

WHAT WAS EMPTINESS AND WHAT COMES NEXT?

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

4-6 JUNE | 2025

CONFERENCE DAY 1: Wed, 4 June 2025

Time	Event
13:00–13:30	Day 1 Registration
13:00–14:00	Session I (introduction): What was Emptiness... Speaker: Dace Dzenovska, University of Oxford
14:00–16:00	Session II (double panel): Keyplaces of Our Times (part I) Chair: Dominic Martin Speakers: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>What makes emptying places keyplaces of our times?</i> Dace Dzenovska, University of Oxford• <i>Place, territory, terrain: A spatial triad for a world on fire</i> Gáston Gordillo, University of British Columbia• <i>Upstream, downstream, offshore</i> Julie Chu, University of Chicago Discussants: Rebecca Bryant, Utrecht University Madeleine Reeves, University of Oxford
16:00–17:00	Drinks Reception

CONFERENCE DAY 2: Thurs, 5 June 2025

Time	Event
08:45–09:00	Day 2 Registration
09:00–11:00	Session III (double panel): Keyplaces of Our Times (part 2) Chair: Dominic Martin Speakers: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Rural Spain: Emptiness, energy transitions, and politics</i> Jaume Franquesa, State University of New York, Buffalo• <i>Quarantine road</i> Chloe Ahmann, Cornell University• <i>Unprecedented : Emptiness</i> Daniel Knight, University of St. Andrews

	Discussants: Rebecca Bryant, Utrecht University Madeleine Reeves, University of Oxford
11:00–11:15	Tea/coffee break
11:15–13:15	<p>Session IV (roundtable): War, Destruction, and Capital Accumulation Chair and moderator: Denys Gorbach</p> <p>Speakers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bad, mad and dangerous: The voracious value regimes of post-liberal security</i> Ruben Andersson, University of Oxford • <i>Keynesian militarism, or doubledown necropolitics?: Perspectives on authoritarian capitalism at the 'home front' in Russia in the fourth (?) year of war</i> Jeremy Morris, Aarhus University • <i>Devaluation of military labour on Ukraine's emptying frontlines</i> Taras Fedirko, University of Glasgow • <i>Liberal accumulation and the return of the king</i> Don Kalb, University of Bergen • <i>Wastelanding as a mode of modern statecraft</i> Zsuzsa Gille, University of Illinois • <i>Martial placemaking: Spatial practices and representations along the Russo-Ukrainian frontline</i> Volodymyr Artiukh, University of Oxford
13:15–14:15	LUNCH BREAK
14:30–16:30	<p>Session V (roundtable): Forms of Collaboration Chair and moderator: Ruben Andersson</p> <p>Speakers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Beyond the solitary figures of anthropology and anthropologists: How collaboration could relocate anthropological relations</i> Sarah Green, University of Helsinki • <i>Second-order anxieties: On comparison and scale</i> Rebecca Bryant, Utrecht University • <i>Collaborative intelligence: How to make anthropologists and AI agents work together as a team</i> Morten Pedersen, University of Copenhagen • <i>On the embrace of zigzag learning</i> Don Kalb, University of Bergen • <i>Collaborative ethnographic comparison</i> Dace Dzenovska, University of Oxford

CONFERENCE DAY 3: Fri, 6 June 2025

Time	Event
08:45–09:00	Day 3 registration
09:00–11:00	<p>Session VI (panel): Land, Space, and Place in the Russian Far East Chair: Maria Gunko</p> <p>Speakers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Russian Far East: Speculating on land and on a future that never comes</i> Natalia Ryzhova, Palacký University • <i>Spirit of capitalism or impulse to growth: Multiplicity of land in agricultural work in Primorskii Krai, Russia</i> Hyun-Gwi Park, Kyung Hee University • <i>The informal economy of survival in the midst of official emptiness: Peripheral capitalism on the Upper Lena</i> Ivan Peshkov, Adam Mickiewicz University • <i>Cadastral power in maritime Russia</i> Dominic Martin, University of Oxford <p>Discussant: Alexander Vorbrugg, University of Bern</p>
11:00–11:15	Tea/coffee break
11:15–13:15	<p>Session VII (double panel): Desiring Power (part I) Chair: Volodymyr Artiukh</p>

	<p>Speakers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Common weal and chastnik: The death and rebirth of public buses in Kryvyi Rih, Ukraine</i> Denys Gorbach, Sciences Po • <i>Who will repair our building?</i> Tamta Khalvashi, Ilia State University • <i>The landscape of solitude: Power, loss, and place in post-industrial Armenia</i> Harutyun Vermishyan, Yerevan State University • <i>Failed transition? From post-Soviet commons to independent urban spaces in Armenia</i> Sarhat Petrosyan, Yerevan State University/urbanlab <p>Discussants: Caroline Humphrey, University of Cambridge Dace Dzenovska, University of Oxford</p>
13:15–14:15	LUNCH BREAK
14:30–16:30	<p>Session VIII (double panel): Desiring Power (part II) Chair: Volodymyr Artiykh</p> <p>Speakers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Khoziain and the desire for a more human(e) state in a former socialist town in Lithuania</i> Marija Norkunaite, Vilnius University • <i>Emotional geographies of loss and neglect – and how they feed the success of right-wing parties</i> Katrin Grossmann, University of Applied Sciences Erfurt • <i>"They destroyed it": Responsibility and ruination in a small Armenian town</i> Maria Gunko, University of Oxford <p>Discussants: Caroline Humphrey, University of Cambridge Dace Dzenovska, University of Oxford</p>
16:30–17:30	<p>Session IX (conclusion): ...and What Comes Next?</p> <p>Speaker: Dace Dzenovska, University of Oxford</p>

