorical

and material performances are the focus of this article, in which I consider how elites *and* nonelites are implicated as both audiences and authors in the Astana project.

Elite actors do, of course, have a privileged position in the city-building drama – as is the case in much of the world. This is nonetheless heightened in Kazakhstan because of the country's authoritarian political system, in which the state's discursive hegemony is far-reaching. Speaking of contemporary Astana as a pinnacle of modernity, President Nazarbayev has argued that 'our young capital has become an example for all cities in Kazakhstan and Central Asia' (Nazarbayev 2010, 53), and that the city's development 'has become the brightest page in the annals of an independent Kazakhstan' (Nazarbayev 2010, 52). Yet, the lofty language of elites like Nazarbayev is but one dimension of how modernity is located and performed in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. As I argue in this article, modernity is also articulated through the discourses and practices of ordinary people, who are not just 'responding' to an elite-defined discursive field, but actively working with it, and reworking it, as they pursue their own desires. It is just as possible that these practices *support* elite intentions, rather than necessarily undermining them.

In a recent article about Kunming's taxicab drivers, Beth Notar (2012, 190) has noted that, while urban scholars have given much attention to elite 'techniques of exclusion,' 'we have paid less attention to the ways in which nonelites might participate in exclusionary discourses and practices.' Accordingly, I also attend to these nonelite practices and performances of 'modernity' and exclusion in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, but demonstrate how these must be understood together with elite visions. As such, I understand the performance of discourses of modernity as a multi-scalar, *political act of bordering* that pervades quotidian and less quotidian practices. Through the case of exclusion in Astana, I explore the mechanisms of reproducing a particular vision of the city as the vanguard of modernity in Kazakhstan, and endeavour to trace some of their implications for power arrangements in the independent state. In my analysis, I am less interested in the actual 'content' of the categories 'modern'/'not modern', but more so in the actual bordering processes – how and by whom some people, things, ideas, etc. are classed and marked as modern or not. I am thus concerned with how discourses of modernity are fundamental to inscribing a certain moral geography within independent Kazakhstan's newly ordered urban spaces.

This study also extends current efforts in political geography to rethink borders (reified as 'things') as bordering *practices*, which are embedded in our everyday language and emotions, as much as physically enacted on the ground (Häkli 2008; Paasi 2010). As part of this project:

> We are also forced or persuaded to learn what are the legitimate and hegemonic national meanings attached to these borders and what are the pools of emotion, fears and memories that we have to draw on in this. These pools of meanings can be labeled as *emotional landscapes of control*. (Paasi 2010, 23)

By considering the ways in which imaginaries of modernity are mapped onto certain spaces, and denied others, I consider such 'representational practices' (Mitchell 1988) as central to enacting these 'emotional landscapes of control.' An important theme in the critical geopolitics literature, I consider popular imaginaries and practices as co-constituted with those of elites (Kuus 2007; Ó Tuathail 1996), and the crux of my argument is that this 'control' is not solely a top-down process, but is deeply intertwined with more popular 'webs of visibilities' and the 'calculated administration of shame' (Rose 1999, 73) in the practices of ordinary citizens.

Data for this article are drawn from ethnographic research in Astana, which I conducted over the course of three fields visits from 2009 to 2011. Although my larger study of the capital city project also included textual analysis, focus groups (n = 36), and a country-wide survey (n = 1233) in numerous cities around the country, this article is limited to presenting data from participant observation and formal and informal interviews (around 150 total). On each visit, I lived and socialized almost exclusively with local, middle class families, with whom I have long-standing relationships since beginning fieldwork in Kazakhstan in 2005. This ethnographic approach was essential to providing insight into the attitudes of ordinary citizens, given the persisting Soviet legacy of reluctance toward open exchange with unfamiliar people. I conducted all the research in Russian, and occasionally in English. Voice recordings were transcribed by a native Russian speaker, but any translations here are my own. Except for public officials, all names are pseudonyms.

The practice turn

Theoretically, this paper both stems from and speaks to what is increasingly being called the 'practice turn' in the social sciences. The 'turn' – i.e. away from structuralism and functionalism – refers to a broad intellectual movement, which privileges 'relations' (social and material) and 'practices' (rhetorical and material), rather than 'structures' in social analysis.

Although geographers have only recently been framing their work as part of the 'practice turn' (Jones and Murphy 2011), the approach is not new. Jones and Murphy (2011) argue that the theoretical turn has its roots in the work of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, but it can also be traced to early 'relational' approaches in geography, such as phenomenology (e.g. Buttimer 1976; Gregory 1978; Jackson 1981), as well as the 'agency' advocates in the structure-agency debates of the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Agnew 1981; Massey 1984; Paasi 1991; Pred 1986 1990; Thrift 1983).[1] Space does not permit a detailed presentation of each of these extensive debates (see Livingstone 1993), so I will instead focus on how I invoke a practice-based analytic in my treatment of discourses of modernity.

