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# The Proletarian Public Space and Its Transformation. The Case of Socialist and Post-socialist Cities

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# The Proletarian Public Space and Its Transformation

## The Case of Socialist and Post-socialist Cities

by Borys Cymbrowski

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### 1. State Socialism as a Challenge to Legitimacy Theory

In this article I would like to show the transformation of societies caused by the introduction of state socialism as a political system, following the Russian Revolution and the WWII. Although the problems are discussed in general terms, referring to every society of the former Eastern bloc, most cases are derived from the Polish experience.

Socialist and post-socialist cities are such an interesting phenomenon that after twenty-five years from the breakdown of state-socialism in Eastern Europe, neither all aspects of how the cities were organized under that system, nor the everyday life in them have yet been thoroughly studied. Studies on this topic still represent the work in progress. Theorists of architecture and historians study the facts of the “construction” of those societies now. It is a little surprising that real growth of interest in the problem began as a new generation of researchers entered universities and started their carriers in social sciences and the humanities – a generation that can only remember their childhood before 1989, or even just nothing, being raised already after the collapse of the old system. It is the more interesting that it no less applies to scholars from the West. Not all of them, though, as there have been exceptions. But they, like e.g. Alain Touraine, David Ost or Elizabeth Dunn for Poland [Touraine *et al.* 1983; Ost 1990; Ost 2005; Dunn 2004] or Iván Szelényi for Hungary [Szelényi

1983; Szelényi *et al.* 1998] did not attract attention in discussions of the problems of transition/transformation.

The majority of studies carried out, devoted to the “socialist condition” or “communist society” are most often concerned with problems of nondemocratic system or political deprivation of the citizens, or economic inefficiency of socialism as a system of state organization. There are only a few which consider the problem of forming of socialist societies since the end of the Second World War. Communist system was based on repression and the social change it entailed was imposed with use of violence. Nonetheless, at the beginning, the communist parties had some political support in society [Kenney 2015, 14].

Some historians argued that the social change brought about by the Soviet liberation in 1944-1945 had features of a social revolution. Marian Leczyk, an author devoted to the cause of communism in Poland, wrote, for instance, that

when the Polish revolution gave the regained independence a shape of a people’s state, it meant an opportunity to accelerate processes which had had their origins back in the Eighteenth century. Those processes transformed Polish people into a modern nation, a society of noblemen into a bourgeois-plebeian society, the mentality of noblemen into a democratic mentality, and the exclusivity into a general public. [Leczyk 1983, 165].

On the other hand, an émigré historian, Jan Tomasz Gross arguing in a significantly different way, called those social changes a “revolution from abroad” [Gross 1988]. Recently the thesis of revolution was recast by Andrzej Leder, who stated that:

The revolution brought by the authorities on Soviet tanks was experienced by the majority as something external, in which one is involved without one’s will and decision. This “participation” let fulfill the hungry and revengeful dreams but without any real identification with one’s own action, an identification whose condition is a positive vision of the future, a consciously shaped set of dreams, aims and ideals. Those aims and ideals could have given the brutality of the coup an aura of meaning and justice. Before the war there existed political forces which formulated those same aims but they had not dominated at that time and their influence on the imaginary of 1930s was rather moderate [Leder 2014, 146].

## **2. Public Sphere and an Attempt at Defining Public Space**

Legitimacy, understood as being authorized to take part in public discussions, pronounce and pursue one’s own interest [Weber 1978, 31-62], is an important context for the discussion of public sphere. In Habermasian terms, “public sphere” is

a particularly *bourgeois* phenomenon. The public is possible only when the private has been developed. Habermas contends even that the classical public sphere came to an end when the bourgeoisie as a class ascended to power; exactly when its particular values characteristic of their social position began to spread over the whole society as values of citizenship, human rights and private property [Habermas 1993, 175-180]. The urban middle classes no longer needed to protect their private realm from the influences of aristocracy. In Habermas, the public could emerge only along with the institution of private property; public discourse was originally a discussion about private businesses of the well-off urbanites. Those who could take part in those discussions were also those who had stakes in the businesses. The bourgeois revolution which brought them to power, gave also some hope for the unprivileged to become stakeholders of some sort in this process. The emergence of the bourgeois public sphere was a particular urban phenomenon: it was developed by the upper and middle classes of cities to protect their common interests from the bureaucracies of the king and church. It was urban, worldly and, to some extent, democratic [e.g. Habermas 1993, 27-56].

Public sphere came into being in the city and permeated more and more from city to the whole of the state as the idea of citizenship and the division of public and private extended itself on the institutions of absolutist policy-making. As a result of the revolution, it became the principle of political organization of modern societies. Public sphere was, hence, originally an urban phenomenon and became generalized – to characterize modern nation state. Public space, in turn, remained an urban phenomenon to a much greater extent. Habermas assumes that in the cities the distinction between the public and the private began to play the crucial role. The public sphere then was an expression of this distinction:

As soon as privatized individuals in their capacity as human beings ceased to communicate merely about their subjectivity but rather in their capacity as property-owners desired to influence public power in their common interest, the humanity of the literary public sphere served to increase the effectiveness of the public sphere in the political realm. The fully developed bourgeois public sphere was based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple. The identification of the public of “property owners” with that of “common human beings” could be accomplished all the more easily, as the social status of the bourgeois private persons in any event usually combined the characteristic attributes of ownership and education [Habermas 1993, 56].