ABSTRACTS

Sessions II and III: KEYPLACES OF OUR TIMES

Double panel

Convener: Dace Dzenovska

Chair: Dominic Martin

Discussants: Rebecca Bryant | Madeleine Reeves

Panel abstract

We seem to be living through a chronotopic shift. More and more scholars and publics, whether in the Global North, South, or East, think—or are invited to think—at a planetary scale and in geological time. This does not mean that other chronotopes, such as the global-historical, have disappeared or are devalued. Moreover, temporal logics and spatial organization are changing within chronotopes. For example, the future no longer promises to deliver us from the ills of the present. Instead, sorting out relations with the past is thought to propel us into the future. Previous spatial categories, such as the city and the country, the centre and the periphery, no longer seem sufficient for capturing contemporary spatial configurations, relations, and hierarchies.

As a result, scholars offer new conceptualizations of time, space, power, and politics. Most people, however, live in places and use vernacular categories, such as emptiness in the case of our research, to make sense of the radical reconfigurations of their worlds. This panel invites participants to think about keyplaces—and key subjects—of our times. What are they and what do they reveal about spatial and temporal configurations of power? Do they push against the limits of dominant theories of space, time, and power? Do they provide vernacular analytics that open new possibilities for understanding and acting?

Paper abstracts

Place, territory, terrain: A spatial triad for a world on fire | Gáston Gordillo

This paper examines the experiential, political, and material dimensions of wildfires in Canada to rethink humanist understandings of place and territory in conversation with more-than-human sensibilities of the Earth amid a worsening climate crisis. Inspired by Lefebvre's triadic understanding of 'space' as simultaneously "conceived, perceived, and lived", I argue that the climate crisis demands that we view each site on Earth as simultaneously a place, a territorial configuration, and a component of the planet's terrain: in other words, as socially and culturally experienced, as regulated politically by technologies of power, and as a component of the more-than-human and voluminous materialities, fluxes, and turbulences of the Earth. In particular, I analyze how different actors respond to wildfires by drawing from their senses of place and territorial allegiances, but also how wildfires exemplify the more-than-human agency of terrain and, in particular, its capacity to disrupt, redefine, and potentially destroy places and territories. I argue that a project of radical decarbonization and climate justice would necessarily entail creating qualitatively new places and territories attuned to the rhythms and power of terrain.

Upstream, downstream, offshore | Julie Chu

Before 'the chain' became the dominant figure for understanding the dynamics of supply and demand in the 1980s, fluvial landscapes have long undergirded logistical projects for building out and maintaining the infrastructural channels of commerce and travel, especially around estuarial or delta zones where rivers

meet the sea. Drawing on contemporary corporate discourses of supply chain management and operational research and on two decades of ethnographic engagements with the original ‘development deltas’ of Post-Mao China, this paper offers an estuarial take on ‘keyplaces’ in relation to what scholars of modernity and supply chain capitalism have described as a ‘liquid’ world full of uncertainty and volatility. But in lieu of thinking of flows along the global links of ‘the chain’, the talk focuses on the logistical junctures of upstream, downstream, and the offshore that make fluvial landscapes thinkable and thereby, actionable in terms of supply chains.

Rural Spain: Emptiness, energy transitions, and politics | Jaume Franquesa

The modern history of Spain has turned on its head Marx and Engels’s call for the “gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country”. Since the 1950s, as Spanish urban areas have grown larger, depopulation and impoverishment have extended through large swathes of rural Spain – an area that is often referred to as the *España vacía* (‘empty Spain’). Whereas this expression, which is of recent coinage, conveys the idea that this part of the country is out-of-synch (a thing of the past, lacking productive function, politically irrelevant, etc.), I argue that the *España vacía* is a ‘keyplace of our times’. This is evidenced in two interrelated processes. First, the remarkable growth of renewable energy, with many seeing emptiness as a key competitive advantage to turn Spain into the ‘battery of Europe’. Second, the myriad political initiatives, both left and right, that in recent years have emerged out of these purportedly empty lands.

Quarantine road | Chloe Ahman

Quarantine Road is a dead-end street in South Baltimore, home to a 150-acre landfill and a ‘keyplace’ for understanding spatial governing practices through which American cities manage threats to public health. Here, I read its present as a site for municipal waste management against its past as a containment zone for the contagious. These two share more than being ‘nuisance’ projects sited on the urban margin. Nineteenth-century epidemics created an appetite for organized waste management and introduced the legal groundwork for sanitation efforts that drew waste infrastructures to this place. By tracking the symbolic, regulatory, and racialized ties between wasting bodies and municipal garbage on this 150-acre plot, we can track the sedimentation of a governing logic that secures itself through big and little acts of quarantine. But we can also glimpse the stuff of its undoing – because a story of the city told from here unsettles fantasies of total sequestration.

