



The Critical Turn and Beyond: The Case of Commemorative Street Naming

Maoz Azaryahu¹

Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Haifa
Haifa, 31905, Israel

azaryahu@geo.haifa.ac.il

The critical turn in the social sciences has produced an impressive body of studies which has highlighted previously neglected aspects of social life as well as contributed substantially to our understanding of the role of culture in social formations. Underlying most critical analyses of place naming is an understanding that the (re)writing of the toponymic landscape demonstrates the connections between cultural and political processes. In particular, it shows how power relations shape commemorative priorities and produce certain geographies of public memory. Interestingly, much of the recent scholarship on the politics of place naming has been associated with the issue of street naming as a strategy of toponymic commemoration (e.g., Azaryahu, 1996; Alderman, 2000; Rose-Redwood, 2008). Consequently, I shall focus my attention here on questions of commemorative street naming and the need to rethink the relation between power, meaning, and toponymic inscription.

Despite the growing interest in the critical study of place naming, scholarship in English is relatively rich for some periods and places but weak for others. Critical toponymic studies of North America and Europe, for instance, are quite numerous, whereas relatively few English-language publications have explored the politics of place naming in Latin America, Asia, or Africa. Even among European countries, the critical place-name literature is quite uneven in its coverage, with few



¹ Creative Commons licence: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works

studies considering the cases of Italy, Greece, Serbia, or Holland, to name but a few. This certainly does not mean that valuable research has not been done with respect to these places in *other* languages. However, studies of street naming in Köln, Germany, the Israeli city of Beer Sheva, or suburban Helsinki, written in German, Hebrew, Finnish, respectively, are unfortunately not accessible to larger audiences (Berring & Grosssteinbeck, 1994; Vuolteenaho, Ainiala, & Wihuri, 2007; Azaryahu, 2008; but see Vuolteenaho and Ainiala, 2009). English is now the hegemonic language for international academic discourse, which means that the “local” is expected to be formulated in the idiom of English if it is to be considered “global.” The availability of more empirical case studies in English from different areas and periods is therefore considered a precondition to the development of a truly global perspective on the critical study of place naming. Having more case studies is crucial not only to shedding light on the politics of place naming in specific local and national contexts but also to enabling a comparative perspective. Such a comparative analysis of commemorative street naming offers an opportunity to refine our understanding of the political dynamics of street naming beyond particular histories and places.

A comparative analysis of large-scale “toponymic cleansing” in the wake of a regime change is crucial for understanding the symbolic transformation of the urban landscape. The study of renaming streets as a measure of historical revision during periods of political change and revolutionary transformation has already been addressed in the literature, mainly with regard to the emergence of post-communist societies in the 1990s (Azaryahu, 1997; Light, 2004; Gil, 2005; Palonen, 2008). Such studies have concentrated on capital cities, such as Moscow, Budapest, East Berlin, and Bucharest. It seems potentially rewarding, however, to broaden the area of study to include provincial cities and even small towns. Beyond additional empirical data, the theoretical understanding of large-scale renaming operations needs to be refined. Of much interest in this respect is the function of renaming as a measure of *symbolic retribution*. The retributive and politicized nature of street renaming has been particularly evident in South African cities. Violent protests have taken place over the removal of road names from the country’s colonial and apartheid past and the establishment of new names that glorify the ruling African National Congress and supposedly slight the party’s political rivals (Wines, 2007).

Exploring the commemoration of specific historical “heroes” in different cities highlights the geopolitics of a particular commemorative theme. A different strategy is to consider commemorative street names as elements of a historically constructed “text of memory” that can be read and interpreted. However, reading these “texts” entails more than mere categorization of commemorative names according to ideological and/or historical themes. It should also take into account the fact that such a text has been written and re-written by multiple “co-authors.” Hitherto the operation of naming commissions as municipal agencies that “author” the landscape-as-text over time has largely evaded academic scrutiny (yet, see

Monmonier, 2006). In this respect, it is worth exploring the relations between the “input,” which refers to the names offered for commemoration, and the “output,” the actual names approved as worthy of official commemoration. Since commemoration is about the allocation of limited symbolic resources—that is, a place in the public sphere—considering the relations between the “input” and “output” is crucial for understanding the politics of commemorative street naming.

