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The Authority and Symbolic Capital of the Polish Intelligentsia

Abstract: There has been a notable absence of analysis of how the intelligentsia is perceived by society, even though such studies would be instrumental in the current context, where there are growing challenges to authority and intensifying anti-elite sentiment aimed especially at cultural elites. This paper addresses the current authority and symbolic capital of the intelligentsia. It draws on empirical data collected in a survey of Polish society and utilizes Weber's concept of authority and Bourdieu's theory of capital. The study established that Poles identify the intelligentsia mainly in its historically shaped form as people with cultural capital and an ethos understood as lifestyle or moral obligation. The image of the intelligentsia is defined in opposition to "specialists without spirit," and only then it is socially effective and still recognized as symbolically important. As a result, the intelligentsia is cast as an authority, which gives it the right to play a leading role. This paper posits that as long as the image of an ethos-based, selfless group endowed with cultural capital prevails in society, the intelligentsia will continue to possess symbolic capital.

Keywords: the Polish intelligentsia, symbolic capital, Bourdieu's theory of capital, Weber's authority

In Central and Eastern Europe, one of the dominant status groups that has traditionally enjoyed the highest authority is the intelligentsia. This is aptly captured by a phrase about "ruling over souls" from a famous drama by one of Poland's greatest poets (Mickiewicz 2016). The phrase has entered everyday language and become an idiom. In the popular sense, "ruling over souls" means that a group has ideological domination over society and influences public opinion (Waśko 2011). The social image of the intelligentsia is to a large extent the product of individuals who are engaged in symbolic work and who advocate for the intelligentsia as an ethos-based, selfless group, guided by the good of the whole society. It can be assumed that for a long time, this work was effective because the intelligentsia was recognized as an authority. However, due to socio-cultural changes, the social perception and evaluation of this group may have changed. The social image of the intelligentsia and public attitudes toward this group have not been analyzed recently. As a result, there are no data on the public perception and image of the intelligentsia, that is, in which roles it is most readily cast and whether it enjoys recognition and authority in these roles.

In this paper, which intends to fill the lacuna, I will present how Polish society currently perceives the intelligentsia, i.e. what status indicators, according to Poles, define and differentiate it from other groups. I will describe which image corresponds to this group's having the most authority and enjoying the most recognition. In other words, I examine which form of validating the intelligentsia's authority prevails among Poles and why it is so. My main thesis in this paper is that the intelligentsia is recognized and has symbolic

capital only when perceived in its historically shaped form as a group distinguished by its cultural capital, including education, lifestyle, culture, and moral attitude. This will allow me to assess why many people still see the intelligentsia as necessary and cast in the role of authority.

This research is important for several reasons. First, it is worth knowing whether an orientation toward economic capital, combined with the more general context of the modernization of Polish society, influence (or even change) the perception of the intelligentsia and lead to a decline its authority, and in some cases even a belief that the intelligentsia has ceased to exist. Indirect data point to a relative decline in the prestige of professions typical of the intelligentsia (Omyła-Rudzka 2019). Scholars disagree on the current status of the intelligentsia. Some argue it no longer exists as a distinct group (Borucki 1994), while others view it as a social hegemon with significant influence (Zarycki, Warczok 2014). Another perspective suggests it has transformed into a middle class or managers (Domański 2012). Some intermediate views highlight the decline in the intelligentsia's importance due to the proliferation of academic degrees and changes in its ethos (Wesołowski 1994). As a result, the boundaries between the intelligentsia and other groups, as well as its authority, seem unclear to many. In contrast to most of the abovementioned opinions, this paper will show that the intelligentsia's is still respected by Poles.

Second, countless works are devoted to the intelligentsia, but they are largely self-referential. Descriptions and diagnoses of the intelligentsia are made by the intelligentsia's symbolic producers whose labor effectively transforms the social position of this group into legitimate one. As a result, we have data on the consciousness of the intelligentsia and a record of the symbolic work of its elites (Kulas 2017; Smoczyński, Zarycki 2017; Zawadzka 2022). Still, we do not know the image of the intelligentsia in society and how society currently views the authority of that group. Moreover, it is impossible to address the intelligentsia's authority only by examining elites and their symbolic labor. Authority is, yet, a relational concept, so studying it demands not only including the intelligentsia's part but also its societal assessment.

Finally, the current perception of the intelligentsia should be analyzed in the context of the thesis that permanent authorities are disappearing from contemporary society due to their superfluity (Bauman 1987), multiplicity (Giddens 1994), displacement (Bourdieu 1984), decline or a recent intensification of anti-elite resentment. Interestingly, the latter is directed mainly against the cultural elites, whose lifestyles and ethos differ from the average (Voelz 2022).

Theoretical and Methodological Concerns

Authority is a relational concept. Paraphrasing Lukes (1990) it can be said that any complete theory of the intelligentsia's authority must be a theory of both the intelligentsia and society's belief in its legitimacy. Haugaard writes (2017: 10): "Normatively, it is important to understand not only why someone should *grant* authority to another but also why it is important that someone should have it." Haugaard writes that Weber distinguished four forms of validating legitimacy (legal rationality, value rationality, traditional action

and affective action) which constitute three ideal types of authority. They embrace legal authority “resting on a belief in the legality of normative rules,” traditional authority “resting upon established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions,” and charismatic authority “resting upon devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person” (Weber 1978: 215). The latter is presumed to encompass “a fusion of two forms of action: affective and value rational action” (Haugaard 2017: 3). Geertz (1983: 143) reminds us that especially charismatic authority “still requires a cultural frame in which to define itself and advance it claims, and so does opposition to it.” That cultural reference helps understand why authority of a certain group remains in “spontaneous compliance” of a given society (Bourdieu 1990: 193).

According to Arendt (1966), true authority is not reducible to a relationship of power or even to persuasion through argument. It is the outcome of moral influence based on certain normative principles. Authority provides intellectual and moral resources that endow power or domination with legitimacy, a moral quality. According to Furedi (2013), authority can be traced back as the source of that decision or opinion and continues or “augments” some founding act or line of action started in the past. In turn, from the theoretical perspective of Pierre Bourdieu, authority can be seen as a form of symbolic capital, whose effectiveness is based on the establishment of rules of classification, forms of recognition, and respect. Swartz (1997) writes that “Symbolic capital is a reformulation of Weber’s idea of charismatic authority that legitimates power relations by accentuating qualities of elites as supposedly superior and natural.”

