

REVIEW ESSAY

Spatializing the Factory: Studying Place, Space, and Scale at the Point of Production in Bulgaria, India, and Turkey

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Görkem Akgöz. *In the Shadow of War and Empire. Industrialisation Nation Building and Working Class Politics in Turkey* (Leiden: Brill, 2023)

Dimitra Kofti. *Broken Glass, Broken Class. Transformation of Work in Bulgaria* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2023)

Christian Strümpell. *Steel Town Adivasis: Industry and Inequality in Eastern India* (New York: Routledge, 2024)

How do spatial approaches and the methodological lexicon of space, place, and scale contribute to understanding the industrial workplace? And how does a “spatializing” perspective intersect with traditional foci in the study of the workplace, such as industrial relations, the labor process, or state labor law and policy?

Taking a cue from the seminal work of Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, Doreen Massey, Edward Soja, David Harvey, and others, the humanities have explored the way space is understood as a social construct as well as a geographical location. The so-called spatial turn in history has either been heralded for introducing a new methodological understanding of space to understand societies and cultures, or problematized for the epistemological confusion created by a plethora of terms—space, place, spatiality, location—that at times seem divorced from their material bearings.¹ Yet both *space*—understood as an abstract, general concept that refers to the physical and social environments in which events occur—and *place*—understood as space that has been imbued with human meaning, identity, and emotional attachment—have an important role to play in explaining the politics of labor and the politics of production at different scales.²

The recent books of Görkem Akgöz, Dimitra Kofti, and Christian Strümpell all prove this point by incorporating different methodological dimensions of space and

grounding their analyses in detailed empirical research. All three books—one historical and two anthropological but informed by historical perspectives—focus on specific factories as sites of production. But each work also understands these locations as places where working-class identity is formed or transformed, and as crucial nodes of state politics and policy around industrial production. The factories that are the objects of these studies are both spaces of production that reflect a specific labor process and places charged with values, codes, and cultural practices. All three authors are concerned with factories that were established between the 1930s and 1950s, at the height of industrial modernity, but in each case, the industrial sites under study have gone through various permutations. Finally, all the books play with different scales of analysis, moving from the point of production to the wider context of national (though seldomly transnational) geographies.

Görkem Akgöz's 2023 book focuses on the Bakırköy cloth factory in Istanbul, Turkey. Bakırköy is one of the state factories that in the interwar period came to symbolize the transformation of the new Turkish Republic into an industrially modern and self-sufficient nation-state. Specifically, Akgöz uses the factory's history to explore the politics of *etatism*—that is, the direct intervention of the state in the socioeconomic development of the nation through the establishment of industrial production in various sectors—with a particular focus on import substitution. *Etatism* turned factories into “openly politicised spaces” (p. 92) where class struggle was shunned or dismissed and workers were seen as part of a project of nation-building. When collective action was repressed, workers resisted in various ways, albeit often through individual strategies. The book explores the gap between public representations of workers as patriotic nation-builders and the reality on the shop floor, where workers sought to exercise agency within a repressive labor regime and challenge hegemonic representations of class and national identities. All in all, the state's production of cultural discourses around the role of the factory in making the nation was as, if not more, important than the actual production of manufactured clothes. Such discourses shaped the labor regime and the factory as a place.

Dimitra Kofti's study is dedicated to a Bulgarian glass factory near the Mladost district of Sofia. The factory was run by the state during the socialist era but privatized after socialism's fall. The book tells the story of how the factory's workers, but also its managers, were and are involved in the production processes, the flexibilization of production, and the precarization of work that took place in the factory after privatization. One of the key themes of the book is how different temporal and spatial configurations in the factory create divisions within the workforce. Kofti is interested in how workers navigate these divisions, many of which followed a workforce restructuring that has produced layers of regular or stable workers, on the one hand, and more precarious workers who work in adjacent buildings, on the other. One of the things Kofti does in her book is deconstruct the concept of flexibility itself, based on the different meanings that workers and managers give to this concept in the factory. Another focus is the different uses—sometimes formal, sometimes informal—that the factory buildings and the built environment have within the factory complex. Overall, the post-socialist transformation initiated a downward mobility for the Mladost workers and their surrounding community, a change that stands in contrast to the neoliberal managerial narrative of upward mobility.

