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A tale of two statues in Astana: the fuzzy process of nationalistic city making

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In the summer of 2009, statues stood leaning in a yard, beyond Independence Square in Astana. The situation was incongruous and constituted an enigma: Why were these monuments left alone in shambles? This paper argues that nationalistic city making is more of a resource for people involved in patron/client relationships and a contingent outcome, rather than a planned strategy. This case study, drawing on evidence gathered through qualitative methods with artists and urban-planners, hence reveals a paradox: in Kazakhstan, there surely is a state incentive to produce nationalistic symbols, but in the absence of a mid-term strategy, city-planners and the people they work with improvise in order to answer local authorities' demands, and use this opportunity to advance their own interests. Hence, the political production of space is considered a fuzzy process, contingent on the agency of multiple subjects, and treated as an outcome of Foucauldian "micro-physics of power." But even though it is erratic, it still creates the built environment which will be reacted upon by citizens. Finally, this sociopolitical perspective on nationalistic urbanism demonstrates that Astana's scenery is a fuzzy "landscape of power" instituting an erratic Kazakhstani regime, based on the political economy of symbolic goods.

Keywords: monuments; urban landscape; nationalism; capital city; authoritarianism; clientelism

> Statues of famous men in the past stand on most of the boulevards. (…) They are made of bronze or quality marble. (…)
>
> The artists who make statues and portraits have the highly arduous task of conjuring up ancient men
>
> NGUYEN TRONG Hiep, *Paris, capitale de la France*, Hanoï (1897) [poems X and XVI]

Introduction

The work presented in the following pages is part of a broader project,[1] which mainly focuses on the investigation of the "capital city" as a political object. It aims at grasping the polysemic construction of Astana as the cornerstone of the Kazakhstani state – and nation-building. Here I consider nationalism in the modernist sense, as the product of a monopoly of legitimate culture (Gellner 1983) and the construction of a national identity

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(Anderson 1983). But rather than approaching it from a macro-perspective, I engage in a micro-sociology of central urban space, hereby analyzing the material, symbolic, and political production of a capital city by focusing on the social interaction between agents who shape the urban landscape which is instrumental of nationalism. Hence, my conception of power relies on the relational and strategic definition given by Foucault: power is a reversible action on action (Foucault 1983). In this paper, so as to contribute to scholarship on how monuments are instrumental to nationalism (Vale 1992; Johnson 1995; Wagenaar 2000; Forest and Johnson 2002; Koch 2010), I demonstrate the contingency of urban design. A question then arises: What is this authoritarian nationalism which relies on contingent symbol production?

Generally speaking, this work is less concerned with meaning, the representation or reception of nationalistic symbols, than it is concentrated on the erratic production of these symbols, which is a symptom of how politics is concretely done. As such, it is intended to elaborate on "ethnographies of the State" (Reeves, Rasanayagam, and Beyer 2013) but by adding artists and architects to the framework. As a matter of fact, the literature is often limited to a visual approach of reading landscapes (Hackman 2009), or is more sensitive to the way monuments are interpreted by national communities (Low 1999b). And when symbolic politics are examined in authoritarian settings (Cummings 2009), it is rarely based on ethnographical material drawn from fieldwork with actual people whose daily agency is to shape city landscapes, apart from a recent example (Bissenova 2013), which is focused at a meso-level.

In the field of nationalism scholarship, contested narratives within Kazakh cinematic works have recently been studied (Isaacs 2014). Here, I argue that by examining another form of nationalism, namely nationalistic city making, and by tracing the process of how monuments gradually appear in the built environment, one may uncover other contested narratives and, more significantly, those interindividual and *micro* power relations between artists, architects, and local authorities, which make up the materiality of the city. In other words, this is identity politics in practice, a way to analyze how "imagined" nation-building becomes "real," to quote the title of this special issue.

Thus, my political ethnography (Schatz 2009b) of authoritarian nation-building (Laszczkowski 2013) gives the opportunity to generalize from these personal interactions to the Nursultan Nazarbayev regime as a whole. This analytical stance is first supported by a theoretical framework which articulates space and politics by refining Low's (1999a) adaptation of Lefebvre's spatial theory, so as to engage in a Foucauldian micro-level investigation of the agency of those people who are involved in the political production of space, defined as the "landscape of power" (Olwig and Mitchell 2009). Second, nationalistic urban planning and monument designing appear erratic, but still create the built environment, which will be reacted upon or assimilated by the citizens. Hence, a planned urban landscape, a contingent outcome of practical compromises rather than of a thorough implementation of coherent projects, is shown as a material consequence of fuzzy processes depending on the agency of multiple subjects. In the end, this case study reveals the political economy of symbolic goods that hides beneath the erratic production of urban space in Astana.

Astana as an empirical object in political sociology of the urban landscape

Astana is a paradigmatic example, a rich case to study a new capital city in a recently independent state. Looking at this sort of city-building project is useful in both fields of urban studies and political sociology, as it questions those power relations among local authorities

that shape the cityscape and simultaneously address the process of producing urban space in the central locus of power, meaning the most symbolically invested district of a postimperial capital city. Looking at the *micro*-scale of city planning and policy implementation tells us that urbanism is an outcome of political phenomena, and that the materiality of the city is a social product. Consequently, how must we treat nationalistic symbols?