Bourdieu (1986: 242) identifies three primary forms of capital: economic capital (such as money and property), cultural capital (including cultural goods, educational credentials), and social capital (comprising networks and social connections). He also elaborates on their internal dimensions and divisions, introducing additional sub-types. Capital theory is relatively well known in sociology, so I will not discuss it in detail here. For Bourdieu, it was a heuristic tool developed over time, rather than a closed system. I will limit my discussion to the concepts used in this text, particularly those less frequently addressed.

In addition to the capitals mentioned above—and the titular symbolic capital—political capital and moral capital also prove useful. Political capital is often understood by Bourdieu as a type of social capital (Bourdieu 1991). At times, Bourdieu (1991: 197) refers to political capital as a form of symbolic capital. Therefore, some critics (Casey 2008) argue that political capital in Bourdieu’s work has a broader meaning and can be extended to encompass all forms of power, regardless of their origin. However, in this text, I confine the concept to its narrower meaning. Political capital consists of direct participation in political life, enabling the exercise of power through control, coercion, and access to material goods appropriated via political authority. Its measure lies in participation in politics through the performance of political roles.

In turn, moral capital is not a term explicitly used by Bourdieu; however, some of his followers have emphasized morality as a marker of social distinction—for example, through the concept of moral boundaries (Lamont 1992). Others have treated moral capital as a distinct sub-type of cultural capital (Valverde 1994; Kane 2001). The separation of moral capital as a distinct sub-type is supported by the fact that an excess of cultural capital may contradict moral capital. A good example is the morality of the American

upper-middle class, as described by Lamont (1992), in contrast to the more cultured French upper-middle class. Another example is the image of the degenerate, immoral artist or an intellectual—possessing “too much culture”—who stands in opposition to moral norms (Valverde 1994: 217). In this text, moral capital is understood as a type of cultural capital, an asset grounded in perceived virtue or ethical legitimacy, built through the fulfillment of social norms, the embodiment of values, and moral commitments (ethos) that are widely accepted and resonate with others. In this sense, moral authority refers to the social recognition of one’s moral capital.

For the aim of this text, the crucial notion is symbolic capital which refers to prestige, recognition, or legitimation. In Bourdieu’s words (1987: 4): “symbolic capital is the form of different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate.” Bourdieu (1990) emphasized that dominant social groups seek to transform their capital into symbolic capital, which then legitimizes their capital’s composition and volume. The transformation of capital into symbolic capital must be “anti-economic”: symbolic capital is most effective when it is expressed in the form of “disinterested practice” and is consistent with the general norms of a given society. To capture this transformation, Bourdieu (1991: 170) employed metaphysical and religious terms such as transmutation, transfiguration, and transubstantiation. The key role in this transformation is assigned to cultural producers (e.g., artists, writers, teachers, and journalists) who yield symbolic capital through symbolic labor (Swartz 1997).

Bourdieu’s theory has been recently relatively frequently used by sociologists to describe the intelligentsia, both from the regional and comparatist perspectives (Gill et al. 2000; Palska 1994; Zarycki 2008; Zarycki et al. 2022; Zysiak 2016). It seems particularly useful for several reasons. First, it allows for a critical approach, noticing aspects less frequently discussed. Secondly, it helps dissect how capitals are used and transformed by the dominant group for their reproduction (Zarycki, Warczok 2014). Thirdly, it helps grasp the process of creating intelligentsia symbolic capital and authority and problematizes the complexity of its ethos.

The text draws on empirical data collected in a survey of Polish society (n = 1000 adult respondents). The fieldwork for the survey was done by the INDICATOR Marketing Research Center in December 2022. The CATI sample in the CBM INDICATOR study is representative of the population of Polish residents aged 18 and over. The study used both landline and mobile phone subscribers. The total sample of interviews consists of 1,000 respondents. Respondents are selected randomly, while maintaining control over the distribution of the following features: gender, age, size of the place of residence, province of residence, education. The study included 52.7% women, 47.3% men aged 18–24 (7.7%), 25–34 (19.6%), 35–44 (18.9%), 45–54 (15.2%), 55–64 (18.1%), 65+ (20.5%). 2.9% of respondents had primary or lower secondary education, 28.3%—vocational, 40.2%—higher secondary school diploma, 28.6%—higher education. 39.6% respondents represent rural areas, 13.3%—cities up to 20 thousand inhabitants, 11.1%—cities with 20–50 thousand, 8.7%—cities with 50–100 thousand, 16.1%—cities with 100–500 thousand, 11.2%—cities with over 500 thousand. Demographic data used in the process of selecting and weighing the sample come from Statistics Poland databases (GUS, lit. the Central Statistical Office).

In the article I analyze mainly responses to three open-ended questions: (1) “Who can be classified as a member of the intelligentsia today?” (2) “Why do you classify people as belonging to the intelligentsia?” (3) “What distinguishes the intelligentsia as a social group from other groups?” People could give multiple responses, which were coded under separate labels. The responses were coded based on theory and a process referred to as data-driven coding. The first type of coding is based on theoretical assumptions. The second involves generating codes on the basis of an ongoing analytical process. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive, so I used a mixed strategy. Due to the open character of the question and the article’s limit, I did not engage in any advanced statistics. The answers to the first question were coded theoretically based on an operationalization of the concept of the intelligentsia in relation to the main research approaches on the subject, some of which were presented in the introduction to this text. The answer to the second question was coded based on Pierre Bourdieu’s divisions between three main capitals: economic, cultural and social, and further supplemented with two sub-types of capital: moral capital and political capital. Most importantly, when possible, the paper underlines which are recognized as important, i.e. how they translate into symbolic capital understood as the highest form certain capitals take once they are perceived as legitimate (see above theoretical part of this paper).

