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Experimental anthropology?

Action-research in urban activism

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Lévi-Strauss once noted that 'of all the sciences, anthropology is without a doubt unique in making the most intimate subjectivity into a means of objective demonstration' (Sahlins 2013:29). In a recent short piece, Marshall Sahlins expanded on this idea by elaborating on the 'reciprocity of the made and the true' (ibid.:19). It harks back to the eighteenth-century philosopher Giambattista Vico, who stipulated that 'what humans have constructed they can know truly, as opposed to natural things that are the work of God and are his alone to know' (ibid.:29). Although this point defies our common sense (which is still wedded to the positivist idea of objective knowledge), it is actually congruent with developments in twentieth-century science. Niels Bohr is often quoted as saying, 'if you're not shocked by quantum physics then you do not understand it at all'. One of its tenets, for example, holds that a single (material) object can be in two places at the same time. Thus it represents a radical departure from our quotidian experience of the world: 'the more the natural scientist discovers about things', noted Sahlins, 'the less such things are like anything in human thought or experience' (ibid.). Hence 'objective' knowledge of the material world is subject to surprisingly frequent revisions. 'Subjective' bodies of knowledge on the other hand have remained surprisingly stable. Sure, we have moved on in anthropology from functionalism and structuralism, but paradigm shifts that have shaken modern physics have been much greater. Natural sciences, argued Sahlins, are by default mired in uncertainty. Only in the human sciences can we draw definitive conclusions. We can intimately know only what is of our own making.

Action-research as experiment

The human sciences, however, are still too much in the shadow of the common-sense natural sciences, or what Philip Mirowski dubbed, in relation to economics, 'physics envy' (Mirowski 1989). The rise of the experimental sciences contributed to the idea that truly valuable knowledge is produced by machines only. Starting from the dispute between Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes on the possibility (or dangers) of a vacuum produced in air pumps (Shapin and Schaffer 1985), the hard sciences have prided themselves on being able to engender 'experimental spaces'. Extraterritorial to all human (political, economic, social and so on) endeavours, this 'scientific space' soon became the very black box generating objective knowledge, in the literal sense of the word. The 'view from nowhere' (Daston 1995) was thus a perspective achieved by dehumanizing epistemology, in which the order of things was discovered by building material knowledge-generating objects much more sophisticated and complex today than the original air pump (Daston and Galison 2007; Daston and Park 1998; Galison 1997, 2004; Latour 1993; Porter 1995).

The most dominant trend in twentieth-century humanities was to follow in the wake of the hard sciences and, as it is most conspicuous in the case of economics and finance, even copy wholesale (mathematical) models from the 'objective' sciences to the social ones (Mirowski 1989, 1994, 2002). The actual outcome, including the 2008 global financial meltdown, have been nothing short of a disaster (MacKenzie 2007, 2011, 2012; MacKenzie and Spears 2014). Yet before the advent of 'objective' knowledge of general rules, as Loreine Daston and Katherine Park (1998) brilliantly showed, science was actually not interested in studying the average but the extraordinary. Scientists focused their interest primarily on what in the language of statistics is described today as 'outliers'. It was the freaks of nature, and not normal distributions, that revealed for them the divine-made order of things. In that sense, anthropology is perhaps the last pre-modern of all sciences. Since the very inception of our discipline we have been interested in the very outliers of modernity. Traditionally, we searched for them in faraway places. Since the invention of fieldwork methods – both concepts, 'field' and 'work', were actually coined within physics (Mirowski 1989; Rabinbach 1992). Many of us do 'anthropology at home', some others decided to 'study up', as Karen Ho (2005, 2009) has put it, and carve out for themselves new 'fields' for ethnographic work such as Wall Street trading rooms and science labs (e.g. Guyer 2007; Lépinay 2011; Miyazaki 2003; Ouroussoff 2010; Zaloom 2004).

There is a vast anthropological literature on the vicissitudes of the relationship between the researcher and the field, particularly on all the ethical (and epistemic) dilemmas that immersion in the field entails. While we reject the positivist (futile) claim of being 'objective', we do not wish to get too close

either. The ultimate danger in our profession has been 'going native', leading to such a blurring of the subject/object dichotomy that one basically becomes one with the people and culture under investigation. Yet, most of these dilemmas (and research designs) have been wedded to the idea of a researcher entering a pre-existing field. We are of course well aware (just as those familiar with quantum physics are aware) that once we enter the field it also changes (the observer influences the observed) but still this relationship resembles the practice of stone-skipping. The stone, bouncing off the water surface as it moves forward, creates visible ripples. We do not deny this. Sometimes it sinks ('goes native') but what is most important is that it is driven by an upward movement. The two – the stone and the water – are ontologically separate. This is what enables this 'encounter' in the first place.