As such, the “bourgeois” public space is as democratic as the “bourgeois” public sphere: public space is where people make their public appearance. It therefore

suffices to look who makes appearance and on what conditions, or, in other words, who, when and why is visible in it. The public space was then reserved for the respectable; members of the lower classes were usually unseen [e.g. Engels 1987]. Workers were not deemed proper users of the main streets, squares and parks of the city. Workers, along with the unemployed, homeless prostitutes and other illegitimate categories of people appeared usually *en masse* in cases of social crisis: during riots and revolts. Their being visible in the public was a symptom of crisis [Negt and Kluge 1993]; it meant that the situation was extraordinary and that it required to restore the order [Orren 1991].

Similarly to public sphere, public space is the space for the bourgeois: The presence of lower classes in the public space is as illegitimate as it is in the public sphere. They can, of course, use the space but the rules are set by the middle and upper classes – those who are considered “respectable” [Sennett and Cobb 1977; Orren 1991]. There is a relation between bourgeois public space and the bourgeois public sphere as regards the presence and manifestation of the workers.

Since in capitalism public sphere is defined by those who possess the means of production and the public sphere itself is the realm of discussion of the terms of economic exchange of goods or the conditions of working the infrastructure indispensable in the process of production of those goods, then they also strongly influence the *public space*. Public space is the spatial dimension of the public sphere: not necessarily it must be “public” in terms of property ownership. In legal terms it can be a piece of private space – but when it is made available for the general use and the access to it is not denied on account of belonging to particular categories of people (defined by e.g. race or physical appearance). It then ceases to be merely a private piece of space. Exactly the same applies when the space is *public* in terms of property rights – when it is a piece of commons. Even now it is decided upon by those who generally have a say in decision making – those who are deemed the main stakeholders in the cities. In the Nineteenth century, the working classes were still excluded from these processes, and had almost no influence on the rules. Property qualification or curial electoral systems popular at that time approve of that. From this point of view it does not make any difference as regards the status of a particular fragment of space in terms of property rights. What matters is whether the terms of using and the rules of behaviour in them are decided by a single person (the proprietor), or by a public collective body whose members are the individual single proprietors. In terms of class interests the particular rules of behaviour in situations where people meet and interact with each other, are the rules which belong to the everyday life culture of the bourgeois. In other words, the public space understood as part of the bourgeois public sphere –

is the bourgeois public space. The “public order” both in public sphere and public space was an order of the urban upper and middle classes.

### 3. The Proletarian Public Sphere: Practices and Experience

In their critique of Habermasian point of view of public sphere, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge posit that the class character of public sphere is the result of the specific experience made by members of particular classes. The topic developed in their *Public Sphere and Experience* [Negt and Kluge 1993 (orig. 1972)].<sup>1</sup> Crucial here are the notions of *experience* and *context of living*. As Richard Grathoff once remarked:

[t]he term “experience” hides an ambiguity which becomes apparent in its twin German equivalents of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. While the former means an experience in the immediate fullness of a lived-through experiencing, the latter distinguishes experience as something to be reflected upon. [...] The ambiguity [...] justifies further careful analysis. [Grathoff 1978, 126].

Negt and Kluge use the “Erfahrung” variant in the original of the book because it is embedded in the context of Marxist philosophy where “experience” is a correlate of class consciousness. In the context of Kluge’s and Negt’s analysis the term “context of living” (*Lebenszusammenhang*) is particularly useful as it makes the “experience” more precise in its relation to production. Negt and Kluge define the context of living in reference to Reimut Reiche [Reiche 1971] and Theodor Adorno [Adorno 2003]. We can speak of the context of living because:

[a]n individual worker – regardless of which section of the working class he belongs to and of how far his concrete labor differs from that of other sections – has “his own experiences.” The horizon of these experiences is the unity of the proletarian context of living. This context embraces both the ladder of production of this worker’s commodity and use-value characteristics (socialization, the psychic structure of the individual, school, the acquisition of professional knowledge, leisure, mass media) as well as an element inseparable from this, namely, his induction into the production process. It is via this unified context, which he “experiences” publicly and privately, that he absorbs “society as a whole,” the totality of the context of mystification [Kluge and Negt 1972, 6].

Public sphere is a realm of experience. Private property which is the basis of the bourgeois experience of public sphere is itself contradictory: it disposes of the personal dimension in the relationship of dependence between the owners of the means of production and the workers who work these means on the daily basis. There are

<sup>1</sup> See also Negt [1975]; Schmidt and Weick [1975]; Langston [2008].

no personal bonds between the factory owners and their workers. Private property which is the basis of the bourgeois experience of public sphere is itself contradictory: it disposes of the personal dimension of dependence between the owners of the means of production and the workers who work these means on the daily basis. The owners may not know personally, and as a rule they do not know, their workers whereas the relationship is defined as private. According to Negt and Kluge, Habermas did not explain the fact that in the process of establishment of private property, public violence was used in favour of the bourgeois and against the working people. Thus, *it was not possible to argue that they are part of public interest* [Negt 1975, 462]. Negt argues that it was possible because the process of emancipation of urban middle classes by making them citizens was deemed a liberation from the rigid rank order of feudalism. In fact, the only winners in the process were those who proved to be propertied. *The burgher became a citizen* – he apparently was not oriented toward any particular interests as his actions were deemed in favour of the whole society – *led by the general interest (das verpflichtende Allgemeine)* [Negt 1975, 462]. Negt summarizes that this is a bourgeois ideology: according to it the norms were considered general, applicable to all spheres of social life and offered liberation for members of all classes. By this the *citoyen* was able to appropriate partly the means of authority and violence in the interest of his private property [Negt 1975, 463]. The workers struggled for the effective realization of those general right on the basis of their experience in their position. The result of the process was the emergence of the proletarian public sphere. It is defined by the process of production and its usual form is the *counterpublic sphere* as it is always directed against the bourgeois public sphere. Its reason is the overcoming of the problem of the private character of the shop floor in which the proletarian public sphere is embedded [e.g. Negt 1975, 464]. Of course, most of the workers' activities take place outside the proletarian public sphere; they are performed in the routine contacts with fellow workers and bosses or within trade unions, thus being under constant control of the factory management [e.g. Schmidt and Weick 1975], i.e. their activities are influenced by the bourgeois public sphere. The proletarian public sphere is apt to emerge in situations where the dominant mechanisms of social control fail – in the cases of crisis. This provides for its spontaneous character. But to be relevant it may not isolate itself from the more general context – it must take into account the whole context of living of the working people, or their *empirical sphere* [Negt 1975, 464]. Here, again, the proletarian public sphere is at risk of being infiltrated by the themes of the bourgeois public sphere as most of the media operate in it [Schmidt and Weick 1975].