The coding process in the third question was predominantly open-ended and remained closely tied to the data. The primary categories used for coding have long been present in the discussion on the intelligentsia. Some of the codes were prepared earlier but were modified, expanded, and corrected during the analysis. The result was a relatively dense network of codes reflecting a nuanced picture of the meanings that Poles attach to the intelligentsia and their attitudes toward this group. Many respondents’ answers were complex and contained multiple associations. In such cases, I kept the first or dominant association. For example, if in answer to the first question the respondent understood the intelligentsia as “cultured and educated people,” then I coded such an answer under ethos/lifestyle (i.e., “people who are cultured and have a higher education”) and not under the label “educated people.”

In discussing the answers, I also use the category of ethos because it is often used in the intelligentsia’s discourse in two different but congruent meanings. The first is more sociological; the second is moral. In the first meaning, ethos is close to the concept of habitus in Bourdieu’s sense, who—inspired by Weber—sometimes used it interchangeably with ethos (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992: 121). In this meaning, ethos includes lifestyle patterns and norms of behavior functioning as requirements for group affiliation, which are not necessarily overtly verbalized. The manifestation of ethos-habitus in this context is lifestyle. The second meaning of ethos takes on a normative character and refers to a conscious moral obligation (Cywiński 2010; Szawiel 1998). It consists of specific hierarchies of values and norms, personified by real and literary heroes important in Polish culture (Kurczewski 2006: 229; Micińska 1995) and worth imitating and shared (Nowicka 1969). As I point out below, within this understanding, the term “ethos-guided intelligentsia” is used.

One of the differences between these two ways of understanding is the “conscious normativity of ethos (i.e. the overt and binding nature of its requirements) concerning the natural and unconscious realization of practices included in habitus” (Bartoszek 2003: 47).

In both understandings, the concept of ethos retains its usefulness in describing the intelligentsia. The first meaning refers to the intelligentsia understood as a status group in the Weberian sense and thus distinguished by its peculiar lifestyle. The second meaning accounts for the normative obligation of its members (Ossowska 1986: 283).

The Symbolic Capital of the Polish Intelligentsia

In the Western context, the concept of the intelligentsia is often used synonymously with the intellectuals or the educated class (Sdvižkov 2011). However, in Central and Eastern Europe, the intelligentsia means something different than intellectuals. It was a social stratum (Gella 1971) that has emerged as a consequence of civilizational backwardness and was endowed mainly with cultural capital. In each country, the intelligentsia's social origins, history during the communist period and later transformation are different. Researchers also draw attention to the rebirth of the intelligentsia, but this process takes on various forms and scope in each analyzed society (Gessen 1997; Kennedy 1992; Kochetkova 2010; Lankina 2021). There is no room for a broader comparison of the intelligentsias in different societies neither in the context of their origin nor the later transformations. The text does not have comparative aims.

The Polish intelligentsia is an heir of the gentry traditions and universalized the ethos of nobility and gentry (Zarycki et al. 2022). It has also been a dominant group from which members of the elites most often come. Thus, it was a relatively large group that also held a dominant role in culture. Due to its historical role, the symbolic position of the Polish intelligentsia seems to be significantly higher than that of the intelligentsia in other countries of the region (Sdvižkov 2011). Comparing the Polish intelligentsia with the German intelligentsia, Helena Flam (1999) observes that the Polish one had more social and symbolic capital. It gave them a broader sense of rootedness and encouraged them to take a bolder stance toward the communist authorities. For decades, the intelligentsia was the dominant actor that imposed important values on the society. It is important to note that the social effectiveness of the intelligentsia did not result from the political positions it held but from its authority. As Kennedy put it (1992: 29): „The intelligentsia won this authority by becoming spokespersons for a new universalism, civil society”.

The authority of the intelligentsia is rooted in its ethos and cultural capital, both of which are historically shaped and grounded in normative principles. Many scholars have emphasized the role of cultural capital in the reproduction of the intelligentsia. In relation to the socialist period, Bourdieu's theory was employed by Palska (1994) and, more recently, by Warczok (2022) and Zysiak (2016). Among Polish researchers, the work of Zarycki (2008; Zarycki et al. 2022) is particularly valuable from a theoretical perspective. Zarycki argues that, given Poland's historical context, cultural capital—broadly defined—was the most significant and enduring resource that could be transmitted across generations. The reproduction of this social stratum, whether through inherited social position or upward mobility, was therefore largely dependent on the accumulation of cultural capital. In other words, while material wealth could be lost and political power under communism was often perceived as antagonistic to national values, what persisted was cultural capital:

university diplomas, ethos, manners, fluency in foreign languages, and similar attributes. Cultural capital also proved to be a key resource for maintaining social position during the transformation period in both Poland and Hungary. Classic works addressing this period include the comparative study by Gill, Eyal, and Szelényi (2000). However, their conceptualization of the intelligentsia is limited to institutionalized cultural capital—primarily education and paternal occupational status.

Meanwhile, ethos—understood as a lifestyle and mainly a set of normative principles—was also a crucial component of cultural capital in Poland. The details of the ethos may change over years, but it is understood as both an anti-economic lifestyle and the moral obligation of the educated elite to preserve the national culture, defend the homeland, and care for compatriots (Kulas 2017; Zarycki, Smoczyński 2014). The ethos was focused on the performance of social service; it involved patriotism, a sense of responsibility for the fate of the whole society and for the common good (Jedlicki 2000; Walicki 2000; Walicki 2007). In Polish, there is even a separate concept: the “ethos-guided intelligentsia.” (Cywiński 2010; Howiecka-Tańska 2011; *Znak Monthly* 1972). From a linguistic point of view, the term is a pleonasm and difficult to translate: every intelligentsia is ethos-guided in the sense that Weber gave to status groups, that is, they are distinguished on the basis of lifestyle. Nevertheless, the term reflects well the above-mentioned normative dimension of the ethos (dedication, care, social responsibility, and maturity, etc.). Due to the ethos, the social roles of the intelligentsia are defined in opposition to economic and political capital. This double negation of economics and politics presupposes disinterestedness, which is attractive, symbolically recognized, and remains in “spontaneous compliance” with the broader rules of legitimation prevailing in Polish society (Bourdieu 1990: 193).

