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New Urban Middle Class and National Identity in Poland

Abstract: This article discusses the question of the emergence of new forms of collective identities brought about by the recent social and cultural changes and their influence on Polish national identity. Specifically, it attempts to analyse those evolutionary changes which have been transforming the character of this identity from an exclusive, ethnic model towards a pluralistic, civic one. The article aims to show that the most significant agent of these processes is a new urban middle class whose growing role in the Polish society challenges traditional national discourses. The article advances a thesis that we are witnessing an emergence of a new platform of identification which significantly blurs the overwhelming contours of traditional national identity and instead strengthens on the one hand local identification and on the other, a cosmopolitan one.

Keywords: social identity, nationalism, urban culture, multiculturalism, social change.

Introduction

This article discusses the question of the emergence of new forms of social identities brought about by the contemporary dynamics of social and cultural change and their influence on Polish national identity. Specifically, it attempts to analyse those evolutionary changes which have been transforming the character of this identity from an exclusive, ethnic model towards a pluralistic, civic one. Certainly, one should bear in mind that it is difficult to treat national identities as monolithic, seamless entities, especially in the contemporary world where they are subject to constant renegotiation and redefinition by different segments of these groups. That is why we have chosen a specific social category, namely the inhabitants of the main Polish cities, firstly because we think that indicators of the changes in the Polish national identity are most detectable among this segment of the Polish society and secondly because this group's role in the society has significantly changed.

What we wish to indicate is the emergence of new collective identities that have influenced the dynamics of the reconstruction of national discourse in many important ways. One of the most important agents of these processes is new urban middle class, which is apparently the most significant bearer of these changes. To illustrate these processes we decided to employ a comparative approach in our research. Its two streams were conducted in two Polish cities: Kraków and Wrocław. Both are

very important centres of new economy, culture, science, and despite actual cultural homogeneity, both cities are trying to take advantage of their multicultural heritage in building their symbolic images. The findings are based on fieldwork conducted between 2008–2009 as a part of the Sixth Framework Programme: *RECON. Reconstructing Democracy in Europe* project. The research consisted of 60 semi-structured in-depth interviews with relatively young (25–40) active inhabitants of both cities, dozens of informal conversations and participant observation.

The Nature of Polish National Identity

Social reality is something which is constantly "becoming" and not just "being" and collective identities should be seen as a permanent process of their construction and reconstruction. This process is conducted through a dialogue not only with "significant others," without whom it would not be possible to draw boundaries and find differences (Barth 1969), but also within social groups who use different elements to renegotiate a collective self-image. This is especially true at the beginning of the 21st century, which is often labelled by social scientists as late modernity, postmodernity or liquid modernity. Under such defined conditions, social identities appear to be increasingly inconsistent and fragmentary. The collectivities which are the basis of social identity today are greater in number, more varied, more intermingled, and more open to redefinition than ever before (Maier and Risse 2003). These changes are also detectable in Poland and we believe that we are witnessing an emergence of a new platform of identification which significantly blurs the overwhelming contours of traditional national identity and instead strengthens on the one hand local identification and on the other, cosmopolitan ones (Beck 2009: 40–55).

National identification, as well as other social phenomena like culture or social structure, cannot be described as finished, primordial and "given," but rather as in a state of flux, and as a never-ending process. The famous thinker Ernest Gellner said that: "(…) nations, like states, are a contingency, and not a universal necessity" (Gellner 1983: 6). Most scholars agree that since there are different nationalisms there is no single theory of nationalism. Nevertheless, there has been a long tradition in sociology to identify two kinds of nationalisms. On the one hand we have the so-called "civic" model, which is much more territorial in character and is based more on the citizen's loyalty to the state, with less reference to primordial ethnic roots. On the other hand, the so-called "ethnic" model of nationalism is of a predominately organic character and is based on the myth of common ancestry and shared symbols. This point of view is very characteristic of those Polish sociologists who, as a result of Poland's turbulent history, stressed the cultural and moral essence of the nation. Stanisław Ossowski put forward a very characteristic, in this respect, concept of two aspects of the *patrie*. One, called "private," consisted of an individual's or a group's identification with local or regional territory and cultural heritage, while the other, "ideological," was based on self-identification with a broad tradition, history, a system of values and ideas as an attribute of the nation as a whole. As Ossowski has pointed out, in the

past Poles often suffered from displacement, had to abandon their territory, emigrate, and reconstruct their identity, and this was possible only because of this ideological national identity which provided an individual with a symbolic basis of identification, despite the loss of his or her private *patrie*. Thus, a nation is not only a cultural community or a politically organized society, but is most of all an ideological entity (Ossowski 1984: 26).