Firmly rooted in poststructuralist theory, the most contemporary works that might be considered part of the practice turn cover a wide variety of analytical approaches, such as governmentality, performance theory, relational materialism, actor-network theory (ANT), non-representational theory (NRT), etc. Much of this work is inspired by Michel Foucault, but the Foucauldian approach that I adopted here is most concisely and clearly articulated by his close friend and colleague, Paul Veyne:

> It consists in describing in quite objective terms what a paternalistic emperor does, what a head herdsman does, *without presupposing anything else at all*, without presupposing the existence of any goal, object, material cause (the governed masses, relations of production, an enduring State), or type of behavior (politics, depoliticization). It consists in judging people by their actions and in eliminating the eternal phantoms that language arouses in us. Practice is not some mysterious agency, some substratum of history, some hidden engine; it is what people do (the word says just what it means). (Veyne 1997, 153)

The goal then, as Veyne sees it, is to describe practices and their effects for the operation of power relations, while negating the impetus to search for 'belief' located in some alternate, mental realm, ostensibly in contrast to the physical. It should also be emphasized that 'practices' are both material (e.g. building a skyscraper) and rhetorical (e.g. discussing Astana's new residents) – and that this division is in fact only heuristic (Butler 1990; Derrida 1988; Foucault 2001 2003 2007 2008 2010; Law 1994; Mitchell 1988 1990 1991 2002; Wedeen 2009). A crucial theoretical and methodological imperative we can take from this literature is to denaturalise the binary between the 'real' and the 'imagined' (the physical and the mental),

[1] My thanks to Anssi Paasi for helping me to arrive at this point.

which are themselves strategic representational practices (Mitchell 1990). This is perhaps nowhere more apparent that with the concept of 'modernity.'

While it may then be tempting to write off modernity as a colonial construct (Dirks 1990), this would neglect how various actors use it strategically in contemporary moral politics (Koch 2010). Its very contextuality and dynamism is what makes it important to consider how the notion is used in various boundary-drawing practices: 'modernity persists as an imaginary and continuously shifting site of global/local claims, commitments, and knowledge, forged within uneven dialogues about the place of those who move in and out of categories of otherness' (Rolfel 1999, 3). Often modernity 'is understood in terms not of a cultural inferiority but of a political-economic inequality' (Ferguson 2006, 33). This inequality is mapped onto various spaces and bodies through the language of modernity, forever drawing on a shifting and global set of material things, ideas, and representational practices (Mitchell 1988).

By approaching modernity as a bounding practice, and examining how it is articulated through discourses, we can trace particular spatial imaginaries in the urban:

> The identity of the modern city is created by what it keeps out. Its modernity is something contingent upon the exclusion of its own opposite. In order to determine itself as the place of order, reason, propriety, cleanliness, civilisation and power, it must represent outside itself what is irrational, disordered, dirty, libidinous, barbarian and cowed. The city requires this 'outside' in order to present itself, in order to constitute its singular, uncorrupted identity. (Mitchell 1988, 165)

In the case of Astana, what – and where – is the 'other' that the city's architects and residents seek to exclude? As this article demonstrates, there are many 'others,' but among them, Astana is not Soviet and it is not the village. These exclusionary, 'othering' practices are also about excluding unequal power relations from sight. In the sections that follow, I will first consider how such exclusionary practices have historically taken place in and through statist urban development agendas around the world, before then tracing how an ever-shifting 'modern/backward' binary is spatialised in Kazakhstan's new capital city.

Statist visions of modernity

State-led urban development schemes (i.e. city-building projects initiated by state or planning elites rather than effected through democratic participation) invite a top-down analytic, and scholars have accordingly emphasized the role of state planners and architects in

materializing these grandiose urban projects (e.g. Barthel 2010; Bunnell 2002; Bunnell and Das 2010; Bunnell et al. 2006; Eisinger 2000; King 1996 2004; McNeill 2005 2009; Müller 2011; Olds 2001; Saito 2003; Smith 2008). Long a focus in urban anthropology (e.g. Holston 1989; Houston 2005; Kanna 2011; Laszczkowski 2011a 2011b; Zhang 2006), geographers have recently begun to explore these state-led urban development schemes through employing in-depth ethnographic methods designed to capture the lived realities of ordinary city dwellers and their interpretations of urban spectacle (e.g. Buckley 2012; McFarlane 2012; Mohammed and Sidaway 2012) – although this was arguably a project initiated long ago by Ley and Olds (1988) in their rich study of the 1986 World's Fair in Vancouver. Rather than being faced with an either/or situation, geographers are in a unique position to attend to *both* elite and nonelite actors, and thus to draw attention to the co-constitution of the urban, geo-political imaginaries.