Whereas ideologues and bureaucrats emphasize the necessity of toponymic coherence, a critical approach applied to reading street names as a “text of memory” should consider the possibility of ostensible incoherence, polysemy and heterogeneity, while acknowledging and seeking to explain the contradictions and inconsistencies that reflect the history of the “text” itself. Such contradictions may later be resolved through changes in the text. For example, the communist take-over of East Berlin in November 1948 was not followed by a massive mopping-up operation of “reactionary” commemorations, mainly the names of Prussian kings and generals, from the street signs. The apparent contradiction between the official vision of history promoted by the new regime and the view of history as commemorated by street names was not resolved in this case until spring 1951 as part of the preparations for an international festival due to take place in the capital of the Communist state.

Of primary significance in this respect is the possibility that certain historical commemorations may be subject to different interpretations, which makes them compatible with different, possibly conflicting, narratives of history. From the perspective of the German radical Left in the 1920s, the names of members of the abdicated Hohenzollern dynasty represented the memory of a disgraced and reactionary monarchy and therefore had to be de-commemorated. However, the Republican authorities refused to rid Berlin’s cityscape of dynastic commemorations, while giving the names of leaders of the Republic to central thoroughfares in the city. As a result, a notion of historical continuity emerged between the monarchy and the republic.

As a form of toponymic inscription, street names are something of a modern, Western innovation. A measure designed to regulate and control urban space by the authorities, and often endowed with a commemorative function, street names have become conventional, though not necessarily an obligatory norm. This begs an investigation into the historical origins and geographical diffusion of this cultural innovation that has become a hallmark of urban modernity and a feature of political culture that transcends political regimes and ideological orientations.

Two issues are also worth addressing with respect to the impact of colonialism on the naming of streets. One is the extent to which colonial administrations were actively engaged in urging towns to introduce street names to achieve a degree of administratively regulated spatial order. In the British Mandate of Palestine, for instance, district commissioners exerted pressure on both Arab and Jewish towns to name streets. Beyond the regulation of urban space, another issue

is the extent to which local authorities deferred to the colonial government by naming streets after colonial heroes. After his death in 1936, cities in British-mandatory Palestine named central thoroughfares after King George V. Additionally, some street names commemorated British colonial officials in Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem. In a similar vein, street names in Abidjan, the capital of the former French colony of Côte d'Ivoire, were named after French colonial heroes. An indication of the complexities involved in colonial naming practices is the case of colonial Singapore where an official, British-Colonial nomenclature and a vernacular, Asian-local nomenclature co-existed (Yeoh, 1992).

A related issue is the de-colonization of commemorative street names following independence. In principle, one might surmise the existence of three main strategies. One is to erase all "colonial" street names (as well as pulling down "colonial" monuments) to signify a complete break from the colonial past. An example is post-colonial Singapore, where naming streets served to erase the colonial past and assert national independence (Yeoh, 1996). The other extreme is to leave colonial commemorations in their place. In Abidjan, streets were still named after French colonial heroes as late as 1982, over two decades after gaining political independence, which was interpreted by some as a sign of "cultural alienation" (Bänziger, 1982). A third strategy is a selective de-commemoration of the colonial past.

Notwithstanding radical undertones and moralizing overtones, the critical approach to the study of commemorative street naming is susceptible to increasingly producing variations on a rather conventional theme based upon the theoretical premise that naming places represents well-defined power relations and ideological agendas. It also tends to concentrate on and privilege the *political* meaning of names, which dominate commemorative naming procedures and later controversies, while ignoring the ways in which place names accumulate meanings that have no necessary relationship with the political rationale underlying the naming or later opposition to the name. In this sense, the critical approach employed by many recent studies is reductive in its treatment of the meaning of place names.

Whether focused on official and textual naming practices or verbal naming practices (on the latter, see Kearns and Berg, 2009; Myers, 2009), the critical study of toponymic commemoration has mainly been concerned with commemorative claims for authority and meaning that comply with given ideological discourses and which support or challenge hegemonic structures of power. Whereas the sociopolitical functionalism that underlies this critical approach seems to be appropriate for analyzing naming procedures, its capacity to shed light on how toponymic commemorations communicate meaning and partake in memory-work is limited. An analysis of how toponymic commemorations perform as media of communication entails a better understanding of the role of users of names as co-creators of meaning. Such a line of investigation must also take into account that toponymic commemorations are informed by cultural and historical knowledge and

the experience of individuals as well as by other commemorative media and texts, since “any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva, 1986, 36-37).