The Astana case is particularly relevant to analyze how new states establish their capital city after a regime change. Many historical examples of capital relocation are well known (Washington, Moscow, Ankara, and even Berlin), but today, Astana, as a permanent building site, is a field *in vivo* in which to observe the establishment of a political center (Geertz 1983). While numerous examples already studied in the literature are of capital cities in democratic contexts (Vale 1992; Scott 1998; Charle 2004), Kazakhstan is unique in that its political system is described in the literature as (soft) authoritarian (Schatz 2009a; Isaacs 2011). Astana is thus an interesting field to study how places of power are materially, symbolically, and socially constructed in nondemocratic regimes.

In her analysis of the major role played by buildings which, according to her, institute society (Choay 2006), Françoise Choay argues that buildings materialize (*aedificare*) the State. This idea is rooted in her translation of Alberti's (2004 [1485]) renown treaty about architecture and production, in which the Italian maestro is the second, after Vitruvius, to compose a consistent and classical framework about how to build harmonious buildings by following up the formal language of music. Following her idea, which actually also emerges from recent works about Astana itself (Laszczkowski 2011, 2013), I argue not only that authoritarian rulers of newly independent states such as Kazakhstan wish to build monumental pieces as a demonstration of power and sovereignty, but also, that these monuments are instrumental of the interpersonal patron/client relationship among the elite. Moreover, having said *why* state officials tend to use their position to build ostensible and monumental objects (Koch 2010), one does not actually pay attention to *how* they are built: rulers, be it a president or a mayor, need professionals to materialize their wishes. For this reason, I focus here on architects and sculptors, on those who draw the plans and implement them.

The case study presented here is based on a particular event which struck me during a field visit in the summer of 2009: I had discovered a number of statues left standing in a dusty yard behind the newly built Palace of Independence. Contrasting with the shiny and colorful buildings all around, I was captivated by this image. During my next field trip the following year, I decided to explore the issue in more detail and I progressively managed to get in touch with those responsible for the statues and conducted semi-directed interviews (all in Russian). The material presented here is contextualized by my experience of conducting nine months of fieldwork between 2005 and 2011.

Metaphorical physics of monuments or the political production of urban space

The built environment is closely linked to identity politics – state- and nation-building processes – a point long argued by geographers, anthropologists, and political scientists (Harvey 1979; Vale 1992; Scott 1998; Delanty and Jones 2002; Forest and Johnson 2002; Déloye 2013). In comparative politics, for instance, the focus on urban centers was above all inspired by macro-sociological analysis of various aspects concerning political development, during the decolonization phase of the twentieth century (Rokkan 1973; Shils 1975). But these arguments are rarely drawn from ethnographical enquiries committed to observe the making of a city. Even if scholars have investigated the built forms in urban centers such as Almaty and Astana to question identity politics or the social

order sustained by buildings (Alexander 2007; Buchli 2007; Koch 2010; Laszczkowski 2011), they rarely engage in ethnography of decision-makers, planners, and other "experts" of the cityscape. A recent exception should although be pointed out (Bissenova 2013), but the author engages in a *meso*-level analysis of how the master plan was designed and implemented for the whole city, whereas I focus on the production of *micro* objects (e.g. monuments) Accordingly, my purpose here is to show, on the basis of Lefebvre's (1991 [1974]) definition of space as political, and through the micro-analysis of a monument's *genesis*, how the production of space is a contingent process involving multiple actors, and how material cityscapes are the outcomes of these opportunist contingencies. Hence this paper questions how nationalistic material symbols are produced, rather than interpreting them or evaluating their social reception.

So as to demonstrate that nationalistic city making is contingent, though concrete, my purpose is to understand *how* material objects with symbolic meaning, such as monuments, appear in the urban landscape and shape it, within the framework of nation-building, defined, in the modernist sense, as the production of a monopoly of legitimate culture (Gellner 1983) and the construction of national identity (Anderson 1983), processes which rely on specific artifacts (flags, anthems, banknotes, maps, etc). Thanks to a micro-sociological analysis of the production of singular nationalistic monuments, I have the opportunity to question power relations involved in the process of urban space production and the process itself. Hence the philosophical premise of my argument is that material and social sides of the urban realm are not two ontologically separated objects, but two phases of a chronological process, which I call urbanism, *id est* the political and fuzzy making of urban space. In the spirit of geographer David Harvey, I take as a theoretical starting point that

> The difficulty is to find a way of proceeding that can deal specifically with the relation between process and object without itself falling victim to unnecessary reification. The spatially grounded set of social processes that I call urbanisation produce innumerable artefacts – a built form, produced spaces and resource systems of particular qualities organised into a distinctive spatial configuration. Subsequent social action must take account of these artefacts, since so many social processes (such as commuting) become physically channeled by them. Urbanisation also throws up certain institutional arrangements, legal forms, political and administrative systems, hierarchies of power, and the like. These, too, give a 'city' objectified qualities that may dominate daily practices and confine subsequent courses of action. And, finally, the consciousness of urban inhabitants is affected by the environment of experience out of which perceptions, symbolic readings, and aspirations arise. (1989, 5–6)

Following Harvey (1979, 1989), Lefebvre (1991), and many geographers (Massey 1994; Mitchell and Staeheli 2009), I treat the material and the social as constituting one another so as to avoid an "enframing" binary (Mitchell 1990). They are not ontologically separated, as they are dependent on each other, but can be observed distinctively, as momenta of a sole process. Like ice, water, and steam are for H_2O, they are involved in a cycle. Hence, in my case study, I take the initial producing sequence (water to ice) in the following cycle of relation between space and politics in a new capital city: power interactions (fluid like water) between those who are involved in the process of planning the city and those implementing the outlined projects create the built environment (solid as ice is), which will be appropriated, reacted upon, and adapted by inhabitants (ungraspable as steam is).

