

My research, the colloquium in Cerisy-la-Salle and the Bassetti-Foundation

di Anna Zhelnina

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In July 2006 I attended the colloquium “L’Anthropologie historique de la raison scientifique” in Cerisy-la-Salle, France.

My visit was funded by the Bassetti-Foundation, to which I’m very grateful now – because this colloquium contributed to my view of my future PhD-project.

I think my research interests have strong links with those of the Foundation: generally speaking, I’m working on innovation – my PhD topic is “Transformations of Urban Space – on Example of Post-Soviet St.Petersburg”. The main idea is to find out, what is the mechanism of spatial transformation in the city (who starts the initiative, who brings the innovation into life, who tries to stop it, etc. – with other words, context, actors, scenarios of urban innovation), the process of introducing the innovation in the urban space and the links between spatial and social changes. I’m concentrating on particular changes and reconstruction projects in St.Petersburg – regarding the design and use of public and retail spaces in the city centre, which is undergoing radical changes since recent 15 years. St.Petersburg is a good example of a changing post-soviet city: that’s why it is a good field for studying innovations – for example, I mean here the special interest for arranging public spaces (the initiative comes from the official governmental level) and way, in which those spaces get re-appropriated by everyday space users (in soviet times there was no public space in the cities in the traditional “western” understanding: that’s why this particular new type of spatial organization was an important step in introducing new public culture); another sphere of significant changes is the retail space: the introduction of new forms of shopping organization, the occurring shopping malls that now take place of markets and department stores also expect certain behaviour and certain values from the space users.

The PhD research is going to be based on my previous studies – my diploma and master theses, which I wrote about two types of spaces (public space – a study of a pedestrian street in St.Petersburg, its design and use history, and retail space – the introduction of shopping malls in St.Petersburg; both studies were actually made about innovations – pedestrian streets and shopping malls never existed in our city until recent times, but I realized the importance of it only this summer). I’m going to extend the field also to the housing area – by studying the transformation of one particular district (Krestovsky ostrov) that is now rapidly transforming from public recreational zone to the district of elite housing; the process is now being widely discussed.

Concerning this I look at the innovation in the spatial structure in the city as at the mean of introducing and supporting new ways and styles of action and behavior, which are more welcome in particular ideological, political, social circumstances. Furthermore, the city space can be viewed as kind of learning arena of hierarchy, power relations and dominating ideologies for the city dwellers – because around every spatial innovation (e.g. reconstruction of one square in central St.Petersburg - Sennaya) there can be a lot of discussion, quarrels, during which groups of interests actually become seen, and so do their means of influence on the result, their relations to one another. The city space is a playground of social transformation – due to concrete spatial and technological innovations.

I suppose the way I use the term “innovation” could be a little to general – actual changes in the spatial structure are starting as well as resulting from social / behavioral changes; but I would like to try to look at the post-soviet history of St.Petersburg as history of spatial innovations which come together with the social ones.

Less general question would be – who are the actors on this playground, who’s initiative and actions are more likely to be effective, who can and by what means influence the situation – in other words, ways of public participation in innovation processes (whether there is a need of public participation at all? Whether it is possible to control the transformation process?).

For the first sight my topic has no straight connection with the historical anthropology of scientific thought, but the topic itself was not the only thing, what I found important during this colloquium. Actually, what I think was best and helped me to improve my PhD-research proposal, is the logic of argumentation and approach to social life that was shown by most contributors. It helped me to organize and structure my own thoughts and define the analytical approach that would be more effective and “fresh” to study my topic – with close attention to things and social communication regarding them.

My original interest for transformation of urban public spaces became more focused on the innovation process and the material dimension of urban built environment: which is essential for understanding present social relations. I will try to apply “latourian” vision (e.g. as stated in “Making Things Public”) to the field of urban environment and urban public spaces. Actually, my study could designated as part of traditional urban studies with a specific theory, or a new field for application of “neo-positivist” view.