In capitalist conditions the proletarian public space is about to emerge in situations where the public affairs are being discussed in public and when the behav-

behaviour in public is regulated according to the class-specific experience of the workers. Those situations usually happen during revolts and rebellions, i.e. when the proletarian counterpublic sphere takes shape and helps redefining the rules of behaviour in the public [Castells 1983].

#### **4. Public Sphere under State Socialism**

It is not easy to describe “the socialist condition,” despite the rich literature in the field of “sovietology” or on post-socialist transformation. With the exception of the period between 1949 and 1956, which was marked by the Stalinist terror and caused the upsurges of popular discontent in different countries (e.g. East Germany in 1953, Poland and Hungary in 1956), the communist rulers could reckon on support of considerable numbers from different classes of population. At the same time there was discontent with at least some policies which were imposed by the party and government. This paradox caused that the experience of the “really existing socialism” was virtually incommunicable [Thompson 1991]. It produced a paradoxical form of social consciousness: a simultaneous approval and refusal of the system [Czepczyński 2008, 60]. The second reason why it is difficult to describe the “socialist condition” is the complexity of functioning of the public sphere.

The revolution was imposed by foreign forces [Gross 1988; Leder 2014] but the activism this revolution was able to engender could have been stopped or suppressed by the state; What is more, Negt says that such limitation by the state is very likely to happen [Negt 1975, 465]. One of the premises of thinking about public sphere in such circumstances was the awareness widespread in most Eastern Bloc countries in the late 1950s and 1960s that it was impossible to change the system. The attempts to alter it in the desperate form of rebellions in 1953 and 1956 approve of that. The party apparatus was keen to discuss only some particular measures, and only in this respect there was some space in which working conditions could be negotiated.

The state-socialist public sphere was a hybrid, first because it was not democratic, and second because it was not oriented toward market but toward production. On the one hand, it could not be bourgeois because it excluded the potentially interested parties from it and, on the other, it was to some extent proletarian since it was oriented on production. Communist decision makers insisted on producing particular goods which always meant an appeal to workers of a specific branch of industry to get mobilized in order to increase their productivity. It applied especially to the so-called strategic goods, i.e. those which were destined for export. They were a source of special revenues for the national economies and this was the reason why party and gov-



ernment paid special attention to those branches. In “bourgeois” democracies such interventions were hardly possible and they were handled out of the public sphere. In state socialism they made central part of public discourse, official press covered those topics, they were present in speeches of the top officials. This kind of public sphere was directly related to the shopfloor realities of particular industrial plants. Being a part of a strategic branch was also a source of working people’s pride in a broader social context and very often of a special status of workers and employees in those “chosen” branches of industry. In other words, this was the mechanism of intervention from the outside into the proletarian public sphere. The workers under socialism, too, were subject to pressures similar to those occurring in capitalism. The difference was that this pressure came directly from politics, and not from the private owners of the means of production. It entirely belonged to the public sphere, unlike in capitalism where those issues belonged to the realm of private owners.

In socialism consumption shortages, low income and pressure on efficiency were the topics which were discussed in public in the context of industrial production. The authorities tried to satisfy the basic needs but the pressure on productivity was constant. Michael Burawoy, a researcher with considerable experience in studying the circumstances of work both in capitalist and socialist countries, stated that the trade unions in socialism played a different role than those in capitalism. In capitalism, the unions’ activities were oriented toward the independence of the decision making of the workers in issues which particularly concerned them on the shop floor and in the plant. In state socialism, on the contrary, the unions were intermediaries between employees and decision-making apparatus (party and state officials) [e.g. Burawoy 1985; Burawoy and Krotov 1992; Burawoy 1996]. They performed the role of conciliators whose main task was to persuade the workers, sometimes using a stick and sometimes a carrot, that they should work to fulfill the plan. Only in critical situations the unions took the side of the workers and represented their interests vis-à-vis the plant management, or the responsible ministry [Ost 2005]. The function of trade unions in socialism was connected with other elements of the system. The messages they were sending to the workers were intelligible and to some extent accepted; since, at any rate, they belonged and co-determined the conditions of work. They were a part of the workers’ experience but their hybrid role in the wider context of production suggests that they did not pertain to the proletarian public sphere. As the recruitment of the trade unions’ members was from among the plant workers it mostly provided for their legitimation. On the other hand, the moments of crisis were marked by significant pressures on productivity and order from the level of decision making, and the unions’ role was to moderate the tensions. Thus, they were likely to lose their legitimation. Like in capitalism, also in socialism the factory gazette and the trade union

bulletins did not belong to the proletarian public sphere as they were controlled by the plant management and the party officials. When the pressure was strong and the unions lost their legitimation among the workers strikes were about to occur. And in such circumstances the fully-fledged proletarian public sphere could emerge: the workers were organizing themselves independent of the authorities and the licensed trade unions represented their own (i.e. particular) interests. Thus, the proletarian public sphere in socialism had a tendency to go beyond the narrowly defined process of production and could be acknowledged in the broader context of social life – this phenomenon was characteristic of this system. The dissident movement started from the instances of criticism from the inside, as pointing out the wrongdoings of the system. This was the case of Milovan Djilas' critique of communism in his *The New Class* [Djilas 1957] as well as Jacek Kuroń's and Karol Modzelewski's *An Open Letter to the Party* [Kuroń and Modzelewski 1966a; Kuroń and Modzelewski 1966b]. But the most pronounced form of protest under state socialism was the founding and actions of "Solidarity", the "Self-Managing Trade Union", as the name had it, to be clearly distinguishable from the official unions.

