

Mikuláš Huba – Vladimír Ira – Pavel Šuška (eds.): Bratislava Aloud as a Challenge

Bratislava 2008, The Institute of Geography, SAS, 71 p.

Gray, quiet, dovish... these are the characteristics attributed to the majority, indifferent to social, political, or ecological issues and challenges present in Slovakia. At a basic level, this lack of public interest manifests itself as apathy towards issues related to the local environment, neighbourhood, or town. Nevertheless, it is an interest in these issues which determines to a great extent whether the ideals of a civil society are being fulfilled.

The initiative Bratislava/Aloud symbolises the environmental activities in Bratislava in the 1980s as well as the culmination of the civil, scientific, and (even though not initially) political activities of a large group of authors with a noteworthy variety of cultural capital. It has remained one of the most momentous collective manifestations of interest in the environment in the broad sense of the word – as a living space from an ecological, urbanistic, and monument preservation perspective. In the context of the political reality of that time, participation in writing that sort of publication required a considerable amount of courage, despite the fact that the initiative had not been a priori political. Nevertheless, it was perceived as political by the ruling communist party, although the consequences were not as harsh as they would have been during the “normalization” era of the 1970s.

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the publication of Bratislava/Aloud, the Institute of Geography of the Slovak Academy of Sciences organised, in the winter of 2007, a seminar entitled *The Scientific and Civil Ethos of Bratislava/Aloud as a Challenge*. The seminar brought together several authors of the original paper (Ján Budaj, Ivan Gojdič, Mikuláš Huba, Vladimír Ira, Juraj Podoba, Ivan Štúr, and Magdaléna Kvasnicová) as well as other experts on the themes dealt with in the publication. The goal of the gathering was not primarily commemorative. The main aim of the seminar was to critically assess individual aspects of the Bratislava/Aloud initiative. The outcome of that meeting, a collection of articles entitled Bratislava/Aloud as a Challenge, also echoes the original publication in its graphic design.

The articles in the collection vary in both their length and content. The authors' stances on the Bratislava/Aloud phenomenon differ as well. The heterogeneous character of the perspectives can be seen as both a strength and shortcoming of the collection. Some authors provided truly social scientific analysis while others contributed their own personal reflections, which have more poetic and essayistic character.

Primarily, the collection consists of texts in which the authors analyse the causality and the broader context of the events that preceded and followed the publication of Bratislava/Aloud. One of the editors, Mikuláš Huba, for example, points out the fact that the interest in ecological problems emerged due to the beginning of “Perestroika” and that at that time, social problems were reflected through the prism “of the protection of nature and environment”. (Huba 2008: 23) The activities of the environmental movement were then characterised by spontaneity, solidarity and

altruism and connected to people who “in normal democratic conditions would find their self-fulfilment either in their professions or within diverse civil movements and, at the same time, for various reasons, did not want to act explicitly in the opposition to the regime”. (Huba 2008: 23)

The text by the anthropologist Juraj Podoba is similar to M. Huba’s study both in terms of its informative character and its focus. J. Podoba attempts to reflect “on the environmental movements of the 1980s and on the Bratislava/Aloud phenomenon as well as on the reasons of its quick marginalisation and fall into oblivion”. (Podoba 2008: 16) Podoba’s analysis typifies a social scientific case study enriched by reflections from his own perspective as an activist.

Personally, I preferred those texts which assessed the current state of one of the areas that were also discussed in the original Bratislava/Aloud. Two of them were thematically similar, one written by the architect and conservationist Ivan Gojdič and the other by the art historian Magdalena Kvasnicová. They both disapprove of the concept-less, even devastating, architectural and urbanistic changes in Bratislava after 1989. They also point to the fact that the current constructions threaten the industrial and modernist buildings that have become an important part of the history of Bratislava and help create its distinctive atmosphere. The significance of such a warning can be documented by the legacy of Bratislava/Aloud that had also denounced similar, often irreversible, changes in Bratislava at that time.

A certain balance in the collection is attained by the inclusion of texts written by authors that (for reasons such as their age) did not partake in the original activities of the “colourful” environmentalist / conservationist movement. Matej Blažek and Pavol Šuška, for instance, offer their own interpretation of the legacy of Bratislava/Aloud in relation to present reality in Slovakia, governed by diversified but also “dispersive” influences of power. (Blažek – Šuška 2008: 57)

Many articles in the collection *Bratislava/Aloud as a Challenge* have the character of reminiscences, mainly because of the direct involvement of the authors in the events under discussion. Now that the time-lag provides a useful distance, the authors offer their particular perspectives on this momentous initiative --perspectives that do not mythologize or merely recollect bygone events. This collection can be inspire further activities in a time when the environment is again more consumed, used up, and devastated than cared for, supplied with alternative visions, and created.

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