Unprecedented : Emptiness | Daniel Knight

Rising to the panel’s provocation to think about keyplaces/keysobjects of our times, I question the seemingly ubiquitous popularity of ‘the unprecedented’ trope in relation to entangled registers of emptiness. ‘Unprecedented’ has become a marker of our time, denoting the supposedly unparalleled magnitude of challenges facing human beings as we hurtle toward the middle of the turbulent 21st century. The unprecedented label imbues an event with a sense of urgency and the need for immediate action, but also has a subtext that implies that the problem is insurmountable, thus foregoing accountability and action.

This paper investigates the relationship between the unprecedented and emptiness as cornerstones of contemporary social imaginaries. The *Emptiness*

project has revealed the abundant multiplicities of present-absences, voids, and in-between timespaces that stalk the contemporary world: temporal gaps and fading futural horizons, extractive landscapes and global environmental change, pervasive conditions of capitalism and (post)modernity, material vacancy and imperial debris, population movements, and emotional and affective vacuums. Is this harlequin emptiness we encounter unprecedented? Is emptiness the bedmate of the so-called unprecedented polycrisis? Or, to what extent are these framing the product of analytic sensitivity and/or dominant rhetoric cultures?

What makes emptying places keyplaces of our times? | Dace Dzenovska

While all epochs produce their share of abandoned places, the problem of discarded places—and people—has emerged as one of the defining social, material, and political problems of the post-Cold War world. It exists as “spaces on the side of the road” and “left-behind neighbourhoods” in formerly industrial areas of imperial centres. It exists as “unstable ground” around postcolonial extraction sites, such as gold mines. And it exists as emptying places in the former socialist world, that is, as places that are losing their constitutive elements, from people to services to infrastructure. These emptying places are the keyplaces of postsocialism and, insofar as they connect via family resemblances with left-behind, abandoned, and otherwise surplus places and people, they are the keyplaces of our times. Analyses of emptying places as keyplaces of our times enables insights about the radical separations—rather than inequalities—that characterize the world we live in and that constitute one of the most urgent political problems for the foreseeable future.

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SESSION IV: WAR, DESTRUCTION, AND CAPITAL ACCUMULATION

Roundtable

Convener: Volodymyr Artiukh

Chair and moderator: TBC

Roundtable abstract

Emplaced accumulation of capital produces exhausted, ‘worthless’, and stagnating spaces, which Don Kalb calls ‘value’s flip side’. When hegemony breaks down, state-organised and privatised violence creates outright devastation where value is destroyed in a negative sum game. Anthropologists study abandoned places attributed to structural violence, but accessing massive areas devastated by wars and enclosed by security forces is harder.

This panel engages with the anthropological history of the late 20th and early 21st centuries as the history of mass geographic, demographic, and environmental destruction related to the secular crisis in accumulation and energy resource extraction. Christophe Bonneuil and Jeane-Baptiste Fresco argue that our age is the Thanatocene, where Western warfare is integrated into the industrial system and science. Social Science is increasingly filled with ‘-cides’: urbicides, ecocides, and climacides, while the liberal way of solving crises leads to further crises, shifting costs to the peripheries. With the waning of the American ‘incoherent empire’ and heightened inter-imperialist struggle, slow and ‘fast’ violence seems to spiral out of control.

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SESSION V: FORMS OF COLLABORATION

Roundtable

Convener: Dace Dzenovska

Chair and moderator: Ruben Andersson

Roundtable abstract

Collaboration and comparison have long been part of anthropological practice but have become subject to intense reflection in the last few years. Some anthropologists have reflected on collaboration with interlocutors, others on collaboration between anthropologists, some on comparison undertaken by lone anthropologists, but few explicitly on collaborative comparison. This panel brings together anthropologists who are working or have worked on comparative and collaborative ethnographic projects, to reflect on the insights that this kind of anthropological work has produced, as well as on the conditions that enable or demand collaborative work, such as funding landscapes, increasingly complex problem questions, and a sense of political urgency.

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SESSION VI: LAND, SPACE, AND PLACE IN THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST

Panel

Convener: Dominic Martin

Chair: Maria Gunko

Discussant: Alexander Vorbrugg

Panel abstract

This panel examines the play of change across the vast and various lands of the Russian Far East (RFE). Participants will seek ways to define and think with this macro geographical region as an anthropological locality through a focus on the land. Land-centric treatment of the contemporary RFE space-place will consider the new forms of digital and algorithmic power that are reshaping the region and 'producing space', whether populated or empty. How is such a system used by, for, and against local Far Easterners? What disputes arise over the measuring and apportioning of land in agriculture, the zoning of land for industrial development, or the projection of spaces into shrinking and statistical oblivion?