One of the best known examples of a state-led urban development scheme is Brasília, in which 'modern architecture was trumpeted as a most visible symbol of Brazil's progress, industrialization, independence, and national identity as a modernizing nation' (Holston 1989, 96). But decades before this project was materialized in 1960, similar projects were already underway in the 1920s and 1930s in Ankara, Turkey (Kacar 2010) and Magnitogorsk, USSR (Kotkin 1995). More so than the case of Brasília, these high modernist projects are very familiar to citizens of the post-Soviet space, and these cities' histories form an important frame of reference for contemporary Kazakhstan's planning elites (Koch 2013). As noted above, the Astana project draws on similar visions and has been an important site for enacting Nazarbayev's vision of Kazakhstan's *post-Soviet* modernity. And yet, these elites are heavily influenced by a distinctly *Soviet-era* understanding of the 'city' – in terms of both its function and its symbolism.

All over the world, and not just in these state-led projects, cities tend to symbolize the 'height of modernity' and are often ascribed a unique socializing capacity (Williams 1973). In this, the Soviet Union was no different; after all, in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels wrote of the city 'as rescuing the people from the idiocy of rural life' (Alexander and Buchli 2007, 8). Magnitogorsk, the centrepiece of Soviet 'blank slate' urban development projects, long served as 'the quintessential emblem of the grand transformation' that drew upon 'the Enlightenment goal of using science to perfect society' (Kotkin 1995, 18). Far beyond Magnitogorsk, Soviet discourses tasked the city with producing new urban citizens, who were expected to enact 'a specifically Soviet way of life: a new economy, society, politics—in short, a

new culture, broadly conceived' (Kotkin 1995, 34). Since even the earliest days of Bolshevism, cities 'came to be viewed as the epitomes of progress and therefore the prime bulwarks for the existing order' (Kotkin 1995, 18). As the following sections demonstrate, although discourses about the 'modernity' of Astana are articulated in contrast to an 'other' – the Soviet past – these imaginaries are nonetheless underpinned by thoroughly Soviet conceptions about the relationship between the urban and rural, the modern and the traditional.

Excluding the Soviet past

Astana is commonly portrayed as having been built on a *tabula rasa* – the barren steppe of Central Eurasia – but Kazakhstan's new capital city was actually moved to the site of a very Soviet city, Tselinograd, and simply renamed in 1998. Though many of the Soviet-era structures remain (some merely hidden behind new façades), various areas of the original Tselinograd settlement have already been razed, as city planners have deemed them unworthy of preservation. President Nazarbayev explains:

> But on the eve of our move from Almaty, Astana was a typical provincial town. There were a lot of old, decrepit buildings, which were spoiling the look of the new capital. We had to demolish them. Instead, we have built new ones. For example, the building of the Ministry of Finance replaced old wooden houses. They did not match the look of Kazakhstan's new capital at all. As to my views on Soviet architecture, I will say that each epoch leaves its creations. Some of them live forever, others do not pass the test of time, quickly become morally outdated and wear out physically. (Nazarbayev 2010, 53)

These 'outdated' structures also include the traditional mud brick (*samannyi*) sedentary architecture associated with Zhatak Kazakhs, i.e. poor Kazakhs who abandoned the traditional nomadic lifestyle because of poverty and lack of livestock (Buchli 2007, 55). Many such homes, as well as other Soviet-era individual homes, have been destroyed or are slated for demolition soon, in order to make way for high-rise apartment buildings – all according to the city's master plan, which is closely supervised by President Nazarbayev.

Not only have these small-scale structures become physically and morally 'outdated,' so too has the Soviet principle of standardization, which was the 'hallmark' of Soviet urban development (French 1995, 47). Nazarbayev has criticized the pervasive five-storey buildings in Astana, which were part of the construction boom in 1960s and 1970s to deal with housing shortages: 'They were uncomfortable buildings, all looking the same' (Nazarbayev 2010, 53). In

the modern Astana, the official rhetoric has consistently underscored the need to make the city's urban form unique, to preserve through architecture the '*natsional'nyi kolorit*' ('national colouring'). Astana's new administrative centre, the 'Left Bank,' as Castillo (2001, 201) remarks about Berlin's Hansaviertel, has become something of 'a monument to uncontrolled individualism,' with the new iconic buildings designed as a colourful assortment of styles and shapes (see Plate 1). The '*natsional'nyi kolorit*' discourse belongs primarily to Kazakhstan's independence era, but it has its roots in the Soviet times; urban planners would sometimes use it strategically, citing local climate and cultural concerns, in order to deviate from the standard model imposed by Moscow authorities (author's interview, July 2011).

Plate 1 Astana's new administrative center, the 'Left Bank.' July 2011. Source: Author.