The mass participation in it during the period of legality and then its clandestine action in the 1980s with the whole system of intellectual circuits involving millions of people, from high school students to public intellectuals, provides an unprecedented phenomenon of the proletarian public sphere under state socialism. In all its forms it was always based on and oriented toward production and, what is more, always took form of the counterpublic sphere. Last but not least, all the time it preserved its class character [Touraine 1983, 44].

## 5. The Proletarian Public Sphere in State-Socialism

The idea of the "public" found its expression in space; in the historical process of the emergence of public sphere all urban space which was not private property of a city's inhabitants was thus "public" including the corporate ownership of some craft and trade guilds [Weber 1978]. The process of incorporation of cities into broader political bodies of national states did not change much in this respect. Even when the supervision over it was carried out by functionaries of the state, very often the cities were able to preserve some of their old prerogatives to control their space. Still, those who had influence on it, were the same who defined public sphere.

The proletarian public space emerged in times of upheaval: no wonder that most social revolutions had their beginnings in cities. The proletarian public sphere emerges within the interstitial spaces of the bourgeois society; it is a rather momen-

tary phenomenon. It emerges in the moments when organized actions of the workers are free of the bourgeois control. As long as the public sphere remains bourgeois in character, the “natural” form of the public space will also be a bourgeois phenomenon. It approves in most, if not all, social upheavals since the Great French Revolution up to the Twentieth century. But not every urban rebellion makes the (bourgeois) city space a proletarian one. Assuming that the proletarian public sphere is necessarily based on production, also the proletarian public space necessarily must be based on it.

The proletarian revolution marks the beginning of the process of endorsing not only the proletarian public sphere. It gives the urban public space new meanings which are constitutive of the proletarian public space. The socialist revolution, regardless of whether spontaneous or brought from abroad, at the beginning brought about the emancipation of the workers by transferring the hitherto more or less organized mass into a group of persons aware of their political subjectivity. As regards public space, it is obvious that workers, as well as members of other classes, were present in public space before the revolution; but their presence had to be in compliance with the rules determined not by themselves but by the more “respectable” members of society – the burghers. The socialist political system assumed a working class-oriented city. In designing of the city space the needs and expectations of working people were taken into consideration. However, it became obvious quite soon that instead of involving the workers in the process of transformation of society, they were guided, controlled, and eventually excluded from the decision-making processes in favour of the Communist Party apparatus. But the major change has been accomplished: the proletarians could feel free in the space and their presence in it was remarkably encouraged. At stake was not only their presence in public; this was known to all who participated in protest actions during mass strikes and revolts. The revolutionary change consisted of the fact that the working-class ways of life and forms of official organization (e.g. trade unions) gained general recognition. Public space was now shaped with the purpose of integrating the proletarians as natural, full members of society; even more: a proletarian became a model version of the citizen. In state socialism production was a public issue, hence the worker as a direct producer became a public figure. The hitherto private means of production were collectivized or nationalized, and the same happened to most of real estate in the cities. These phenomena decisively changed the situation of workers in the public space. The process of change was very apparent, at first, in Soviet Russia in the two decades after the revolution [Buck-Morss 2000, 192], and then, already in changed conditions, in other countries where socialism became the ruling political philosophy. It especially applied to the policies of industrialization which resulted in building of

new industrial plants, development of the existing cities in the newly built factories and housing estates for working people, as well as constructing some new “socialist” cities from the scratch. The main goal was to create a new human, who would be liberated from the chains of the family. The socialist programme foresaw a special role for architects and space planners. They gained the position similar to “social engineers” [Nawratek 2005, 89] as they were supposed to arrange the infrastructure for the major social change: that peasants should be made into workers, and workers should live like aristocrats [Czepczyński 2008, 63]. During Stalinism new guidelines were created for architecture and spatial design of cities. According to them the architectural design should be socialist in the content, but national in the form [e.g. Pehnt 2006, 287-297; Nawratek 2005; Leder 2014, 171]. The content was production – every new neighbourhood and every new city was an addendum to an old or a newly built industrial plant. The form, in terms of design and embellishments, should bear features of the respective national culture. The link that matched the content with the form was the fact that the workers were building those districts and cities for themselves. The workers who worked on the construction sites of those new housing estates were often also those who were their prospective dwellers [Hładec 2011]. This act of creation and its presentation in the public space was very convincing for those who were involved in it at that time; the builders of those cities and the direct beneficiaries of the process of building. This was very important from the point of view of the Marxian theory. In this way, at least theoretically, the problem of alienation had been overcome. Nonetheless the proletarian public sphere under socialism was hybrid; and by the same token so was the socialist proletarian public space.

The practice of the state socialism showed a cleavage between the official public sphere and the shopfloor-based proletarian public sphere. The organization of production and the strong stress on industrialization caused phenomena which were already well known from the dynamically developing capitalist economies of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth century. The orientation on effectiveness caused exploitation, and the equivocal role of trade unions, as it happened, even contributed to the heating up of the situation. The shopfloor public sphere of the proud proletarians who felt authorized to determine the working of their plants was often quite opposed to the expectations of decision makers who were rather distant from the workers. It was one of the causes of popular discontent in state socialism – the workers who now felt legitimate to express their postulates and demands, became dissatisfied as their needs had not been taken into account.