As a result of the loss of their homeland, the Polish intelligentsia assumed the function of maintaining national continuity, and in practice often fulfilled the role of the lost state (Jedlicki 1988). Due to the policies of the occupiers, especially in the Russian Partition, the higher and middle professional positions, particularly in important areas such as education (which required “de-Polonization”), were reserved for Russians (Chwalba 1999; Jedlicki 1978; Snyder 2010). As Daria Nałęcz (1994: 5) has explained, “the intelligentsia’s rule over souls was a derivative of national captivity, lack of statehood, and the blocking of natural channels of social activity.” In communist Poland, despite periodic crises and tensions between the holders of political capital (the party nomenklatura) and holders of cultural capital (the intelligentsia), the intelligentsia retained its authority and influence.

In order to understand the symbolic capital of this group, it is important to note that for most of modern history, it was subordinated in the field of power: first to the administration of the partitioning states and then during communism to the party, which had weak social legitimacy, and therefore tried to conciliate the intelligentsia and dominate it at the same time. Despite censorship, however, the intelligentsia managed to maintain a considerable degree of autonomy, especially in the field of culture. The situation of foreign domination led to recognition of the intelligentsia, whose members were perceived not only as defenders of Polishness and bearers of patriotism, but also as defenders of universal moral principles and humanity. The intelligentsia was perceived as a moral elite that, during the partitions and communism, was capable of expressing opposition and adopting a critical stance. Dissident attitude was mainly characteristic of the intelligentsia elite. For

this reason, a distinction should be made between the intelligentsia as a stratum and as an elite. Nevertheless, it was the symbolic work of the elites that projected authority on the entire group (Kulas 2018).

After World War II, the number of people with higher education increased systematically—from 55,998 in 1945 to 468,129 in 1976 (Warczok 2022: 91). Although this growth was evident across all types of universities, higher technical schools saw the most dramatic rise, with student numbers increasing sixfold. The largest share of students continued to come from intelligentsia families: children from these backgrounds typically chose universities and medical schools, while children of working-class families more often enrolled in vocational and practically oriented institutions. Nevertheless, in all cases, higher education served not so much as a confirmation of skills but rather as a marker of intelligentsia status (Warczok 2022: 90–92). The term the “intelligentsia” also remained in official use.

Cultural capital gathered during communism also proved crucial during the transformation period. According to Kennedy (1992: 29): “The most prominent actor in the 1989 transformation of Eastern Europe has been the intelligentsia, a class whose basis for power is its control over a special form of teleological knowledge, and a culturally constituted group whose claim to authority is its historic role as leaders of East European nations.” Yet, since the systemic transformation after 1989, there has been a growing division of the intelligentsia into, on the one hand, a minority that preserved the legacy of the intelligentsia ethos, and on the other, the more pragmatically oriented supporters of the transformation of institutionalized cultural capital (formal education and diplomas) into economic status (Zarycki 2005: 57). The transformation resulted in the conversion of the intelligentsia’s resources (mainly the cultural and social capital accumulated over generations) into economic capital (Kulas 2018). This process is often interpreted in terms of “retiring from the stage,” the transformation of the intelligentsia into a middle class, and relinquishment of its ethos. Meanwhile, it can be interpreted critically as aimed at improving the material status of the group. The intelligentsia was valued on the labor market for its “expert knowledge.” (Fodor et al. 1995). It was cultural capital, in the broad sense, that proved to be a key resource in the post-1989 transformation (Gill et al. 2000). In this period two different forms of cultural capital should be distinguished: (1) modern, pragmatic, and institutionalized capital, based on education supported by a diploma and focused on the logic of exchange for economic values, and (2) embodied capital expressed in lifestyle, ethos, and broad, partly non-pragmatic knowledge (Zarycki 2008: 33). It was rather the first dimension of cultural capital that constituted a valuable currency of exchange in the transition from communism to a market economy.

The intelligentsia enjoyed the highest prestige in society because of its cultural capital and ethos, and more precisely professionalism and qualifications, regardless of the political system (Domański 2008; Kurczewska 1998; Walicki 2007). An important proof of the recognition society accorded to the authority of this group was the high place of professions typical of the intelligentsia on the scale of prestige (Domański 2012; Omyła-Rudzka 2019). However, in recent decades there has been a gradual decline in the level of social prestige of some intelligentsia’s professions which have now a relatively lower status than before. Studies of occupational prestige reveal a shift in perceptions, as professions that were traditionally associated with the intelligentsia (being a professor, doctor, lawyer, or teacher)

are now considered less prestigious than “ordinary” occupations such as those of nurses, firefighters, skilled workers (e.g., turners, bricklayers), and miners (Omyła-Rudzka 2019). In this context, one can hypothesize whether the weakening of the prestige of intelligentsia professions is related only to the above-mentioned pragmatic and education-based forms of cultural capital or whether it means a decline in respect for the intelligentsia in general. Below, I will address these problems by examining the relationship between the various forms of cultural capital and the authority and symbolic capital of the intelligentsia.

The Image of the Intelligentsia in Society

I will start analyzing the survey results by presenting respondents’ answers to a clearly defined question about who qualifies as a member of today’s intelligentsia (Table 1). According to the largest number of the respondents (22.7%), education is the main factor determining belonging to this group. 5.2% said that having a prestigious profession or specialty is decisive, while a similar percentage (nearly 5.8%) said that the intelligentsia are people of culture and scholarship. 11.2% stated that the intelligentsia is composed mainly of elites. The second group of responses referred to a lifestyle in the broad sense (almost 19%), and to working for the common social good (8.4%). Financial status was almost irrelevant in responses to this question. Only 3% included wealthy people among the intelligentsia. Therefore, this is not an important condition, although some respondents believe that members of the intelligentsia are able to use their resources to improve their standard of living. Almost 9% answered that the intelligentsia no longer exists. 14% were unable to answer the question or had no opinion. Respondents from the latter groups usually did not answer the next questions either. Several people confused the meaning of “intelligentsia” with “intelligence.”