There have been a series of historic factors that have influenced the Polish national identity in such a way that it has been formed according to a predominantly ethnic model. There is common agreement that three variables played a key role in the development of European nationalisms. Firstly, one of the most important reasons for these developments was the question of whether ethnic groups possessed their own state in the 19th century or not. Those with their own political entities could use the institutions of the state to transform peasants into citizens, as described in the seminal book by Eugene Weber (1976) using the example of French society. Those nationalisms that could not harness political institutions to the nation-building processes were forced to turn their mass mobilisation efforts towards ethnic and cultural ties.

The second variable that determined the type of nationalism was related to the presence or absence of a strong bourgeoisie at the moment when the ideology of nationalism was diffused to particular areas around the globe.

States and areas with strong bourgeoisies tended to opt for a rationalist and voluntaristic version of the ideology of nationalism, which required everyone to choose a nation of belonging but did not prescribe a particular nation; whereas states and areas with weak bourgeoisies opted for organic nationalism which prescribed the nation of belonging for each individual from birth (Smith 2003: 17).

The third variable was indicated by Tom Nairn, who maintained that the kind of nationalism was determined by the location of the centre-periphery continuum. In the centre and in the 19th century this was overwhelmingly the West—ethnic nationalism was not a particularly visible issue (although there were and obviously are ethnic identities). This was because the centre was dominated by an expansive bourgeoisie, which possessed the self-confidence that comes with successful social and economic development. The hegemony of the Western bourgeoisie at the height of the colonial era was so entrenched that there was no need to seek solidarity with the lower strata of their societies. Obviously, the situation looked completely different at the other end of the scale—peripheries which were dominated and exploited. As described vividly by Gellner (1983), peripheries had to adopt ethnic nationalism because of the underdevelopment and marginal status of their elites who did not want to agree to the domination of the centre.

In the case of the 19th century—the time of the emergence of modern nations— in Poland all three of these variables created structural conditions where the Polish national identity had to be constructed around cultural, religious and ethnic lines.

All these structural determinants did not disappear until the collapse of the communist regime. At the end of the 20th century most of Polish researchers agreed that: "representatives of most political parties define the nation in ethnic categories" (Kurczewska 2000: 262). Zbigniew Bokszański showed in his research that in comparison

to some other European societies, "the Poles are closer to traits of national identity that are closely related to ethnicity, understood as a source for individual identity and as a base of social organization" (Bokszański 2006: 242). In his research he contrasted certain European countries as modern and postmodern, and argued that one can detect a trend that shows that a transformation towards the condition of the late modern society weakens the ethnic character of national identities in Europe. At the same time, Andrzej Piotrowski asked an important question:

To what extent the shift towards a capitalist market economy, the entrance into the European Union, the pressure of globalization, and finally tendency towards the development of multiculturalism, marked by facilitation of migration and the explosion of electronic communication networks, so, to what extent, and in what direction all these factors will have all left their mark on the traditional structures of Polish national identity? (…) Will these structures lose their significance for regional identifications in the inner regions or for these ones which cross national borders? (Piotrowski 2006: 252).

It seems to us that one can take a risk and try to show how those indicated by the Polish sociologists processes contributed to the fact that the Poles have gone from "a strong dependent nation, towards an independent, but weaker one" (Kurczewska, 2010). What lies at the heart of this article are the changes in the Polish national identity which accompanied the transformation of Polish society from a rural to an urban one.