In official and popular justifications of the destruction of the old, Soviet-era neighbourhoods, the issue of style carries great weight for some, but a much more common theme is that of sanitation (author's interviews, July 2011). There are many homes, for example, along eastern Kenesary Street, one of Astana's major northern thoroughfares, which are among those designated for demolition in the master plan in the next two years. Official justifications of the demolitions have centred on the poor living conditions and a lack of amenities, such as connections to central sewage, gas and electric systems. '*Kensary – eto nasha bol'shaya problema*' ('Kenesary is our big problem'), I was told by Amanzhol Chikanayev, the director of the Astana master plan (*General'nyi Plan*), and the regime's primary mouthpiece for all issues

related to Astana's appearance (author's interview, July 2011). In his view, which is also (re)produced by nonelites, these old housing developments are unsafe and unsanitary. The entire narrative echoes so many colonial discourses, in which the local urban developments are characterized as chaotic, primitive, and unhygienic – and definitively non-modern (Crews 2003; Mitchell 1988 2002; Rabinow 1982 1989; Stronski 2010).

Individuals currently residing in the future demolition zones are entitled to compensation and relocation to new apartment buildings, but many have deemed the reparations insufficient and/or do not want to move (Buchli 2007; Neef 2006). These people have generally been demonized for trying to 'extort' the government for unrealistic sums of money. Perhaps more significantly, they are deemed irrational for not wanting to accept the modern ways of Astana's city life, i.e. living in a modern, individual apartment. One informant who reproached these residents, explained to me that Kazakhs once lived communally as nomads, and this habit continued, albeit in an altered form, into the Soviet era. Things have changed in 'modern' Kazakhstan, she continued, requiring a dramatic adjustment for people to live in individual apartments. 'But they really like it,' she underscored (author's interview, July 2011; see also Alexander 2007; Bissenova 2011). The inhabitants who wish to retain their old style of living, as with the buildings described above by Nazarbayev, are thus rhetorically located in some 'morally' and physically 'outdated' space-time, in need of demolition to make way for the new social and political economic order of the city and the state.

Lefebvre (1996, 99) has argued that when planning tends toward this role of formulating social problems into questions of space, it forms a system in which social pathologies (e.g. 'backwardness') are plotted as 'pathologies of space.' Chikanayev, as the planner who identifies Kenesary as a '*bol'shaya problema*' ('big problem') thus becomes a sort of 'physician of space' who works with 'healthy and diseased spaces,' and whose task is to impose a harmonious social and spatial order (Lefebvre 1996, 99). In this imaginary, the act of imposing spatial order becomes the 'natural' solution to problems of unhealthy urban space. But, notably, 'The appearance of order means the disappearance of power' (Mitchell 1988, 79). The appearance of order also means the production of 'disorder' as a 'natural and inevitable liability, requiring a constant vigilance' (Mitchell 1988, 79-80). That is, it becomes a naturalised site of governmental intervention. Disorder and order are simultaneously produced through an act of boundary-making, with the effect of naturalising power relations – or at least, making them less visible.

However, the destruction of these Soviet neighbourhoods (the ordering of Astana's built environment) is a highly political intervention, as is the designation of the disorder they are supposed to represent.

Another example in Astana illustrates how political this bordering practice is. If we are to understand the state's relationship with individual housing developments, it is insufficient to only consider the poor neighbourhoods of Astana (e.g. along Kensary). This is because one neighbourhood (or '*mikrorayon*') stands out as a notable exception: Chubary (see Plate 2). Located just north of the new government centre, and to the east of Kabanbai Batyr Street (the city's major north-south thoroughfare), the neighbourhood was constructed by the first new residents of Astana when it became the capital. Nazarbayev and his planners were not pleased with the development of such a large area of small (one- to two-storey) homes so close to the new administrative centre: for this area, they had envisioned something supremely monumental (Dzhaksybekov 2008, 216). Like the older Tselinograd-era private homes, Chubary is not connected to basic service networks and, in the winter, many residents burn coal and wood to heat their homes – contributing to increasingly problematic air pollution in the city.

Plate 2 Chubary microdistrict, as seen from the Baiterek tower. It is the area of low-rise buildings in front of the row of high-rises in the old Tselinograd-era center. June 2009. Source: Author.

All of these factors would seem to point to the same outcome as Kenesary: Chubary's slated demolition and redevelopment in the form of new high-rises. However, this has not happened. Popular consensus in Astana is that this is because the residents are all wealthy individuals, with too much sway within the government for the Nazarbayev's planners to impose their will; resigned planners were thus forced to simply develop a long row of three-storey commercial property along Kabanbai Batyr Street in order to block the view of these low-rise developments (author's interviews, 2009-2011). It is unclear if the regime will renew its efforts to develop this area in the future, but for now, planners clearly deem the wealthy Chubary neighbourhood to be less problematic and less threatening than the 'disorder' of the poorer neighbourhoods elsewhere in the city. So while they do not consider Chubary sufficiently 'modern,' it is not quite a 'diseased space' demanding immediate removal.

