



Urban space as a commons in print media discourse in Poland after 1989



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ABSTRACT

While the idea of the city as a commons had corrupted in Poland throughout the socialist period and did not recover in the wake of the systemic change, individualism appears to have become a dominating force shaping Polish cities since 1989. The aim of the paper is to unpack the concept of urban space as a commons and examine its readjustment at the beginning of the 21st century through the lens of the Polish print media. Results of the discourse analysis indicate that the term, applied to fragments of urban space varying in function and scale, has strong connotations of conflict and strife. Legacy of Poland's contemporary history appears as the most common justification for the weakness of the urban commons and despite the growing awareness of the issue, the debate on possible remedies is still at an early stage and hence inconclusive.

1. Introduction

One of prominent research threads in studies of post-socialist urban transformations concerns socio-spatial changes. Restructuring of the political, economic, social and cultural spheres largely affected the relations between the social and the spatial in cities of East Central Europe (Czepczyński, 2008; Ianoş, Sîrodoev, Pascariu, & Henebry, 2016; Sailer-Fliege, 1999; Stanilov, 2007; Stenning, Smith, Rochovská, & Świątek, 2010). In Poland the transition began, inter alia, with restoration of land rent, re-establishment of the local government and rise of the tertiary sector, which had further consequences, such as growing competition for urban space and increased socio-spatial differentiation (Marciniczak, 2012; Węclawowicz, 1996). As much as these processes have been quite well investigated and documented, what seems to be missing from the vast body of literature is the accompanying shift in perception(s) of urban space. Considering that cities are the most complex communal forms of settlement, the aim of the paper is to unpack the idea of urban space as a commons and examine its readjustment at the beginning of the 21st century in Poland through the lens of the print media. Although transformation of urban commons is a global phenomenon (Berge & McKean, 2015; Unnikrishnan, Manjunatha, & Nagendra, 2016), the Polish case study situated in the post-socialist context is presented here in line with the proposition developed by Tuvikene (2016). Instead of treating the term “post-socialist” as a spatio-temporal container (based on location in a particular region) or a condition (emphasising hybridity of past and present), a less constrained, de-territorialized conceptualisation is applied, viewing cities not as post-socialist per se, but focusing on certain aspects of

them, typical of post-socialism – in this case the specifically changing discourse on commonality of urban space. According to Tuvikene, such approach allows to regard the ongoing changes, or continuities and anti-continuities with socialist-era urban processes, not as ‘instances that happen in post-socialist cities but [as being] themselves carriers of the meaning of the concept of post-socialism’ (143).

Urban space is the fundamental element of structure and image of any city. Since its appearance and functionality changes over time (Krier, 1979), as well as considering that space in general is a social product (Lefebvre, 1974; Thrift, 2003), an evolution of the accompanying discourse(s) appears to be a non-terminating process. Once set within a frame of reference involving accumulation, density and complexity, in opposition to rural areas, cities today are perceived as distinct spatial entities. As observed by Parr (2007: 383), ‘the city is increasingly regarded not so much as a concentration in its own right, but rather as a focus of some wider space’. In turn, the notion of urban public space, a derivative or essence of urban space, ranges from the concise category of ‘spaces with public ownership’ (Bastida Freijedo, 2016: 192) to a much broader ‘common ground where people carry out the functional and ritual activities that bind a community, whether in the normal routines of daily life or in periodic festivities’ (Carr, Francis, & Stone, 1992: xi). While publicness and accessibility are at the core of most theoretical interpretations, both attributes have been much contested in practice, due to such processes as fragmentation, privatisation and social exclusion (Bodnar, 2015; Németh, 2009; Staeheli & Mitchell, 2007; van Lieshout & Aarts, 2008).

Spread over different academic disciplines, theory of the commons is also a well-grounded idea. Common good takes various forms, from a

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moral category in philosophy and theology to a resource in economics and thus may be understood both as a value and a certain entity. For the purposes of this paper the term is used in line with the definition of the commons by Hess and Ostrom (2007: 4), i.e. it 'refers to a resource shared by a group of people', regardless of its size and number of users. It is important to underline that such understanding escapes the clear distinction between the 'public' and 'private'. Among examples of the commons provided by Hess and Ostrom one can find a family refrigerator, sidewalks, libraries, the Internet and scientific knowledge. According to Mattei (2015: 45) this follows from the fact that, unlike private goods and public goods, the commons 'are not commodities and [therefore] cannot be reduced to the language of ownership'. Another crucial point is made by Moss (2014), who maintains that subjectivity of perception is often neglected in studies of the spatial commons. Both of these conditions are taken into account in the empirical part of the paper.

In post-socialist countries the urban common good seems particularly burdened with its historical legacy. Under communist rule the 'public' was to devour the 'private' and collectivism was to take over individualism. This applied even to as intimate, domestic spaces as the dwelling and *kommunalka*, the former private bourgeoisie apartment whose rooms had been allocated to multiple families as communal flats, is a prime example of the introduction of the new order (Crowley & Reid, 2002). In Poland right after the Second World War the idea of the common good was first employed as a rationale for rebuilding war-damaged cities in a "better", i.e. socially just and inclusive, way. In regained, previously Prussian, Gdańsk newly erected residential buildings were now claimed to belong to all citizens, contrary to old tenement houses, pictured as the former property of unconcerned individuals – the self-absorbed bourgeoisie (Friedrich, 2014; Perkowski, 2013). Newcomers to the city actively participated in its reconstruction, doing voluntary work on weekends, which mostly involved removing heaps of rubble and clearing the future construction sites. Likewise, the „Six-Year Plan for Reconstruction of Warsaw” developed by the leader of the ruling Polish United Workers' Party, provided that the “new” capital was not supposed to become ‘an only improved duplicate of the pre-war assemblage of private interests within the capitalist society’ (Bierut, 1951: 121). One of the key tasks outlined in the Plan in terms of housing policy was the reintroduction of workers to central and inner city neighbourhoods and ‘eradication of the capitalist tradition of pushing out the working class to the suburbs’ (231).