According to chronological order, artifacts first appear in the cityscape and are thus logically mentioned first by Harvey. Second, "social action" is affected by these material objects. "Finally," as Harvey puts it, social experiment of the lived-in environment is possible because the materiality of the city was initially produced by social agency between

decision-makers. But at this stage, it feels as if the "social" interactions that shape the cityscape and "social" experience of the city itself by inhabitants are of the same nature. To overcome this difficulty, I rely on Low's (1999b, 112) distinction between the "social production" and the "social construction" of space as two articulated aspects of the spatial dimension of social life.

My purpose in this section was to argue, in the Lefebvrian spirit, that the production of space is a *political* process, because it implies reciprocal interaction between decision-makers, city-planners, and performers. This theoretical argument allows me to analyze further the concrete fabrics of those monuments which are part of the nation-building process (Vale 1992; Johnson 1995; Wagenaar 2000; Forest and Johnson 2002; Koch 2010).

A tale of two statues: the fuzzy fabrics of nationalistic artifacts

Once upon a time, during the summer 2009 while exploring the new places and buildings on the Left Bank (Astana's relocated "center"), I was struck by the presence of several enormous statues standing, some even laying on their side, in an empty lot immediately behind the recently completed Independence Square (Figure 1). They were of two kinds: warriors on horse (these ones were blatantly falling down) and nomadic khans: one sitting on a chair, as if he were protecting the fundamental law,[2] and the other standing aside. Those two were slightly detached from the rest of this striking "hall of fame," which looked like an odd regrouping of historical figures that lived centuries ago. Their pompous stance was in strong contrast with the dusty surroundings. Moreover, these statues looked unstable and the simple fact that they were standing here was, in short, incongruous. It was an enigma of its own kind: Why were these monuments left alone in shambles, while the first days of July are actually dedicated to inaugurating new monuments and buildings[3]?

In this section, I explore this curious scene as a means to illustrate my argument that nationalistic urbanism is more a "resource" than a planned strategy, which would be running top-down from the local or central authorities to the people who shape the cityscape. An economy of symbolic goods, revealed by our micro sociopolitical investigation, is a core driver of the Kazakhstani regime and shows that the urban fabric is contingent and

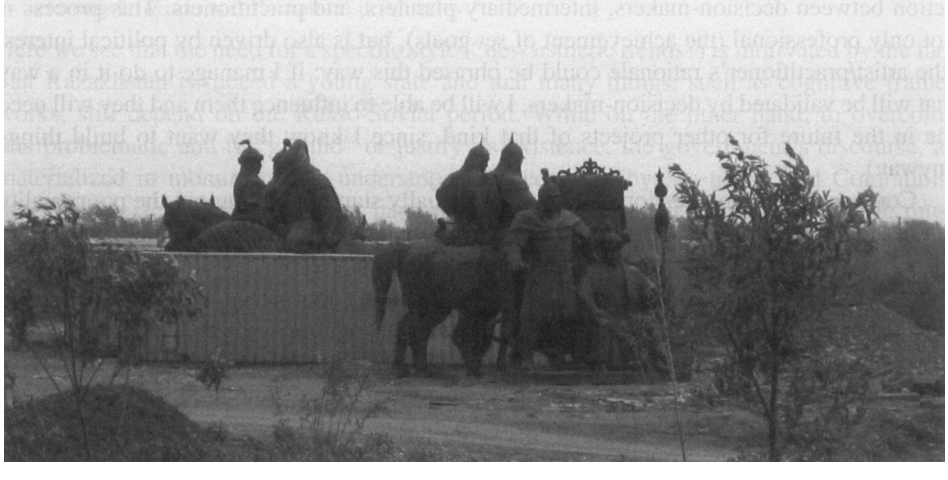

Figure 1. Statues in ruins behind the Independence Palace.
Source: Author.

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leaves space for improvization and opportunist agency. The result, however, is concrete. Regardless of the nature of the process, in the end, urban space is politically produced and is thus already a social construct. By using the notion of "social construct," my aim, then, is to underline the contingent character of the studied phenomena which appear as emergent effects, unwanted by all involved actors, but constituting a resulting aggregation of their strategies (Crozier and Friedberg 1980 [1977]).

Returning now to the illustration of this argument – in brief, these statues of the Khans Zhanybek and Kerey[4] should have been installed next to a monument dedicated to the founding of the Republic of Kazakhstan, but the initiative was cancelled. A second version was created, but ended up being installed somewhere else entirely. The original site, the so-called Kazakh Eli column, is situated on the new Independence Square, which faces the Palace of Peace and Accord (a pyramid-shaped building designed by Norman Foster). This place has a symbolic centrality, as it is an element of the East–West axis along which the presidential palace and other significant buildings are located. In fact, the whole Left Bank urban project is structured by this axis (Koch 2012, 2452). But instead of being installed as planned, the twin representation of Zhanybek and Kerey was left out, later to be melted and replaced by another version, installed miles away from the original place. The second piece now stands in front of the President's Museum, which is not in the newest part of the city, but in the restored Soviet-period core neighborhood, downtown Tselinograd-Akmola.