Excluding the village

In Kazakhstan, the 'village' (*selo* in Russian, *aul* in Kazakh) is an important spatial imaginary, which defines how many in Astana experience the city, including those rural migrants scorned by long-time urban residents (Bissenova 2011; Laszczkowski 2011a 2011b). Many rural visitors arrive in Astana and discover, to their great surprise, that large parts of it do not match the hypermodern view of the Left Bank. The administrative centre operates in the official discourse as synecdoche – a part imagined to stand for the whole, i.e. the entire city. This limited view of Astana is visually disseminated around the country through television, advertisements, billboards, etc., and gives the impression that Astana as a whole is the height of 'modernity' in Kazakhstan. But, according to Kazakhstanis, if large parts of Astana look like the 'village,' what does this mean for the 'modernity' of Astana?

For some middle- and upper-class residents of Astana (primarily Kazakhs who have been urbanites since the Soviet times, and are thus largely culturally Russified), the city is often referred to as a '*bol'shaya derevnya*' ('big village').[2] To them, Astana is not a 'real' 'modern' city because they see too much of the village there – ranging from village migrants to village mentalities to village structures. As Tekeli (2009, 16) says of Ankara's earliest urban bourgeoisie, these privileged groups have ''imprisoned' the newcomers in the imaginary villages

[2] This is my own ethnographic observation (author's interviews, 2009-2011), but for corroboration, see also Alexander and Buchli 2007, 8, 30; Laszczkowski 2011a, 87; 2011b, 95.

in their minds as 'peasants in cities.'' In the narrative of one informant, middle-ranking bureaucrat, Lesbek, 'even if a person moves to Astana or Almaty from a village and lives there for two years, this does not change the fact that this person has a rural mentality (*sel'skii mentalitet*),' which he characterized as a certain crudeness and a lack of aspirations beyond moving to the city (author's interview, July 2011). Our conversation was held on a pleasant patio next to a riverside beach on the outskirts of Astana, but we had a difficult time hearing each other over the blaring Russian pop music. 'This music, for example,' Lesbek continued, 'is an example of the rural mentality. No one here asks you if you want to listen to the music, or if it bothers you. Someone just turns it on, way too loud, because they think that's what people want for 'fun.' It is a complete a lack of culture.' He also noted that this stigma about the rural mentality is most often attached to people from the country's south, like himself.

As Lesbek's remarks suggest, a certain moral geography is articulated through commonplace discussions about the country's regional differences. That is, the social character of a specific region is judged through a normative lens of being good/bad, healthy/unhealthy, safe/unsafe. The urban/rural dichotomy is but one example, while a north/south dichotomy also figures prominently in popular imaginaries. Although the north is frequently demonized by southerners and/or Kazakh nationalists, the stigma attached to the south (especially by urbanites and Russified Kazakhs) is perhaps the most extreme example of how this moral geography is rhetorically produced in independent Kazakhstan. In this imaginary, at the broadest brush, urban and north are coded as modern, culturally and linguistically Russified, and civilized; the rural and the south are coded as traditional, uncivilized, and culturally and linguistically 'Kazakh.'

The divisions are also tied up with class divisions, as urbanites and northerners have historically been in comparably privileged economic and political positions. As in so many places around the world, there is an added layer of race in these class identities. Not only are the poor in Kazakhstan ascribed to a different (rural or provincial) space, but even when they leave this space, they are marked by their skin colour. For example, the Kazakh word '*karabala*' is used to indicate a dark-skinned boy, but it is also used to indicate a boy from provinces (the term's opposite, '*sarabala*', indicates a fair complexion, but does not carry a place attachment). So here we have two conceptual nodes. On the one side, the 'northerners': urban, modern, civilized, wealthy, Russified. On the other, the 'southerners': rural, traditional, uncivilized, poor, Kazakh, dark-skinned. This binary vision of society – and how it is mapped onto imagined

spatial divisions in Kazakhstan – has firm roots in the Soviet times (Nazpary 2002), and even into the pre-Soviet times (Crews 2006; Khalid 2006). Nonetheless, some new dimensions have been added in the independence era.

Specifically, in the narratives of Soviet-era elites (and their children),[3] the 'southerners' are characterized as retrogressive 'nationalists.' In a conversation with one upper-middle-class Russian husband and wife, Igor and Yulia, with whom I lived for some months in 2009, for example, I was told that there is a 'war' (*bor'ba*) between the north and the south. Reproducing a widespread narrative about the north-south divide, they complained that Kazakhs from the south tend to be nationalists, and now that many have acquired high posts in the government, they are 'redistributing' the country's money to the south, where they are building schools, hospitals, and 'sitting around all day eating *beshparmak*' (a traditional Kazakh meal). Yulia's anger at her family's perceived marginalization at the hands of those southerners in the government had grown in recent years, especially as Igor's medium-sized business was increasingly being harassed by officials from the Financial Police – whom she depicted by holding her hands to her eyes and pulling the skin back to make them look 'Kazakh.'[4] This sort of racist commentary (not uncommon in Kazakhstan) was only reserved for those 'traditional' and uncivilized southerners, rather than their Kazakh friends, all of whom were 'Russified' and whom she and her family would consistently praise for being 'progressive.'