Table 1

Categories of people belonging to the intelligentsia by respondents’ education level (%)

	Primary / Lower secondary	Vocational	Secondary	Tertiary	Total
Educated people	13.8	37.1	17.7	16.4	22.7
Specialists (professionals)	3.4	3.5	7.5	3.8	5.2
People engaged in culture, scholarship	10.3	4.6	7.2	4.5	5.8
People with a distinctive lifestyle	27.6	20.1	22.4	11.9	18.9
People who work for the good of society	10.3	5.3	9.2	10.1	8.4
Elites	10.3	11.7	11.2	10.8	11.2
Rich people	3.4	5.3	2.2	2.1	3.1
The intelligentsia does not exist	6.9	2.8	6.0	19.2	8.9
I don’t know	10.3	8.1	14.9	19.6	14.2
Other	3.4	1.4	1.7	1.4	1.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author’s elaboration of results of the survey “The image of the intelligentsia in Polish society,” Indicator, Warsaw, December 2022.

Educated people (Specialists vs people of culture and scholarship)

Respondents who stated that the intelligentsia consists of educated people (22.7%) often added that it was about an elite education, even with degrees from foreign or prestigious universities. In a situation where higher education has become widespread and devalued, the completion of any form of higher education is not a sufficient criterion for belonging to the intelligentsia. "I wanted to say people with a higher education, but there are many such people, so I don't know," said one of the respondents. Due in part to the demographic decline, it is currently relatively easy to obtain a university degree in Poland, even from a public university (where there is competition for places). Therefore, in order to maintain the elite status of the intelligentsia, belonging requires additional distinction in the form of a foreign degree or a prestigious and less accessible degree. According to some people, the education of a member of the intelligentsia should be good, international, specialized, and obtained from an elite, preferably foreign university. The value of an education increases when it is accompanied by international experience or the acquisition of academic degrees abroad ("Members of the intelligentsia are graduates of the best foreign universities who have international experience"). Interestingly, completing higher education was seen as being the result of individual abilities, dispositions, and innate intelligence, rather than, for example, the accumulation of school capital and dispositions acquired through an upbringing in a particular environment ("You have to be smart to study"). Education, understood in this way translates into prestige and trust ("In my opinion, [the intelligentsia are] all educated people who have a position and respect"). It should be added that, according to some respondents, education should go hand in hand with ethos-related obligations: the right way of behaving and living. From this perspective, a diploma is merely a passport to the intelligentsia's social obligations and duties, which consist in performing the functions necessary for the existence of society and for improving the fate of its weakest members ("They are educated people who do not shut themselves off from social problems. They have the knowledge to help people").

Irrespective of the respondents who defined the intelligentsia in terms of higher education, another 5.8% identified it more specifically with specialists and 5.2% with representatives of culture, art, or scholarship. The distinction between specialists and people of culture and scholarship is due to the fact that for generations the image of the well-read, erudite humanist personified the Polish intelligentsia more than, for example, an engineer or surveyor, especially those employed by the partitioning states. The distinction also gains additional significance if we consider that at the beginning of the post-1989 transformation the main prognosis was that the intelligentsia would be replaced by specialists and professionals, that were then considered to belong to the middle class and express its ethos. It is therefore interesting to see whether, according to the respondents, professionals meet the criteria of the intelligentsia. In defining specialists, the respondents most often mentioned doctors, engineers, functionaries, civil servants, or lawyers. Concomitantly, there were generally few references to bourgeois professions related to management or economics. In turn, "representatives of culture, art, or scholarship" is a category that includes intellectuals, writers, academics (or directly, professors, PhDs), teachers, and museum workers. Both categories are needed for the

functioning of the state and the maintenance of its social, educational, health, and cultural functions.

The Role of Ethos: between Lifestyle and Moral Stance

A relatively large number of the respondents said that the intelligentsia comprises people with a distinctive lifestyle (almost 19%). In addition, 8.4% of the respondents independently pointed to the ethos-guided intelligentsia who—through their social engagement—work for the good of society. Since these two choices refer to different types of ethos, it can be argued that more than 27% of the respondents pointed to an ethos as the main characteristics.

The first approach to the ethos is close to the Weberian view of a status group and Bourdieusian habitus. The implication is that the intelligentsia are characterized by good upbringing, knowledge of the prevailing rules of behavior and of the cultural code, impeccable manners, and high personal culture, including correct use of language (“They are able to behave as they should in any situation”; “The intelligentsia are people at a certain level, able to behave in any situation and well educated”; “The intelligentsia—it’s not only about knowledge but also the ability to behave properly”). The ethos is the result of social training and practice, which are part of the cultural capital accumulated over generations. This is certainly easier among the descendants of intelligentsia families, where the parents have higher educations and especially if they come from the old intelligentsia and carry on the good reputation of their family (“They come from the older intelligentsia and have been given everything to continue such a lifestyle”). Thus, a social genealogy combined with a certain lifestyle ensure a better education and better start in life in general. The statements of the respondents leave no doubt: “From childhood they are better educated”; “They have a better start provided by their family. Easier access to education or good jobs.”

The second view of the ethos refers to people who devote themselves for the social good. As mentioned, this type of intelligentsia is called the ethos-guided intelligentsia, the engaged intelligentsia, or the unbowed intelligentsia. It encompasses social activists and volunteers who work with people and whose education helps others (“They have devoted their attention and wisdom to educating themselves and providing service to society”). The social obligations of the intelligentsia are not directly related to their professions. Education, wisdom, and specific skills are important, but it is ethical behavior that defines the intelligentsia (“It is not solely education that constitutes wisdom, but also behavior and work for the benefit of others”). The intelligentsia understood in this way includes people who are sensitive to others, adhere to principles, and have “an attitude worthy of a human being” (“They are well educated and sensitive. Sensitivity gives one the ability to see the problems of others”; “The ability to feel the pain of others”).

