



BRILL

## *Book Reviews*



Andrea Fischer-Tahir and Sophie Wagenhofer (eds.), *Disciplinary Spaces: Spatial Control, Forced Assimilation and Narratives of Progress since the 19th Century*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2017, 300 pp., (ISBN: 978-3-8376-3487-7).

The study of space as a social construct has become a popular subject in recent years, provoking intense theoretical debates among scholars from all disciplines – from geography and anthropology to sociology – and thus confirming the consolidation of what it is usually referred to as the “spatial turn”, that is, a vivid strand of literature that places emphasis on space in order to analyse a great variety of social, economic and political phenomena. Among historians, the emergence of transnational and global history as strong areas, as well as the renewal of interest in the history of empires, borderlands, and the making of the modern “refugee regime” after World War I have contributed to putting “space” and “place” at the heart of historical research as well. Consequently, “(t)erms such as frontiers, borders, boundaries, and place are widely employed to delineate virtually all aspects of culture”,<sup>1</sup> and arguably of social life.

Present surge of studies about the spatial production of issues such as ethnic conflict and border making, to mention a few, must be connected to previous intellectual endeavours made by French scholars such as Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, or the British geographer David Harvey, in the second half of the 20th century. Beginning in the early 2000s, a number of works inspired by Ismail Beşikçi’s early pieces on “internal colonialism” in Turkey explicitly addressed the spatial dimension of the Kurdish issue within the framework of Kurdish studies. As spatial meanings are established by those with the power to make *places* out of *spaces*, the “spatial turn” seemed to be a key entry point to study not only how Kurds became a dispossessed people, but also the ways

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1 Rieber, A. J. (2014). *The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands: From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 5.

in which the latter resisted dispossession through a variety of strategies such as remembrance and subversion of the space settings imposed by states.<sup>2</sup>

In *Disciplinary Spaces: Spatial Control, Forced Assimilation and Narratives of Progress since the 19th Century*, Andrea Fischer-Tahir and Sophie Wagenhofer have sought to provide a survey of forced displacement and illuminating details about disciplinary techniques implemented by diverse “national builders” in different periods and geographical settings (North and East Africa, West and Central Asia, Australia, the Americas, and Central Europe), and include two specific chapters on the Kurds in Iraq. In so doing, *Disciplinary Spaces* situates the Kurdish experience within wider and entangled dynamics that have shaped the emergence and consolidation of the modern world.

The opening chapter provides a thorough theoretical orientation towards the topic of forced migration, highlighting the terms and concepts. While acknowledging that forced migration and dispossession also occurred within imperial settings, the chapter argues, drawing on James C. Scott’s works, that modern states are obsessed with controlling people’s spatial patterns of behaviour. Because modern states need their societies to be “legible”, they tend to create and enhance disciplinary techniques that promptly guarantee spatial control over the latter, rendering uncertainty and contingency unlikely.

Specifically, the book examines the territories (model villages, collective towns, and reservations) created by states to radically alter the behaviour of people perceived as culturally “other” – due to ethnic, religious, and socio-economic characteristics – and thus ill-suited to fit hegemonic imaginations of “the nation”. In that sense, the volume attempts to simultaneously detect “the wider and *longue-durée* circulation of disciplinary techniques” and consider the “cross-border relations, intraregional and transregional connectivities, and the translocal movement of knowledge, people and goods” (p. 11). Henceforth, contributors are invited to account for the connectedness of the biopolitical forms of control and bureaucratic accommodation invented in the Global North in the 19th century and those implemented in the Global South in the 20th century. As with most edited volumes, however, the chapters differ greatly in terms of theoretical as well as epistemological and empirical input. Notwithstanding the uneven quality and originality of the collected papers, the

2 Öktem, K. (2004). Incorporating the time and space of the ethnic ‘other’: nationalism and space in Southeast Turkey in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Nations and Nationalism*. 10 (4). pp. 559–578; Jongerden, J. (2007). *The Settlement Issue and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War*. Leiden: Brill; Gambetti, Z. (2005). “The conflictual (trans)formation of the public sphere in urban space: the case of Diyarbakir”, *New Perspectives on Turkey*. 32. pp. 43–71; Gambetti, Z. and Jongerden, J. (2011). “The spatial (re)production of the Kurdish issue: multiple and contradicting trajectories-introduction”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*. 13 (4). pp. 375–388.

two chapters on the construction of collective towns by the Baathist regime in Iraqi Kurdistan deserve a special attention for a variety of (good) reasons.