These new principles were extolled by contemporary poets, such as Adam Ważyk, whose verse entitled “People Will Enter the City Centre” (1950) was even ahead of Bierut's proposal, or Wisława Szymborska, who praised the socialist city as ‘the city of good fortune. / With no suburbs and no dead ends. / A friend of every man.’ (Szymborska, 1952:16). Soon, however, the ideals began to crumble – the same Ważyk only a couple of years later published “A Poem for Adults”, in which he expressed his disillusionment with the altered, unfamiliar appearance of his hometown Warsaw and the already socially degenerating Nowa Huta, an intended model socialist city built from scratch as of 1949 (Ważyk, 1956). Such kind of poetic commentary conveyed an all-important message and in fact played a significant opinion-forming role, since public discourse in post-war decades in Poland was quite constrained. Public debate and communication channels had been appropriated by the state, including the press, almost totally controlled by political decision makers and officially censored, thus articles and other documents of that time are not easy to interpret (Brzostek, 2007: 38).¹

Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence that following the ‘small stabilisation’ period of the late 1950s, the doctrinal paradigm of the

(urban) common good gradually devalued. This process is well visible in development and downfall of large housing estates. Built as co-operatives, they were erected throughout Polish cities as a response to the pressing housing shortage in post-war, quickly urbanising country. The design of buildings and shared spaces was entirely in line with commonality standards. However, according to Basista (2001), the fact that former flat-owners in the new system became, in essence, flat-users, with very limited property rights, eventually relieved them of maintenance responsibilities and led to a progressive deterioration of the housing stock. The ‘common good’ was therefore replaced with ‘no one's good’. Ultimately, the social disillusionment with the political system around mid-1970s dissolved the mistaken assumption that co-operative housing estates would conjure the community spirit among residents (Peisert, 2009).

Then again, after the socialist system had collapsed, much of the ‘no one's good’ underwent privatisation and commercialisation. Country's democratisation, instead of restoring the best practices which had been set in motion after the Second World War, culminated in society's atomisation and prevalence of individualism. Discussing the ways in which Warsaw has evolved over the turn of the centuries in terms of physical changes, Staniszkis (2012: 102–103) observes:

Assuming that architecture reflects society, the Warsaw townscape says a lot about the condition of society and the mental attitudes of architects in post-communist times. The contemporary syndrome of the culture of the common good being trumped by the culture of individualism is plain in Warsaw.

As harsh as it may seem, her conclusion is backed up by Bartmański (2012: 142), who argues that after 1989 the narrative of ‘ownership’ overshadowed the narrative of ‘participation’ and that the citizens of Warsaw are more ‘devoted to *acquire* a suburban house or flat rather than *cultivate* an inner city community’. Similar processes in Sofia described by Hirt (2012: 4) are labelled privatisation, understood as ‘the widespread disbelief in a benevolent public realm and the widespread sense that to appropriate the public may be the best way to thrive in private’.

The common good has also been rather absent in the post-socialist legal discourse. Apart from the opening article of the *Constitution of the Republic of Poland* (1997-04-02), granting the whole country the status of the commons, in the first decade of transformation legal acts and documents concerning (urban) space did not tackle that issue. Even public space is defined and regulated insufficiently and inadequately (Mierzejewska, 2011), which prompted participants of the 3rd Congress of Polish Urban Planning in Poznań to issue a *Public Space Charter* (2009). The document opens with an expression of ‘concern about public space as a commons’ and enumerates imminent threats facing it: 1) low social awareness of the importance of the commons, 2) misconception about the free market's ability to balance the spatial and socio-economic development without public intervention, 3) precedence of individual interests over the common good, especially in spatial planning and management and 4) insufficient civic participation in decision-making on socio-economic and spatial development.

Yet, in recent years the prevalence of individualist approach towards urban space seems to have triggered a counter-acting response which takes the form of rising claims for the ‘right to the city’ made by urban movements and informal initiatives of urban dwellers (Bartetzky, 2008; Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2017; Mergler, 2014). Sagan (2016) explains this as an outcome of the imbalance within post-transformation urban policies, shaped by the young and relatively weak democratic structures and institutions on the one hand and strong economic pressures of neoliberalism on the other. In order to investigate the mutual dynamics of two opposing forces: centripetal (collectivism) and centrifugal (individualism), the subsequent sections of the paper look into the problem of the common good with regard to urban space in articles published in the Polish print media between 2006 and 2015. With the use of discourse analysis three research questions are addressed: 1) how is urban space identified and conceptualised in the context of the

¹ Soon after it had appeared in print, Ważyk's problematic “Poem” was banned from dissemination and for decades functioned only in *samizdat* publications.

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