In Yulia's narrative about the war between the north and the south, her family was aligned with the north, as her family was depicted as being under assault by southerners. We should note here the blurring of 'north'/'south' and 'modern'/'backward' in this imaginary. Although they grew up in two of Kazakhstan's northernmost cities, Igor (Petropavl) and Yulia (Karaganda) have spent their entire adult lives in Almaty, a city in Kazakhstan's south. So while their current residence does not make them 'northerners' *per se*, they understand themselves as the socially-coded opposite of the southerners – cultured urbanites rather than retrogressive nationalists. Instead, they understand themselves as metaphorical 'northerners' in this perceived social battle between the (Russian/Russified) north and the (Kazakh) south, with each region

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[3] Including both ethnic Russians and Russified Kazakhs – all of whom have been consistently marginalized by the Nazarbayev regime's Kazakhification policies.

[4] This open discussion of the 'nationality question' (*natsional'nyi vopros*), i.e. about relations between Russians and Kazakhs, was a rather isolated ethnographic experience for me, and one that the family could have only shared with me, given that we have known each other for many years.

being ascribed a place on the modern/backward continuum.[5] Similarly, Lesbek, whom I quoted above, was from the south, but identified more with the Russified elite, who had a sense of 'culture.' For him, Astana was not just a 'big village' because of the rural migrants, but in general, he said, 'the entire country still has a rural mentality.' And simply moving to an urban area, he reasoned, would not change this.

While it may be tempting to read these narratives about Astana as a 'big village' as critiques of the elite project in Astana, they are in many ways supportive of it. The implication is that the city *should* be a beacon of modernity and progress; the problem is merely that it is *not*. This is true for both the migrants who are disappointed that they do not find themselves in a radically transformed social reality when they move to Astana, as well as the political and economic elite, who look down upon the city's rural migrants, who are deemed 'out of place' for their dress, their skin colour, and their behaviour in public spaces. While this idealization of the Astana project is broadly shared across the classes, the political economic transformations, which Astana is supposed to symbolize, have worked to deepen socio-economic divisions within Kazakhstan. These divisions, however, are generally articulated in terms of the urban/rural binary – rather than engaged more explicitly in terms of wealth discrepancies and the political economy behind them.

Excluding inequalities

Given Kazakhstan's increasing engagement with market capitalism, Astana has become a place where the country's most powerful and most dispossessed citizens come together, and where the new valorisation of consumerism (which has accompanied neoliberal reforms) is at its height. Not all have been so eager to accept the new values, however. As a man from Shymkent once told me: 'Democracy in Kazakhstan is simply spat on: all it means is that some people have a lot of money and can buy everything, while everyone else stays poor' (author's interview, 2009). This conflation of 'capitalism' with 'democracy' is quite incisive because exclusivity, as it operates in the neoliberal order, 'rather than being recognized as anti-democratic, acquires an

[5] In general, they believed Kazakhstan's hinterlands to be dangerous places populated by 'hooligans' and infested with disease, as I discovered over many years of having them extremely grudgingly send me off on my trips to the Aral Sea, Shymkent, etc. Every time, they were convinced I would not return alive and, one year, I thought I might even be placed under house arrest after Igor had received a scare email about an outbreak of Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever in Turkistan, a few days before my scheduled trip. Their fears were absolutely standard among urbanites, however, and I heard the very same things from most people who had never traveled in western or southern Kazakhstan.

aura of scarcity and becomes a form of cultural capital' (Duncan and Duncan 2004, 29). Yet this critical outlook does not prevail in Kazakhstan, and there are both systematic and spontaneous efforts to obscure from view many cues of the inequalities that pervade the city and the country as a whole.

This erasure is not only found in the built landscape (e.g. the officially-mandated metal barricades that hide decrepit old homes from view, or their elite counterpart, the high walls that protect from sight the sumptuous new villas), but also in the terms of how people comport themselves, dress, and pass their free time. Speaking of spaces of 'well-regulated liberty,' such as department stores, which emerged out of new proscriptions for governing urban space that emerged in the nineteenth century, Nikolas Rose (1999, 73) writes that within them:

> individuals were not only scrutinized by guards and attendants, but were scrutinized by one another, providing the spatial and visual means for self-education. In all these topographical technologies of civilization, persons were to be governed not through imposing duties, but by throwing a web of visibilities, of public codes and private embarrassments over personal conduct: we might term this *government through the calculated administration of shame.*

This self-education through a 'web of visibilities' is intensely familiar to those who lived under the surveillance state of the USSR, but in independent Kazakhstan, these codes of personal conduct and the administration of shame have increasingly been rearranged to match the norms of a neoliberal, consumerist economic order. The aura of exclusivity through unofficial dress codes – for example, at restaurants, clubs, cafés, or malls – is such that many low-income individuals feel highly uncomfortable and shameful, and simply avoid being in such a place.

