

THEME SECTION

Between loss and opportunity The fate of place after postsocialism

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Abstract: Many places in the post-socialist world undergo emptying: a loss of their constitutive elements—people, infrastructure, services, and futures past. Some people see this emptying as a loss, others as an opportunity. We argue that the shift from loss to opportunity—or vice versa—is a site of the political, that is, a moment of decision about the place of the present in a framework of meaning that gives form and direction to life. Drawing on contributions to the theme section, as well as on literature on hegemony, the political, and Anthropocene, we identify a potential tension between re-politicization on the scale of geopolitics and de-politicization on the scale of the planetary.

Keywords: emptiness, hegemony, interregnum, postsocialism, the political

Lielciems is a former mono-industrial “settlement of urban type” near a railway station 25 km from Latvia’s border with Russia.¹ The clay drain-pipe factory that structured life during the late Soviet period stands in ruins; five of the seven apartment buildings have been emptied, stripped of glass, doors, and other furnishings, leaving only shells with gaping black holes where the windows had been. In the 1990s, the clay extraction site was privatized as part of a 90-ha large forest territory and belongs to a former KGB agent who was put in charge of privatizing the Latvian gas sector. It now resembles a lake. Machinery, along with remnants of the dismantled railway tracks, was sold off as scrap metal by the former factory management. In the 2000s, there were a few attempts “to take European Union money” by launching businesses in the factory buildings, but no lasting structures of production were put in place.

Most of the 2,000 residents who came to Lielciems in the 1970s from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine for apartments as much if not more than for work have left. The remaining 250–300 residents, many of them retirement age, receive meager and reluctantly granted pensions from the Latvian state for the work they have done for the Soviet state, gather berries and mushrooms in the forest, grow vegetables in half-abandoned allotments, apply for welfare payments, and participate in the Latvian state’s workfare program. Their children and grandchildren live and work either in Russia or Western Europe. There are seven children left in Lielciems and a dozen or so young men, most of whom live with their mothers. Those who can stay sober long enough work in a small forestry brigade run by a former physical education teacher. A few women work in the remaining shop, the pharmacy, and municipal offices headed by an



appointed manager who has long given up on any plans for development and throws his energy into making sure the wood-burning boiler room is in running order.

What remains of the factory is classified as “degraded territory” by the state. What remains of the residents of Lielciems resembles what Georgi Derluguian calls the non-class of subproletariat (Derluguian 2005: 150; Bourdieu 1973). Latvian nationalism does not have a place for them either, as many—but not all—are Soviet-era migrants from various parts of the former Soviet Union.² They—both Soviet-era incomers and residents with family history in the area—do not recognize themselves in the addresses to the public by political elites. Instead, they see themselves reflected in the public discourse as a problem (especially so after the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war). They say, in one voice, almost as if reciting the official motto of Lielciems: “Lielciems is empty. Only pensioners, disabled people, and drunkards are left. Soon there will be nothing, there will be emptiness.”

This theme section is dedicated to emptiness. Emptiness and emptying are terms used not only by residents of Lielciems but also by residents of other towns and villages in eastern Latvia to describe a process whereby places and communities lose their constitutive elements (Dzenovska 2020)—jobs, services, schools, infrastructure, people, sociality, and the future—in relation to a particular point of reference posited by residents or, in some cases, observers. In the process of emptying, place and community-constituting relations change radically and across scales—from forms of economic and political power that reshape space and place to daily emplaced practices. The relationship between people, place, and time—remembered, lived, and imagined—is central to the emic conception of emptiness. While the residents view Lielciems as a place going through an existential crisis, if not dying, those who classify it as a degraded territory see it in functional terms—as a space useful or not useful for productive activity. To be sure, the residents’ conception of

Lielciems as a place is not devoid of spatiality. The placeness of Lielciems is shaped by the material and social infrastructure of Soviet socialist spatial planning, which created clusters of urban modernity throughout Latvian provinces. Lielciems had everything—a factory, a school, shops, a post office, a doctor’s office, a railway station, a pool, a club—and more infrastructure was planned. A specific form of sociality emerged in and around this infrastructure. Now the place and community have become unfamiliar—and often disturbing—to its residents. Some describe feeling nausea or despair at the realization of how empty their place of residence has become.