The Foreignness of Urban Culture in Polish Nationalism

The unique conditions that determined the emergence of Polish nationalism during the 19th century meant that Polish national identity developed on the basis of two strata: the gentry and the peasantry. These two strata created two models of culture which differed between themselves to a large extent but shared one common feature which is fundamental, in our view, to understanding Polish national identity: a complete opposition to urban, industrial culture. This alienation can be described on a cultural level as well as on a structural one, and has resulted in a situation where values characteristic of urban, industrial society were perceived as "alien," whereas features which were connected with folk and gentry culture were identified with "homeliness." An important feature of the structure of Polish society in the 19th century was the weakness of the bourgeoisie. Polish historian Tadeusz Łepkowski estimated that in 1870 the urban population of Polish areas[1] was about 16–17% (Łepkowski 1967: 119). Additionally, the inhabitants of small towns made up a large proportion of the bourgeois population and had nothing in common with the term "urban," which was characteristic of the industrialised western part of Europe. As a seminal Polish sociologist noted: "In Poland, capitalism did not create cities as much as industrial areas (…). There were clusters of people who lived from and for factories but did not create a higher form of social and cultural life" (Chałasiński 1948: 206).

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[1] The term "Polish area" stands for Polish territory before the partitions. In 1870 the Polish state did not exist. Moreover, the territory identified as Poland changed radically during the first half of the 20th century, as a result of the First and Second World Wars.

Hence, it would not be inaccurate to say that during the age of modernity the Polish bourgeoisie almost did not exist in the demographic sense. However, far more important in this context is the exclusion of bourgeois values in the mainstream of national culture. In fact, whilst Polish history consists of one long struggle for sovereignty, this was especially so in the 19th century, when mythologised history, art and literature glorified the fight for independence. This resulted in a situation where the problem of political sovereignty took first place in the discourse of Polish nationalism. It is obvious that in this situation the values of the bourgeois—rationalism, accumulating property and cultural pluralism—could not fit into the dominant model of Polish culture. Thus, the Polish model of national identity was characterised by the structural alienation of the city and everything that represented urban culture.

This alienation of cities and urban culture in art has its basis in the unique structure of Polish society in the 19th century. The elites who possess symbolic power—in the sense of Bourdieu (1991)—were strongly connected with the culture of the gentry. Although the Polish gentry identified themselves as Poles on the basis of being citizens of the state—*Rzeczpospolita*—not on the basis of ethnic origin, religion, or even language (see: Tazbir 1998), the situation changed radically after the partitions. At that time the Polish intelligentsia came from the impoverished gentry who were undervalued and discriminated against economically, socially and politically by Russian and Prussian invaders[2]. In that situation, when the political reality was perceived as alien, the myth of the lost paradise began to spread. In this case, paradise was symbolised by a manor house and rustic landscape. It is very characteristic, in this matter, that most works of art call to attention the manor house as the symbol of Poland. For example, masterpieces of Polish literature like *Pan Tadeusz* (Mr Tadeusz) by Adam Mickiewicz and *Wesele* (The Wedding) by Stanisław Wyspiański introduced two rustic, iconic houses into the Polish culture—Soplicowo and Rydlówka—which have become an archetypal image of Poland. These poems were, and in fact still are, a fundamental part of Polish culture, shaping the symbolic picture of Polishness. Moreover, the visual arts, and especially paintings, concentrated only on rustic landscapes or ancient battle scenes, bypassing the cities. Thus, all these art forms made up a symbolic image of Polish culture where there was no place for cities or urban culture. This is why Polish art as well as journalism perceived cities and urban culture as alien. This process of alienation was strengthened by the fact that during that time a significant part of the bourgeoisie in Polish cities came from different ethnic groups, being mainly Germans, Russians and Jews. The alienation of the city in Polish culture continued in the 20th century by the process of the ruralisation of cities. It was a complex and mulitdimensional phenomenon, which was mainly caused by the following reasons.

Firstly, the tremendous catastrophe that descended on Polish cities and the bourgeoisie with World War II and its consequences. Putting aside the enormous material losses, what was most important was the fact that the biggest victim of the war was the

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[2] The exception was Galicia, ruled by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. During the period of liberalisation, Poles contributed to Austrian bureaucracy and politics. But the unique situation in the Austro-Hungarian Empire—relatively backward, especially in Galicia—led to a renewal of the tradition of the gentry in this region.

urban intelligentsia, deliberately exterminated by the German and Soviet occupants. Warsaw is the most tragic example. In 1947 the statistics estimated that out of 6 million Polish citizens who died between 1939–1945, urban inhabitants consisted of 78.9% of those victims, a shocking figure of 4.76 million (Szarota 1969: 78).