Another important dimension is how this spatialising power interacts with the RFE's evolving migration regime. Former closed spaces were turned in the 2010s into special economic zones and will soon become in the 2020s 'international territories of advanced development' where normal citizenship laws will not apply. What do these evolving spatial politics entail, literally, *on the ground*? How do Far Eastern lands get revalued by sovereign decree as the Russian state's spatial priorities shift? What happens when current Russian geopolitical aspirations meet the obdurate Far Eastern lands with their palimpsest of imperial legacy? If classic anthropological studies show that land is the site *par excellence* at which the individual and the collective are imbricated, then what assumptions about personhood are entailed by and become confounded when such state projects touch the ground, in the lands where diverse Far Easterners (Russians, Koreans, Cossacks, Chinese, etc.) meet?

Paper abstracts

The Russian Far East: Speculating on land and on a future that never comes | Natalia Ryzhova

In 1910, journalist Amursky criticized Vladivostok's land distribution, noting how foreigners received prime plots for negligible fees. He argued this mismanagement ignored the city's future 'privileged position' while fueling speculation. Speculation is central to my analysis, approached in two interrelated ways: (1) as land acquiring and selling, balancing profit potential with deal timing; and (2) as a futural orientation, engaging with uncertainty (Bryant & Knight 2019). The first lens examines local practices in the early 20th and 21st centuries. Despite vast land reserves, regional inhabitants have never had proper access. State programs failed to resolve this issue, and speculation logic explains why. This shaped the region's spatial unevenness – largely 'empty', abandoned, yet densely packed in rare 'select' areas. The second lens links local aspirations to geopolitical ambitions, which drive governments to repeatedly speculate on the region's 'privileged position' and push people to continually participate in the construction of a future that never materializes. The resulting speculative cycles drain the Russian Far East – materially and emotionally.

Spirit of capitalism or impulse to growth: Multiplicity of land in agricultural work in Primorskii Krai, Russia | Hyun-Gwi Park

In Primorskii Krai, Russia, agriculture is considered to be the most advanced and modernised sector of the economy. Not only during the colonisation of the Far East, but also during the socialist revolution and subsequent Sovietization, 'work on the land' (*zemledelenie*) has been central to state policy and the lives of ordinary people. Focusing on the Korean factor in agriculture in Primorskii Krai, I will show the changes in land use by South Korean agricultural corporations and Russian-speaking local Koreans from the 1990s to the present. Drawing on ontological theory (Mol 2003), I will present the different uses and imaginations of the land and analyse the main power and motivation between corporate agriculture and small-scale household cultivation.

The informal economy of survival in the midst of official emptiness: Peripheral capitalism on the Upper Lena | Ivan Peshkov

Urbanization in the RFE is connected to a great extent with radical changes of spatial aspects of development caused by the shift to market economic models and drastically reduced state involvement in the social sector. This has radically narrowed down social infrastructure to big cities, thus widening the gap in the quality of life between the region's centres and provinces. From this viewpoint, urbanization relies, to a great extent, on the flow of people from the provinces wishing to get their share of the shrinking package of social services and educational opportunities for children. These 'refugees of modernity' try, despite being stigmatized as representatives of tradition and backwardness, to integrate into urban life using all possible chances and contacts.

But what happens to people who choose to stay in abandoned territories? How do new models of exploring the empty space combine with crisis models of survival? What new forms of life are hiding behind the official absence? I will try to answer these questions using field materials from the Upper Lena, a remote area of abandoned villages inter-connected by a river and helicopter service. Despite the status of the abandoned territory and the almost complete absence of official residents, the life of the district is far from collapsing and contains the estates of oligarchs, unofficial plantations, pensioners who returned to abandoned villages, visiting farmers, former prisoners, and migrants. All this diversity is connected by two main processes – the technologies of remote survival of the poor and the practices of mastering

the emptiness of the rich. New participants are involved in these processes – former prisoners looking for places away from the state and migrants serving the new economy of emptiness. The purpose of the paper will be to analyze the spatial aspects of the preservation of life and the development of territories. The fieldwork was conducted in June 2021, by sailing down the Lena river from the settlement of Ust-Iлга located in Zhigalovsky district of Irkutsk region to the town of Ust-Kut in Irkutsk region. The expedition allowed exploration of 10 inhabited localities with permanently settled population and 19 localities considered formerly inhabited or those without permanently settled population.

- **Cadastral power in maritime Russia**

Dominic Martin, University of Oxford

This paper examines the production of emptiness from the perspective of the Primorskii region's development planning, the logic that underpins it, and the form of power that realises it. This modality of power resides in a particular projection of space that facilitates its domination: space as cadastre. The paper explores and develops the concept of 'cadastral power', which takes a particularly clear form in the contemporary Russian Far East and in such mega-projects as the Rosneft's 'Primorskii Metal Factory'. It also examines two other cases: how cadastres are laid in in the spheres of agriculture and through the Far Eastern hectare programme. Ethnographically, the paper juxtaposes the experiences of people living in emptying places with elites who plan and reshape the region at their annual gathering, the Far Eastern Economic Forum.

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SESSIONS VII and VIII: DESIRING POWER

Double panel

Convenor: Maria Gunko

Chair: Volodymyr Artiukh

Discussants: Caroline Humphrey | Dace Dzenovska

Panel abstract

The chaotic process of postsocialist privatization led to significant gaps in public accountability and resources management, creating a landscape where legal and moral obligations of state and non-state actors in relation to property still remain unclear. In many places, management of and care for different types of property—personal, private, and public—is shaped by a climate of normalized austerity, that is, the acceptance of the ideology of shortage in relation to human, material, and financial resources. This climate of normalized austerity manifests in discourses and practices of self-reliance, in attempts to assert or shed the rights of private owners, and in paternalistic approaches to the management of public property.