Most of Lielciems’ residents are “surplus people” in relation to both capital and the state (Li 2010; Smith 2011)—they are doubly devalued, to use Don Kalb’s (2022) terms. They tend to be on the side of an absolute rather than relative surplus, as their surplus status arises from cycles of capitalist demand not immediately influencing Lielciems (Li 2010; Smith 2011: 16).³ Moreover, their absolute surplus status is intertwined with place: they are surplus together.⁴ In contrast to cases discussed by Tania Murray Li (2010) and Jaume Franquesa (2018), where people are surplus but places are not, there is no capital waiting to exploit Lielciems beyond the stripping of socialist-era assets that has already taken place. The material remains of the company town are not needed considering Latvia’s explicit policy of deindustrialization. The buildings, including the abandoned school, are too big for small businesses making profit in niche or digital markets—the centerpiece of Latvia’s economic imagination. The presence of the degraded buildings and the subproletariat, in turn, makes it impossible—or too costly—to raze the settlement to the ground and reforest or recultivate land. The ruins of the factory are marked with a sign “dangerous,” but they continue to live their own life. They are visited by dark tourism fans, graffiti artists, and members of a drone-flying club from Daugavpils. Occasionally, they are used by the Latvian National Guard (*Latvijas zemessardze*) as training grounds for urban

warfare, suggesting that perhaps Lielciems is a “sacrifice zone” of sovereignty as much as if not more than of capital (Edelman 2019: 504).

In contrast to Don Kalb’s interlocutors in Poland (2009; see also Kalb and Mollona 2018), those of Susana Narotzky (2016) and Jaume Franquesa (2018, 2019) in Spain, Kristóf Szombati (2018) in Hungary, or Mark Edelman (2019) in rural United States, the residents of Lielciems are not revolting by embracing right- or left-wing populist agendas, perhaps because the right is part of the Latvian government, and the left has been discredited due to the socialist past and ever-present fear of Russia (which in these parts is associated with old-school communists rather than the new right). Since the collapse of the ideological framework of Soviet modernity that lent meaning and direction to the lives of Lielciems’ residents and their expulsion from the neoliberal nationalist hegemony that tried to replace it, a variety of “convictions” proliferate (Pelkmans 2017; see also Martin 2017). Most of Lielciems’ residents seek information outside of mainstream media. Some rely on tabloids, others on online prophets, others yet on the Bible, and all on conversations with friends and neighbors. Many watch Russian television, mostly for entertainment but also because they think that two forms of propaganda are better than one. They speak of the Soviet period as a past of plenty when the only way was up—more buildings, more services, better lives, and brighter futures. They speak of the 1990s as a period of active destruction by “them,” usually meaning a predatory capitalist-nationalist alliance that is difficult to reach or understand (Arrighi 1994)—for example, what is the former KGB agent doing with the clay extraction site, and what else but embezzlement of EU money was going to come out of attempts to do business in the abandoned factory buildings? When they speak of the present and the future, they speak of emptiness—*tukšums* (in Latvian) or *pustota* (in Russian).

We begin our discussion of emptiness with this extended introduction to Lielciems because we wish to use the emic concept of emptiness as

a “portable analytic” through which to engage with the contributions to this theme section (Dzenovska et al. 2022; Howe and Boyer 2015). Sticking with emptiness rather than taking up terms such as devaluation (Kalb 2022), indeterminacy (Alexander and Sanchez 2018), industrial ruination (Mah 2012), or demodernization (Minakov and Rabkin 2018) used by scholars studying resonant processes pushes us to constantly account for the multiplicity of elements that make up emptiness and pay attention to emplaced social practices, including meaning-making and affect, alongside the structuring processes of accumulation, governance, and, in several cases, war.⁵ Most importantly, and we will return to this later, it enables us to compare contexts that may be deemed too different when deploying a macro-sociological approach. Whether to change the world or understand it, we consider it crucial to begin with what our interlocutors are thinking, saying, and doing. We agree with Susana Narotzky that we should “overcome the blindness that a [neoliberal] hegemonic project has created” (2016: 279), but, as the contributions to this theme section show, every counter-hegemonic project entails its own exclusions—of form or content—and these, too, must be accounted for. We think that ethnographic comparison—moving emptiness laterally to resonant contexts where other terms may be used—is crucial for assembling an archive of practices of emplaced lives before building up to “a general theory of how social relations are governed and how they should be challenged and transformed” (Narotzky 2016: 279).

Emptiness and related terms

The contributors to this theme section engage with the concept of emptiness but also take up other terms, some of which are emic and others analytical, to consider specific aspects of what we call emptiness. Anna Varfolomeeva’s interlocutors in Kvartsitnyi, Karelia, mostly Soviet-era incomers, speak of nothingness (*nichto*) as preceding Soviet industrialization. For them,

nothingness is part of the origin story of Soviet modernity. It is also what remains after deindustrialization. Varfolomeeva uses emptiness and nothingness as synonyms and analyses these “references to pre-and post-industrial emptiness as mythological narratives depicting a bright new world appearing ‘out of nothing’ and then collapsing back into ‘nothingness’ as the industry is gone.” The notion of nothingness shows the entanglement of emptiness with modernist—and colonial—origin stories, that is, with the assumption that “there was nothing” before modernization, and nothing remains when it retreats. The nothingness of the Soviet myth devalues Vepsian forms of life, and the arrival of Soviet modernity entails its own forms of emptying of Vepsian villages. At the same time, the Soviet origin story finds a correlate in the epos of Kalevala, where the land of Kalevala is created out of nothing. Moreover, living in Karelia means forging relations with place and landscape that remain in place even after Soviet modernity is gone. In contrast to the Soviet origin story that denied the existence of place before Soviet modernity, post-industrial emptiness recognizes the existence of a place as a constellation of relations between people and the landscape and draws on pre-Soviet cosmologies to give meaning to the radical changes in place and community-constituting relations.