Beyond this, there is a systematic exclusion of lower classes through high prices. In the recently-opened Khan Shatyr entertainment complex, for example, the entry fee for the spectacular indoor beach is nearly US $40, which is prohibitively expensive for all but the very top strata (and low attendance confirms its exclusivity). The discussions of lower strata Astana residents about the city's new elite institutions and buildings (such as the Khan Shatyr) follow a consistent pattern, in which people superficially remark on its beauty, but underscore how expensive it is (author's interviews, 2010, 2011). This 'language of the caveat' is simultaneously revealing and *un*revealing (Massey 2007, 54). At first, people express their pride about these iconic symbols of the country's increasing prosperity, but the inevitable footnote about the

staggering and prohibitive expense silently points to their own exclusion from that space (author's focus groups, 2010).

And yet, in Astana, many of the new upscale consumer and leisure establishments do *not* always work to 'eliminate or expel those who have no legitimate – that is to say, consumerised – reason to be there' (Rose 1999, 251). Malls in particular have been popularized in independent Kazakhstan. For example, 'Mega' is an upscale mall with an extremely clean, modern-looking interior, which houses high-end stores that sell clothing and various luxury goods that are far beyond the means of ordinary citizens. Nonetheless, Mega centres in Astana, Shymkent, and Almaty are all popular destinations for young people to hang out with friends. For many people, it is rare for them to actually visit any of the stores, the cinema, the rock-climbing wall, or food court; they simply buy a cheap drink at the Turkish supermarket chain, Ramstor (Migros in Turkey), and sit and socialize in the mall's clean and 'modern' setting (see also Laszczkowski 2011b).

This trend may well be changing, however, which becomes evident in Astana's newest mall, the Khan Shatyr. The complex's architectural design alone refuses this public socializing role. Compared to Mega, its uncomfortable spaces are much less conducive to this popular role. The layout pushes visitors through it in a constant stream of motion, and does not encourage lingering to enjoy the space. Unless one pays to sit at a restaurant, the awkward seating arrangements in uncomfortably open spaces function like street furniture designed to discourage a certain kind of sociality, subtlety embedding control 'in the very structuring of time, space and the environment' (Rose 1999, 252). The Khan Shatyr even lacks a typical Astana mall entry square, equipped with bouncy castles and other children's amusements, which are among the most important public places for socializing in Astana. As such, the solemn, mausoleum-like entrance of Khan Shatyr does not provide the same opportunities for communal interaction found in the other malls and squares around the city (see Plate 3).

Plate 3 Outside view of the Khan Shatyr center, which bears a certain resemblance to Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow. July 2011. Source: Author.

Nonetheless, Khan Shatyr has consistently been framed in the official rhetoric as being 'for the people.' Taking this to heart, many rural tourists can be seen making the pilgrimage to Astana's newest attraction. They do not do much more than walk around and take some pictures – everything in this consumerist paradise is far beyond their means, and so too are the amusements inside (e.g. the beach, games, theatre). As opposed to the poorer Astana locals, who are familiar with its economy of shame and simply do not attend, the village visitors are either not prepared to encounter this 'web of visibilities,' or their innocence is such that they are not aware of or do not care about the disdainful regard of Astana's middle- and upper-class urbanite shoppers. In either case, the effect of the rural visitors' presence seems to work in the reverse: it makes the privileged visitors uneasy about their comparative affluence. As several such people asked me when they heard I had visited, 'Did you see the people from the village?' Some would

just give a knowing smirk (i.e. that these people were 'out of place') and others were more explicit: 'Isn't it *weird*?'. This discomfort is precisely what drives the exclusionary practices: the desire for what Duncan and Duncan (2004, 9) call 'painless privilege' – the attempt to spatially and visually insulate themselves from the reminders of the social consequences of their privilege.

Even if the rural visitors are made uncomfortable by the spaces of Khan Shatyr, in which Kazakhstan's new inequalities come sharply into focus, 'modern' (i.e. neoliberal) Astana's symbolism as a place of the future is such that it inhibits discussions about alternate, perhaps more equal, social and spatial practices. This is one of the effects of the binary geographical imaginaries that we have seen at work throughout the article:

> If what was seen in the town could not be approved, because it made evident and repellent the decisive traditions in which men actually lived, the remedy was never a visitor's morality of plain living and high thinking, or a babble of green fields. It was a change of social relationships and of essential morality. And it was precisely at this point that the 'town and country' fiction served: to promote superficial comparisons and to prevent real ones. (Williams 1973, 54)

The narratives of the city's centrality and progressiveness automatically code the rural visitor as peripheral and old-fashioned. As in Massey's (2007, 87-88) construction, the autonomous energy in these smooth spatial binaries is always at the centre – such that the villagers become passive actors in the centre's new moral economy. As Williams suggests, the villager's feeling of revulsion at the unequal social and spatial order that characterizes the urban/rural relationship is never cast as a result of their higher morality, but one of their peripheral mind-set – the *sel'skii mentalitet* – which they are expected to adjust to the norms of the city's new political economy.