This panel seeks to explore how, within messy and ambiguous property regimes, new forms of power emerge and intersect with structures created by the old ones. It focuses on the aspirations and expectations of people with regard to (re)production of place and social life. By discussing the figures that are evoked in conversations about (dis)order and (lack of) care (e.g. the state, an owner [khozyin, ter, etc.], an anonymous 'they'), the panel aims to identify what actors and forces are held or invited to be responsible for keeping things going and/or for destroying things.

Paper abstracts

Common weal and *chastnik*: The death and rebirth of public buses in Kryvyi Rih, Ukraine | Denys Gorbach

The paper will trace material repercussions of moral-economic reconfigurations in an Eastern Ukrainian city. A case in point will be the city's public transportation. In the 1990s, massive impoverishment led to the proliferation of categories of population legally exempted from paying transit fares. As a result of these laws, combined with halted investments, public buses quickly disappeared, whereas electric transportation became a 'social' transport, low quality and low price. A new mode of transportation emerged: minibuses. Constructed as a private domain, outside of the paternalist moral economy, they were able to ignore fare limitations. In the following decade, buses were reintroduced by a new power bloc. Their small fleet was merged into the 'social' transit infrastructure, which was so heavily subsidised that eventually the municipality abolished fares altogether. As a result, Kryvyi Rih became the largest city in the world with free *public* transit – while *private* minibuses keep charging fares.

Who will repair our building? | Tamta Khalvashi

Living in the Soviet mass housing in postsocialist Tbilisi is a highly sensorial and utterly puzzling experience due to its crumbling infrastructures that challenge daily movements, safety, and health. It thus generates political critique of the promise of post-socialist 'transition' into a brave new world of neoliberalism. Broken elevators, dismantled central heating systems, leaking roofs, and individually installed gas heaters challenge the dominant imaginary of Georgia's liberal democracy to bring irreversible renewal. Hence, this coming apart of Soviet mass housing is the scene of the disintegration of not only the phantasy of the wholesome Soviet industrial past but also the phantasy of the fulfilling neoliberal future. In the absence of communal resources and post-Soviet responsabilisation of citizens to take care of their housing, the residents of these buildings are viscerally invested in puzzling through their broken buildings. The paper will demonstrate how, in these buildings, political claims, sensibilities, and responsibilities of repair unfold, shedding light on ambiguous and often entangled post-Soviet property regimes.

The landscape of solitude: Power, loss, and place in post-industrial Armenia | Harutyun Vermishyan

In post-industrial Armenian cities, solitude emerges not only as an emotional state but as a structural condition shaped by economic decline, privatization, and the dissolution of collective spaces. Drawing on narrative interviews, this paper explores how city dwellers articulate solitude as both an inherited burden and a space of reflection, adaptation, and endurance. Inspired by the notion of solitude, I examine how individuals navigate the tension between isolation and resilience in urban environments marked by abandonment and uncertain governance. The absence of clear institutional responsibility, the ambiguous role of property ownership, and the lingering traces of socialist collectivism create a landscape where solitude is deeply entangled with questions of power and agency. By analyzing how people narrate their experiences of urban transformation, this paper situates solitude as a central theme in the sociological understanding of post-socialist urban life, where past and present intersect in uneven and often fragmented ways.

Failed transition? From post-Soviet commons to independent urban spaces in Armenia | Sarhat Petrosyan

The transition of urban spaces from Soviet to post-Soviet has been extensively analyzed in the literature at the intersection of various disciplines and across different geographic scales, within varying socio-political contexts, and through comparisons of post-socialist and post-colonial conditions. However, what remains unclear is why the 'post-Soviet' persists in some countries even three decades on, often at the expense of independent nationhood.

While the post-colonial framework of development has, to some extent, been accepted in post-Soviet studies – focusing on Soviet legacies and power relations, the internal failures of local institutions receive less attention than they deserve. These failures are embedded in materialities and reflected in urban spaces, particularly in the (semi)public ones, where responsibilities, authority, and ownership rights have undergone significant shifts. Aiming to examine the failures alongside shifts in responsibilities and ownership, this study draws on data from Armenian cities. Here, the early 'Sovietization' of the built environment intertwined with 'national' narratives was followed by subsequent failure of its 'post-Sovietization' through 'de-nationalization', which has peaked amidst the country's socio-economic challenges and security uncertainties.

***Khoziain* and the desire for a more human(e) state in a former socialist town in Lithuania | Marija Norkunaite**

This paper ethnographically unpacks the shifting meanings ascribed to the vernacular concept of *khoziain*, or a householder, by the mainly Russian-speaking residents of Visaginas, a former socialist industrial town in Lithuania. In the Baltic public discourse, the desire for a *khoziain* is often interpreted as a preference for a 'strong hand' leader and ascribed to the region's socialist past. However, in Visaginas, the moral aspect of *khoziain*-style relationships took precedence over their control over and redistribution of public and private resources. The term embodied a set of governing principles grounded primarily in practices of 'knowing' and 'seeing' the other as a human being. I analyse this conceivably more human(e) form of power as a critique of and an alternative to the national and neoliberal state in Lithuania, often experienced by my interlocutors as indifferent and selfish. I conclude by theorising the ideal of *khoziain* as a local manifestation of the domestic economy model.