Secondly, in Poland, urbanisation had a different character than it had in Western Europe: rapid industrialisation only began—with a few exceptions—after World War II, and was centrally planned by the ruling Communist Party. Moreover, in this respect, we should speak about two different processes of urbanisation. On the one hand, belated industrialisation occurred in a predominantly peasant environment, as it was portrayed by the study of new industrial centres like Płock, Puławy and Tarnobrzeg (Sagan, 1995: 63–65). The most spectacular example is the creation of Nowa Huta, a city of workers recruited from the Polish countryside, which was thought to be the counterpart to traditional intelligentsia circles (Purchla 1996). Thus, giant factories were staffed mostly by peasants from neighbouring villages. This resulted in a situation in which another era in the history of Polish cities dawned: a social category which possessed a symbolic power that had nothing in common with urban culture. During the 19th century it was the "gentry-intelligentsia," whereas after World War II it was "peasant-workers." These new inhabitants of Polish cities, the "peasant-workers," possessed symbolic power in a double sense. Firstly, because of the weakness of the bourgeoisie, who had no power to impose their patterns of culture on them, and secondly because of communist ideology, according to which the real ruling classes in the Polish People's Republic were peasants and workers, and where other groups were described as "enemies of the people."

Thirdly, After the Yalta Treaty, Poland lost its eastern provinces, mostly inhabited by a rural society, but in exchange acquired ex-German urbanised provinces. Thus, Poles were expropriated from their eastern villages and settled in abandoned German cities. As Georg Thum points out, the cities located in the Western Lands possesed the capacity to take in around 4 million people, but the number of repatriates from eastern cities was only 423 thousand, mainly from Lwów and Vilnius (Thum 2005: 133–134). Needless to say, insecurity and instability persuaded most of them to stay in the central part of Poland. Thus, Poles as new inhabitants of these cities felt a double alienation: firstly because of an urban environment which was completely the opposite of their native one, and secondly because these cities were German and, despite the communist propaganda, most of them had nothing in common with Polish culture. This meant that for a long time these migrants were not able to reconstruct their identity and feel at home in these places, living in permanent temporariness. This situation was described by Zdzisław Mach—who conducted his research on these cities in the 1980s—in a book whose title puts the situation very eruditely: *Niechciane miasta* (Unwanted Cities) (Mach 1998). A similar situation occurred in the Polish ethnic part of Poland in the case of ex-Jewish towns, the so-called *shtetls*. Small towns, which were typical in pre-war Poland, were inhabited mostly by Jews; in the former Galicia, Jews often constituted 70–80% of the total population of these towns. As a result of the Holocaust and the emigration of Jews, their houses were subsequently inhabited by Poles from neighbouring villages. These examples are very interesting in

the context of Polish national identity because German and Jewish heritage of urban culture played the role of a typical "alien" in Polish culture.

Fourthly, most Polish cities after the Second World War were seriously damaged, and re-building them consisted mostly of constructed housing estates from concrete slabs, isolated from the city centre and from each other. This resulted in a situation where individual housing estates fulfilled the function of suburbs, and did not constitute an importance for urban culture —an *agora*, a public space.

These factors indicate that in the case of Poland after World War II we cannot speak about cultural urbanisation, but rather about the ruralisation of urban culture. Despite the fact that the population of Polish cities increased dynamically, this did not mean that the patterns of Polish culture were transformed in the same way.