Anna Balazs juxtaposes pre-2014 Mariupol (that is, Mariupol before the beginning of the war in Donbas), where Soviet-era materiality and sociality were slowly decaying without being replaced, to post-2014 Mariupol, where active contestation of Soviet-era materiality began to take place. She uses the analytical term “indeterminacy,” borrowed from Catherine Alexander and Andrew Sanchez (2018), to capture the temporal and classificatory suspension in pre-2014 Mariupol. It is this condition of the old order dying without a new order being clearly visible that is also important for our concept of emptiness (Dzenovska and Knight 2020), but emptiness extends beyond the specifically temporal and classificatory (i.e., waste or value) aspects of indeterminacy.

Anastasiya Ryabchuk’s article from the frontlines of the war in Donbas and, subsequently, the Russo-Ukrainian war shows the intersection of the slow violence (Nixon in Franquesa 2019; Vorbrugg 2019) of post-Soviet emptying with the fast violence of the war that exacerbates the isolation and fragmentation of frontline communities. Ryabchuk shows the disjuncture between the residents’ assessment of what their communities and places need and the international aid organization’s wish to provide piece-meal aid to targeted “vulnerable groups.” Ryabchuk’s article shows the impoverishment of category-based targeted technocratic aid in conditions where places lose their constitutive elements because of intersecting forms of emptying as violence. Her article shows that the concept of emptiness as a self-perception of the frontline communities, which articulates a lack in the core of the community, is epistemically more powerful than the technocratic “vulnerability.”

With Dragan Đundaš and Ivan Rajković’s articles, we move to Serbian mountains where emptying was the result of pre-socialist and socialist modernization before it was exacerbated by post-socialist demodernization (Minakov and Rabkin 2018). Đunda shows that affordances of the landscape (Charbonnier 2020), namely mountains and rivers, render the emptying places valuable for “environmentally harmful investments” in alternative energy sources, such as hydropower plants (Rakita), or generate attachment to tourism as the last—and possibly successful—utopia that can revive village life (Dojkinici). And yet, for emptying places to be revalued this way, people and places must be decoupled, for both cannot continue to live together. Đunda also shows how both people and places retain value in relation to each other through the process of articulation of residual and fragmented valuations from different historical periods. And it is precisely one such form of valuation—the yearning for infrastructure exhibited by the residents of Rakita—that also renders Rakita available for extractivist accumulation. Ivan Rajković, in turn, shows how mountains and rivers attract environmental

activists from urban centers who do not wish to extract value from or consume space but re-imagine concrete places as reservoirs for “Life itself.” In the process, they abstract lives into Life, demarcate deaths that matter from those that do not, and erase concrete ways of life. Both Đunda and Rajković describe specific observable aspects of emptiness, such as depopulation and erosion of infrastructure, while emphasizing the competing interpretations and political mobilizations of emptiness toward different ends and by different subjects.

In this theme section, emptiness functions on at least three registers: one, as a term used by residents of emptying places or their observers, including anthropologists, when they speak of buildings, places or lives as empty; two, as a metaphor in the repertoire of modernity; and three, as an ethnographically derived analytical term for the process of places and communities losing their constitutive elements, which gives rise to relationally structured yet emplaced and contingent responses. When it is used by interlocutors or anthropologists, we ask: what configuration of relations elicits the designation “empty”? As in Mathijs Pelkmans’ (2003) discussion of an empty school in post-Soviet Ajaria, “empty” is first a term that describes a building and then becomes “emptiness” as a promissory space for a future of prosperity that is continuously deferred and can only exist as deferred. As a metaphor of modernity, emptiness has a long and violent history in aiding colonialization and exploitation of people and places. Anna Varfolomeeva’s article shows how this history is mobilized and reworked in the present. When we mobilize emptiness as a portable analytic, we parse out the constitutive elements of emptiness—and associated terms—that we find in different places and consider what comparison across difference can yield for a deeper understanding of the material and discursive forms of power that structure them and forms of life that emerge in them.

