

WHAT WAS EMPTINESS AND WHAT COMES NEXT?

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

4-6 JUNE | 2025

Conference venue: Maplethorpe Building (MTB), [St Hugh's College](#), St Margaret's Road, Oxford OX2 6LE, +44 (0)1865 274900 (Porter's Lodge)

CONFERENCE DAY 1: Wed, 4 June 2025

Time	Event	Location
13:00–13:30	Day 1 Registration	MTB Foyer, St Hugh's College
13:30–14:00	Session I (introduction): What was Emptiness... Speaker: Dace Dzenovska, University of Oxford	MTB Hall, St Hugh's College
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	MTB Hall, St Hugh's College
16:00–17:00	Drinks Reception	MTB Foyer, St Hugh's College

CONFERENCE DAY 2: Thurs, 5 June 2025

Time	Event	Location
08:45–09:00	Day 2 Registration	MTB Foyer, St Hugh's College
09:00–11:00	<p>Session III (double panel): Keyplaces of Our Times (part 2) Chair: Dominic Martin</p> <p>Speakers:</p> <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 <p>Discussants: Rebecca Bryant, Utrecht University Madeleine Reeves, University of Oxford</p>	MTB Hall, St Hugh's College
11:00–11:15	Tea/Coffee Break	MTB Foyer, St Hugh's College
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 	MTB Hall, St Hugh's College
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 	MTB Hall, St Hugh's College

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <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 	
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CONFERENCE DAY 3: Fri, 6 June 2025

Time	Event	Location
08:45–09:00	Day 3 Registration	MTB Foyer, St Hugh's College
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>	MTB Hall, St Hugh's College
11:00–11:15	Tea/Coffee Break	MTB Foyer, St Hugh's College
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>	MTB Hall, St Hugh's College
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>	MTB Hall, St Hugh's College
16:30–17:30	<p>Session IX (conclusion): ...and What Comes Next?</p> <p>Speaker: Dace Dzenovska, University of Oxford</p>	MTB Hall, St Hugh's College

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: Denys Gorbach

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 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.

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