Regaining Cities. Urban Culture as a Way of Life

The city has always possessed a central position in Western civilization. Starting from ancient Greece and Rome through the medieval period, the city was a space of freedom and innovations. After the period of "crisis discourse" in the 1970s and 1980s, when neo-marxist authors created a strongly pessimistic perspective of the future of city, this feature has again become important during the last two decades. New economy based on knowledge and innovations has opened new perspectives for cities. A new discourse of resurgence of city has emerged. Such authors like Richard Florida (2002) and Edward Glaeser (2011) have pointed out the role of city in the process of creation of social and cultural capital, which are essential assets for new economy. Also, in Poland many authors have come to analyze social and cultural changes in Polish cities, mainly as a consequence of the growth of symbolic economy and processes of Europeanization. Wojciech Burszta and Barbara Fatyga have stressed the crucial role of culture in the growth of cities in Poland (Burszta, Fatyga 2010), which has similarly been raised by Mołgorzatę Dymnicką (2011). A seminal collection of articles collected by Bohdan Jałowiecki (2009) explains complex processes of globalization and metropolisation in the contemporary world. Marek S. Szczepański and Anna Sliź in turn deal with some consequences of these trends which transform contemporary cities into increasingly multicultural places. There are also more focused studies such as Marta Smagacz's work on the revitalization of urban spaces (2008), Tomasz Nawrocki's inquiry into the condition of public space (2011), or Magdalena Łukasik's illuminating study on the recent mass migration to major cities in Poland (2007).

Since 1989 we have witnessed a number of complex and interdependent processes at play, such as: an economic transformation creating the economic and legal foundation for the growth of the bourgeoisie, globalisation, domination of new economy, European integration, and the emergence of a network society. They have created all of the structural changes that have brought about the redefinition of the role of the city and urban culture in Poland, and, by this token, have shifted the main traits of the Polish national identity from ethnic elements towards civic ones (Galent, Kubicki

2010). This redefinition depends on several important structural elements. During our research we identified four of the most significant ones.

De-ruralisation

First and foremost is the process of the de-ruralisation of Polish cities; for at least the last decade we have been able to observe the fast-growing process of the de-ruralisation of Polish cities. This is because there is a growing second and third-generation urban population in these cities, who have started to identify themselves with urban culture. Yet, this new category, as with every new social phenomenon, is searching for axiological and symbolic values that can legitimise its identity—an urban identity. As we have tried to explain, traditional Polish nationalism excluded urbanism and cultural pluralism from the mainstream of Polish culture. Nowadays, we can observe in the case of Poland, that urban culture is being invented and discovered. One of the better examples of this process is the reinvention of a multicultural heritage of Polish cities.

Wrocław is a city that was settled by Polish migrants who lived with a feeling of temporality, but whose children and grandchildren have grown up in the city and have started to construct their identity in line with the urban culture through its German heritage. A similar phenomenon can be noticed in Krakow. Before the Second World War, about 70,000 Jews lived in Krakow; they made up about 30% of the total population and mostly lived in one, separate district—Kazimierz. After the Holocaust this district was completely depopulated, and the local government sent people there from the dregs of society, creating a district of the underclass, thus giving it a very bad reputation. Starting from the end of the 1990s however, this situation changed completely. Nowadays Kazimierz is one of the most fashionable and vibrant places in Krakow, and this gentrification is mostly based on its Jewish heritage. Twenty years ago this district was a no-go area, now it is a must visit for everybody who lives and stays in Krakow.

This positive attitude towards reintroducing multiculturalism into contemporary social and cultural life of Polish cities was fully confirmed by the empirical research. One of the main goals we wanted to achieve through conducting in-depth interviews was to establish to what extent our interviewees were positive about this part of the image of their cities, which included explicit references to multicultural heritage and multiculturalism in current social life. There was no single respondent who challenged this idea, either in Wrocław or in Krakow. One could even think that multiculturalism was seen as something that was associated with the "normal" shape of a proper western cosmopolitan city. Some of them invoked memories of living abroad where they had experienced a multicultural environment first hand and recalled it in a positive way. The lack of cultural heterogeneity in Polish cities was often perceived as a legacy of the homogeneity enforced by the socialist regime and as something that made the respondents feel inferior to Western cities. However, they were rather aware of the fact that the marketing strategies promoting their cities were using their multicultural

traits as a sort of invention without real content. The quotes below are typical of all respondents:

It is said that Wrocław is the city of many cultures: Polish, Czech, German, but in fact, it is just a myth. It isn't perceived in everyday life (M/W/05). I had a rather bad opinion about Kazimierz, as Disneyland with lot of pubs, but when I started attending lectures and cultural events there, I realised that Jewish culture is really vivid in this place and is not artificial (…) look, the synagogues are not rebuilt, they have been there all along (M/K/07).