Emotional geographies of loss and neglect – and how they feed the success of right-wing parties | Katrin Grossmann

Emotions and affects are key drivers of human behaviour, influencing the way we perceive, shape, and claim spaces. Furthermore, place is a key component of personal identities. In peripheralized contexts, loss is an omnipresent experience. "It's getting less and less by the year," said an interviewee, referring to the lasting perception of loss in his community, a loss of people moving out, a loss of infrastructure, a loss of vitality, a loss of physical features of the place, resulting from dependencies on higher levels of government, lack of local resources and power, and embeddedness in global economic and financial systems. The resulting emotional conditions comprise sadness, shame, insecurity, sometimes anger, and they create fertile ground for right-wing actors, who exploit regional grievances by framing small, marginalized localities as victims of neglect by distant, out-of-touch government.

"They destroyed it": Responsibility and ruination in a small Armenian town

Maria Gunko, University of Oxford

This contribution interrogates the discursive construction and use of the third-person plural pronoun "they" in post-Soviet Armenia, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a small town between 2022-2024. Through the residents' narratives about decline and destruction, the study reveals how "they" functions as a multivalent linguistic device that reveals the complex power relations in the course of postsocialism. The ambiguous "they"—variously signifying state officials, political elites, or capital—operates simultaneously as an assignment mechanism and distancing strategy. While residents frequently invoke "they" to assign responsibility for destructive processes (deliberate dismantlement, resource extraction, and infrastructural abandonment), this research identifies a paradoxical ascription of both destructive and productive agency to the same entity. "They" also articulates a specific post-Soviet conceptualization of responsibility, wherein the state remains imagined as "khozyain" (master)—an absent yet morally obligated caretaker. This phenomenon reflects broader tensions between neoliberalizing governance and expectations of state responsibility.

BIOS

Chloe Ahmann is an environmental anthropologist who studies how people politicize 'impure' environments in the long afterlife of American industry. Much of her work is based in Baltimore, Maryland, where she follows industrialism's enduring traces in toxified landscapes, patchy regulation, quotidian expressions of white supremacy, and particular orientations toward time. She is the author of [*Futures after Progress: Hope and Doubt in Late Industrial Baltimore*](#) and Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Cornell University.

Ruben Andersson is Professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford University's Department of International Development and a member of the EMPTINESS project's Advisory Board. He works on security, migration, borders and related topics, and is currently working on the project [*Apocalypse Soon: Security, Subversion and The Struggle for a Human Future*](#) (Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship). Ruben is the author of *Wreckonomics: Why it's time to end the war on everything* (Oxford University Press, 2023, with David Keen), *No Go World: How fear is redrawing our maps and infecting our politics* (University of California Press, 2019), and *Illegality, Inc.: Clandestine migration and the business of bordering Europe* (University of California Press, 2014).

Volodymyr Artiukh is a Postdoctoral Researcher at COMPAS (University of Oxford) with the ERC-funded project [*EMPTINESS: Living Capitalism and Democracy after \(Post\)Socialism*](#). Within the EMPTINESS project, Volodymyr studies migration in the context of war-induced destruction in Ukraine. His project situates their laboural and migratory experiences in Ukraine and Romania.

Rebecca Bryant is Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Utrecht University. She studied Cultural Anthropology at the University of Chicago and has since held teaching and research positions at the London School of Economics, George Mason University, and the American University in Cairo. She has also taught as a Fulbright fellow at Bogaziçi University in Istanbul and as a Visiting Professor at Middle East Technical University's Cyprus campus. She holds affiliations as an Associate of the Peace Research Institute Oslo and a Research Fellow in the European Institute of the London School of Economics. She is a cultural anthropologist of forced migration, borders, and unrecognized states. She is the author (with Mete Hatay) of [*Sovereignty Suspended: Building the So-called State*](#) and multiple other books and articles.

Julie Y Chu is a sociocultural anthropologist at the University of Chicago and author of [*Cosmologies of Credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China*](#). Her current book project, *The Hinge of Time: Infrastructure and Chronopolitics at China's Global Edge*, examines how certain figures of 'infrastructure' animate the global politics of time in three distinct keys – as matters of constancy, rhythm, and non/event.

Dace Dzenovska is Associate Professor of the Anthropology of Migration at COMPAS and SAME, University of Oxford and the Principal Investigator of the ERC-funded project [*EMPTINESS: Living Capitalism and Democracy after \(Post\)Socialism*](#).

Taras Fedirko is a political and economic anthropologist studying war, media, and oligarchy in Ukraine. He serves as a Lecturer at the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Glasgow and is an Associate Researcher at LSE IDEAS. After obtaining his PhD from the University of Durham in 2017, he has held postdoctoral positions at Cambridge and St Andrews and recently was a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna.