So why were these monuments left alone in shambles? One might initially venture that they were simply dropped somewhere because the place where they had to be installed originally, the Kazakh Eli column, was modified to host a monument glorifying president Nazarbayev. Indeed, prior to the man's seventieth jubilee (celebrated on 6 July 2010), the original marble fresco narrating the history of Kazakh statehood was replaced by a bronze bas-relief picturing the chief of state. So there was no sense in unveiling the two statues anymore, as the meaning of the Kazakh Eli monument had changed from long-term history to contemporary personalization of political power.

But this answer is unsatisfactory. Even if it already gives a hint about how artifacts of that kind are adapted and subject to change (a monument is corrected from what the general plan had been), behind this possible answer pointing to chronological conjuncture (the correction is linked to Nazarbayev's 70th birthday), something else is hidden: the interaction between decision-makers, intermediary planners, and practitioners. This process is not only professional (the achievement of set goals), but is also driven by political interest (the artist/practitioner's rationale could be phrased this way: if I manage to do it in a way that will be validated by decision-makers, I will be able to influence them and they will need me in the future for other projects of that kind, since I know they want to build things anyway).

Concerning the first version, some critics actually started pointing out the poor quality of the statues' pedestal. And claims about the poor manufacture of this creation gave birth to a harsh controversy, leading to the eventual production of a second version of the Zhanybek and Kerey monument. Other critics, however, including journalists and young educated people, started complaining about the characters' physiognomy, which they did not view as "genuinely Kazakh," but definitely Chinese. As a matter of fact, the first version of the statues was forged in China, and this became an argument to question the legitimacy of those who ordered, fulfilled, and backed the monument.

A group of students from the Gumilev Eurasian University in Astana, interviewed by local media, started to criticize the city governor and former prime minister, Imangaly Tasmagambetov, in November 2009, during a street parade. He answered, putting forward

administrative arguments, saying that the statues were abandoned, because of some missing official documents which would authorize their successful installation. But actually, the first version of the monument was launched under a previous mayor's governorship (Askar Mamin) six months earlier. So actually, the answer by Tasmagambetov clearly points out a professional responsibility or failure on the side of his predecessor Mamin. Local decision-makers did not have the time to validate the monument, so the first project was also cancelled, with the additional reason that the meaning of Kazakh Eli column had meanwhile changed.

This situation created a window of opportunity to make another monument in the name of Zhanybek and Kerey. Some artists and monument designers found a way to get their new project validated, as they were already involved in the adaptation of Kazakh Eli, and they knew how to please politicians with a nice idea. Based on ethno-folkloric and archeological arguments, the same students, their teachers, pensioners, and some local journalists started to vociferate about anachronistic clothing and conveyed historians to demonstrate the cogency of their remarks.

"The influence of Chinese specialists was too obvious," said one of my informants, Astana's master planner,[5] who was vice-president of the selective jury for the second version of Zhanybek and Kerey statues. As a consequence, it was decided that a new model must be conceived and cast "at home" – meaning in Kazakhstan by Kazakhstani artists, and using local materials. With this agreement and validation, the second initiative succeeded where the first statue project, an initiative undertaken by the previous mayor, failed. Thus, this tale is not only about two versions of the Zhanybek and Kerey monument, but it is also about a rivalry between several protagonists: two politicians (Mamin *versus* Tasmagambetov), as well as between two sculptors/architects (Smagulov *versus* Mansurov). In this, we can clearly see not the social, but the *political* and thus *strategic* production of space in this recent capital city.

The public contest to replace the first composition only lasted a month. Among 10 projects, the youngest artist won. His age and low influence from Soviet cognitive frameworks were defined as positive features by the chief designer of Astana, Dzhambulatov, in the media[6]:

> We are a young state and if we do not break old stereotypes of monumentalism (*sic*), we won't find new aesthetic trends, we will make socialist realism. This is why the jury rejected projects referring to Minin and Pozharskii in Moscow.[7]

Here we see that the need for a specific style ("new esthetic trends") is motivated by the fact that Kazakhstan is indeed a young state and that many things, such as cognitive frameworks, still depend on the Russo-Soviet period. While on the other hand, to overcome this problematic and to "ground" or justify its existence, the government's discourse, as materialized in monuments, is understood to necessarily bypass tsarist and Communist times, and extend into an ancient past of great khans. Even if the form and style must not be inspired or captivated by "old stereotypes," the very idea of a monument dedicated to a pair of national heroes is nonetheless a sign of cognitive path dependency on the Minin and Pozharskii example.

Hence, the contest guidelines mentioned the need to picture the khans in line with ethnographic requirements regarding clothing and weapons in particular. However, on the basis of my interviews with the people involved in the making of the second set of statues, it actually appears that improvisation and adaptation ruled the process. Rather than submitting to a pseudo-scientific set of criteria, the artists and architects consciously worked by muddling through. This shows that, in Astana, the fabrication of nationalistic

urban artifacts is a fuzzy process. In fact, the expert panel opinion only gave more legitimacy to the second project.

Furthermore, here is what one informant said about the way the expert panel coped with the historical arguments put forward by critics of the poor first version of the statues.

