Ágnes Erőss
Symbolic spaces and space use in multiethnic cities: the case of Berehove and Oradea

Main findings of the Ph.D. dissertation

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I. Introduction

Symbolic space – constituted by streetnames, landmarks (statues, commemorative tablets) and the related symbolic politics and symbolic space use – communicate political and ideological messages. Shifts in symbolic space, like street name changes, translate political transitions into everyday settings of individual and social life. The inherent practical, and profane function of toponymy and other symbols of the public space makes them the subject and sensitive indicator of political and ideological changes.

To study above issues of urban space has developed into one of the main streams of international Human Geography in the last decades. Academic interest of symbolic space has appeared in Hungarian social sciences at the end of 1980s, but it embodies a rather new wave of research in Hungarian Geography. It is closely related to Ethnic, Cultural, Political and Urban Geography. My PhD dissertation is situated within the field of recent researches of urban space in Human Geography.

II. Aims of the research

The dissertation tackles the politics of representation and diverse, top-down methods of appropriation of public space in Berehove/Beregszász and Oradea/Nagyvárad. It also analyses the bottom-up, ethno-nationally centred symbolic space appropriation strategies. The timeframe covers the period of almost half a dozen political transitions from the end of the 19th century to the first decade of 21st century. The research sites were chosen due to the obvious differences in their symbolic landscape. Hence the similarities in the history of the two cities in the 20th century, Berehove gives the impression of a Hungarian-Ukrainian bilingual town, whereas in Oradea the visibility of Hungarian language remains limited.

The main research aims and questions are the followings:

1. to analyse top-down politics and bottom-up initiatives of symbolic space appropriation and the use of space (1) in multiethnic urban spaces, (2) in altering hierarchy relations between majority and minority, (3) in case of different political transitions, in a longer period.

The main interest is to map:

a. how regime changes transformed urban symbolic space;

b. which were the most frequently applied tools of symbolic space appropriation and what importance of spatiality was in their use,
2. To divert the attention of *Hungarian Human Geography* research towards the perspectives of studying symbolic spaces. I will pay special attention to analyse how symbolic space appropriation methods structure urban space, and what the role and importance of spatiality and hierarchy of urban spaces is when applying different symbolic politics?

3. In the frame of *Hungarian Ethnic Geography*, the research points to the relevance and importance of *studying the local scale* and micro spaces. Based on field research experiences, by studying the micro-level, the everyday dimensions of ethnic co-existence or the geographical aspects of interethnic relations might be better understood. The altering symbolic landscape of the two research sites induced the following research questions:
   a. how the local minority-majority relations influence the symbolic landscape;
   b. how political events happening on different scales (local, regional, international) influence local symbolic politics and discourses.

4. The dissertation makes an attempt to link this research with a strong Human Geography approach to the body of knowledge of international Human Geography and Hungarian Social sciences. Thus, the changes of toponymy and other symbols in Berehove and Oradea have not only been discussed in ethnic dimensions, but in a more general sense, these are reframed as majority-minority contestations over public space. Such approach makes possible to (1) generalise findings in contexts and spaces other than the Carpathian basin and (2) interlink results to findings delivered in different ethnic and majority-minority contexts in international and national literature.

### III. Brief review of previous studies

The topic, the theoretical and methodological approach of the dissertation is multi-and interdisciplinary, as it is based on previous researches in ethnography, cultural anthropology and history. Symbolic space, symbolic space use, symbolic space appropriation or symbolic politics are tackled by several disciplines of Social Sciences and Humanities (Figure 1). The dissertation investigates its selected subject from the distinct viewpoint of Human Geography: the research is centred around space and spatiality and intends to investigate the different meanings of spaces and places or how given space is transformed by symbolic politics, or space use of individuals and groups.
Researching symbolic elements and meanings of space was induced both by the spatial turn in Social Sciences, the post-structuralist theories of nation and ethnicity and the interpretative understanding of culture (Szijártó Zs. 2008; Niedermüller P. 1995). In the dissertation I apply the social constructivist interpretation of ethnicity according to which ethnicity is a political project aiming to create and maintain the difference between “us” and “them” (Feischmidt M. 2010). Following Lefebvre, I understand space as a social product and I intend to study symbolic politics and symbolic space use in the trialectic space (perceived, conceived, lived, more details see Berki M. 2015).

The research subject is rather new in Hungarian Human Geography and in closer connection to Cultural, Ethnic, Political and Urban Geography. Due to inconsistency/lack of exact definition, additionally the problems of translating English terms into Hungarian, I define symbolic space as a space that is produced by symbolic politics, symbolic space use and symbolic space appropriation practices and it is transformed by everyday mundane spatial practices and political application of space while at the same vein, the space also interacts and interferes with individual-, group and power spatial practices. Consequently symbolic space is present/impact/transform the perceived, the conceived and the lived space.
IV. Methodology

The research was carried out by quantitative and qualitative methods and based on literature in Hungarian and international Human Geography and Social Sciences.

I used urban toponymy as the main indicator of political application of symbolic space. Based on the evaluation of street names according to their ethnic connotation I visualised the shifts in different periods in series of thematic maps. Further data derived from archival documents, press and interviews enhanced the understanding of the role of spatiality in the symbolic politics of different regimes concerning statues, commemorative plaques and configuration of representative spaces and festive space usage. Field works and visual material collected during field observations are crucial parts of the dissertation. A survey was carried out in Oradea to better understand the social perception of symbolic space.