## 6. Public Space Under State Socialism

There is no clear answer to the question as to the scale of major differences between socialist and capitalist cities. A purely “socialist city” is such one which was designed and built during the period of socialism, there are but a few such cities across Europe [e.g. Sumorok 2011]. It makes therefore more sense to speak of “cities under socialism” than of “socialist cities.” The point is that most discussions about “socialist cities” focus either on those few genuinely socialist cities (respectively on selected districts of already existing cities, that were designed upon the rules of “socialist realism”<sup>2</sup>), or just on cities under socialism, considering the impact of state socialism as a political and economic system on them [French and Hamilton 1979, 3-4; Jałowicki 1980; Szelényi 1996].

In answering this question, Manuel Castells proposed a hypothesis that

socialist urbanization is characterized by the decisive weight of the political line of the party, in the organization of the relation to space, possibly changing the relation to the economic or to the technological, such as can be seen in capitalist urbanization [Castells 1977, 65].

Additionally, the socialist urbanization

presented certain features to those of the capitalist countries in their phase of industrial-urban take-off with this difference, that the working-class population did not experience unemployment and that, even if the standard of living was extremely low, the urban organism proved capable of assimilating the rate of growth [Castells 1977, 66-67].

Later research evidence proved that the impact of state socialism on cities produced “unique socialist urban forms” which consisted in 1) “less urban population growth and less spatial concentration of the population than in market capitalist societies at the same stage of economic development” (despite the industrial take-off), 2) “an ecological structure which was different from their pre-socialist structure or the structure of Western cities during the same historic period,” and 3) the segregation of rich and poor and ethnic minorities which “was produced by new, different mechanisms. Slums [...] were formed at spots which are not typical locations for slums in a West European or a North American city” [Szelényi 1996, 288].

Spatial design was interconnected with other specific problems of socialist spatial economy. Planners could pay less attention, or even no attention to land value [Jałowicki 1980; Szelényi 1996; Hirt 2012]. The extensive industrialization, though

<sup>2</sup> In the Soviet Union from late 1930s to 1956; in other countries usually from late 1940s to 1956.

connected with constructing new urban areas, was a different process from the industrialization which took place under capitalism. Cities were deurbanized in this process [Czeczynski 2008, 63], or that there was “less urbanism” in socialist industrialization than in capitalist one [Szelényi 1996, 287]. The degree of concentration of functions in space was lesser in socialist cities than in capitalist ones – because of the virtually nonexistent influence of land value.

In state socialism the decisions were made politically by definition, the possible stakeholders were only very formally involved or excluded from the process. The resulting design had to be foreseen in advance. The representative or symbolic function of public spaces of the centers of cities in state socialism was to show the magnitude of the state. The “public” in its content was related with “the state” as the most important social actor.

Major public spaces are situated in the centres of cities. Socialist urban planning did not provide any comprehensive vision or model for designing city centres. At the turn of the 1980s Bohdan Jałowicki remarked (focusing on cases from Poland) that

no doubt, in the Polish practice of urban planning there is no clear conception of how to shape the urban centre, either in social, economic or symbolic terms; particular instances seem to be absolutely casual [Jałowicki 1980, 157].

After the rejection of Stalinism in 1956, the Party no longer regarded spatial design as strategic, as in the first years of enforcing socialism on society. Construction seemed more important than spatial design; the architects ceased to be “social engineers” but instead gained some more liberty. One of the key architects of this period in Poland, Adam Kotarbiński, referred to this situation as a “liberal directionlessness” [Nawratek 2005, 91]. It had several consequences for the built environment of cities and very strongly affected the public space. It resulted in the fact that functional zoning of cities had not fully developed and that most of central areas had assumed multiple functions [Jałowicki 1980, 157]. Second, it very strongly influenced the urban space beyond the city centre, as the non-central areas of socialist cities saw rapid urbanization in 1960s and 1970s.

The development of the new housing areas was connected with the progressing industrialization of the early 1950s and the mid-1960s, the construction of rather smaller houses, dominated, seldom taller than four floors. The housing estates from this period are still regarded as more functional because they were often combined with green areas. The policy of urban planning and construction changed in mid-1960s when the new fashion got foothold: from now on housing estates of large blocks of flats, having ten or more floors, were being built. The ideological premise said it was “more modern,” and in fact it mostly was the situation of patterns that had

recently been practiced in Western Europe and North America; their production was based on prefabricated elements which made possible to speed up the process of building in an era of progressing industrialization. This development caused significant problems: a growing cleavage between the planners' visions and the perception of the space by the inhabitants, especially regarding the public spaces that were created in this way [e.g. Frysztański 1989]. It caused estrangement and contributed to a rather negative perception of those housing estates. Quite often those problems were multiplied because those new housing estates required more functional commuting connections: the inhabitants should count on reliable means of public transport – a need that was never satisfied in socialism, or they should rely on their own cars (a commodity that was expensive and rare) [Jałowiecki 1980, 126].

Since public sphere is the agora of the political, no wonder that public space (as a part of the former) is the locus of articulation of political demands and confrontation of interests. Politics takes place in public space. People concerned with production on the daily basis use the space, appear in it, but always on certain conditions. In the circumstances of the bourgeois public sphere the public space was decided upon by those who had a say in the public sphere – middle class urbanites; the most important stakeholders in the decision-making process. In the hybrid circumstances of state socialism public space was incumbent on the power apparatus. The typical and most characteristic example of the shop floor-born proletarian public sphere, which simultaneously is a counter-public sphere is a strike or a public demonstration. This is the form in which the class interests of the proletarians are pronounced in the public *space*. The demonstration is about the rights of the workers. The organized presence of workers in public sphere was never casual – it was always a manifestation of their class interests.