> It was at first Mamin's and the president's wish. They wanted to give space to state founders. So they gave millions of tenge [local money] to Chinese people. And the statues were left apart, of poor quality, to that extent that no one could install them somewhere, even for ten years or so. Then a journalist started complaining about public money wasting and unfair project selection. But they truly looked like the clay Chinese warriors of the Xian mausoleum. Ismagulov and Ayagan, from the Institute for State History insisted on that resemblance.[8] Once it got broadcast in the media, Tasmagambetov organized a press conference with academics where journalists acted very aggressively. This is when Abzhanov[9] got involved.[10]

Few people actually know who these two khans are. Of course, local historians know who the two warlords were, but their knowledge does not always foster criticism towards that kind of nationalistically improvised construction. Even being deeply aware of the degree of randomness in shaping the form of statues, one of my informants expressed satisfaction to see such monuments being built:

> In fact, we don't know much about these two men, despite their breaking up with Abul Khair.[11] Sources are the same. But I feel sympathetic with people's reaction. Mr. Abzhanov, my supervisor for the Doktor Nauk degree,[12] wrote to the local authorities, insisting on three points: quality of the metal, corruption, and biased historical facts. But it's weird, when you think of it, that in every city, there are Ablay Khan[13] avenues, but no Zhanybek and Kerey, or let's say, Kasym Khan.[14] Personally, I was happy of the monument, we just had to invent their faces etc. Because there is no description of the way they looked like. This is exactly what Erofeeva[15] calls mythologization! We know Kenessary[16] was small and weak, but we still portray him as a strong and tall guy.[17]

Thanks to this quote, we exactly witness the contingency and improvisation aspects I will demonstrate in detail further on: nationalistic monuments are invented on the basis of non-rigorous knowledge. This is why interpretative analysis or the enquiry of social reception of symbols is problematic. Although, on the macro-level, nationalistic artifacts such as stamps or newspaper and school books serve as instruments for imagining the national community (Anderson 1983), one must first investigate how, on the micro-level, they are produced, by whom, and in what context.

Before we continue examining the agency of the people who were involved in the intellectual conception and material making of these nationalist artifacts, which are today part of the central city space in Astana, we should consider the words of President Nazarbayev. Here is what he said during the monument's inauguration in front of his very own First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan museum:

> The name of our people – the Kazakhs – was precisely assessed in the 15th century, underlying its inclination for freedom. And we value all the merits of those who founded Kazakh statehood (gosudarstvennost'). Zhanybek and Kerey contributed to the history of our people. Today, to acknowledge this, we inaugurate this monument. A special place was chosen in this respect. Here, indeed, the new capital city's heart started beating (…).[18] These two historical figures shall help fostering patriotic feelings and love of homeland among citizens, especially among the younger ones. It is a way to increase our historical memory.[19]

Hence, the founders of "Kazakh statehood," Zhanybek and Kerey, now stand in front of a museum dedicated to the statesman who led Kazakhstan from Soviet rule to independence and still heads the country. This situation (in the literal and figurative sense: place and event) underlines alleged deep historical continuity running from the fifteenth century up to now.[20] As mentioned by Grant (2001) and Buchli (2007) concerning monuments in

Moscow and Astana, it points to an ancient past to prove the authenticity of a nationwide identity, with the help of simplified, almost infantilizing, new historical narratives.

Now that we have a better picture of what happened with the Zhanybek and Kerey statues, from the contested first version to the inauguration of the officially validated one, let us return to the Kazakh Eli composition, where the first version was to be installed originally – because its adjustment acts like a mirror of what happened to Zhanybek and Kerey. Indeed, the way the first version of the two heroes' monument was treated is actually explained by how the Kazak Eli modification, with a Nazarbayev bas-relief erasing historical narratives, was treated as well: it did not receive political support from key decision-makers (the mayor and the chief of state).

Here is what another informant, an educated Kazakh woman working as a senior civil servant, says about the way it was not enthusiastically welcomed, despite the bronze bas-relief of the president:

> I work in front of the pyramid and I always loved entertainment. So I looked at it with a curious eye. Hundreds of people, pupils, school teachers etc. were called to gather on the morning, in March, but the ceremony only began couple of hours later, because the president and ministers were not coming. It was −10°C! (Laughing)[21]

Yet, this modification of the Kazakh Eli column did not receive the same official treatment as the Zhanybek and Kerey statues. President Nazarbayev did not come to the inauguration, as if to say that he did not validate the meaning of such a radical materialization of his particular position as the chief of state. Why then produce such monumental objects to feed the ruler's cult of personality if the man is not happy with such an effigy? Why exactly modify the Kazakh Eli monument and suppress the narrative marble fresco, embracing centuries of history?

Kazkh Eli, clientelism, and space to improvise

The answer lies in the clientelistic power relations, already apparent in the following statement made by the capital city chief designer, Sagyndyk Dzhambulatov:

> The mayor supports the idea of distinguishing what comes from Europe and what comes from here. This is why I suggested the president to develop a national style of architecture. He gave me his blessing. I shall even write a book about this. At first, we made it quick because something had to be built. (…)We influence power in its decision and the power shows off through its buildings (…)We must do it our way but it has to be beautiful.[22]

An interactive sequencing can be found in Dzhambultov's remarks "the mayor supports the idea […] I suggested the president […] he gave me his blessing […] something has to be built […] we influence power […] power shows off […] it has to be beautiful." The problem is, however, that sometimes those who order such monuments or accept the idea do not appreciate the final result, or are not fully aware of the initiative – so they refuse to validate the political product and its symbolics. Even if it was a sort of gift for his forthcoming birthday, President Nazarbayev is said, by two of my informants (deputy planner and chief designer), not to have liked the bas-relief, finding it exaggerated, akin to his distaste for a Senate member's spring 2009 proposal to change the name of Astana to Nursultan (on the example of Washington DC in the USA). In fact, someone (a bureaucrat or an intermediary local politician) who was able to influence the shape of the Kazakh Eli monument took it as an opportunity to show off his or her personal allegiance to the president. A window of opportunity opened up with the cancelation of the initial project of installing two heroes (Zhanybek and Kerey) aside.