They knew that the multiculturalism of their cities was something that could be used as a good promotional strategy, but even such forms of multiculturalism were appreciated by our respondents —especially so in Wrocław, where the whole advertising strategy is focused on creating an image of the open city, "the city of meetings," where everybody can find his or her place among others. Even though they knew that the multiculturalism of Wrocław did not resemble that of the multiculturalism in genuinely diverse cities, they liked this kind of image and identified with it fully. As one of the respondents pointed out:

I mean, what we're talking about, that it's a multicultural city … it's really easy to generalise, to apply that kind of label to Poland, because we don't really know what it's like, what it's like to live with other cultures, let's just say that to me, there has been a slight increase on the whole but that it is a good programme. I'd rather that it looked that way rather than people said that here is just for us and for no one else. I think that Wrocław will have to adjust to the image that it is creating pretty quickly because we are starting to really get that kind of international community here (M/W12).

Despite the fact that, in general, multiculturalism is perceived rather as a marketing slogan, respondents in both cities agree that this is a good idea and they want their cities to become multicultural. Thanks to their experiences they seem to be fairly certain that multiculturalism broadens the mind, teaches tolerance and is not a threat to their identity.

This is very important especially in the context of a knowledge-based society, which is constituted on *creative class* according to Richard Florida's (2002) well-known theory. Florida argues that in the contemporary world only cities that are tolerant to a range of people, to ethnic and social diversity, can develop successfully, and this success depends on attracting talented people, including high-technology workers. In other words, the city must utilise a multicultural approach in practice, which respects and promotes difference and creativity, regardless of the character of ethnic and social minorities. These cities possess low barriers for the entry of human capital, because they encourage open-minded and creative people to settle down. Therefore Polish cities started competing against each other for human and creative capital and began building their images as open and tolerant, using an idea of multiculturalism in marketing campaigns in order to stress the uniqueness of their city. This is why their promotional strategies try to include references to their multicultural character, which is supposed to send a clear message that they are open, creative and tolerant. These strategies produce a special discourse which negates those discourses that are based on collective and national content where the most important value is ascribed to the notion of cultural homogeneity and unity.

In fact most Polish cities, as well as other Central European cities, are deeply rooted in multicultural heritage, however, as described above, this tradition was perceived as alien and dangerous for an exclusive ethnic culture. Nowadays, we can observe a completely opposite attitude. Multicultural heritage is a valuable feature and can be exchanged for crucial products in a symbolic economy such as, creative capital, human capital and above all tourism. Nowadays, the "others" play an attractive and useful role because they stimulate the local economy, add an additional flavour to a city and they do not compete with Poles for rare resources. Interesting data is found in the Eurobarometer "Perception survey on quality of life in European cities," which was conducted in November 2009 in 75 cities in the EU, Croatia and Turkey. In this survey, respondents were asked if the presence of foreigners is good for the city. Respondents from Krakow[3] were one of the most likely to think that the presence of foreigners was beneficial to their city, just after respondents from Luxembourg and Stockholm. A few other Polish cities also ranked high on the survey: Gdansk was 7, Bialystok 14, and Warsaw 15.

Growing Domination of the Symbolic Economy

As Allen Scott said:

Numerous attempts have been made to characterize the essential features of the new economic order. It has been variously evoked in terms of postindustrial society (Bell 1973), flexible accumulation (Harvey 1987), and postFordism (Albertsen 1988), among other labels, although none of them is satisfactory. Perhaps the best way of alluding to what is at stake here is to say simply that the leading markers of growth and innovation in the contemporary economy are made up of sectors such as high-technology industry, neo-artisanal manufacturing, business and financial service, culture production industries (including the media), and so on, and that these sectors constitute a *new economy* (Scott 2006: 3).