IV. Main findings

The series of examples proved that the political transitions are followed by reconfiguration of symbolic elements of public space. I edited thematic maps based on data derived from the analysis of urban toponymy according to ethnic connotation of names as they appear on maps printed in different periods (see Figure 2, 3). The thematic maps proved that each regime - in different forms and scales - made attempts to inscribe its power in public space, or by applying Lefebvre’s term, to create its own place of representation.

The creation of place of representation took place in the perceived, and conceived space of the studied cities. However, due to the regulations aiming to control and limit access to public space or spatial practices, additionally different interventions in the urban tissue directly and indirectly impacted the lived space, influencing the perception of space of locals and users of the urban space.

Consequently, the public space becomes the subject of ethno-nationally based struggle between participants in unequal power positions.

I proved that symbolic landscape and visibility in public space is influenced by the local majority-minority relation: hence both Ukraine and in Romania Hungarians are minority, in Berehove the local Hungarian community constitutes the majority in the city and managed to sustain its power position. Thus they were able to shape the symbolic space to achieve greater visibility. Whereas in Oradea the gradually shrinking Hungarian community’s weakening power position is reflected in their limited visibility in public space.
Figure 2 Street names according to ethnic connotations in Oradea in 1902. Cartography: Patrik Tátrai

Figure 3 Street names according to ethnic connotations in Oradea in 2006. Cartography: Patrik Tátrai
The research confirmed that spatiality is a major element of symbolic politics from planning to implementation. The studied archival documents about the commemorative street name politics in the interwar period of Berehove show that the size, physical appearance and spatial position of the streets was an important argument and justification in naming politics. Consequently, symbolic politics structure urban space into symbolically valuable and less valuable parts. Usually the centrally located, busy and representative spaces are considered to be more valuable, whereas spaces in the peripheries or with limited functions are less likely to fall victim of power struggles. However, as it was presented in the post-2010 events in Oradea, if the minority’s visibility is guaranteed in peripherally located areas of the city, the relative value of those areas might increase from the point of view of minority visibility.

On the other hand, the spatial and geographical characteristics of given spaces (centre-periphery, wide-narrow, etc.) are determine what sort of symbolic politics and space use might take place there. The spatial characteristic of a street is especially important indicator in case of commemorative street names, as the spatial position of the street refer to the actual position of the commemorated person in the collective memory.

Based on field research experiences, I argue that in order to create its own place of representation, the power directly and indirectly interferes with the inhabitants’ mental maps and spatial practices both by building/creating (new buildings, neighbourhoods, new architectural styles) and by demolishing/neglecting (buildings, neighbourhoods etc.). As a consequence in the studied sites public space is not only charged (1) with political content but also (2) filled with ethnic content and even (3) in case of urban development plans, reconstructions the objectives of symbolic politics and the related politically implicated interests are taken into consideration during the decision making.

I analysed how the symbolic politics and acts happening in public space aiming to gain more visibility contribute to the production of space. When presenting the history of transformation period of Berehove, I pointed out the role and importance of symbolic politics and acts (like street names changes and erecting commemorative tablets) in the very process of the political transformation. I argue that such symbolic acts were not simply events in the local history of regime change but those were important building blocks of democratic changes and embodied tools of democratic advocacy.

I further discussed how symbolic spaces and related activities develop and sustain local identity and attachment to locality. The survey and interviews carried out in Oradea confirmed the existence of a Hungarian alternative city text. I analysed how the parallelly existing Hungarian city text, compiled of historic Hungarian street names sustained by the community’s
oral tradition, create a virtual net, suitable to embody ethnic identity, bridging generations and linking individuals to the locality. The alternative virtual net of street names can be comprehended as an indicator of Hungarian identity that also functions as empowering factor, strengthening in-group cohesion. In this context it is suitable to represent a specific local identity (“Hungarian from Oradea”), whereas it serves as a marker delimiting the boundary of the group separating it, in this case from the majority Romanian population of Oradea (and from other Hungarians who are not familiar with the old names).

Based on examples from Oradea, I argue that the ethnically centred political contestation over public space contributes to the production of alternative spaces that can be considered as safe spaces, offering places where minority ethnic and other identities can be represented. I set up two major types of safe spaces. One I call ethnic space where the institutions’ internal spaces and certain clubs related to the Hungarians can be listed, that are suitable to host Hungarian events, serving the needs of the community, offering space and occasion to get together (e.g. to celebrate national holidays). The other type of alternative space wish to create a multilingual atmosphere building on the local cultural heritage and cosmopolitan, multicultural traditions by this overpass and move beyond the ethnicised contestation over public space.

Finally I analysed the importance and the role of local heritage. In my opinion discovering and nurturing local heritage is not only a tool of building and strengthening identity, but it is equally important in creating local place attachment. Both in case of Berehove and Oradea the recent development of tourism gives actuality to the discussion about local heritage. In Berehove the growing number of Russian and Ukrainian tourism related inscriptions might negatively affect the position of visibility of Hungarian language. However in Oradea the reinvention of local heritage and commercialisation of the city’s multicultural past eventually might contribute to the mediation of conflicts in public space and symbolic appropriation of space.

Finally, my research points to the importance of scale in Ethnic and Social Geography, as it proves that local minority and majority relation primarily influence the patterns and strategies of symbolic appropriation of space.
VI. References


VII. Publication of the author related to the dissertation


See full list of publications and citations as well as full-text links to most papers here: https://vm.mtmt.hu/search/slist.php?lang=0&AuthorID=10015154