And yet, despite the expression of contempt from the ruler, this adjusted monument was unveiled and remains part of the cityscape. The question is, though, for how long? As we have already seen, the Kazakh Eli column was not "permanent," but was later adjusted. Hence, symbolic and material artifacts of that kind, overloaded with meaningful narratives about selected individuals who occupy governing positions, such as monuments dedicated to the president, are actually part of a relationship between those who govern the city and those who fulfill the contracts, revealing individual strategies taking advantage from opportunities created by the regime, as "something should be built."

Building objectives are actually subject to loose interpretation, and serve as a medium of a patron/client relationship: those who shape monuments and buildings seek to please their bosses (local authorities or even the president) and look forward in remaining a good client (a demanded expert) for their own sake. And the relationship can get reversed, in the Foucauldian spirit of micro-power analytics, because those who developed these monuments (the mayor) did so in order to fulfill President Nazarbayev own vision – but crucially as an act of interpreting his *anticipated* will. Then, the mayor needs someone to satisfy his commands. The client (a sculptor) then becomes boss, as he or she is the only one able to draw and materialize the project. And if the wish is not clearly expressed (as is frequently the case), they have room for improvisation and can influence their commissioner's vision. Now let us see how it works more concretely. The following lengthy transcript gives more hints about the way things happen in the fabrics of nationalistic symbols, which are political products of a process of "muddling through." This interview with one of Astana's key sculptors was conducted a couple of miles from the place where the first statues were initially discovered in shambles, as if the solution was already nearby.

One afternoon, I met this sculptor at his smelting company, on the outskirts of Astana. I contacted him because I knew he was involved in the Zhanybek and Kerey affair, but I discovered that he was actually responsible for the bronze bas-relief of Kazakh Eli, as well. First, while he was loading a statue to be sent by truck to the southern town of Kzyl-Orda, and putting the official papers in order (a worry consistent with the mayor's argument earlier), he invited me to come inside the oven, and showed me the gigantic molds he uses for statues. There, employees were working on golden arabesque ornaments with hammers and blowtorches, and reduced-size models and matrices of various other statues were strewn about. We then went to his office, where sketches and scrawled city maps were pinned up on the walls.

This place was the very *locus*, or confluence, of the power relations enacted and materialized in the production of garnishments for Astana's urban spaces. His workshop, this iron foundry, was the nexus between the two initial phases (out of three) of the metaphorical process I delineated at the outset of this article: in this very place, the "water-like" political production of space incarnated into an "ice-like" artifact (a "frozen" materialization of clientelistic interactions and meaningful historical narratives). The sculptor and entrepreneur said:

> Those in power always wanted to build monuments, this dates back to the Pharaohs. And we answer: 'everything is possible, as far as you pay and that technical constraints allow us to do the job.' Politicians are like kids, they want their ideology incarnated.
>
> Our project is to set rules, so that the process would be less chaotic, to make sure things are done properly, as in other countries. It will help developing culture and enrich artists, by putting forward creative works. [...] Now we can melt Kazakhstani bronze here, it's far better. But we don't want any medals; I'm just fighting to protect national culture, you see. And to do it, one must support artists. [...]

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> Well, yes, we executed the job for Zhanybek and Kerey here, in this workshop, based on this young man's sketches. The older version was really poor, because the Chinese can do any work at any price, if you need it. And it's the customer's interest, so that he can keep the rest of the money and pretend it was spent. These statues were moved as the wind was blowing; they didn't have an internal structure. [...] But of course the first ones looked Chinese. Take a look at me; I have a Chinese face too. It doesn't mean anything. We did exactly what we wanted to. [...]
>
> Monumentalism is my job. We are at the very end of the process. The others decide, struggle to prove something to the president, and we perform. If people do not like, guess who's going to pay: us. But on the other hand, we can influence the meaning or the shape of the pieces. For instance, Kazakh Eli bas-relief was awkward, because there was only the president standing. So we added people behind him, to make him less detached from the population. [...] Well, here you are, these are the imperialistic symbols of the State.[23]

These words were pronounced in the very place where the sculptor actually "performs," and he is the only person mastering the technical process. So no matter how authoritarian the regime may be, the ruler's or intermediate decision-makers' imperative wish to have a monument erected cannot be satisfied without the agency of a person who specializes in the material fabrics of symbolic objects: "monumentalism is my job." And the expert can only answer this demand provided he is offered a material gain, and the idea is technically feasible. However, his position as a performer, executing orderings, is not completely a subordinate one. The practitioner is concerned not only with esthetics, as a professional artist, but also with the meaning conveyed by the object he helps to produce. Here the relationship turns upside down and the executer transforms himself into an executive "we can influence the meaning or the shape of the pieces," even adopting a paternalistic (or patronizing) stance toward decision-makers, who suffer from constructive obsession "politicians are like kids, they want their ideology incarnated," an idea already observed in Moscow under the Luzhkov administration, where the grandiose and kitschy monuments are symptomatic of a childlike state (Grant 2001). Hence, when the project does not suit the artist's viewpoint, he can always accommodate things and do it his way: "we did exactly what we wanted to."