In this chapter I wish to consider a situation in which the fieldworker not only influences the field due to his or her interaction with it, but actually generates it. In other words, I wish to describe my own research experience in which, unknowingly at first, I became one of the midwives of a wholly new social phenomenon that is today a subject of a proper 'scientific' research. As many 'discoveries' in experimental sciences, it was an outcome, as the reader will soon find out, of serendipity. It started as a hobby and a refuge from the drudgery of 'proper' academic work back in 2009 when I joined a grassroots anti-development movement in the city of Poznań. By 2014, it was a new social and political phenomenon in Poland (known by its own, separate label as an 'urban movement') and a subject of literally thousands of news items, commentaries and studies. *Ruchy miejskie* (urban movements) became the most-discussed theme during the Polish municipal elections of autumn 2014 – not only in Poland at large but even internationally. The issue even made it into the global edition of the *Financial Times*, where I, amongst others, was described as 'a rebel with a cause' bringing change to the way politics is done in East and Central Europe (see Foy 2014).

So at one level this is a story of how I became an urban activist and the main co-coordinator of an alliance of twelve different movements from twelve Polish cities that ran in municipal elections under a single platform (*Porozumienie Ruchów Miejskich*). Our success was moderate: in some places we managed to get council men and women elected; in one – Gorzów Wielkopolski, a regional capital in Western Poland – we actually won. What I wish to show here is that this experience does not fall into the category of 'engaged' or 'public' anthropology the way it is usually understood. Although what follows is highly personal, what interests me here is the structural situation we were part of. My argument is that my involvement with urban politics, or actually engendering a new social (and political) field, had been, since the very start, of an epistemic and not just political nature. My work has

not just been about lending academic legitimacy to a grassroots movement, or doing anthropological work by giving voice to subalterns. Instead, it had been – right from the start and until the very end – about finding out what the 'order of things' is. If we take the 'reciprocity of the true and made' seriously, then it follows that engaged anthropology is actually worthwhile pursuing not because it is how we apply our knowledge (generated in our ivory towers or respective fields) to the real world, but instead because we can consider the conditions under which anthropology can function as an experimental endeavour.

My main frame of reference, thus, is something which in the arts (and in education studies) has been dubbed 'action-research' (and not 'activist research') (see e.g. Brydon-Miller *et al.* 2003; Hale 2006). One of its most brilliant examples is the recent work of the Swedish artist Anna Odell. Her film *Återträffen/The Reunion* (Odell 2013) is based on an 'artistic intervention' in which she turns personal experience into a knowledge-generating experiment. The film begins as a quasi-documentary about a school reunion of her former peers. We quickly learn that she is the only one who is not enjoying herself and is not nostalgic for the past. It turns out that she had been bullied by everybody else for the nine years they had spent together as kids. When she starts talking openly about this, the celebration turns sour – and eventually she is kicked out in a pretty nasty way. Only after having experienced this slightly gauche situation does the audience discover the real trick. What we he have been watching was not a recording of a real reunion, but a work of fiction. As it happens, there had been an actual reunion, but she had not been invited. Thus she tries to find out why and how it would have gone if she had been there. The fictional account of the reunion comprises the first third of the film, and the rest is a re-enactment of the conversations she had with her former classmates, and a story of what her experiment stirred in a Swedish community. Odell makes it very clear that her objective is not personal but epistemic. She does not want an apology from the people who had wronged her. Instead, she uses the opportunity generated by her former peers as a chance for 'action-research'. The real story is not what had happened thirty years ago, but how people cannot deal with the fact that they had once been a different person (a bully). They are all in a different structural situation now, and she shows not their lack of compassion for her but instead their startling lack of empathy for the people they used to be. She discovers the 'other' that many of us carry within our own biographies. And her work is pertinent, because it was the experiment she generated, thanks to being much more active in the 'field' than the usual code of scientific conduct would allow for, that shows us, amongst other things, that even in one of the most equal societies on the planet, quotidian violence is often the elephant in the room.

Serendipitous fieldwork

The story below is a thick description of an action-research opportunity I stumbled upon as a student. It all started in May 2009, when I returned to Poland from being a visiting fellow at The Center for Place, Culture and Politics at the City University of New York (CUNY). I was there to finish work on my doctoral dissertation, which dealt with uneven development and class formation in Poland over the span of five centuries. I went to CUNY to work with Neil Smith, but upon arrival I found that the Center was no longer run by him but by David Harvey. I was thus introduced to the Right to the City Alliance that David Harvey and Peter Marcuse were supporting back then. My doctoral work was anchored in world systems analysis, and I was only beginning to read the urban studies literature (which back in 2008/9 was not as rich as it is now). I read some Henri Lefebvre and took the legendary Urban Revolutions class offered by Smith, but I still did not consider the idea of the 'right to the city' intellectually intriguing in the least. I thought that it was as banal as the idea of human rights, only transposed to the urban realm. As my work was basically devoted to the structural side of the structure/agency dilemma, and I was busy explaining why inequality persists by changing its guises over the *longue durée*, I did not even imagine that agency can also be an interesting subject of research. Like David Harvey (2007:114–15), I considered agency somehow irrelevant – how people experience the world does not change the way it is organized. This is a minority view within anthropology, to be sure. But it is congruent with the traditions of historical materialism and world systems analysis.