Place-name studies has long focused on the description and classification of toponyms and treated “place” as an unproblematic geographical concept. However, recent critical toponymic research has shifted the focus away from the name itself and towards a political analysis of naming practices and the cultural production of “place” (Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu, 2010). Concurrently, the academic study of place-making has largely ignored the issue of place naming, implicitly assuming that place names are mere signifiers. The understanding that place names are not passive signifiers but are actively involved in place-making practices opens up new directions of research on both toponymic inscription and the production of “place,” and holds much promise for further study.

References

- Alderman, D. 2000. A street fit for a King: Naming places and commemoration in the American South. *Professional Geographer*, 52(4), 672-684.
- Azaryahu, M. 2008. Hanzaha mekomit: Shemot le-rehovot Beer-Sheva 1973-1998. In, Y. Gradus and E. Meir-Glitzenstein (eds.), *Beer Sheva: Metropolis in the Making*. Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, pp. 197-216.
- Azaryahu, M. 1997. German reunification and the politics of street names: The case of East Berlin. *Political Geography*, 16(6), 479-493.
- Azaryahu, M. 1996. The power of commemorative street names. *Environment and Planning D*, 14(3), 311-330.
- Bänziger, A. 1982. Jeder Kolonialheld hat seine Strasse. *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 7 January.
- Berring, D. and K. Grosssteinbeck. 1994. Die Kulturgeschichte von Strassennamen. Neue Perspektiven auf alten Terrain, gewonnen am Beispiel Köln, *Muttersprache* 104, 97-117.
- Gill, G. 2005. Changing symbols: The renovation of Moscow place names. *The Russian Review*, 64(3), 480-503.
- Kearns, R.A. and L.D. Berg. 2009. Proclaiming Place: Towards a geography of place name pronunciation. In, L. Berg and J. Vuolteenaho (eds.), *Critical toponymies: The contested politics of place naming*. Aldershot, UK and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, pp. 153-178.
- Kristeva, J. 1986. Word, dialogue, and the novel. In, T. Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 34-61.

- Light, D. 2004. Street names in Bucharest, 1990-1997: Exploring the modern historical geographies of post-socialist change. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 30(1), 154-172.
- Monmonier, M. 2006. *From Squaw Tit to Whorehouse Meadow: How maps name, claim, and inflame*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Myers, G. 2009. Naming and placing the Other: Power and the urban landscape in Zanzibar. In, L. Berg and J. Vuolteenaho (eds.), *Critical toponymies: The contested politics of place naming*. Aldershot, UK and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, pp. 85-100.
- Palonen, E. 2008. The city-text in post-communist Budapest: Street names, memorials, and the politics of commemoration. *GeoJournal*, 73(3), 219-230.
- Rose-Redwood, R. 2008. From number to name: Symbolic capital, places of memory and the politics of street renaming in New York City. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 9(4), 431-452.
- Rose-Redwood, R., D. Alderman, and M. Azaryahu. 2010. Geographies of toponymic inscription: New directions in critical place-name studies. *Progress in Human Geography*, 34(4), 453-470.
- Vuolteenaho, J., T. Ainiala, and E. Wihuri. 2007. Asuntosäästäjien Tapiolasta Helsingin East Endiksi: Kaava- ja taloyhtiönimistö Vuosaaren kasvun vuosikymmeninä. *Yhdyskuntasuunnittelu*, 45(4), 6-28.
- Vuolteenaho, J. and T. Ainiala. 2009. Planning and revamping urban toponymy: Ideological alterations in the linguistic landscaping of Vuosaari suburb, eastern Helsinki. In, L. Berg and J. Vuolteenaho (eds.), *Critical toponymies: The contested politics of place naming*. Aldershot, UK and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, pp. 227-252.
- Wines, M. 2007. Where the road to renaming does not run smooth. *New York Times*, 25 May, A4.
- Yeoh, B. 1996. Street-naming and nation-building: Toponymic inscriptions of nationhood in Singapore. *Area*, 28(3), 298-307.
- Yeoh, B. 1992. Street names in colonial Singapore. *Geographical Review*, 82(3), 313-322.