



UNDERSTANDING CENTRAL EUROPE

Edited by Marcin Moskalewicz and Wojciech Przybylski

61 Urban solemnity and warped public space in Poland

Kacper Pobłocki

Introduction

Amongst the unintended consequences of Central and Eastern European accession to the European Union, particularly conspicuous was the invasion of Polish, Czech or Hungarian streets by young Britons, flying over for stag weekends or partying bouts. Locals found their ways truly disagreeable. But their offensive demeanor in public can only be partially attributed to their pub culture – with its credo of “drink ‘till I pass out”. Jan Nowicki, an actor and Polish *arbiter elegantiarum*, based in Krakow – Poland’s cultural capital and once the mecca of arty coffee houses – described British tourists as the “new barbarians”, nothing short of hooligans or even plain criminals. Accustomed to a different regime of public space, young Britons simultaneously broke and revealed some of the tacit rules undergirding Central and Eastern European urban life. What is striking about city life in this region is its persisting feudal, or hierarchical, character. Public space in Central and Eastern Europe is not flat, horizontal and democratic. Instead, it is warped, in the sense that some of its users are perched higher and others lower in the urban pecking order.

Hierarchical spaces

Partying Britons stood out in the local landscape for at least two reasons: first, whatever pub or bar they went to, they rarely sat down – they instead consumed their beverages standing in a tight swarm. In such an arrangement, they disrupted the predominant spatial order of the region, comprising human bodies engaged in a conversation while “properly” seated and immobile. They brought with themselves elements of the uniquely British working-class public culture, which differs substantially from the Central European coffeehouse tradition. According to Jürgen Habermas (1991), this heritage became the very linchpin of civic life in continental Europe, whereas the British working class was forged largely in pubs and taverns, as described by E.P. Thompson (1980). First of all, this was because these spaces provided for unfettered political contention and heated, often overheated, debate. Secondly, the zeal, chaos and mob-like atmosphere of pubs triggered a “civilizing” backlash from the working-class aristocracy that coalesced

around the teetotal movement. Perhaps because Britain is still the world's only true class society (in the sense that "old-school" class analysis remains congruent with realities on the Isles), it is also one of the few countries where the working classes developed real grit, a sense of cultural pride and independence, and where the rank-and-file frowned upon elites – rather than looking up to them. Consequently, unlike in Central and Eastern Europe, many Britons feel relatively unencumbered by highbrow "rules" of behavior in public, urban spaces.

A similar difference can be observed in the Netherlands and Belgium. Sights that terrify Polish urbanites, like street camera footage of a naked foreign tourist strutting on the main square of Wrocław, an event that once made headlines, would leave most Dutch people unimpressed. In the Netherlands, a drunken man urinating in the middle of the street is not likely to raise eyebrows. By contrast, Belgium is far more continental in its intolerance of such displays. The key difference here is the absence of the cultural brunt of the nobility. The Netherlands is perhaps Europe's most bourgeois society, culturally established in the "golden" seventeenth century (Prak 2005). It was not pressed to marry into the aristocratic house and court culture in order to assume the reins of modern society. The Dutch also "missed out" on the nineteenth century – when most continental national cultures were forged largely out of trickling down highbrow elements, and when, as described by Richard Sennett (2003), the modern city life of Europe germinated (cf. Jerram 2012). One of the key components of that development was the ushering of silence into the public realm. Thus, their disrespect for silence constituted the second feature that singled out British tourists from the urban landscape in Central and Eastern Europe. In this sense, the "unruly" Britons or "blunt" Dutch (as they often describe themselves) remained premodern, and the way they jell together in urban space is similar to the public life of the *ancien regime*, where it was still in good form to talk, or even shout, during theater and music performances, where the demarcation line between the active performer and silent and passive audience was very much blurred (cf. Sennett 2003). Today in the Netherlands, silent services on trains remain silent only in theory, and I have never seen a person admonishing others for not keeping quiet.

Uncanny visitors from the past

City life in Poland is marked, as the historian Błażej Brzostek (2007) put it, by its "solemnity." A foreign visitor described the antebellum street life in Warsaw thus: it "is not good form here to whistle or sing in the street. People do not talk on the tram. Nobody laughs. Nobody is joyful, and nobody smiles. Even whores strut the streets puffed up as if they were matriarchs" (Brzostek 2007: 122). Although somehow exaggerated, he captured the lineaments of the emergent urban order, when old social and class divisions, hitherto anchored in rural life, entered the urban turf (Pobłocki 2012). The *ancien regime* proved to be very persistent, as in the whole of Europe (Tamas 2006), and the Polish gentry quickly refashioned itself for the new realities of urban life (cf. Jakubowska 2012). Thus, the foundations for a urban hierarchical order were laid. The elites meted out

symbolic violence towards new urbanites, deeming them uncouth, rude, or simply untutored in the urban way of life, and increasingly a groundswell of conviction germinated holding that there indeed is a strict (albeit somehow elusive too) rift between proper and improper behavior in public space (cf. Smith and Low 2005; Mitchell 2003).