The performer, being "at the very end of the process," after frictions among those bureaucrats and politicians who want to prove allegiance to the president (the boss/client relationship lying at the core of the Kazakhstani regime), is also situated at the nexus of space and politics. He shapes what some call a "landscape of power" (Olwig and Mitchell 2009), because his agency results in the incarnation of discourse and worldview options expressed by those who govern. Furthermore, the personal interest of the expert must be underlined. By proving he could do something of better quality than the first Chinese-made, polemic version of Zhanybek and Kerey, he positioned himself as a reliable professional. And since he is convinced by personal experience, almost a universal law as he puts it, that decision-makers are prone to order symbolic and grandiose artifacts ("those in power always wanted to build monuments") he strives to institutionalize rules which could of course position his expertise as the most adequate ("our project is to set rules [...] enrich artists [...] now we can melt Kazakhstani bronze here") pretexting a patriotic stance: "I'm just fighting to protect national culture, you see."

Contrary to the Vietnamese verses about Paris that I quoted *in exordio*, in Astana, poor-quality statues once stood on a dusty yard, and the harsh task of the sculptor is not of making it but having it accepted by decision-makers. Produced material objects that are part of the nation-building toolkit must be seen as *constructions* in both literal and figurative senses. And people who are part of this process try to satisfy orders emanating from those who govern and to be noticed for their job. As a matter of fact, rather than a thorough

implementation of coherent plans, in Astana, planned urban landscape is an outcome of practical compromises.

But above all, the production of urban space, even in the authoritarian context, must be seen as a fuzzy process, characterized by the aggregation of interests and the frequent reshaping of objectives, in the manner of the artist modifying a sketch. A micro-sociological investigation through a monumental case in Astana reveals the contingent though opportunist agency of the individuals involved. Through their personal strategies, those who shape monuments or buildings improvise and contribute to defining the rules of the game and local authorities' priorities. This situation is taken into account by those who try to find their way in the regime or take advantage of the system for their own sake, as the sculptor's example shows.

Conclusion: political space and the political economy of symbolic goods

In this paper, through an urban and recent case study, I demonstrated that the investigation of social interaction between agents who produce material symbols, displayed in the city landscape, has to be on the agenda of nationalism scholarship. Even if modernist approaches (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983) have shown that nationalistic artifacts such as monuments or maps are central to the process, we still need to consider that the production of these objects is the consequence of micro-power relations (Foucault 1983). Moreover, this process is contingent.

Crucial to my concerns of displaying the fuzziness inherent in the political production of urban artifacts forming Astana's cityscape, the final assessment of this tale (its morality, sticking to the Aesopic fable standard) is that the contingent and opportunist interactive agency of decision-makers, planners, and experts have a concrete impact on micro-level materiality. What I observed and interpreted for a single case could be generalized into a political economy of nationalistic symbols: they are not consciously planned and their accumulation in the central urban space of Kazakhstan's capital city is erratic. But in the end, these artifacts still fill in produced space. Consequently, the gallery of "great men" that stand on streets and squares in Astana is not really the expression of a clear and unified nationalistic agenda. For the rest, a local specialist of nationalist politics in Kazakhstan stated, in an interview, that these decisions were utterly failing to follow a rigorous rationale since the early 1990s, because of the political turnover among the people in charge both at the local and national levels.[24] Rather, there are moments when individual agency manages to drive the "water-like" political production of monuments process to its ending "freezing" phase, depending on the contextual looseness of urban planning which opens windows of opportunity. Hence, the production of such monuments is a resource for agents who try to find their way in the Kazakhstani system, seeking to gain attention from the rulers because of the institutionalized patronage that structures the regime ("The others decide, struggle to prove something to the president"). What is more, these interpersonal relations are not only based on reciprocal interactions as we have seen earlier. They are driven by an economy of symbolic goods (Forest and Johnson 2002).

The nature of this political production of space in Astana, which I have revealed on the basis of a single case study (contingent and opportunist, fuzzy though interest driven), can be generalized to the broader economy of symbolic goods that structures the Nazarbayev regime. This is the reason I believe symbolic goods are part of the political economy within the Kazakhstani regime. Used as gifts, they are not only a Maussian regulatory institute within the family or between segments of society (Suraganova 2009), but also the

medium of power relations. In such a system, the more you produce material objects (symbolic goods such as monuments or even books) that are welcomed by the authorities (at the local or national level), the more you provoke sympathy, you "keep in touch" with those who govern, and assure your own situation towards the ruling elite or even among it. This is exactly the same reasoning in the case of the production of space: the more you satisfy decision-makers' wishes, the more you will be solicited to do it later on.