What we see in the contributions to this theme section is that emptying—as places and communities losing their constitutive elements,

from people to infrastructure to a sense of future—takes place in a variety of ways and for various reasons. There is pre-socialist depopulation of mountainous areas in Serbia, and there is the Soviet-era symbolic and material emptying of Vepsian villages that precedes the post-industrial and post-Soviet emptying. In other publications that we’ve engaged with, there is earthquake-related emptying of villages in Calabria (Vascomi 2021), and there is industrialization-related emptying of villages in Catalonia (Franquesa 2018) and Tuscany (Gaggio 2017). Sometimes emptying is the kind of emptying that is required for capital to produce value in the emptied places (as in the cases described by Đunda); sometimes it is mobilized for new environmental agendas (Rajković this issue); and sometimes it is the result of the violence of war (Balazs this issue; Ryabchuk this issue). And sometimes emptying renders places and people absolutely surplus, as in Lielciems, because capital produces value elsewhere—for example, in the logistics sector or through financial speculation. What emptiness allows us to do is broaden the comparative reach to think about how places and communities lose their constitutive elements in relation to each other, and how the revival and revaluation efforts, if such exist, propose to reconfigure people-place relationships. Are new people needed to revive an emptying place? Must the residents of emptying places leave to survive? What does this tell us about the fate of place in contemporary spatial configurations of capital, sovereignty, and environmental crisis? We see that in some cases emptiness amounts to suspension of the future (Balazs this issue), while in other cases it plays out as a series of tensions between different political visions of emptying and solutions to it (Đunda this issue; Rajković this issue).⁶ However, even in contexts where emptiness entails a state of suspension, imaginaries of possible futures—as death, replacement, or development—proliferate. In eastern Latvia, like in the Serbian mountains, tourism and nature reserves are present as dominant tropes of future possibilities for emptying places, regardless of whether

affordances of landscape are compatible with such imaginaries or not. For example, the former railway tracks running through Lielciems have been turned into a green path for tourists on bikes who do not come. While waiting for them to come, planners naturalize the emptying of Lielciems as part of change internal to history as progress.

Between loss and opportunity

When we discuss emptiness in various academic and non-academic settings, we often receive comments from audiences that emptiness is not literally empty, that there are things: animals, ruins, people, and more. Indeed, there are, and the residents of Lielciems include those things in their definition of emptiness. It is not the kind of life—or the kind of place in which—they wish to live. Whether and how an emptying place is reimagined as an opportunity—or continues to be seen as a loss—depends on the articulation of affordances of the landscape, such as surface and sub-surface physical characteristics; historical sedimentations, such as infrastructure or its ruins; the positionality of the place in relation to dominant forms of economic and political power; the place of the place in relation to counter-hegemonic projects that themselves can bring about dispossession (such as environmental activism); and the presence or absence of subjects in the position to propose—and possibly carry out—new visions and plans.

The tension between loss and opportunity appears in most contributions. It characterizes the encounter between Serbian mountain villagers for whom depopulation is a loss and environmental activists for whom depopulation is an opportunity for regeneration in Ivan Rajković's article. It is loss and subsequent yearnings for infrastructure that facilitate extraction and commodification in Dragan Đunda's article. And it is present as an oscillation between waste and value as Mariupol's planners and residents try to deal with Soviet material remains in Anna Balazs' article. The people who think of empty-

ing as a loss and those who think of emptying as an opportunity are not the same political subjects. The shift from thinking about emptiness as a loss to thinking about emptiness as an opportunity is a political shift, a moment of decision about the place of the present in a framework of meaning that gives form and direction to life. There is no neutral platform, no shared frame, in which all—those who see emptiness as a loss and those who see it as an opportunity—can be equally represented or can equally take part. In the struggle between loss and opportunity, the present appears as part of a framework that extends beyond it toward the past of plenty or the future of opportunity, but the present is difficult to see in and of itself—perhaps another reason why the term “emptiness” is fitting. Emptiness sits between loss and opportunity; in fact, it is as close as one gets to a shared frame between the subjects of loss and subjects of opportunity. It is a space where the opposite of emptiness has not yet been given form (Jullien 2004). The naming and the framing are political moments of form-giving.

Emptiness could be seen as an interregnum, that is, as a situation when the old is dying—the withering away not only of liberal hegemony but also of structures and narratives of modernity—and the new cannot be born (Gramsci 1971: 276; see also interpretations by Bauman 2012; Bordoni 2016). Seeing emptiness as interregnum necessarily means seeing loss and opportunity side by side (Dzenovska and Knight 2020). It is tempting, however, to push beyond the violence and the “morbid symptoms” and articulate emptiness as a necessary condition for (leftist) political mobilization (Kalb and Mollona 2018), the building of new general theories (Narotzky 2016), or as an opportunity to make the right choices (Bordoni 2016). This is a huge challenge, however, insofar as one cannot assume a shared frame within which a particular political end—such as justice or emancipation—makes sense for some articulation of “people.” As the contributions to this issue show, it is always contested who the subject of justice or emancipation is. This is not to say that polit-

ical struggles should dissolve in the sea of endless difference as an identity category, but they should take difference—as a state when a stance or a practice is consequential, that is it makes a difference (McClure 1990)—seriously.