Krzysztof Nawratek writes that socialism as a political ideology of the national state had two basic and contradictory aspects: firstly, in terms of social philosophy underlying it, it was an extreme version of humanism, and secondly, in terms of daily political practice, it was aggressive and totalitarian. The first aspect saw humans as individuals who had right to their personal development; the other tended to eliminate the ideological enemy and to convert the individual into a part of the collective [Nawratek 2005, 91]. The “humanist” aspect was responsible for fostering the individual self-confidence of working people. And in fact, the new system was largely accepted and many people got involved in its construction. There was a sort of social revolution which let them feel that the shop floor, the city and the country belonged to them. It was not a simple process because neither working people were prepared for taking up such a role, nor the rigid, party-and-state structures were keen to follow

the encouragement voiced in the official propaganda. The socialist working class was expected to accept its role as a disciplined army pursuing the class struggle, under the command of the communist party – this was the second, oppressive, aspect of the system. The genuinely spontaneous activity of the workers in the public sphere was still questionable, but at least their presence in the public space, individual and collective, was accomplished.

## 7. The Proletarian Public Space under State-Socialism

There is evidence that many workers had reservations towards the official measures [Kenney 1993]. At the beginning many of them felt out of place in the public *sphere* and *space*. But within one generation their being in it was already a natural experience. This very tension between the two contradictory dimensions of the socialist state caused that workers began to revolt against the system which claimed to act for their own interest. Because the system created a kind of licensed proletarian public sphere within the official framework, the popular contention of the workers took form of the proletarian counterpublic sphere. It was very swiftly extended from the shop floor into the urban public space. Thus, the cities which saw the mass protests, simultaneously experienced the creation of the proletarian counterpublic space – wherever people could act independently from the watchful eyes of the police and beyond control of the oppressive authorities. There were specific rules of behaviour in this space, the public order was kept, but independently from the official power structures.

It is important that socialist ceremonies, though sponsored, directed and orchestrated by the authorities, resembled in form spontaneous workers' demonstrations in capitalism. Although those appearances in public space were part and parcel of the licensed public sphere, they pretended to be counterpublic sphere. Everyday practices in public spaces outside the representative spaces of cities, concentrated mostly in the neighbourhoods, were oriented mostly on consumption of goods, and very often of those goods which were difficult to obtain [Szczepański 1991, 134]. The shortages in supply brought about a situation in which people had to stand in a queue for hours in order to obtain commodities of everyday use. It influenced strongly the ways of spending time and resulted in popular anger which added to the growing social discontent. This is how the proletarian counterpublic space was created – when the actions of the workers, or other citizens, got out of control of the authorities. It was visible during all major waves of popular protest in socialist countries, beginning from the East German uprising on 17 June 1953, the violently suppressed Budapest



uprising in 1956, the events in Poznań, Poland in the autumn of the same year as well as the Prague spring of 1968. Similar in character were also the events which accompanied the forming of Solidarity trade union in Poland, between 1980 and 1981. However different they movements were and happened in different stages of socialism, the common denominator of all those phenomena was that they always took place in particular cities; either on the shop floors of factories or in public spaces of cities where those factories were located.

## **8. The Public Sphere in Post-Socialism**

The process of changing of the political and economic order from state socialism to democracy and from the planned economy to the free-market capitalism affected not only the societies of Eastern Europe. It had some consequences for Western democracies. According to Nancy Fraser, the “postsocialist condition” refers as well to the public sphere of the West, as the disintegration of the East Bloc ensued changes globally. This process had three features. The first of them is the “delegitimation of socialism in the broad sense” as a

belief in the principal ideal that inspired struggles for social transformation for the last century and a half [Fraser 1997, 1-2].

The second feature of the post-socialist condition refers to the fact that

[c]laims for the recognition of group difference have become intensely salient [...] at times eclipsing claims for social equality [Fraser 1997, 2].

Fraser remarks that recognition and equality are false antitheses which caused a kind of confusion. It is difficult to identify the distinction between economy and culture, and how they both produce injustice [Fraser 1997, 3]. The third feature of post-socialism is

a resurgent economic liberalism. As the center of political gravity seems to shift from redistribution to recognition, and egalitarian commitments appear to recede, a globalizing wall-to-wall capitalism is increasingly marketizing social relations, eroding social protections, and worsening the life-chances of billions [Fraser 1997, 3].

In the formerly socialist countries the transition to a new order, the one defined by those features, was broadly perceived as a liberation and emancipation from the system that was economically ineffective and politically oppressive. From the point of view of democratic politics the new order of things offered no particular alternative; it just replaced redistribution by recognition. Since 1989 there has been “a crisis of

publicness in the broadest meaning of the term” [Hirt 2012, 31] and the discussions about public sphere in general are dominated by the ideology of “privatism” which is

a culture that entails diminishing appreciation of broad-based collective narratives and actions, and a growing interest in issues centered on the personal and the domestic, the individual, the family and the narrowly defined interest group [Hirt 2012, 18].

Another factor affecting societies in post-socialist countries, and especially contributing to the changes in the cities, is deindustrialization. The objective of the transformation was rather to create a strong middle class from the members of societies that hithertofore were building socialism. The economic basis had to be changed from industry to services; from material production to immaterial production. It resulted in massive and rapid deindustrialization [Nawratek 2012]. According to Nawratek, those processes caused not only structural problems of economic and social character, but also problems to offer adequate narratives for the post-socialist cities – the ones which make easier the identification of the space, to assign functions to it in a fashion that would more adequately answer the current problems [Nawratek 2012, 4]. This trend towards privatization of almost every aspect of city life in the period of transition of post-socialist cities was addressed by Sonia Hirt [Hirt 2012].