Between an Elite and Non-Existence

The intelligentsia was identified with an elite by 11.2% of respondents. For a large part of them, an “elite” meant a high, stable position due to one’s cultural and social resources; for others, the word denoted a political elite. In the first sense, an elite is composed of influential people who shape the imaginary of Poles (“They have an impact on the direction

of what the nation thinks and does”; “This is the highest group in society and influences other people”). These people are usually well known and enjoy prestige (“I would call them the ‘cream of society’”; “This is the part of society that is best educated and enjoys respect, because the conduct of the elite should be the ‘litmus test’ of society as a whole”; “Erudite people of the upper classes”). In this case, social genealogy plays a role, since the intelligentsia includes “well-born” people “who have belonged to the intellectual elite for generations. They make sure that their children are well educated so they can gain international experience.” Significantly, it should be noted that although some of this group of respondents mentioned prominent politicians or statesmen, the attitude toward political elites was most often negative (“Power determines who belongs to the intelligentsia. Power and cunning”).

Finally, it should be mentioned that according to 9% of respondents, the intelligentsia no longer exists as a separate social category (“This group is just a memory—it is gone”; “I am old, and I can compare what used to be with what is now and say that the intelligentsia as a group no longer exists”). Some argued that the intelligentsia disappeared after the Second World War; others said that it disappeared after the change of system in 1989 (“This group ceased to exist after communism”; “The elites existed under communism; now it is not the same”). The process of transformation to a market economy resulted in a decrease in the importance of cultural capital, which changed the structure of resources and the perspective of educated people; currently, a broad education, a certain lifestyle, and knowledge of culture and history have ceased to be goals in themselves (“In my opinion, there is no intelligentsia today, because people understand less and less and want to learn less and less”). Therefore, the systemic and economic transformation made it difficult for this group to function as an intelligentsia: “In the past, this group decided the culture and future of Poland; now it is gone, because money started to rule”; “From the time we have capitalism, this group ceased to exist.” Notably, the denial of the existence of the intelligentsia due to the reduced importance of culture and an ethos is indirect proof of the recognition the group enjoyed in its historical form.

Respondents’ Education Level and Categories of the Intelligentsia

Additionally, it is worth noting how ideas about the intelligentsia differ depending on the level of education (Table 1). The distribution of answers among respondents with different levels of education indicates that for people with primary education, the key dimension of the intelligentsia’s belonging is ethos and lifestyle (27.6% of all people in this group), and only then education (13.8%). For people with vocational education (but without a high school diploma), education is key (37.1%), followed by ethos and lifestyle (20.1%). People with a secondary school diploma (who are the most numerous) indicated the importance of ethos and lifestyle (22.4%), education came second (17.7%). In all categories, elites received a similar number of indications (10–11%).

The case of people with tertiary education (university diplomas) is particularly interesting. They most frequently indicated that the intelligentsia either do not exist (19.2%) or that they do not know who qualifies as part of it (19.6%). For them, factors such as

education (16.4%), a distinctive lifestyle (11.9%), or working for the social good (10.1%) were considered less important. These responses may indirectly suggest that—despite holding university diplomas—these individuals do not aspire to be part of the intelligentsia, as they are uncertain about what the term currently signifies. Moreover, they may lack the resources beyond formal education that are perceived as necessary for inclusion into this group. In their view, a university education alone is not sufficient to legitimize belonging to the intelligentsia. In other words, their responses reflect uncertainty about the contemporary identity of the intelligentsia among those who, based on their educational background, are theoretically closest to it. This trend has been observed in Polish studies on the identity of the intelligentsia elite, which have noted a growing sense of distance from the intelligentsia (Kulas 2016, 2017, 2024; Zawadzka 2023).

In general, a distinctive lifestyle is valued most by people at all educational levels—except those with university diplomas. A moderate number of people with university diplomas consider education an important element of the intelligentsia—perhaps because they are aware that it is not sufficient on its own. Education, on the other hand, is most highly valued by those who do not possess it and are “in-between” educational levels (i.e., people with vocational training). This is not the case for individuals with the lowest level of education, who also seem not to expect to obtain higher qualifications.

The Intelligentsia's Capitals

Let me now turn to the question concerning the intelligentsia's capitals. The answers were coded with reference to Bourdieu's theory of capital: cultural (including moral), social (including political), and economic. In addition, I noted moments when a given type of capital took on a symbolic form: trust, respect, prestige, and recognition, which according to Bourdieu is the form that a particular configuration of capitals takes when it is considered legitimate. It should be noted that respondents often gave complex answers that could be coded multiple times, yet I kept the first or dominant association. However, since there was an unusually large number of responses inseparably combining cultural capital and social capital, I decided to make it a distinct category.

According to almost 38% of the respondents, the distinguishing feature of the intelligentsia is cultural capital (Table 2). Most often, they mentioned a combination of knowledge and culture, or education and culture, a good upbringing or personal culture, and proper behavior for the circumstances (“Educated people can behave in any situation”). In addition, almost 8% of the respondents mentioned both social and cultural issues, that is, they linked belonging to the intelligentsia to the simultaneous fulfillment of at least these two conditions, which are difficult to separate from each other. They argued that “To belong to this group, you have to have knowledge and connections,” and “The intelligentsia are better educated from childhood.”

16% of respondents consider social capital as crucial. Notably, however, “pure social capital” was very rarely mentioned (1%). Social capital mainly involves ties with others, which confer honor and prestige (“It's hard to join this group. You have to be born into it,” “Belonging to this group is hereditary”). High resources of social capital enable the

Table 2
Types of capital of the intelligentsia

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Cultural capital	376	37.6	37.6	37.6
Social and cultural capital	79	7.9	7.9	45.5
Social capital	158	15.8	15.8	61.3
Moral capital	132	13.2	13.2	74.5
Economic capital	13	1.3	1.3	75.8
Other	6	0.6	0.6	76.4
Not mentioned	236	23.6	23.6	100
Total	1000	100.0	100.0	

Source: Author's elaboration of results of the survey "The image of intelligentsia in Polish society," Indicator, Warsaw, December 2022.

exertion of social influence and are directly linked to the possibility of activating resources of power, influence and authority. High levels of social capital enable the intelligentsia to exert social influence, directly linking them to the ability to activate resources of power, influence, and authority. It can be, thus, said, that the intelligentsia fulfills the desire for wise, legitimized power, which manifest in a more subtle, mediated form of authority, as charisma ("Charismatic people move crowds; they are people of a certain substance, not just any sort of person"). Above all, this authority is rooted in the cultural and symbolic order. It is worth quoting several illustrative statements: "They have an influence on directing what the nation thinks and does"; "They are wise and lead society well"; "They are very well educated and have great experience in leading other people"; "Without them, this country would be nothing"; "They have vast knowledge, and therefore authority"). The task of the intelligentsia is to lead people, shape their behavior, care for the welfare and future of society, set directions for development, and represent the country abroad ("The intelligentsia is a signpost that shows the way for society"; "The highest class in society speaks volumes about it"). Interestingly however, most Poles do not regard the intelligentsia as occupying "pure" political roles, and the few who do are inclined to take a negative view of such activity. As one respondent put it: "Politicians will call themselves the intelligentsia, but they are characterized by arrogance and a desire for power." It further shows that the influence of the intelligentsia is based less on pure political power than on authority.