Taking difference seriously is the normative underpinning of the critique of the period of depoliticization and technocratic governance that followed the end of the Cold War (e.g., Mouffe 2005, 2013). Critics of liberalism, such as Chantal Mouffe and others, argued for the need to return to politics if not as a space of antagonisms, then as a space of nominally shared values within which agonistic politics can unfold. Admittedly, during the post-Cold War decades of depoliticization and technocracy, the return of the political was somewhat romanticized (Dzenovska and De Genova 2018; Tiktin 2011). We write at a moment when hopes for the re-politization of the technocratic post-Cold War world are facing serious challenges in the form of an intensifying inter-imperialist conflict currently manifesting itself as the Russo-Ukrainian war and the intensification of claims for sovereignty the world over. In contrast to the “end of history” paradigm that was institutionalized through practices of liberalizing the post-socialist world, there is no clear victor anymore. Both liberalism and its opponents feel embattled (Dzenovska and Fedirko 2021), and this embattlement has been weaponized to detrimental effect in Ukraine. Moreover, climate change challenges the very desire for the political (Dzenovska and De Genova 2018), as publics are once again invited to listen to experts and think at a scale that is not fathomable from the perspective of a single human life (Latour and Chakrabarty 2020). And yet, a world without politics seems equally dangerous.

Emptiness and re-politicization

There are good reasons to conclude that the re-politicization of the European public space is not a return to the pre-technocratic era of the Cold War, where politicization was organized

along the lines of grand narratives and geopolitical camps on the global scale, class-based organization on the level of civil society, and party politics on the level of the nation-state (even in one-party states). The trends that heralded the era of post-politics—another term for the technocratic era characterized by the decline of trade unions and the growth of non-standard employment, dwindling trust in parties and participation in elections, demise of “grand narratives”—persist. New antagonisms do not resemble the politics of the Cold War: the surge of the right (Orban and Trump), left (Podemos and Syriza), and radical center (Macron and Zelensky) populism, expansion of movement-based parties, identity politics, urban networked cross-class uprisings that often descend into violence and civil wars, and voluntarism in international politics accompanied by the erosion of global institutions. Some scholars call this new quality of the political—a synthesis of post-political and new politicization—hyper-politics (Jäger 2022). The articles presented in this issue address this intertwining of post-political trends—urbanist technocracy (Balazs), NGO-ization of social services (Ryabchuk), commodification of protest (Đunda)—with the re-politization of everything—networked ecological movements (Đunda; Rajković), individualist estheticizing practices (Balazs), and the re-writing of foundational myths (Varfolomeeva).

This re-politicization is present across a variety of spaces from global cities to the ever-expanding theater of abandonment, indeterminacy, and exclusion. Since, following Henri Lefebvre (1992), we view space not as a background but as a function of interaction between subjects; emptiness is not merely a site of re-politicization but its object. Thus, Ivan Rajković in this issue shows that each attempt to revive a dying place entails its own form of emptying, for it must account for which human and/or non-human deaths are at the center of revival efforts. Dragan Đunda’s interlocutors mobilize diverging affordances and historical sedimentations to revalue devalued places, resulting in new forms of domination. Anna Varfolomeeva’s interloc-

tutors engage in discursive and material acts of creating something out of nothing in a changed ideological and material landscape. Anastasiya Ryabchuk's interlocutors insist on the politicization of hollowed out frontline communities as spatial and social formations, when aid providers wish to target selected groups in space. And Anna Balazs' interlocutors challenge dominant political narratives through engagement with the material landscape of Mariupol.

The re-politicization in/of emptying places, as elsewhere, is linked with the violent forms of dispossession engendered by post-socialist forms of capitalism and sovereignty and the withering away of modernist promises to deliver prosperity to everyone, instead targeting specific categories of individuals or groups.⁷ In Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, elites used the export-driven economic growth of the 2000s to conceal the economic disaster of the 1990s while promoting political demobilization of the subaltern population. No scene was left to play out competing images of the future: political parties without coherent ideologies, trade unions without bargaining power, and civil society organizations without connections with wide local constituencies. In the era of post-politics, deficient hegemonic projects took the form of populism as lingua franca of post-Soviet politics. In the paradigmatic cases of Lukashenka in Belarus or Putin in Russia, the appeal to "the people" devoid of concrete collective properties of class or citizenship, allowed for "plebiscitary democracy" (Yudin 2021) whereby personalist rulers acquired minimal legitimacy to exert sovereignty in the name of but without participation of "the people." Thus, the period of post-socialist post-politics in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus was the era of fragmented spatial order, where areas of capital accumulation interlaced with spaces of stagnation, as well as the era of fragmented ideological order, where extreme individualism coexisted with mythologies of collectivism.