Christian Strümpell's book also focuses on a state-sponsored industrialization project—in his case, that of a large steel plant, the RSP, in the eastern Indian city of Rourkela. This too was a project designed to usher in industrial modernity in a developing country. In particular, it had a transformative effect on a greenfield site that was turned into a steel town and in the process, displaced the local Adivasi population. A key theme of the book is the relationship between class and caste and how these divisions play out on the shop floor, particularly in relation to the different spaces of factory production but also in the township attached to the factory—a space of labor reproduction. The spatialization of social differences and inequalities sits at the center of the book's research. Key protagonists here are the Adivasi, the ethnic group who lost their land to the steel plant and subsequently were placed at the bottom of the factory hierarchy by upper caste managers of other ethnicities. The book dwells on how categories of caste, ethnicity, and class are continually produced and negotiated in the specific context of the workplace by all actors involved—from managers to workers to trade unionists—albeit from unequal positions of power.

As can be seen from these brief descriptions, all the books have a granular focus on the perspective of workers on the shop floor, but they also contextualize these perspectives within the wider political economy. When read together, there are many overlapping themes. These include the ongoing making and unmaking of the working class that has been triggered by the project of modernization (which can include, as in the Bulgarian case, post-socialist transformation); the spatial logics of capitalism (within the built environment of the factory or in the shaping of economic geographies); the relationship between different spatial scales; the making of *place* at work; and the process of producing difference and inequality within the workforce.

Let's first consider the spatial (re)structuring of economic geographies. Throughout the processes of industrialization and de-industrialization that are described in these books, the spatial location of factories, and the political significance of those spaces, are the outcome of relations among different actors, including the state, investors, managers, and workers themselves. Spatial restructuring is also related to the creation of labor markets and the ability to migrate. In Turkey, republican industrial policy aimed to move away from Ottoman dependence on foreign exports or the assembly of foreign products. Instead, such policy became a vehicle for nation-building through the strategic use of location, even when this was not always justified from a labor market perspective. In rejecting an economic geography shaped by export-oriented agriculture, the republican ruling class wanted state-led industrialization to transform a quasi-colonial economy into an integrated national economy. The choice of factory sites was crucial to the nation-building project, as they were both *spaces* of production and *places* where the national identity is symbolically and culturally embedded. Namely, the state aimed to rebalance the previous economic configuration that favored Istanbul and its hinterland to boost greenfield locations in central Anatolia, often in remote, sparsely inhabited locations. In turn, this sort of intervention reshaped local labor markets through the creation of a new built environment, the establishment of new plants, supporting infrastructure, and housing. Thus, the politics of space not only reshaped the national economic geography, but the localities as well. The impact could be appreciated at both scales. One could comment here that the discourse that glorified these national factories and their workers as contributors to building the nation

also created a new geographical imaginary, “the Turkish nation,” which needed to distinguish itself from the old empire.

A similar dynamic was at play in India. In the 1950s, the Indian government juggled the goals of distancing the national economy from its colonial legacy, building a cohesive national citizenry, and reshaping the national economic geography. While this resonates with the case of Turkey and Bulgaria, the case of India is an even starker example, as the government saw heavy industry, rather than consumer industry, as the center of its project. If Atatürk’s minarets were the chimneys of textile mills, Nehru’s temples were steel mills and dams. Strümpell’s study looks at the impact of shifting economic geographies from the vantage point of the state-owned RSA steel plant in Rourkela, Orissa, which involved the displacement of some 20,000 Adivasi locals and the creation of a township adjacent to the plant, where caste and class intersected to determine residential location and thus the possibility of intergenerational social mobility. Precariously employed Adivasi workers, for example, were cut off from the better-equipped schools that children of either the upper caste or permanent workers could attend. This affected their future position in the labor market. The transformation of space in this remote area—1,000 km from Delhi and characterized by a rural economy—was intended to create a catalytic effect that would trigger the sort of industrialization and urbanization that the Indian ruling class envisaged. But it was also intended to make it a different *place*, one that would attract workers from the four corners of India and create a melting pot where workers could transcend their ethnic and caste divisions and loyalties.

In Bulgaria, the socialist government of the 1950s and 1960s molded economic geography by encouraging migration to urban and industrialized areas like Sofia and discouraging rural economies and lifestyles. As Kofti shows, this attempt at proletarianization did not work as planned. In fact, many industrial workers who migrated to the outskirts of Sofia, where factories were located, retained their ties to their villages and to the plots of land where they produced for personal and local consumption. But factories on the outskirts of cities transformed their surroundings by encouraging the construction of housing for workers, whose loyalties and identities were effectively split between two different places. In the post-socialist era, the privatization of factories created a new division between permanent and precarious workers. On the one hand, the permanent workers, with fixed working hours, could continue to plan their time in the villages and their secondary economic practices. On the other, the precarious workers, at the mercy of constant and unexpected changes in work opportunities, could not. As in the Indian example, the difference in employment status played out spatially. Here, Kofti introduces the concept of “local dislocation” (p.11) to describe how institutional and market changes disrupted the spatial dimensions in which workers lived, even as factories continued to operate in the same location.