Moral Capital

Although moral capital can be understood within the framework of Bourdieusian sociology as part of cultural capital, I classified separately the answers that refer to ethical obligations and moral conduct. As aforementioned in the theoretical section, moral capital is a socially recognized asset built on a positive assessment of the fulfilment of obligations arising from ethos, consisting of both norms of behavior and accepted values. Such an understanding was indicated by a relatively large group of respondents (13.2%), who believe the intelligentsia is distinguished by the fact that it is helpful and supports others, does good works for humanity, and changes things for the better. Some respondents addressed the issue directly:

“They can distinguish good from evil and do no harm to anyone”; “They are helpful, care for society, and exhibit an attitude worthy of a human being”; “They act in accord with the canon of ethics.” In this view a profession, an education, knowledge or wisdom are not personal resources for the free use of the individual who possesses them but are important for the good and improvement of the serving of society as a whole. These credential characteristics become valuable only when they are supplemented by moral criteria relating to social service for the common good: “It is not only education that constitutes wisdom, but also behavior and work for others”; “They can transform their knowledge and abilities into action for the common good”; “They have acquired an education in order to serve other individuals”; “They have vast knowledge and thanks to their work society is cared for”). In addition to that, the ethos-guided intelligentsia should present courage, the sensitivity and empathy that enable them to perceive the problems of others (“They act wisely so that no one gets hurt”). Finally, it is worth noting that in terms of morality, the intelligentsia is a role model for others. They are an example for others of how a person should live and act” and “create the image of a good person and constitute an ideal social model” (see [Zarycki et al. 2022](#)).

In the end, it is worth adding that both economic capital and “pure” political capital were mentioned only occasionally by respondents (around 1% consecutively) and mainly as negative references. Thus, economic and pure political capital make binary opposition to cultural capital. This only confirms the low importance of material and purely political values.

The Intelligentsia’s Social and Cultural Boundaries

The final step is to examine the boundaries drawn by the respondents between the intelligentsia and other groups. This open-ended and inductive question aimed to double-check the endurance of beliefs about the intelligentsia and reconstruct respondents’ classification system. The responses to this one were classified under generalized labels based on the constructs used by the respondents.

Table 3
Characteristics distinguishing the intelligentsia from other groups

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Education, knowledge, wisdom	466	46.6	46.6	46.6
Culture and lifestyle	39	3.9	3.9	50.5
Prestige, respect, recognition	52	5.2	5.2	55.7
Moral attitude	88	8.8	8.8	64.5
Power and leadership	53	5.3	5.3	69.8
Material status, possibility of development	58	5.8	5.8	75.6
Origin	3	0.3	0.3	75.9
Not mentioned	241	24.1	24.1	100
Total	1000	100.0	100.0	

Source: Author’s elaboration of results of the survey “The image of intelligentsia in Polish society,” Indicator, Warsaw, December 2022.

According to the majority of respondents, the intelligentsia is distinguished by education, knowledge, and wisdom (47%). It was pointed out that belonging involves a better education, especially one enriched with international experience ("They have erudition and a razor-sharp mind"). Many respondents emphasized the importance of the intelligentsia's use of their talent, intelligence, and knowledge in everyday life, with the effect being the social welfare.

Culture and lifestyle were indicated as a distinguishing feature by less than 4%, which is somewhat surprising considering the high importance of these dimensions in the answers to the first and second questions. Here, the respondents drew attention to personal culture, proper use of language ("They speak a more scholarly language; they are well-groomed"), good manners, and the right behavior and lifestyle ("They prefer going to a museum or theater"; "They have impeccable manners"). Interestingly, heritage—that is, coming from a family known to be of some significance in intelligentsia milieu—turned out to be statistically insignificant. Only four people indicated that having ancestors from the same class was a distinctive feature of the intelligentsia.

The culture and lifestyle of the intelligentsia were often corresponded with great knowledge, respect, and prestige. However, prestige, respect, and recognition were indicated as the main characteristics of the intelligentsia by 5.2% of respondents. These respondents referred to prestige resulting from the intelligentsia's high position, recognition, education, general image, social status, wisdom, professions, and dignified attitude ("They have honor, knowledge, and skills").

Moral attitude was mentioned by 8.8% of respondents. Noteworthy, the considerable range and diversity of arguments are used here. The intelligentsia consists of people who are characterized by modesty, selflessness, devotion to others, sensitivity, fair judgment, courage, commitment, patriotism, help, and empathy ("The ability to feel the pain of others"). All these traits allow the group to have a positive impact on society, to care for the fate of the nation, to work for the good of others, and to make wise decisions. The respondents noted that the intelligentsia are wise, educated, and dedicated people who are characterized by "habits of the heart," and this earns them the respect of other people. Some emphasized adherence to the law. Finally, the intelligentsia is distinguished by being guided by higher values, which "form in people a sense of goodness, beauty, aesthetics" and "develop positive values and struggle against cheapness."

5.3% of respondents mentioned power and leadership. Literally only a few people argued in terms of the intelligentsia's desire for power/leadership for their sake. The intelligentsia's power was perceived as a natural effect of the group's knowledge, experience, and ethos (including responsibility for development). Notably, power is understood in two ways. On the one hand, it includes the ability to govern others, that is, leadership ("knowledge and skills needed to govern"). In the second sense, power has a more general form of influence rather than power in the bureaucratic-political sense. In both senses, members of the intelligentsia deserve to occupy certain positions.