While at CUNY, I recalled a development in Poznań that I knew of mainly because I was personally acquainted with one of its main protagonists – I happened to have been dating his daughter at the time. A group of local neighbourhood-based organizations were protesting against a controversial decision by the Polish government to establish a NATO base of F-16 aircraft within the city limits of Poznań – one of the key regional capitals. I also knew that the organizations had some clout with the local media that was reporting on them, and their activities triggered a public debate. Upon my return to Poland, I moved to Poznań (again, purely for personal reasons) and got more interested. I went to an anti-military-base demo and saw how the father of my girlfriend, amongst others, was trying to organize an alliance that would transcend its Nimby origins and frame the F-16 issue not as a local predicament but as a city-wide problem. In a way it was: while the noise was unbearable in the vicinity of the base, it was still considerable in other parts of the city that the planes regularly flew over. But when I went to the demo, it was far from spectacular – some local residents showed up as well as a bunch of

'alter-globalists' and anarchists, but that was all (see Polanska and Piotrowski 2015; Pomieciński 2013).

The rumour was that one of the local leaders of the movement against the base was collaborating with the military, who wanted him to 'quiet down' the dissent (this was never proved). The demo was intended to block a (civilian) air show taking place at the military base. There was a major road that connected the airport to the city, so we walked in circles, crossing the zebra crossing as often as we could in order to sabotage the steady flow of cars in and out of the air show. It was pouring with rain and the local leader who was suspected of collaborating was indeed trying to be very 'civil' with the protest. I remember discovering within myself the excitement of going to the forefront of the crowd and being the first one to step onto the road, leading the protest – and doing this against the watchful eye of the police (and amid dissatisfaction among the demonstrators with the local leader). The demo was modest and it did not matter as far as the air show was concerned, but it appeared on the main TV news channel in Poland, TVN24, who reported live from the scene, and so it seemed to have worked. So this is how I discovered the thrill of activism – this time not against the military or corrupt government, but against an activist leader who seemed to have been compliant. I was in.

So I started going to meetings, signed up as a member of My-Poznaniacy and got slowly dragged into some of the campaigns. I became involved exactly for the very same reasons that Loïc Wacquant (2004) started boxing: as an escape from the drudgery of academic labour. While writing pages of my dissertation during the day, in which I analysed in detail why nothing had really changed over the last half a millennium as far as the structural constraints of capitalism are concerned, at night I was discovering the meaning (and pleasures) of agency. At the time there were two major campaigns that My-Poznaniacy was involved in. Both dealt with overbuilding on green sites, and in both cases the struggle boiled down to attending meetings at the city council and a battle of words in the local media. So I took up the task of being a 'citizen journalist' and helped build the website of the movement, which, within a year, became an important place for voicing views critical of the 'growth machine' ideology of the municipal administration. We did not have a mass readership (the website received around 100 hits per day). But we knew that these were the people who mattered: local politicians, activists, journalists, bureaucrats. We also had a few clandestine supporters within the city administration who would sometimes tip us off, and thus we used the website for disseminating what they told us.

Most of my own work was invisible – I did not publish under my name (actually many of our authors did not) and it mainly boiled down to editing texts and convincing people to write for us. Most of the activists I worked

with had a background in the 'hard' sciences, engineering or professions such as accounting. They were extremely vocal and outspoken during often heated discussions at city council meetings. But when I came to putting words on paper, they suddenly became paralysed with anxiety. 'I'm not a humanities person' (*nie jestem humanistą*) they would explain when we asked them to write down what they were saying, evoking a traditional divide in the Polish culture between people who are good with humanities and good with the sciences. Writing a small piece for the website suddenly seemed for them too daunting a task. So by becoming a member of the movement, I also quickly (and gladly) discovered that I had a skill that was actually unique and useful.

