

BOOK REVIEW

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Outside, Inside, In Between: Rethinking the Socialist Subject

Abstract: *This review reads the special issue through the problem of the relationship between human beings and their environments. It proposes a three-part typology distinguishing between environments that shape behaviour from the outside, environments that become internalised through habit and discipline, and environments that are constitutive of cognition itself. By tracing these overlapping modes of subject formation, the essay highlights the broader conceptual contribution of the special issue to debates on socialist modernity, subjectivity, and the making of persons.*

Keywords: *socialist modernity; environment; subject formation; governmentality; 4E cognition.*

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There is a core conviction that runs through all six studies gathered in this special issue, namely that the human subject is malleable, shaped by social conditions, available for deliberate improvement. This was one of the defining commitments of socialist modernity, which sought not only to transform economies and political structures but to produce new, better, socialist human subjects and subjectivities. One good concept that comes to mind if one would like to summarise this attitude is “engineering”: it implies something intentional, top-down, applied to human material with a programme in mind. But I would like to suggest that engineering does not capture everything that is to be found in the six studies. This word strongly implies a plan, a planner, and an object being shaped. What I find across these texts is something more

entangled than that. The socialist subject is not simply manufactured; it is caught up in its environments in more diverse ways. Orhan Pamuk once wrote that real museums are places where time is transformed into space. I want to suggest that these six studies do something similar – they transform a historical problem into a spatial one. The question of how socialist modernity tried to make new human beings becomes, in these texts, a question about spaces, places, and environments.

Thus, the common thread running through this special issue is not only engineering but a conceptual problem: where does the environment end and the human being begin? Each of these six studies proposes a different spatial imagery for answering that question. Each one locates the socialist subject at a different distance from the environment that was meant to shape it. Some place the subject squarely outside, acted upon by architecture, infrastructure, and administered schedules. Others show how external norms cross the threshold of the skin and become habit, aspiration, self-surveillance. Others still dissolve the threshold altogether, distributing cognition and selfhood across organism, tool, and designed environment.

To make those different imageries visible, I would like to propose a typology – three axes describing three ways in which environment and subject can be related. In practice they are almost always intertwined, overlapping, mutually reinforcing. But it is useful, analytically, to pull them apart, and it is along these three axes that the six studies in this special issue can be most precisely located.

The three axes

The first axis describes how the environment acts on us from outside. Spaces are arranged so that certain behaviours become easy and others difficult or impossible, without anything being explicitly stated, without rules being announced, and without ideology needing to be articulated. A classic example is Robert Moses's bridges on Long Island, built too low for buses, thereby excluding working-class visitors from the beach through concrete alone. This is the case analysed by Langdon Winner, who argues that artifacts can embody political relations and that technical arrangements can carry forms of power without requiring explicit legislation or discourse (Winner, 1980). On this axis, the environment functions as a silent operator that structures action through material configuration rather than persuasion or command.

The second axis describes how the environment gets under the

skin. Through repeated practice - ritual, habit, ceremony, discipline-external norms are gradually internalised and become durable dispositions. What begins as an external constraint becomes part of how subjects experience themselves, how they evaluate their own conduct, and how they come to desire what they have been trained to desire. Governmentality studies, for example, trace precisely this movement: from outside prescription to inner aspiration, where power operates not only through external arrangement but through the formation of subjectivity itself.

The third axis extends this trajectory further by challenging the very separation between environment and subject. Here, the environment is not outside at all but constitutive of cognition itself. Within the 4E tradition – embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended cognition – mind is not located in an autonomous interior but is distributed across bodies, tools, spaces, and materially structured practices (see for example Newen et al., 2018). The boundary between person and world is not given in advance but assembled through scaffolding, coupling, and situated activity, such that cognition and agency emerge from these ongoing relations rather than preceding them.

The six studies

The two papers *Shaping the Bulgarian Youth: The Architectural Heritage of Pioneer Camps, 1944–1989* (Ekaterina Tsoleva, Maria Kouvari, Silke Langenberg) and *Sports and Recreational Policies in Post-war Bulgaria* (Nevena Dimitrova) can be read together as occupying the first axis, where the environment acts on subjects from the outside through arrangement rather than declaration. In Tsoleva, Kouvari, and Langenberg's study, the spatial logic is precise and quietly coercive: the main square positions children for roll call, the fence prevents unsanctioned exit, and the group leader's room is placed near the staircase so that surveillance is an effect of layout rather than of intentional observation. Hygienic regulations - bed orientation, air volume per child, the distance between toilets and refectory – operate as measurements that directly constrain bodies without needing to be articulated as rules. Nothing has to be said; the space itself does the governing. At a broader infrastructural scale, Nevena Dimitrova's *Sports and Recreational Policies in Post-war Bulgaria* shows the same logic extended across welfare and leisure systems. The distribution of sports halls, balneotherapy centres, therapeutic schedules, minimum bed counts, equipment requirements, and the allocation of resort places according to

workplace category all structure what workers can do with their bodies and time without explicitly declaring ideology. Like Robert Moses's bridges, these infrastructures act through material fact rather than discourse. Both papers, however, already begin to move toward the second axis, where the environment no longer merely structures behaviour externally but gets under the skin through repetition, ritual, and organised practice. For example, in *Shaping the Bulgarian Youth: The Architectural Heritage of Pioneer Camps, 1944–1989*, architectural logic is supplemented by ceremonial forms of collective life: flag-raising rituals, campfire gatherings, and “cultural mass work” in which personal stories of former partisans or border guards are staged as patriotic pedagogy. What begins as spatial arrangement becomes embodied repetition, gradually forming dispositions of belonging, discipline, and identification. Similarly, Dimitrova's analysis shows how infrastructures of health and leisure become lived routines. What begins as external organisation becomes aspiration, self-evaluation, and embodied normativity.