The author Leopold Tyrmand captured this formative moment in his novel *The Man with the White Eyes* (1959) – perhaps Poland's only true piece of urban literature. It describes how life in Warsaw was disrupted by a mysterious superhero dubbed *Zły*. He appeared out of nowhere whenever “normal” law abiding urbanites were troubled by “hooligans”, beating villains to a pulp. Tyrmand reveled in describing the vibrant chaos of postwar Warsaw – a “wounded city” largely reduced to ashes during World War II. Materially a ghost of its pre-war equivalent, it was a wholly new beast in social terms. Because most investments during Stalinism went into industry, the urban environment was a feeble structure, unable to contain the human crucible of Poland's momentous transition from rural to urban. Tyrmand describes, with a true brilliance, all the quotidian situations when the rules for the new urban order were being established. Warsaw, he wrote, resembled a spectacularly overcrowded tram. And when packed like sardines and no longer able to tame their seething anger, “people's most important instincts and character trace surfaced,” and they got into fights. The young “hooligans” refused to play by the new rules, not only disrespecting the iron principle of seniority (young people were, and still are, expected to give their seat on public transport to the elderly) but also occupying seats for the disabled and telling the indignant passengers off. Or they cut in line. Or they threw things at bypassers just for the heck of it. In all these situations, *Zły* entered the stage, rescued the innocent victims and paid the perpetrators back in their “mindless violence.”

Zły thus represents the superego of the new, urban society in the making. Although he breaks the law by resorting to violence, he is revered by the mass media and even by the police. Nobody has ever seen him, except for his piercing, white eyes. His silhouette was nondescript; he was neither tall nor short, draped in a gray coat. He was, in other words, the oft-mentioned “average citizen,” an everyman, whose gaze, amplified by the beatings, became the new disciplining factor in Poland's post-war cities. Today, the structural violence underpinning the urban games of demeanor and deference (Goffman 1956) are less apparent, and in some cases, they have moved from custom and morality to law proper. In a city in Ukraine, for example, there was a motion to introduce fines for those who declined to give their seats to public transit to the elderly. Contemporary cities are no longer dominated by “hooligans”. They are dominated by “average citizens” who share *Zły*'s moral code. We take this regime for granted. And this is precisely why so much moral indignation was triggered by the British tourists, who are like an uncanny visitor from Poland's past, when the rules of the urban game were not yet set in stone, but actually were being negotiated in the millions of daily situations described by Tyrmand, when the urban cauldron was still teeming with spontaneous, if unruly, life, that has not yet been confined by a structure.

Warped public space

So what is this structure of public space in Poland like? A vignette from Marek Koterski's film *Day of a Wacko* gives a hint. It features a scene on a bus. All the seats are taken, and then the bus stops and one person leaves. Then this seat, considered to be "superior" to somebody is quickly taken; then a complicated reshuffling ensues – the seat vacated by that somebody who moved to a "superior" seat is taken by somebody else. This, in turn, vacates another seat, which is then taken by yet another person and so on. The voice-over narrator comments the reasons for all this: a seat is considered to be "better" because it is next to a window, is facing the direction of driving and so on. In this snapshot, Koterski shows that what we consider public space is not homogeneous and flat in Poland – but it is hierarchically ordered, or warped. What I mean by this is that some public places are considered to be better than others; public space is "hilly" in the sense that in some of the places one can sit "higher" than the rest and look down upon them. Of course, each urban regime has its public transit etiquette. In New York City, for example, the gravest offenses on the subway, at least according to the portal *Gothamist.com* (2013) are to do with food and hygiene. These are things like smearing seats with food, nail clipping or flossing in front of others. Also hogging seats with one's bags (or taking a bike or an antique table) are considered rude. This is, however, because it snatches space away from others and not because it violates the rule of seniority. In Poland, a principal offense is still not to give your seat away to the elderly. Sitting is considered one of the important privileges – as historically this has been so – the throne has been the utmost symbol of royal power because it separated those who can sit from those who have to stand. And this distinction is reproduced in the many quotidian situations today.