In our opinion, the best example of this "new economy" that has been transforming Polish cites is the symbolic economy. According to Sharon Zukin, this can be defined by three points: it is urban; it is based on the production of symbols as basic commodities; and it is based on the production, in a very self-conscious way, of spaces as both sites and symbols of the city and of culture. The problem of the symbolic economy has become a subject of interest in cities because of the decline and relocation of manufacturing facilities, which has left a gap in many traditional industrial economies. The gap, to a small degree, was filled by the rise of the so-called knowledge-based industries and activities that placed design and innovation at the forefront of production in order to construct images of cities, to attract people and to draw them in to improve the life of the public sphere. Yet the construction of the urban imaginary is not just a deliberate effort by the government, by businesses or by the media. It is also made up of ordinary people living and working in cities and developing a sense of excitement that we find in world cities (Zukin 1995). This process, described by Zukin, has been observed since the 1970s but in

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[3] 45% strongly agree and 38% somewhat agree, 6% somewhat disagree, 4% strongly disagree and 6% DK/NA.

Poland, for several reasons, we have only identified it in the last decade. Further-more, the symbolic economy is not only related to post-industrial cities. Kraków and Wrocław are good examples of this—cities that have never been dominated by industry and industrial culture. Nowadays these cities are building their symbolic im-age as fresh and vivid, creative places with lots of urban attractions, such as clubs, restaurants, art galleries, museums, festivals, etc., which attract young, well-educated people to settle. In the contemporary world, based mostly on cultural consump-tion, the workplace is attractive if it is connected with the possibility of consuming the symbolic economy and yet this is inextricably linked with urban culture. Thus, cities are perceived not as dehumanised places as they were before, but rather as places which are conducive to living in, where everybody can fulfil themselves, not only in terms of their professions but, above all, through entertainment, lifestyle, hobbies, etc. Today it is consumption, which to a large extent locates individuals in a social structure and influences the construction of identity. Hence, urbanism as a way of life becomes a desired and much appreciated value and constitutes signif-icant grounds for defining the identities of generations of the "new urban middle class." As a result, the inhabitants of such cities have acquired a symbolic power, which influences Polish culture and politics.This was also confirmed by our empirical research.

Growing Subjectivity

The emergence of new identities has also been triggered by the significant growth in the freedom of local government, allowing individuals to construct new identities and practice democratic attitudes in everyday life at a grassroots level. Identity is activity—it is action in relation with others, creating and transgressing boundaries, the active realisation of feelings of belonging and symbolic identification. Despite the official declaration of self-governance in the Polish system, this self-governance has in fact never existed. This situation started changing as a result of administrative reforms (1999) and an amendment to local elections—the mayors of cities being elected via direct election (2002). This meant that cities gained local leaders who could mobilise and engage citizens and, in fact, we can observe a dynamic increase in local activity as a result, especially in cities that have genuine leaders. This is especially noticeable in Wrocław, where the local authorities were highly regarded by almost each respondent, since they were convinced that the current success of the city resulted from a well-thought out and long-term policy, which had been consistently applied by the same group of people since 1989:

At the very beginning the aim of the ruling team was to restore Wrocław to a European dimension, and it has been doing [this] all the time (M/W/12).

This growing subjectivity of cities made the new urban class members fragment the picture of national politics and focus their attention and resources on the local scene.

What is also very important is the fact that authorities are not perceived through the prism of political affiliation. One of the respondents pointed out that one of the most important achievements of the authorities was:

To overcome the typical Polish dichotomy "we-others;" people in the city identify themselves as "we" (M/W/12).

The mayor of Wrocław (who stresses his political non-alignment) has been in office for two terms and 80.8% people in Wrocław still trust him, whereas political parties are trusted by just 10.2% citizens of Wrocław. A very interesting situation in this respect can be observed in Rzeszów —a traditional bastion of Catholicism and the Right, where at the end of his second term the left-wing mayor was trusted by 87.7% of citizens, whereas the Catholic Church was trusted by only 72.4% (SPLOT and PBS DGA, 2010). Both mayors were re-elected for a third term in the first round during the last local election (November 2010).

In our opinion a good indicator for growing subjectivity could also be civil participation and NGO activity. The new urban middle class wants to be the creators of a social and cultural reality in their surroundings. During our fieldwork we observed the dynamic proliferation of urban NGOs and civil participation. Their activities extend to nearly every aspect of urban life, such as: protecting green zones and local heritage, planning bicycle paths, promoting the city and its culture, etc. However, in this context we observed important differences between inhabitants of Krakow and Wrocław. Inhabitants of these cities undertake their social activities in different ways because their activities are determined by the discourse of the city and its specific history[4].