The genesis and development of such places of plenty and emptiness can be traced throughout the history of foundational antagonisms in post-socialist contexts. The age of Cold

War confrontation and authoritarian modernization created the spaces of plenty—those agglomerations of capital through what the Soviet economist Yevgeny Preobrazhensky called socialist primitive accumulation that remain in the memory of our research subjects as the socialist modernity that replaced nothingness (Cucu 2019; Goldman 2022; Varfolomeeva this issue). Its material monuments in the form of factories, railway stations, houses of culture and apartment buildings elicit a warm, if at times ironic attachment (Balazs this issue). The conquered wilderness and the ecological wastelands left behind as "externalities" of socialist primitive accumulation (see Chornobyl zone in Turnbull et al. 2021) gave birth to the modernist Green and nationalist movements in the later days of socialism, while the contradictions of socialist accumulation led to workers' militancy, like the miners' strikes in the Soviet Union in 1989–1991. This phenomenon is highlighted by Rajković who co-opts Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier's (1997) concept of the "environmentalism of the poor" to fashion a definition of the meager leftovers of the aftermath of socialist development. What he terms "total de-growth" emerges as a newly privileged space of unspoiled nature. This process of "creative destruction"—revolutionization of productive forces that destroys their own predecessors (Schumpeter 1962)—however, did not occur in sites of emptiness, where we can observe material and social formations that have either remained untouched since the Soviet period, like the Azovstal plant recently demolished in Russia's assault on Mariupol (Balazs this issue; Tooze 2022), or have been stripped to their carcasses, like the factory and the empty apartment buildings of Lielciems or the remnants of collective farms in Ukraine's Poltavsk province. Such stagnant spaces, inhabited by surplus populations (Marx [1867] 1967: chapter 25) or subproletarians (Bourdieu 1973; Derluigiian 2005: 154) are coeval with the post-socialist post-politics. They are both pregnant with hyper-political violence and sites where alternative worlds and modes of living are imagined and practiced.

Emptiness affords different ways of articulating the political and thus collective political subjects. The demographic and economic correlates of emptying—outmigration, deindustrialization, disinvestments, uneven geographic development—destroy traditional political subjects: “classes for themselves,” civil society organizations rooted in communities and relations of production, representative political parties with hegemonic claims, voting citizens, while creating space for a variety of articulations of political subjects without lasting institutional structures and for distancing from politics altogether (Greenberg 2010). The embattled “good sense” (Gramsci 1971: 326), if it reaches the level of a political passion (Đunda this issue; Rajković this issue), finds a way out in clashes over localized or single event-based identifications associated with haphazard leaders and ad-hoc ideologies. In “advanced” Western polities, such as in the United States and United Kingdom, the emergence of a kind of over-satiated, identitarian politics ranged against neoliberal hegemony has characterized the “end of history” moment. Frequently described as *intersectionality*, it assumes a sense of common cause and solidarity across diverse groups and actors unable to move beyond forms of instinctive, perhaps even visceral, opposition, toward a common program. Charbonnier analyses this type of politicization, with a particular focus on environmental activism and the emerging political imperatives of the Anthropocene. He determines, that just like in the post-socialist setting, this form of political subjecthood looks “nothing, or almost nothing like a class understood in its classic socio-economic sense” (Charbonnier 2020: 256).

In the cases where such structureless expressions of political passions are overdetermined by imperial sovereign claims, as in the case of Ukraine (Balazs this issue; Ryabchuk this issue), they lead to violence of ever-growing proportions. What we do not see is clear dominance of what elsewhere is referred to as authoritarian populism of the dispossessed (Edelman 2019); neo-nationalism with elements of both left and right politics (Kalb 2009, 2022; Kalb

and Mollona 2018), or counter-mobilization in the name of dignity (Franquesa 2018; Narotzky 2016). While mobilizations against unsuccessful authoritarian populism in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus referred to dignity, dignity was quickly fossilized as an empty political slogan giving way to frustration, apathy, or violence. We see articulation of discourses of emptying with a variety of political projects and counterprojects, each positing a different political subject in a different relationship with emptying as a place-bound spatial phenomenon. And, in some cases, such as in Lielciems, we don’t see political mobilization at all. Talk of emptiness in this case becomes a critical discourse without being attached to a clear political position or subject. Focusing on the left-right opposition—or the problem of the rise of authoritarian populism in the provinces or neo-nationalism across Central Eastern Europe—might overlook Lielciems as politically irrelevant. In other words, it would be expelled from both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic politics. Thus, in contrast to literature concerned with emptying insofar as it provides an arena for political mobilization, we are interested in emptiness as a space that has not yet given form to concrete political subjects.