The proletarian public sphere which takes form of the counterpublic sphere can only be expressed in the framework of public sphere. In her discussion of the “postsocialist condition,” Nancy Fraser argues that a new “postbourgeois” conception of public sphere should be formulated to

envison democratic possibilities beyond the limits of actually existing democracy [Fraser 1997, 92].

Such a conception would take into account specific features of urban space and the possibilities of communication in them.

## **9. Public Space in Post-Socialism**

In socialism public sphere in cities was marked by an overwhelming grandeur, which was the sign of the triumph of the public over the private [Hirt 2012, 38-39]. The collapse of the system and the transition engendered “privatism.” The change from public toward the private, the deindustrialization in the realm of economy, was accompanied by the emergence of socio-spatial stratification that had previously been rather mild in socialism [Hirt 2012, 38]. Such problems as social marginality, homelessness, poverty and prostitution became visible in the urban space. In aesthetic

terms, one can speak of “Las-Vegas-ization” of the built environment [Hirt 2012, 38] consisting, among other things, in converting public buildings to commercial use, ceremonial plazas appropriated for commercial use and more recently, constructing vast, shopping malls that hollowed out city centers from their original commercial functions [Bierwiazzonek *et al.* 2012, 133-146]. It is not the uniqueness of post-socialist cities that the significance of public sphere was diminished in their space. When after 1989 the public became much less important in favour of the private – globally – this process was much more palpable in the democratizing post-socialist societies in which it was interpreted as the necessary change [Sztompka 1993].

The rapid introduction of capitalism meant the immediate abandonment of thinking in terms of any collective interest; even spaces which were attractive, not merely functional, were deemed ideological, too “socialistic” because they oriented individuals towards each other; they stressed that some needs can be dealt with in common, while the post-1989 individualism had it that people should solve their problems alone or with the help of one’s family. People dreamed about their own detached houses in suburbs, and this is how the process of suburbanization (at least in Poland) and urban sprawl started [Kajdanek 2011; Kajdanek 2012]. This process was reflected in the shape of post-socialist public space. The pre-1989 urban public space was symbolically filled with ideological content, usually in the form of murals, posters and neons advertising the unity of nation, socialism and peace (most of it was abstract for inhabitants and passers-by but those messages worked as reminders of the tenets of the leading ideology). On the contrary, the post-socialist conditions were marked by a rapid introduction of market mechanisms and which almost immediately caused social differentiation. This symbolical marks in the urban space were being replaced with commercial advertisements. Urban spaces, just like humans who used it, could have been labeled “winners” and “losers” on account of their particular performance in the changing economic circumstances. Land value became important in the process of planning and development. No wonder that the most successful were those which displayed some historical and cultural values and were able to attract tourists, regardless of whether they had played a role in national industry or not. Some cities (and regions) were still prosperous as they had been relatively less affected by deindustrialization which accompanied the transformation in East and Central European cities. The democratization of politics – the main part of the process of transformation, engendered also the reforms in the legal and political structures of local government (the status of the mayors and councils vis-à-vis national government and regional administration). From now on the local government took over the responsibility for the development of the city. Local authorities had to struggle for the investors, most preferably foreign direct investments, and get involved in competi-

tion for them with other cities in the country and abroad. In an instant they found themselves in the middle of the process of globalization. This shows very clearly what Margit Mayer calls “perforated sovereignty” [Mayer 1994, 317]. One of the results of this was the decision makers’ ideological belief in knowledge-based economy which in local post-socialist conditions implied further deindustrialization and shifting accent from factories to universities as “factories of knowledge.”

The unrestrained free market in post-socialist cities in connection with the ongoing process of deindustrialization caused that each city, regardless their size, started looking for its specific, distinguishing feature. Some positive outlooks for the future were connected with the universities as the advent of the knowledge-based economy had been prophesied. If state socialism was Fordist in its form of societal organization and subjected to the processes of industrial production, then post-socialism was a very peculiar, or acute form of post-Fordism – the one in which production was significantly reduced. Tomasz Zarycki [2008] remarked once that in major Polish cities the biggest employers were the state-owned universities. Most of them are the bequest from state socialism as most of universities, especially in medium-sized cities were founded between late 1940s and the decade of 1970s to provide the local industry and administration with qualified cadres.

At the beginning of the transformation process Piotr Sztompka coined the term *civilizational incompetence* [Sztompka 1993] to refer to the problem of the inability to accept new rules and adjust to market-regulated society by people who were shaped by the communist system. He even discussed the process of modernization fostered by state socialism but labeled it *fake modernity* in contrast to the “genuine” modernity, which had been spontaneously developed in Western countries. Socialism as a system of societal organization was future-oriented; transition, too, was no less future-oriented, but the swift and rather haphazard introduction of market economy did not stop the working of the “directionlessness” but rather caused its entrenchment in architecture and spatial planning. Now it was about the liberty of expression and the wish of the private investors. Their designers (not only architects but also mayors and private investors, aldermen, less often activists of urban social movements) left their marks on the public space of the city in pursuit of capital. No less important here is the processes of privatization which were among the most important factors defining public space of the cities and always affecting the local public sphere of particular cities.