A second theme that helps us navigate these books is the relationship between spatiality, labor, and place. In Turkey, the simultaneity of nation-building and industrialization processes introduced a new labor regime, driven by modern management techniques and an overall narrative of modernization that stood in contrast to the Ottoman narrative of traditionalism. The new Turkish industrial worker was heralded as a patriotic producer, helping end the Ottoman legacy of foreign dependency and

economic stagnation. However, the reality on the shop floor was one of an authoritarian labor process in which management sought to crush workers' autonomy, though not always successfully. This process points to a basic insight that characterizes all three books: the space of the shop floor is continually reorganized and transformed in relation to large-scale changes. One is reminded of the Lefebvrian argument, outlined by Ravi Ahuja: "Social space cannot, in its entirety, be eradicated and newly invented according to the will of even the most powerful social forces. The space of the present is interlaced with spaces of the past."³

At the steelworks in Rourkela, the politics of space in the factory intersected with the caste and ethnic divisions of the workforce. In the so-called iron and steel zone, where coke was burned, iron ore was melted, and steel was produced, the heat and dust made the environment toxic and inhospitable. This area was dominated by Adivasi workers, who were considered "tribal" and thus lower caste. The "mill zone," where the steel slabs were rolled into sheets or welded into pipes, was a much cooler and cleaner working environment, and therefore one that management felt was more suitable for upper caste workers. Management's choices both followed and reproduced cultural norms in creating places imbued with specific social meanings. At the same time, however, industrial settings allowed workers to challenge these norms and reconfigure caste and class relations. One such example was when Adivasi workers' protests allowed them to move into some upper-caste jobs, becoming permanent employees who could access healthier spaces in the factory but also afford better housing in the company township. In turn, these workers could distance themselves from the precarious Adivasis, who remained in the slums and did not have access to public amenities.

In Mladost, Bulgaria, the transition to post-socialism changed what the factory meant for workers. Privatization meant more than a change of ownership; it also meant a change in the structure of the workforce, which now juxtaposed permanent workers, who possessed stable contracts, with precarious workers, who were paid less and faced more precarious working conditions. In the socialist period the glassworks had been an all-encompassing institution with a variety of services offered to workers, including housing, uniform sewing, hairdressing, and a vertical organization of production in which cleaners were also part of the workforce. But after privatization, the workers' sense of place was transformed as management shed most aspects of production not directly related to industrial glassmaking. Many departments were closed and their functions outsourced. Abandoned buildings, now empty and dilapidated (or occupied by contractors providing services to the factory and employing precarious workers) were an archaeological reminder of the past, nostalgically cherished by older workers. Indeed, one of the most poignant findings of Kofti's fieldwork is the "informal museum" that workers kept in an abandoned building within the industrial complex to remember the production of *edno vreme*—the "old times." This museum consisted of a variety of finely crafted glass products for domestic production (a stark contrast with the narrow post-socialist focus on the production of standardized bottles for the international market), as well as memorabilia of social life during the socialist period, when workers identified with the factory in a different way. Thus, in a transformation of regime production, rundown buildings became places to commemorate workers' identities that had been enacted in the past.

Barney Warf and Santa Arias remind us that “Geography matters, not for the simplistic and overly used reason that everything happens in space, but because *where* things happen is crucial to knowing *how* and *why* they happen.”⁴ The three books reviewed here demonstrate how spatial perspectives can usefully be deployed to study industrial labor. They also show how approaches related to the spatial dynamics of capitalism and those related to place-making at a localized level work together to help us better understand the “hows” and “whys” of transformations related to economic geographies, labor regimes, and labor markets. While refraining from framing their works within a spatial turn, the authors open fruitful avenues for investigation into how, from the vantage point of their specific places, workers resist grand narratives, like nationalism or neoliberalism. Recalling David Harvey’s argument that a sense of place is critical to the spatial (re)organization of capital, these studies suggest that the very notion of place is constructed, challenged, and negotiated by different actors at the same time that the physical space of the factory is reconfigured by the state or by capital.⁵

Notes

1. Ralph Kingston, “Mind Over Matter? History and the Spatial Turn,” *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 1 (2010): 111–21; Leif Jerram, “Space: A Useless Category for Historical Analysis?” *History and Theory* 52, no. 3 (2013): 400–19.
2. Charles W.J. Withers, “Place and the” Spatial Turn” in Geography and in History,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70, no. 4 (2009): 637–58.
3. Ravi Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire. Circulation, “Public Works”, and Social Space in Colonial Orissa (c. 1780-1914)* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2009), 36.
4. Barney Warf and Santa Arias, *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.
5. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).