Somehow, this could appear to echo a dynamic conception of power (something that could be accumulated, preserved, redeemed, etc) such as holistic Bourdieu's "social capital" (Bourdieu 1986), which maintains or reproduces dominating/dominated cleavages. However, as I have attempted to illustrate here, these material symbolic artifacts are above all a medium for individuals to enter and play the political game of interpersonal, patron/client, reversible power relations, so as to influence the cityscape. Rather than adopting Bourdieu's paradigm of power as an attribute, while phrasing the metaphorical water physics describing the political production of urban space, I get closer to what Foucault (1983) calls "micro-physics of power" – a strategic, relational, interactive, and hence methodologically individualistic notion. By tracing the way nationalistic material symbols are made up, these mechanics pop out, displaying a complex situation, contrasting with the traditional "authoritarian" top-down-and-centralized definition of the Nazarbayevian state (Tilly 2007), based on macro-institutional analysis.

Is there a moral to this tale of two statues? I have argued, in short, that these interpersonal relations of power (among rulers, planners, and experts) that erratically create monuments or buildings, analyzed as "micro-physics of power," reveal an economy of symbolic goods that lie at the core of the Nazarbayev regime. And the political production of monuments is paradoxical, even erratic, because this fuzzy process still creates the built environment which will be reacted upon or assimilated by the citizens. Of course, the city does not consist of monuments only, but their symbolic dimension (Sperber 1975) makes them central in the urban part of the nation-building process. The final result is a gallery of monuments, accumulated since independence, which official discourse channels in order to inculcate attachment to the sovereign nation (Buchli 2007). Hence, the political production of nation-building(s) in the literal and figurative senses (Laszczkowski 2011) is contingent but still leaves lasting marks in the landscape; these artifacts are the physical substance of the city, its "landscape of power" (Olwig and Mitchell 2009). After all, if "the state relies on the institutional integration of power relations" (Foucault 1976), and some of these erratic interactions create the cityscape of Astana, it follows that the political production of urban space in Kazakhstan's capital city institutes the state. And yet, the "state," as personified by the Nazarbayev political regime, is inherently contingent and interest driven, fuzzy but real, just as are the urban material productions that materialize (*aedificare*) it.

Notes

1. My PhD dissertation in Political Sociology, defended in 2013, was entitled *City, Nation and State in Kazakhstan: Astana or the construction of an urban locus of power.* I would like to thank the reviewers for their stimulating comments on a previous version of this paper.
2. A representation of the Constitution of Independent Republic of Kazakhstan was behind the sitting khan.
3. Coinciding with president Nazarbayev's birthday, the Astana Day celebration of 6 July has become, since the middle of the 2000s, a nationwide official event.
4. The two men are considered founders of the Kazakh Khanate in the fifteenth century.
5. Field interview, June 2011.

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6. http://rus.azattyq.org/articleprintview/1929616.html (last accessed 4 September 2012).
7. The two Russian princes gathered an army to repel the Polish-Lithuanian forces from Moscow in 1612. A monument dedicated to this event was erected on the bicentenary of their victory on the Red Square in Moscow. http://www.duanrevig.com/Moscou/slides/Monument%20Minime%20et%20Pojarski%20Ivan%20Martos%201818.html (last accessed 4 September 2012).
8. http://www.newskaz.ru/society/20091117/361512.html
9. This person is considered an authority of the Kazakhstani academia. Distinguished professor of history at the Gumilev Eurasian University (Astana), he led the Institute of history, ethnology, and architecture at the Academy of Sciences (Almaty) for years.
10. Interview with an archeologist, member of the expert panel (13 June 2011, Astana), in her forties, professor at the Gumilev Eurasian University.
11. Founder, in the fifteenth century, of what will become the Shaybanid Empire centered in Samarkand, he united Uzbek tribes from which Zhanybek and Kerey were to separate.
12. The highest diploma in the post-Soviet scholar system. It is usually defended by 40-year-old researchers, to become full professors.
13. He united Kazakh tribes against Dzhungars and became a warlord hero for defeating them (eighteenth century).
14. The son and successor of Zhanybek.
15. The former director of the Institute for the Study of Nomadic Legacy based in Almaty.
16. The last Kazakh leader who led a rebellion against the rule of the Russian Empire (nineteenth century).
17. Interview with a senior scholar (18 June 2011, Astana), in her forties, Kazakhstan history professor at the Gumilev Eurasian University.
18. Prior to being a museum, this building was initially the local authorities' headquarters; then, once the town gained official capital city status, it hosted presidential administration until the Left Bank complex was inaugurated.
19. http://www.info-tses.kz/red/article.php?article=71895&print=Y (last accessed 4 September 2012). http://mutantclan.narod.ru/jk.htm (last accessed 4 September 2012).
20. Let me recall that the two statues were initially projected to be installed aside the Kazakh Eli monument. But instead, and because of several arguments delegitimizing the first version, a bronze made bas-relief of president Nazarbayev became the central piece of Kazakh Eli. The founder of the actual state replaced the founders of the medieval one, and the latter are now defending the entrance of the former's museum.
21. Interview with a lady executive civil servant (10 July 2010, Astana), in her thirties, specialized in art history and sociology of culture [kulturologia], PhD in political philosophy from the Kazakhstani Academy of Science.
22. Interview with Sagyndyk Dzhambulatov (June 24 2011, Astana), in his 50s, architect and designer in chief of Astana.
23. Interview with a monument architect (22 June 2011, Astana), in his forties, sculptor and entrepreneur.
24. Interview with a senior scholar in political science (Almaty, July 2010), in his sixties, specialized in nationalism studies at the Kazakhstani Academy of Science and lecturer in political theory.

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