Material status distinguishes the intelligentsia from other groups according to 5.8% of the respondents. The respondents pointed out that the work of the intelligentsia is more stable and more interesting: However, material status is not only about money but generally about the possibility of leading a better life ("They can use the knowledge they

have acquired and take care of themselves”). For a smaller proportion of the respondents, material status and position result from a better start provided by the family (“They were born into wealthy and influential families”). However, only a few people voiced the criticism that the intelligentsia is characterized by the pursuit of money as a goal in itself (“They want more and more money and have excessive ambitions”).

Discussion and Conclusion: the Intelligentsia’s Authority

In the final section, I would like to summarize the key findings and return to the central issue of the social image that best legitimizes the intelligentsia’s authority and affirms its symbolic capital. The data presented primarily reflect the social perception and evaluation of the intelligentsia, rather than offering direct insight into its actual existence or functioning. Nevertheless, it is precisely through such social assessments—elicited through open-ended questions—that the authority of the intelligentsia can be validated. In this sense, recognition by society becomes a necessary condition for the intelligentsia’s symbolic capital.

It is worth noting that for 75% of respondents, the intelligentsia still evokes meanings; for the majority, they are unequivocally positive. However, 8.9% of respondents claim that the intelligentsia does not exist, and an additional 14.2% have difficulty defining it. Albeit the survey presupposed the existence of this group in contemporary society, the notion is currently rarely used. It makes a huge difference concerning the time before 1989 when it was one of the official terms for the educated class. However, after the systemic transformation, it gradually lost its meaning (Kulas 2018). Currently, mainly the intelligentsia’s milieu use it. No answer from these 14.2% respondents may result from the open-ended questions, which could have been difficult for some. Based on the collected data, it is worth repeating the study, offering respondents the opportunity to answer closed questions with a ready-made cafeteria of answers. Interestingly, people with higher education had the most difficulties with the question about the intelligentsia’s “definition.” It may indicate that people with university diplomas—before 1989 routinely classified as the intelligentsia—are currently uncertain about their status. Similar argumentation is evidenced by studies of the intelligentsia (Kulas 2016; Kulas 2017; Zawadzka 2023).

Taking into account the poor presence of the notion (the intelligentsia) itself and the problem with the identity, 75% of positive answers make up a relatively big number. In my study, the intelligentsia is perceived by hardly defined forms of cultural capital: an elite education that possibly serves others, two forms of ethos encompassing lifestyle (1) and the moral attitude to serve the society (2). The image emerging from research consists of empathetic, trustworthy people who feel responsible for society and whose education and wisdom contribute to the common good. It is further endowed with appreciation and respect.

The social belief in the intelligentsia’s legitimacy is based specifically on broadly understood cultural capital (encompassing moral capital). The positive and affirmative image people have about the intelligentsia’s assets leads to the conclusion that the group possesses a high volume of symbolic capital and authority. To reiterate: “symbolic capital

is the form of different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate” (Bourdieu 1987: 4). Symbolic capital/authority is furthered assured since all of these aforementioned characteristics also evoke historically coined framework of the cultured and educated people guided by society’s welfare. It refers to the devotion, heroism, exceptionality and even sanctity of the intelligentsia’s protagonists.

Only a small percentage of individuals indicated that wealthy people and politicians belong to the intelligentsia. Some of these responses were supplemented with negative comments when the intelligentsia was seen as a closed elite or as individuals pursuing money or power. Moreover, people who use such resources solely for their benefit rather than for the common good move away from the ethos-based role for which it is traditionally respected. Political power (capital) and wealth (economic capital) lack sacred authority and are not valued or socially recognized as authority. Overall, this negative evaluation of wealth and politics suggests that the intelligentsia can only hold authority when they oppose economic and political capital.

It can be concluded that the pursuit of economic capital, the postulated transformation into specialists, alongside the replacement of symbolic criteria and norms with expert ones (management through expertise), can lead to a decrease in recognition for the intelligentsia and a weakening of its authority. These groups are associated with capital and resources that enable pragmatic action and are thus, in Weberian terms, purposive-rational. Both the proverbial manager and the expert lack the dimension of legitimization that characterizes the Polish intelligentsia. Max Weber predicted the era of specialists without spirit in a bureaucratic “iron cage,” and many commentators on the Polish transition into the market economy followed suit; however, cultural capital wholly demystified is uprooted and lacking legitimacy. The resources of experts, professionals or managers cannot be considered convincing symbolic capital “without self-interest,” endowed with trust and recognition. They have become disenchanted and now seem overly technical.

According to respondents, it is not “a family position acquired through money” (as one person put it), nor origin, nor membership in an elite that forms the basis for the existence and legitimation of the intelligentsia. The intelligentsia, deprived of its way of life, reference to traditional values, and the “charismatic” role of people serving the community, are not seen as much as the legitimized group. Neither social capital (including political capital), nor economic capital, nor even institutionalized cultural capital based solely on diplomas can serve as the foundation for the authority of the intelligentsia. This helps explain why so many professional groups (such as doctors) still refer, in their discourse, to the tradition and charisma of their genuine predecessors (Bokszański 2016: 35).

Overall, the intelligentsia enjoys recognition and is seen as deserving of the title only in its “traditional” form—when it is distinguished by its cultural capital, that is, socially valuable education, lifestyle, and moral standards. Only under these conditions does it possess symbolic capital. By drawing on values rooted in tradition, the group can activate sources of legitimacy that foster affective belief in its authority. According to Bourdieu (1990), symbolic capital must be “anti-economic,” manifested through “disinterested practices” and aligned with the dominant moral norms of a given society to remain effective. Public expectations of the intelligentsia reflect a desire for an authority that is symbolically grounded and characterized by care and trustworthiness, in contrast to leadership perceived

as lacking in ethical or moral substance—those “without spirit.” The authority of the intelligentsia legitimizes its claim to a leading social role—one that, in the eyes of many Poles, it fulfils successfully.

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