Of course, the real privilege is wrested by those who do not have to use the public transit – namely those who switched to automobiles. The general exodus of the middle-aged population from public transit (as well as from the inner-cities dominated by the elderly and students) exacerbated the tension between the youth and the elderly. The fact that one sits in one's car cannot be disputed by anybody, and thus, this escape was an act of withdrawal from the "public" to the "private." As Marek Krajewski (2012) and his research team brilliantly showed, one cannot speak of wholly public (or private) spaces in Poland but rather of hybrids of the two. Their project on the way Polish cities are shaped from the grassroots in daily, sometimes even banal or outlandish, practices, indelibly shows that contemporary Polish cities resemble, as Rafał Drozdowski put it, an archipelago of tiny private worlds. Some seemingly "public" spaces are in fact (legally) private – like churches for example; others, and especially those tinkered up by individuals, are privatized public spaces. Even improvements and grassroots "activism" (of the individual sort – organized urban movements are a different matter) are largely done at the expense of the commons. One of the key conflicts in Polish cities is about parking spaces. A man at an estate in Wrocław, for example, would "conquer" space from automobiles by planting grass every time a car left. He also plants verdure on the walls of houses has turned the housing estate into an

impressive English-style garden. The community is not happy about this because they all have to contribute to the enormous water bill this garden generates; this man's act of "enhancing" or even reclaiming the public realm is considered by them as his individual project or even a pesky whim.

Urban fiefdoms

Polish cities are shaped by various forms of guerrilla enclosures, forms of conquering the urban "no-mans land", generating a plethora of "privatized" public spaces. The anthropologist Elizabeth Dunn (2004), by her fieldwork in a factory in the mid-1990s, concluded that Poland is home to a "dividual" form of personhood, as contrasted with the Western "possessive individual." Maybe Poles are collective at the workplace. In the urban realm, however, the notorious "Polish individualism" creeps in. Many examples of it were described by Tyrmand – it was all a vestige of the gentry lifestyle and its, back in the days guaranteed by law, "Golden" liberty. The Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania, a "nobles Republic" and peculiar polity where the gentry elected monarchs and where, gradually, all sorts of larger institutions dissolved for what was increasingly referred to in Europe as the "Polish anarchy". This "anarchy", however, was not chaotic at all, but, rather, it was a class-based rule, based on "private fiefdoms" of an individual nobleman, who exerted absolute power over their domains (cf. Beauvois 2011). Precisely this cultural and legal heritage was mobilized after "proper" capitalism waltzed through the region after 1989. As Krajewski (2012) and others argued, the daily strategies of individual urbanites are a mirror reflection of the way Polish space is shaped "from above" – by local administration and developers, who also seek to exert near total and undisputed control over individual fragments of spaces. One of the most often encountered grudges held against the local "growth coalitions" is that they treat the city as a "private fiefdom" (*prywatny folwark*) – and by resorting to this idea, one could argue that Polish cities comprise of such many "urban fiefdoms," where old, pre-modern, forms of exerting power have been employed, albeit in a contemporary guise. One's automobile is one too – there nobody can dispute the owner's right to "sit." What lays in-between such enclosed private worlds is subject to asymmetrical conflict between those perched higher or lower on the warped "public" space. And it is this invisible, and yet very palpable at the same time, hierarchy that constitutes the very backbone of contemporary city life in Poland.

References

- Beauvois, D. (2011) *Trójkąt ukraiński: Szlachta, carat i lud na Wołyniu, Podolu i Kijowszczyźnie 1793–1914*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS.
- Brzostek, B. (2007) *Za progiem: codzienność w przestrzeni publicznej Warszawy*. Warszawa: Trio.
- Dunn, E. (2004) *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- Goffman, E. (1956) "The Nature of Deference and Demeanor", *American Anthropologist*, vol. 58, no. 3, pp. 475–499.
- Gothamist.com. (2013) [Online] <http://gothamist.com/tags/subwayetiquette>, Available 12 April 2013.
- Habermas, J. (1991) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jakubowska, L. (2012) *Patrons of History: Nobility, Capital and Political Transitions in Poland*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Jerram, L. (2012) *Streetlife: The Untold History of Europe's Twentieth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Krajewski, M. (2012) *Niewidzialne miasto*. Warszawa: Bęc Zmiana.
- Mitchell, D. (2003) *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*. New York: Guilford.
- Pobłocki, K. (2012) "Knife in the Water: The Struggle Over Collective Consumption in Urbanizing Poland", in Brenand, P. and Neuburger, M. (eds.) *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Postwar Eastern Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 68–90.
- Prak, M. (2005) *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Golden Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sennett, R. (2003) *The Fall of Public Man*. London: Penguin Books.
- Smith, N. and Low, S. (2005) *The Politics of Public Space*. London: Routledge.
- Tamás Gáspár, M. (2006) "Telling the Truth About Class", *Socialist Register*, vol. 42, pp. 228–268.
- Thompson, E. P. (1980) *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Penguin Books.
- Tyrmand, L. (1959) *The Man With the White Eyes*. New York: Knopf.