The primacy of capital in post-socialist cities along with the “perforated sovereignty” institutionalized in the form of public-private partnerships, especially when multinationals gain the status of “corporate citizens” further change the public sphere along with public space. The emphasizing of the individual decision-making of people

upon their own property, brought about significant changes of the “content” of the public space in the most paradigmatic form – the centres of cities. It became especially visible in medium-sized and smaller cities whose authorities became enchanted by the idea of having a shopping mall at the outskirts, what caused that the city centres ceased to be frequented and that local entrepreneurs noted losses in their businesses. Those processes caused that central areas of many cities do feel now “deserted” [Bierwiazonek *et al.* 2012; Bierwiazonek 2016]. Since most of commerce moved from the public space in the central areas to private space in the suburbs, the public space additionally lost in terms of its being a significant part of the public sphere.

The changes in the public sphere and the redefinition of the urban public space caused also some changes in perception of some pieces of the “genuine” socialist architecture. For instance, Cracow’s district of Nowa Huta attracts visitors for whom it is interesting how a socialist city looked like. In fact, Nowa Huta was designed and carried out by experienced architects who had been educated before the Second World War, in the “bourgeois” conditions; it might be surprising, but the monumental architecture is functional today, in post-socialist conditions, and, after years from the collapse of state-socialism, it is interesting as a tourist attraction and a resource of real estate, or just as a specific socialist cultural landscape, appealing to new middle-class dwellers and contributing to the gentrification of some of its neighbourhoods [Gądecki 2012; Hładec 2015].

## **10. Conclusions: Counterpublic Sphere in Post-Socialism**

This hybrid situation of socialism made possible the emancipation of the workers. As a result they were always the first to manifest their discontent with official policies of the party and state and advocate the need for democratic change. Even today the expression “the workers went out on the streets” has a positive connotation, if it refers to occurrences before 1989. This positive connotations of protest in the socialist past no longer apply to post-1989 democratic conditions. Workers in deindustrializing post-socialist cities were continuing protest [e.g. Clarke *et al.* 1993; Ost 2005]. Currently in post-socialist countries the workers’ discontent is perceived as a form of extorting of undue privileges [Ost 2005].

The important circumstance was deindustrialization. Along with it, the workers kept losing their significance for the national economy as the state-owned plants were being closed down or restructured. Deindustrialization changed the shape of the public sphere; production ceased to be the defining factor for the proletarian public sphere. But still there have been many issues and a considerable discontent

about particular decisions. The situation is paradoxical: the democratic system guarantees the right and opportunity of political expression but the public sphere becomes again governed by capital. The media prefer to listen to the employers and are concerned with their particular problems, which they present not as specific for the social stratum of entrepreneurs but as a general problem of importance for the whole society. On the other hand, this transformation is reflected in the public *space* of cities which have experienced deindustrialization; the social status of workers decreased significantly. Strikes and demonstrations do not find such social resonance as before. Working people are now admitted as consumers (as the users of capital), but they are no longer invited to manifest their political interest. The public space of cities became a sphere of investment and consumption; capital is again the defining factor.

In the aftermath of transformation, the first decades of the Twenty-first century see a revival of urban social movements. For some time they have been visible worldwide but those which are present in post-socialist cities have their need to preserve the public space in cities and to put some limitation to the ongoing process of privatization, while they are very often active in the neighbourhoods. Some of them have more ambitious claims and raise questions which affect the nationwide legal regulation, concerning e.g. “reprivatization” (or restitution of property which was nationalized or otherwise collectivized during socialism) or privatization of real estate in cities, thus significantly opposing the interests of those who have capital and who want to define public space [Kowalewski 2016]. Along with those movements there are observable some changes in perception of the kind of space which was originally planned as “socialist.” It was rather rejected but with the passing of time it was accepted with reservations, then accepted, even up to some sort of fascination which is prevailing now [Hładec 2011, 137-139]. And, again, there is a paradox in perceiving of the space with socialist heritage: its current value is measured mostly according to the capital it can attract. The very fact, however, of directing collective interest and considering it as culturally valuable is the merit of activists and social movements who generally oppose the workings of capital and try hard to make the post-socialist space more interesting for local inhabitants. In doing so they often contribute to something which resembles, and sometimes actually is, the counterpublic sphere. The urban social movements are active in the public sphere but in the process of their formation in the last two decades, they succeeded to create their own counterpublic sphere: channels of information, the network of lawyers, NGOs. Their aim is to represent inhabitants of particular neighbourhoods in front of municipal authorities or influential business people, interested in redeveloping real estate in cities. This counterpublic sphere which is present in urban space, is no longer based on production;

the common denominator for their activists and rank-and-file members is the lack of capital – the lack of influence in issues which concern them at close quarters.

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## The Proletarian Public Space and Its Transformation

### The Case of Socialist and Post-socialist Cities

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**Abstract:** The article discusses the relation between public sphere and public space in the context of state socialism and post-socialist transformation. Public sphere is an important and defining condition for the constitution and functioning of public space. It is argued that in societies under state socialism a specific form of public sphere prevailed which was based on the experience of production, and not on experience of dealing with capital. This circumstance influenced the conditions and shape of the public space. The specific form of public space in socialist cities is discussed as *proletarian public space*, as it developed along with the process of massive industrialization and ascendancy of working class as the leading social force. Post-socialist transformation caused a rapid delegitimation of working people in the public sphere, and even a decrease of significance of the public in favour of the private. No longer production, but again capital became the decisive factor for defining public sphere. This process has been very well visible in the transformation of the public space of cities. Along with the decrease of production and the relative disappearance of working class from the public sphere, urban public space in numerous cities became a battleground between the investors and developers on the one side and inhabitants and urban social movements on the other. The activists of those movements develop a sort of *proletarian public sphere* which, however, is not based on production but on the entitlement to decide upon it derived from the fact of inhabiting a particular tenement house or neighbourhood.

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*Keywords:* Public Sphere; Public Space; State Socialism; Post-socialism; Proletarian Public Sphere; Proletarian Public Space.

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