Jaume Franquesa is Professor of Anthropology at SUNY-Buffalo. His research combines theoretical elaboration and long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Spain to explore processes of energy transition, the mutations of rural politics, and the shifting relationship between city and countryside. Franquesa's latest book is *Power Struggles: Dignity, Value, and the Renewable Energy Frontier in Spain* (Indiana University Press, 2018). Since 2022 he has been co-editor-in-chief of *Dialectical Anthropology*.

Zsuzsa Gille is Professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a member of Advisory Board at the Emptiness project. Her research focuses on qualitative methodology as it relates to globalization, on environmental politics, on the sociology of food, waste, materiality, and the rise of the New Right in Europe. She is the author of *Paprika, Foie Gras, and Red Mud: The Politics of Materiality in the European Union* (2016 Indiana University Press); *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History: The Politics of Waste in Socialist and Postsocialist Hungary* (Indiana University Press 2007); co-editor of *Post-Communist Nostalgia* with Maria Todorova (Berghahn Press 2010), co-editor of the *The Socialist Good Life: Desire, Development, and Standards of Living in Eastern Europe* (Indiana University Press 2020), and co-author of *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections and Imaginations in a Postmodern World* (University of California Press, 2000).

Denys Gorbach is a Postdoctoral Researcher at Lund University. His research focuses on everyday politics of the popular classes. In 2024, he published a monograph based on his doctoral thesis: *The Making and Unmaking of the Ukrainian Working Class: Everyday Politics and Moral Economy in a Post-Soviet City* (Berghahn Books). His next project, funded by the French Red Cross Foundation, centred on survival strategies of Ukrainian refugees in France. His current research explores conflicts around conspiracy theories in Belgium.

Gastón Gordillo is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. He is a Guggenheim Fellow and the author of several books, among them *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction* (2014, Duke University Press; Honorable Mention, Victor Turner Prize for Ethnographic Writing) and *Landscapes of Devils: Tensions of Place and Memory in the Argentinean Chaco* (2004, Duke University Press, Winner of the Sharon Stephens Book Prize by the American Ethnological Society).

Sarah Green works at the University of Helsinki. She studies location (where things are rather than what or who they are) and is currently researching changes in the ways animals transgress people's borders. She has worked collaboratively on multiple projects, including CRESC, Archaeomedes, EastBordNet, Helsinki One Health, and Crosslocations. Her most recent book, *An Anthropology of Crosslocations* (HUP 2024), was co-authored with six other collaborators: Samuli Lähteenaho, Phaedra Douzina-Bakalaki, Carl Rommel, Joseph Viscomi, Laia Soto Bermant and Patricia Scalco.

Katrin Grossmann has been Professor in Urban Sociology at University of Applied Sciences Erfurt since 2014. In her research, she combines normative concepts like justice or dignity with critical urban studies, sociological theory, and environmental topics such as energy poverty, energy policy, and housing; social cohesion, migration and conflict; social inequality, residential segregation, and neighbourhood change. Urban shrinkage has been a long-term interest in her work which lately lead to a focus on small towns and peripheralization.

Maria Gunko holds an MSc and PhD in Human Geography. Currently she is a DPhil Candidate in Migration Studies at the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford within the ERC-funded project [EMPTINESS: Living Capitalism and Democracy after \(Post\)Socialism](#). Maria's research interests lie in the intersection of urban studies and social anthropology, including ethnography of the state, infrastructures, and urban decay (aka shrinkage, ruination, emptiness/nothing), with a geographical focus on

Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus. She is co-editor of *Postsocialist Shrinking Cities* (Routledge, 2022) and author of over 20 articles in scientific journals. Alongside her academic career, Maria is a columnist for the Yerevan-based media EVN Report and Yerevan Journal.

Don Kalb is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Bergen, Academic Director of the GRIP program on Global Inequality (UiB/International Science Council, Paris). He served as the project leader and principal investigator of the research programme 'Frontlines of Value: Class and Social Transformation in 21st Century Capitalism' (University of Bergen 2017-2023). He is the author and editor of numerous books, most recently: *Value and Worthlessness: The Rise of the Populist Right and Other Disruptions in the Anthropology of Capitalism* (Berghahn Books, 2025), *Insidious Capital: Frontlines of Value at the End of a Global Cycle* (Berghahn Books, 2024), *Financialisation: Relational Approaches* (Berghahn Book, 2020, with Chris Hann). Don Kalb is Founding Editor of *Focaal – Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* and of FocaalBlog.

Tamta Khalvashi is Professor of Anthropology and the Head of the PhD Program of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Ilia State University, Georgia. She obtained her PhD in Anthropology from Copenhagen University (2015). She has been awarded postdoctoral fellowships from the Fulbright Program at New York University, Department of Anthropology (2016-17) and Cornell University, the Society for the Humanities (2022-23). Her research interests overlap experimental anthropology and the interdisciplinary field of affect theory, focusing on postsocialist spatial transformations, peripheral histories, and marginal social identities.