Emergence of the Net of Global Cities

Another important factor that has contributed to the creation of a "new urban middle class" identity has been the emergence of global cities. According to Saskia Sassen, global cities hold a key position in the new geography of centrality. The annihilation of space in the global economy is countered by the reassertion of the significance of place. Global cities are key places in this sense since they host the financial districts where global investment decisions are made as well as the producers of services that support the command functions of transactional corporation. Cities that perform such a function often have greater interlinkages between them than they do with their respective regions or nations (Sassen 1998). A discussion was initiated by Sassen on the role of global cities at the beginning of the 1980s concerning, Tokyo, New York and London, and was developed by Manuel Castells in his seminal trilogy *The Information Age* (1996, 1997, 1998), where he highlights the fact that thanks to communication technologies, an increasing number of cities are being included in networks, thus leading to a deepening of the social phenomenon which Giddens

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[4] More on this problem see: P. Kubicki 2010.

called the "disembedding" of social systems (1990). He defines this process as "the lifting out of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space" (ibid. 22).

For Poland, this global network opened first after the transition, but the process accelerated mainly after the accession to the EU, and has started creating new opportunities for cities and their inhabitants. The scale of the circulation of different kinds of goods has risen rapidly over recent years. The new opportunities of joining these flows are also utilised by members of a "new urban middle class," who seem to be very mobile, and among whom international experience is very common. As one of our respondents stated:

Well, yes, now it's hard to imagine someone who was born in one place and never left (M/W/07).

What was also very telling was the very positive attitude towards transnational experiences gained during and through migration.

This inclusion into a network of exchanges allows the dynamic spread of cultural patterns and creates the opportunity to experience multiculturalism and pluralism through direct contacts. In this sense, Polish urban centres are going through a much more dynamic process of social change than the population of smaller towns and villages where a multicultural environment and pluralism is present only via stereotypical images and where cultural or social strangeness is still seen through the prism of threat. In the case of urban culture this heterogeneity and strangeness is associated with positive meanings such as creativity and innovation. Manuel Castells points out that

"The dynamics of networks push society towards an endless escape from its own constraints and control, towards an endless reconstruction of its values and institutions (…). Networks transform power relationships. Power in the traditional sense still exists: capitalist over worker, men over women (…). Yet, there is a higher order of power: the power of flows in the networks prevails over the flows of power" (Castells 2002: 133).

This means that the traditional elites who possessed symbolic power are now losing it. The real power that produces culture and symbolic meanings is located in the flows. These flows operate between nodes—cities and Polish cities like Wrocław or Krakow are gradually included into the network, which transforms the traditional frame of reference determined by the nation state. For inhabitants of some big cities there is a visible process where a new "significant other" emerges. Together with strengthening the collective identity based on an identification with the city, one can observe the introduction of new points of reference for shaping these identifications. For the new urban middle class these new points of reference are simply other cities and their cultures, either Polish or located in other European countries.

Conclusions

According to the medieval saying *Stadtluft mach frei*, the city, understood as a social space, creates more opportunities for social agency in a normative sphere. This allows

for the creation of new cultural elements which would otherwise be suppressed in a framework of the traditional structure. Therefore, the new urban middle class can be treated as an important player in the process of changing Polish national identity, especially since they are well equipped with three kinds of capital: cultural, social and financial. Of these, the most important are the first two, which, as was shown during the research on the attitudes of Poles towards European integration, play a key role in creating the kinds of competences which best allow people to cope with the changing consequences of structural social change (Galent, Natanek, Turyk 2001). In our view, this social category is characterised by the highest dynamics of change in their social identity and by the fact that they acquire material and symbolic power that can influence other segments of the Polish society. We do not want to claim that there is a fundamental difference between the younger and older generations or between the population of the big cities and the rest of the country. We merely think that the changes in social identity among the "new urban middle class" are more intense, and by this token, more detectable. Thanks to their social and cultural resources, they are becoming the most important subjects in building civic and open society. They perceive and treat "the others" as those who they cooperate and sometimes compete with, on the broad free market of material and cultural resources, but they do not treat this competition through a prism of distrust and resentment.

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