The villagers and other low-income citizens of Kazakhstan do not sit 'outside' this new political economic order, but are an integral part of its operation. Astana's mostly hidden poverty and the city's apparent 'success' are intimately related, for 'they are the combined outcome of the politico-economic strategy of neoliberalisation' (Massey 2007, 55). Unlike the manifestations of this binary presented there, Astana's urban form is unique in its use of aesthetics and beauty 'as a subtle but highly effective mechanism of exclusion' (Duncan and Duncan 2004, 7). The beautiful landscapes and spaces of the city's new developments not only obscure the practice of exclusion, but also the exploitation that produces them (Duncan and Duncan 2004, 26). Like beautiful landscapes, consumption practices are similarly exclusionary and depoliticizing.

Envisioning modernity in Astana is not limited to representing beautiful landscapes, but consuming has increasingly become a way of identifying and marking oneself (Rose 1999).

For many in Kazakhstan, the exclusive goods and new practices of exclusivity are valorised objects of desire. Of course, these individuals' craving for the consumerist luxuries brought by the market economy does not arise 'naturally,' but develops through an intricate web of social and material interactions, as well as visibilities. As subjects of the new state and economic order, many citizens have internalized the developmental narrative of possibility: that they too can soon be among the privileged middle class. This expectation is not necessarily idle fancy, however, as many people in Kazakhstan (and especially Astana) are increasingly able to access exclusive goods and experiences. Participation in this moral and political economy is not a mere product of top-down elite planning; participation is simultaneously a 'spontaneous' way of subjectivising oneself by acting on ones' desires. The new consumption practices, as well as the new methods of spatial order work 'by producing and codifying a visible hierarchy' (Mitchell 1988, 45). As sites of desire and/or envy, luxury items and beautiful landscapes form an integral part of the new 'technologies of the self' (Rose 1999).

Although there is a great deal of prestige accorded to luxury goods and exclusive spaces among Kazakhstanis, some, predominantly older, generations hold onto the socialist ideals of their upbringing in the Soviet Union. While their criticisms of the country's new inequalities are generally side-lined as old-fashioned and definitively *not* modern, there appears to still be a need to hide certain inequalities from sight – if only for the winners to achieve the insular 'painless privilege.' Much of this effect comes about not just through the material practices such as building walls, but also through the exclusionary geography of modernity discourses, which is predicated on political imaginaries about who belongs in a particular time and space.

Conclusion

Pierre-Arnaud Barthel has recently noted that statist urban development schemes taking place in Western liberal settings differ markedly from 'rather authoritarian states,' where the 'stakeholders' are predominantly governmental elites (2010, 137). While there is certain truth to this point, even where the state-society relationship is not defined by the norms of democratic involvement, ordinary citizens are also 'stakeholders' in these projects. As I have sought to illustrate in this article, this is especially apparent when we examine the performance of

discourses of modernity at *both* the elite and popular scales. Though elites do play a key role in initiating both urban transformations and modernization narratives, I have endeavoured to jointly consider the discourses of ordinary citizens, who come to reside in such cities and actively make them 'their own.'

Though the case of Astana can at times appear exceptional, it is in fact representative of a common trend toward large-scale urban development agendas throughout Asia (Bunnell et al. forthcoming). While it is tempting to examine statist projects (such as those in Abu Dhabi, Doha, Dubai, Naypyidaw, Putrajaya, Shenzhen, Singapore, etc.) in the top-down fashion that they seem to be materialized, this would discount the role of ordinary citizens, who are not just passive spectators, but active participants, in the political drama of state- and city-building. They too have their own conceptions of 'modernity' and their own material desires – both of which they act upon in an endless number of ways. Furthermore, the indeterminacy of these quotidian practices allows for ample opportunity for the 'overflow' of elite intentions and in this history of modernist city planning, Brasília (Holston 1989) and Ankara (Batuman 2009) are prime examples of how these projects inevitably come to be colonized by the everyday. Like the early days of these capitals, people are similarly drawn to Astana for its iconic modernity, which they often find to be lacking, as seen in the narratives about the city as a 'big village.' But it is precisely this notion that the city *should* be the beacon of modernity that impels people to materialize this reality themselves, through the discursive bordering practices I have explored here. Pushing far beyond the scope of state planning, the popular idealization of Astana as 'modern' has become a key part of spatialising the imagined socio-political order of the newly independent state.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the reviewers of *Transactions* for their insightful and constructive feedback. All remaining faults are of course my own. A previous version of this paper was presented at 'Unequal Cities,' a conference of the RGS-IBG Urban Geography Research Group at the University of Edinburgh. This material is based upon work supported by the US National Science Foundation (NSF) under Grant No. 1003836. This research was also supported by an NSF Graduate Research Fellowship, an NSF Nordic Research Opportunity grant, an IREX Individual Advanced Research Opportunity Grant, and a US State Department Title VIII Grant for work at the University of Illinois Summer Research Laboratory on Russia, Eastern Europe, and Eurasia. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this

material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation, or any other granting organization.

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