To begin with, based on a variety of sources from government records, press articles and political parties' brochures, as well as on the interviews with relocated families, in "From Agrarian Experiments to Population Displacement: Iraqi Kurdistan Collective Towns in the Context of Socialist 'Villagisation' in the 1970s" Mélisande Genat does place the Baathist policies in the 1970s in a wider context. Convincingly, the author argues that, at first, the collective towns erected in Iraqi Kurdistan in the mid-1970s sought to secure enough manpower to work in expanding agricultural production. As the March 1970 Iraqi-Kurdish Autonomy Agreement made possible a brief period of development, the Iraqi regime redistributed land to landless farmers, while establishing and expanding cooperatives and state farms. Although these kinds of development projects were not new in the region, arguably the direct push for their implementation came from the Soviet Union and its Iraqi Communist counterpart. As early as 1970, Law 216 explicitly refers to the practicalities of Soviet support for the construction of new villages inspired by contemporary socialist experiences. Incidentally, Genat reminds us that between 1970 and 1975, the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) became a key player at a national level. Thus, the launch of collective towns was also the result of indigenous recommendations for the improvement of the living conditions of farmers and workers. Furthermore, interviews with Kurdish "new villagers" confirm that, initially, local populations perceived these measures as positive because the long-awaited implementation of the land reform voted in 1958 had only been partially successful, in particular in the Kurdish provinces.

But, as the author demonstrates, the objectives changed as the war between the Kurdish movement and the Baathist regime resumed in 1975. Progressively, the modernisation efforts by the regime in the early 1970s were replaced by security concerns. As a result, the guiding impulse of the new relocation and housing campaigns "was clearly counterinsurgency" (p. 151). In that sense, Genat's chapter allows us to depart from the orthodox *foucauldian* and linear readings of Baathist policies from 1968 until 2003, in that the emergence of the first collective towns in Iraqi Kurdistan cannot be analysed only in the light of the infamous Anfal campaign of the 1980s in which thousands of Kurds were assassinated and displaced. Although the former were certainly disciplinary spaces in the broad sense, they were a part of a wider political agenda: Kurdish communities, along with other Iraqi populations in other regions, were to be integrated coherently with the national modernisation strategy.

With "Appropriating and Transforming a Space of Violence and Destruction into one of Social Reconstruction: Survivors of the Anfal Campaign (1988) in the Collective Towns of Kurdistan", Karin Mlodoč brings to the fore two original

inputs for the analysis of this massive punitive operation and its aftermath. On the one hand, Mlodoch looks at space from a psychological perspective, relying on concepts of trauma and recovery elaborated in critical psychology. On the other hand, drawing from both direct observation over the last twenty years and an important number of interviews with the victims of al-Anfal, she argues that Anfal survivors who were relocated in collective towns in Germyan region proved their capacity of agency by transforming a space of coercion and dispossession into one of social (including psychological) reconstruction. How is that possible?

Like Mélisenda Genat's contribution, Mlodoch's chapter adopts a dynamic and interactionist approach to explain how Anfal survivors – mainly women and children – recovered from their trauma and were able to subvert Baathist policies in detention-like camps. Crucially, she points out that psychological stabilisation and recovery were correlated and intertwined with the economic and social improvement of the Kurdistan region, including the remaining collective towns, witnessed from the late 1990s onwards. As living conditions improved (in terms of job opportunities, infrastructure investments) Anfal survivors were able to engage in new life perspectives with a double struggle: transforming detention-like camp conditions into “vibrant” medium-size towns and, in parallel, maintaining the memory of Anfal alive, not as it was explained by Kurdish political parties and “official” historians, but as remembered by the victims themselves.

Taken together, both contributions are in constant dialogue with explicit comparisons and references to each other's chapter. Finally, because they both study collective towns in the same country, albeit in a different time period and responding to different aims, comparisons can readily be made by both knowledgeable and less informed readers.

In short, although the connectedness and comparisons between diverse disciplinary spaces created since the 19th century worldwide are not always explicit, this is clearly a thoughtful volume, and one from which students will benefit. It would be of value as a primary or supplementary text, a source of course readings or research resource for students of disciplinary spaces, forced displacement, as well as for those interested in ethnic conflict and related issues.

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