That said, we are also interested in the fate of politics and the political in relation to the emptying places in post-socialist contexts. On the one hand, we could ask whether postsocialism was coeval with the post-political, and whether hyper-politics—as proliferation of antagonisms that lash out and subside without establishing hegemony or lasting structures—herald the end of postsocialism? On the other hand, the contributions to this theme section unfold against the background of the Russo-Ukrainian war, which leads us to ask whether perhaps even hyper-politics is on its way out with the emergence of the new iron curtain that separates Russia from the West? Hyper-politics overwhelmed post-Soviet societies in times of post-crisis stagnation in sync with the Arab countries and the West. The political passions, in these conditions, found a weak articulation in cross-class uprisings that

tried to challenge state power through control over depoliticized common spaces (Gezi Park, Tahrir, and other Arab Spring squares, Occupy movements, colored revolutions with their Maidans), which themselves acquired properties of populist movements (Kalb and Mollona 2018). Such solidification of political passions, “bodies without organs: clenched and muscular, but without a real internal metabolism” (Gebraudo quoted in Jäger 2022), never led to an establishment of hegemonic politics but rather to a brief disruption of the demodernization tendency that characterizes emptiness (Minakov and Rabkin 2018). Populism combined with networked mobilizations produced the Bolotnaya protests in Russia that sunk to neighborhood and community levels after harsh repressions (Zhuravlev et al. 2020), Ukraine’s Maidan that started as a grassroots movement but was subsumed under geographical-identitarian striving to become closer to the European Union (Ishchenko and Zhuravlev 2021), and Belarusian protests that grew out of a populist alternative to Lukashenka’s populism (Artiukh 2020), shocked the country out of its *Sonderweg* in 2020 but were brutally suppressed by Lukashenka’s regime (Artiukh 2021).

The movements that opposed hyper-political anti-regime mobilizations in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus were equally identitarian disorganized responses, fueled by the fear of destruction of the remnants of Soviet mode of production in Donbas (“anti-Maidan”) or the never-ending *perestroika* of Belarus, were quickly appropriated by violence entrepreneurs and, later, Russian imperialist functionaries. Russia’s war on Ukraine can be seen as one more move in this cycle of failed hegemony, and some argue the last one. Volodymyr Artiukh has called Russia’s political logic the logic of anti-maidan governments (Artiukh 2022b). He defines anti-maidan political regimes as reactionary ideological and political formations that are predominantly based on preventing/suppressing the political in any form, but without a coherent ideological narrative or hegemony. If and when ethnographic practitioners manage to reach the areas

occupied by Russian forces after 2021, they would most probably find an unprecedented experiment of establishing a regime of pure dominance without hegemony (Guha 1998) that would combine police brutality at the scale not seen in Belarus, violence without precedent in Donbas since 2014, and postmodernist ideological spectacles never experienced in the Russia of Yeltsin and Putin.

The story of the long decline of the Soviet hegemonic project, the failed attempts to find new hegemons in the 1990s, and the increased antagonisms in post-crisis societies as evident in contributions to this theme section open a way for preliminary analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the war-related destruction, and the emptiness of ideological signs that emulate the missing hegemonic project (Artiukh 2022a).

Antagonism of scales

If the Russo-Ukrainian war unfolds on the global scale and draws political frontiers between human communities, contributions by Rajković and Đunda push us to think beyond the globe. In both pieces, politics is animated by competing environmental concerns, and both invite the reader to think about subjects who claim to represent nature beyond the human. In doing so, they connect to debates about the political in the Anthropocene, challenging us to think about the global and the planetary together (Chakrabarty 2021). As their contributions also illustrate, it should not be assumed that struggles for environmental justice will not produce “the part that has not part” (Rancière 2004). The political subject of Anthropocene, however vague, disparate, and temporary, rearticulates the antagonistic frontier of the political. It moves the frontier of the political from one that separates classes, ethnic groups, genders, or other groups within human societies to one that separates eco-social nexuses from forms of extractive and destructive power that endanger them. In doing so, it may inaugurate a new cycle of depoliticization, for, as Bruno Latour and

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2020) have noted, the scale of the planetary exceeds what is knowable and understandable during a human lifetime. Pursuing forms of justice that focus on eco-social nexuses rather than human communities may result in technocratic hegemonies without clear sovereigns and therefore without the political as a site constitutive of polities. What we are seeing, then, from the vantage point of emptiness is also the clash between the scale of the global and the scale of the planetary. In addition to the loss of hegemony and shared ground for agonistic politics, there is also the loss of shared scale at which to think politically. In such conditions, place—as lived space—takes on significance for grounding politics (and so a temporal politics of unembedded individuals is out, while place-based politics is in).

In conclusion, then, there is no one place from which to think about the political at the intersection of the multiple and multi-scalar crises shaping our worlds and those of our interlocutors. Every take on the political is itself an act of positioning alongside one or another emplaced frontier just like every act of acting upon emptiness as a space of in-betweenness, disorder, indeterminacy, demodernization, or degrowth is a political act of form-giving, of drawing a frontier along a particular us/them distinction. That said, the existence of a frontier is the one thing that all instances of the political share insofar as every act of inclusion is also an act of exclusion, to every “we” there is a “them.” Thinking otherwise is a depoliticizing act or, worse yet, a political one that attempts to obscure its political nature. As Carl Schmitt has noted, “a political entity cannot by its very nature be universal in the sense of embracing all of humanity and the entire world” (1996: 53). When someone claims to act in the name of humanity—or Life itself—it is likely to be usurpation of a universal or all-encompassing concept for the purpose of battling a particular enemy.