Yana Yancheva's *The Ideologically Constructed Image of Socialist Child and the Perceptions on Its Body* makes this second axis explicit, showing how disciplined repetition produces a subject who monitors itself. Hygiene, bodily discipline, and educational performance are framed as continuous obligations, while pioneer rules demand constant demonstration of worthiness through study, labour, and creative activity. Uniforms, pledges, and rehearsed salutes do not simply constrain from the outside; they are repeated until they become part of how the child understands itself as a moral and political subject. Visibility to authority – teachers, Komsomol leaders, institutional observers – becomes internalised visibility, where the child begins to anticipate, simulate, and reproduce the evaluative gaze. Across socialist contexts, the disciplined body thus becomes both instrument and symbol of state power, not because it is forced at every moment, but because it has been trained to carry the state within it. Georgeta Nazarska's *The ‘Study of Man and His Brain’ Long-term Comprehensive Program in Bulgaria (1984–1995): in Searching of ‘Harmoniously Developed Personality’* pushes this logic further by intensifying the aspiration to intervene directly in biological and cognitive capacities. The programme's ambition - to optimise creativity, prevent illness, enhance working capacity, reduce stress, and even reorganise learning and perception through suggestopedia, hypnosis, and neurochemical intervention - marks a shift from external discipline to internal modulation. Here, the environment

is no longer only something that is repeated until it becomes habit; it is redesigned to act directly on the substrate of cognition and affect. Yet precisely at this point, the second axis begins to blur into the third, as the question emerges of whether there is still a stable inside on which the environment acts.

This is made explicit in Kristina Popova's *Travelling Pavlovism: Ideas on Children's Development and on Preschool Education in Bulgaria and the GDR in the 1950s: Prof. Eva Schmidt-Kolmer and Prof. Sophia Avramova*, where the self is no longer treated as an interior substance but as a system of conditioned relations. Repetitive grammatical drills, automatised bodily training, and developmental models of attachment in Schmidt-Kolmer's work all converge on the idea that cognitive development is not internal maturation alone but depends on structured relations with the environment. Without scaffolding, development is impaired; with it, cognition emerges as a distributed process. Denitsa Nencheva's *What is "Anthropotechnics": On the Trail of a Transforming Concept* extends this into a broader historical frame, showing how post-war ergonomics and systems thinking redefine humans as components within socio-technical assemblages rather than autonomous agents. In this third axis, the environment is not outside or internalised at all, but constitutive of cognition itself: mind is embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended, and the boundary between person and world is not given in advance but assembled through scaffolding, coupling, and practice.

I want to end with two observations – one that zooms in, and one that zooms out, so to say. There is a risk that the analysis of socialist environments becomes too coherent, too smoothly functional – as if people simply inhabited spaces exactly as planners intended, as if governance flowed in a straight line from architectural arrangement to bodily discipline to internalised subjectivity, without friction, remainder, or deviation. Against this, the zooming-in moves toward the mundane dimension of lived experience: toward those ordinary, repetitive, and seemingly trivial practices through which social life is actually sustained. Read in this register, the socialist environments described in the preceding studies are not only infrastructures of control or ideological production, but also dense fields of mundane activity. They are inhabited through boredom, gossip, minor acts of resistance, improvisation, waiting, and repetition. This is precisely the direction opened by Catriona Kelly's work on socialist everyday life (Kelly, 2014), which shows how late socialist society cannot be understood only through its

ideological projects or institutional architectures, but must also be read through the grain of everyday practices, domestic rhythms, and affective micro-worlds in which state socialism was both reproduced and subtly reworked.

The second observation moves in the opposite direction – outward, toward the comparative and the transnational. There is a corresponding risk in reading socialist Bulgaria as a self-contained system. The pioneer camp was not an exclusively socialist invention. In Western contexts, comparable institutions – scout camps, holiday colonies, summer programmes for urban children – were organised around the same assumptions about fresh air, physical exercise, moral formation, and the benefits of structured life in nature. The spatial organisation, the hygiene regulations, the practices of ideological interpellation were all present there too (see for example Van Slyck 2006). Sport and the physical wellbeing of workers is a cornerstone of neoliberal corporate culture as much as of socialist productivism, precisely because both systems recognised, in their own idioms, that a healthy and disciplined body is a productive one. Going in this direction would not erase the differences between socialist and liberal-democratic governance. It would clarify what was shared and what was specific – and allow the Bulgarian material to speak to questions that extend well beyond the Cold War.

What unites the six studies, finally, is not a shared answer but a shared willingness to ask where the human ends and the environment begins, and to let that question stay open rather than resolving it into a single image of the socialist subject. Whether approached from the outside, from beneath the skin, or from a vantage where the distinction itself dissolves, the subject that emerges from this special issue is neither fully made nor fully free – it is, like the spaces it inhabits, always under construction.

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