Daniel M Knight is a Reader in Social Anthropology and Director of the Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. His research focuses on the time-crisis pivot, posing questions about futural orientations, historical consciousness, and vertiginous life. He is author of numerous books, most recently *Energy Talk: Green Knowledge from Greece's Silicon Plains* (Cornell, 2025) and *Porous Becomings: Anthropological Engagements with Michel Serres* (Duke, 2024, with Andreas Bandak). Daniel co-edits *History & Anthropology* journal.

Dominic Martin is an anthropologist of Russia and a Postdoctoral Researcher on the ERC-funded project [EMPTINESS: Living Capitalism and Democracy after \(Post\)Socialism](#). He has an MA, MPhil, and PhD in Social Anthropology from King's College, Cambridge, and has taught at the Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg, and Yale University. Dominic's research interests include religious revival and diaspora (Old Believers), rituals and traditions of nationalism and militarism (monarchists and Cossacks), "closed cities" and monotowns, Russo-Japanese relations, Russian corporations and state capitalism.

Jeremy Morris is Professor of Russian and Global Studies at the University of Aarhus, Denmark. He is author of *Everyday Postsocialism* (2016) and *Everyday Politics in Russia* (2025).

Marija Norkunaite is a Junior Research Fellow at the Vilnius University Institute of International Relations and Political Science and a Postdoctoral Affiliate at the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography at the University of Oxford. She holds a DPhil in Area Studies (Russia and East Europe) from the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies. Her research investigates state-society relations in the Baltic States and Eastern Europe from an anthropological and comparative perspective, with a particular focus on economic and fiscal citizenship.

Hyun-Gwi Park is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Humanitas College, Kyung Hee University, Seoul, Korea. She has been conducting ethnographic research in the Russian

Far East since the early 2000s, focusing on borders, migration, and kinship. She published a monograph, *The Displacement of Borders among Russian Koreans in Northeast Asia*, with Amsterdam University Press in 2018, and is currently working on the interconnection between Korea and the Russian Far East.

Morten Axel Pedersen is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Copenhagen. He has worked in Mongolia and elsewhere in Inner Asia for two decades. For the last five years, he has been doing research in Denmark. As a co-PI in the Copenhagen Center for Social Data Science (SODAS), he works on quali-quantitative methods, computational anthropology, and data ethics and politics. Simultaneously with his role in the new field of social data science, he conducts ethnographic research among neo-orthodox Lutheran Christians and national-conservative intellectuals in Denmark. He is the author of *Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Lives and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia*, and multiple other articles and books.

Ivan Peshkov is Associate Professor at the Institute of Eastern Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. His current research focuses on urban development, biopolitics, and memory work in Inner Mongolia and Transbaikalia. He has carried out research in the Chinese, Russian, and Mongolian border triangle and investigated the main economic and historical processes that characterise the area.

Sarhat Petrosyan holds an MS in Architecture and a PhD in Urban Planning. He taught at the Chair for Urban Planning National University of Architecture and Construction of Armenia, Acopian Center for Environment American University of Armenia, and Geography Department Yerevan State University. In 2011, Sarhat founded urbanlab, a Yerevan-based urban think-do-share lab and directed it until his appointment as the Head of the Cadastre Committee of Armenia in 2018. After resigning in 2019, he focused on his design and urban practice SP2 founded in 2006. Sarhat is author and editor of around 20 publications on urban design, policies, and development, including co-editor of *Utopia and Collapse Rethinking Metsamor: The Armenian Atomic City* (2018, Park Books). In 2016, he curated the Armenian National Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale.

Madeleine Reeves is Professor in the Anthropology of Migration at the University of Oxford, where she directs the doctoral programme in Migration Studies. She is the author of *Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia* (Cornell 2014), and the editor, most recently, of *The Everyday Lives of Sovereignty* (Cornell, 2021, with Rebecca Bryant) and *The Central Asian World* (Routledge, 2023, with Jeanne Féaux de la Croix). She currently leads the Wellcome-funded research programme on reproductive mobilities in Eurasia.

Natalia Ryzhova is Assistant Professor at Palacky University (Czechia). In 2019-22 she was a researcher on the 'Sinophone Project: Interaction at the Edge' project. An economist embracing anthropology, she studies post-socialist transformation and the Russian Far East's lagging development, focusing on cross-border trade, smuggling, Chinese agricultural presence, and extra-legal mining. She edited *Local Capitalisms in Siberia (Inner Asia, 2022)* and co-authored *Post-Soviet Agrarian Transformations in the Russian Far East: Does China Matter? (Eurasian Geography and Economics, 2022)*.

Harutyun Vermishyan is Head of the Chair of Theory and History of Sociology at Yerevan State University (since 2017) and Head of the Territorial Studies and Development Lab (since 2024). His research explores the ideological and cultural transformations of urban space, the crisis of social identities, and the evolving narratives of place in post-socialist cities. With over 15 years of academic and expert experience, he has worked on sociological methodologies and historical analysis of urban change.

Alexander Vorbrugg is Senior Researcher at the Institute of Geography, University of Bern.

His research focuses on rural and agrarian change, reforestation, rural land abandonment, and land futures. He is particularly interested in how rural resources are created, contested, and governed within changing and disrupted political-economic and natural environments. Alexander applies relational spatial perspectives in his work and has developed a longstanding interest and expertise in Ukraine and the Russian Federation.