Schmitt’s critique was, of course, directed at liberalism, and, as such, was picked up by Chantal Mouffe who has criticized both the depoliticizing effects of technocratic post-Cold

War liberalism and the unipolar world order of American hegemony. Writing in 2005, a generation beyond the collapse of the Soviet Union, Mouffe urged the establishment/continuation of an equilibrium among regional poles, whose specific concerns, traditions, and myths should be seen as valuable, and the acceptance of “vernacular” models of democracy. Warning against the imposition of the Western liberal model as the only legitimate form of democracy, she predicted that recalcitrant societies that did not accept this inevitability, in particular, Russia, would be presented as “enemies of civilization,” thereby creating the conditions of an antagonistic struggle.

In eastern Ukraine, Schmitt’s admonition against the process of depoliticization engendered by the rise of modern liberalism rises to meet us (1996: 69–73). Borders, be they the formal Westphalian markers of the limits of the state, or the spatial markers of emptiness that draw the line between interpretative frameworks of life or divergent teleological orientations, stand as a challenge to the mistaken assumption that technology or abundant energy (or the fiat of a hubristic “end of history” hegemony) can effect an escape from the political turmoil of the past. The symbolic battlefield of the urban industrial landscape of the Donbas presents a clear exemplar of the danger of this illusion and argues the necessity for what Schmitt designated as a “philosophy of concrete life” (1996: 73); one, that is, which recognizes politics with its struggles and conflicts to human life.

But just as one usurpation of universalism is laid to rest, another emerges, now encompassing not only humanity but all life on earth. Those wishing to make new worlds do not appreciate the continued presence of the political and do not recognize the pluralistic nature of the world, the fact that it is a “pluriverse,” not a “universe.” The plural nature of the world, like the political, can only be seen through encounters. Thinking not from one place but from many concrete places—eastern Latvia, Serbian mountains, Karelia, the Russian Far East, eastern Ukraine, especially Mariupol and Donbas—shows how

scales, frontiers, and political subjects are articulated together in still historical conjunctures rather than on a time scale unfathomable from the perspective of a single human life.

Acknowledgments

This special issue was initially envisioned as the product of a long-awaited collaboration between the editors of *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Science* and the theme section editors. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, dramatically changed the publishing context. As a note from the editors of *Laboratorium*, we quote the words of Elena Bogdanova:

On the fateful date of February 24, 2022, we happened to be hard at work on this particular issue. And it was through work on this issue that we came to realize, in stages, how things have changed for international collaborations, for social sciences in Russia, and for Russian social science journals. The first thing that we realized was that it was becoming extremely difficult to preserve *Laboratorium* in its previous format—meaning, a full-fledged uncensored publication freely circulating in Russian and international spheres of social sciences alike. The complex and multidimensional contexts at the intersections of which we find ourselves have created a situation where the effects and interpretations of certain publications become unpredictable.

Compounding the issue are the new Russian legislations with vague formulations, potentially extremely broad reach, and leading directly to fines or imprisonment of up to 10 years. The risks for *Laboratorium*, the authors, and members of *Laboratorium's* editorial collective are high. Under the current circumstances, any sociological text, even if not intended as a political one, can take on the appearance and ethos of a political statement. At

the same time, as we are allied with the principles of public sociology, we support the right of our authors to clearly state their political positions. After a discussion among *Laboratorium's* editors, we determined that under the present conditions, we cannot publish texts without strategic editing. We also agreed that it would be downright unethical to try to convince authors to self-censure their articles. We thus finally decided to forego the publication of this special issue in *Laboratorium*. We are grateful to *Focaal* for generously providing an alternative platform and to the special issue editors for their professionalism, understanding, and open dialogue. We feel sorrow about our aborted collaboration, and about all the collaborations with Russian social science researchers that have now been rendered impossible because of the situation at hand. We want to affirm the position of *Laboratorium* in support of the principles of contemporary independent social science beyond borders and nationalities.

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Liberalism in Latvia (Cornell, 2018) and *Departure and Emptiness in the Latvian Countryside (in Latvian)*, Turība, 2012).

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Notes

1. Lielciems is a pseudonym.
2. For a more extended discussion of the Latvian state's minority politics, see Dzenovska 2018.
3. We address relative versus absolute emptiness in another publication (Dzenovska et al. n.d.).
4. See also Jaume Franquesa's (2018) analysis of Southern Catalonians' insistence on the link between place and people via discourses of dignity, which makes them appear as "waste" in the eyes of planners and investors.
5. It could be said that our aim is to tread a middle ground between what Don Kalb and Mao Mollona (2018) call the idealist and realist strands in critical scholarship.
6. We thank *Focaal* reviews that enabled us to formulate this as a juxtaposition between tensions and suspension.
7. See Smith (2011) for a related argument on the disappearance of "expansive hegemony"—that is, of hegemony that strives to include most if not all subjects, and the emergence of "selective hegemony" as consent-building projects that target specific groups.

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