The politics of scale

At the time, it seemed to me that my increased engagement with the movement was no more than a hobby (like boxing for Wacquant), and was also pretty natural – I attended a demo, then I went to a meeting, I was introduced to and accepted by the group. But now I know there were also other forces at work. I recently met a young architect who, just like me, got interested in My-Poznaniacy in about 2009. She wrote them an e-mail and was invited to a meeting. While it clicked between the movement and myself, and I also gradually found a role for myself in the movement, this was not the case for her. In the end, My-Poznaniacy activists concluded that they were residents of Poznań and fighting for the betterment of the city, while she was born and raised in a suburban county outside the city, and thus could not become a member. She 'bounced off' the group right from the start, and never came back. They also never mentioned her to me, although I was at the time as unusual a guest in their milieu as she was. This, we came to realize, happened just before I joined. And I recall that many people actually came to our 'open' meetings, but only a fraction of them stayed and blended in. Most, as she did, did not find their way 'in'. I was, actually, an exception.

Part of the problem was, I think, the age difference. The architect was my age – we were both around thirty at the time. Most of the activists were in their fifties or even sixties – they had families and careers, and now wanted to get involved in public matters. Indeed, for a while, especially when talking about the movement to outsiders, I often joked that I was the youngest member (it was actually true for a while). As the movement expanded, it eventually included people from different age groups, and during the municipal elections of 2010 we had, for example, the youngest candidate for the city council (he had just barely turned eighteen before registering). But this was not the case in 2009. When I went to my very first meeting, the activists actually joked that they need 'some youth'. So in my case the age difference seemed not to be a

problem – but in her case it may have been, and it probably could have easily been in my case too.

I had two other advantages that she did not have. First, I was already 'in' on account of going out with the daughter of one of the movement's key members. He had considerable clout with the group, and was actually the person who was most active in recruiting new members – so I had the right recommendation. But more importantly I had international contacts. The first advantage withered away pretty soon – my romantic relationship ended in early 2010, and once I got really involved in the movement (after I completed writing my dissertation) I was no longer only a person dating somebody's daughter. But the latter seemed to have mattered. During my very first encounter, I gave a little speech to members of My-Poznaniacy about the Right to the City movement that I had encountered at CUNY, and also mentioned that there were similar movements in Croatia and Hungary. (I knew of these via my CUNY contacts.) 'You're not alone in this' – this was my message, and it seemed that it found some resonance. They may not have been interested in young people who lived in the suburbs, but it seems to have been important that I was able to show them that they were not alone in their predicament.

My 'experiment' initially boiled down to helping the activists in 'jumping scales', to borrow Neil Smith's concept (Smith 1992). I became familiar with the scalar idea while at CUNY, and understood from Smith's work what the 'politics of the scale' are about (cf. Keil and Mahon 2010). The first demo I attended was exactly about this: trying to shift a local struggle to a city-wide level. The movement actually originated when some local activists met one another in the assembly hall of the city council, when the so-called *Studium*, a legal document representing a sort of a spatial 'constitution' for the city, was being discussed. Unlike local development plans, which were also subject to many controversies, a *Studium* is a single document that covers an entire city. So it offered a chance for public debate on what the policy for Poznań as a whole should be. As I learned, the powers that be expected to be done with their discussion of the *Studium* within two or three months. Unknowingly they opened a Pandora's box of dissent. Discussions were simultaneously local (pertaining to a set of specific 'spatial conflicts', as they were dubbed by the activists) and general, pertaining to how the city as such, or cities in general, ought to be run. The whole discussion went on for nearly a year, and during that process My-Poznaniacy was born.

The alliance was initially informal, and after a few months legalized in the form of an association (*stowarzyszenie*). It was called My-Poznaniacy, which means 'We the residents of Poznań'. The name itself was a powerful scalar concept. Its function was similar to the slogan *Wir sind das Volk* that was used by East German protestors in 1989. The name referred to the sense that the

powerful always talk about 'the people': the people this, the people that. In the process they have forgotten who 'the people' actually are. So the movement was born, and its name captured the idea that it represented 'the people' that are so often talked about. The mayor of Poznań and his administration assumed a classic Nimby-crashing strategy for dealing with the local activists. He presented them as loud mouths who were not interested in getting things done but only in blocking things (*hamulcowi*) – most importantly new developments. (The very first newspaper article that heralded the birth of the alliance was headlined, 'Will they block the *Studium*'?) But more importantly, he positioned himself as the person who was in the unique position of assessing divergent local (narrow, individual and parochial) interests and deciding what was good for the residents of the city. Thus by calling themselves My-Poznaniacy the movement told him that he no longer had a monopoly over speaking about what was good for the city as a whole. In effect, their message was: 'We are the residents of Poznań you always talk about. So now deal with it.'

This scale-jumping strategy was also about something bigger. The hyphen within My-Poznaniacy strongly suggested that the movement stood for building bridges between things that have been artificially sundered. So the work of moving from neighbourhood-level activism to city-wide activism was also about moving from defending particular interests to defending public interests. The idea was to reinvent the way the public good was conceived. Most conspicuously, My-Poznaniacy argued against the romantic vision of democracy, in which it basically stands for a collective agreement between all parties. 'Agreement is constructive' (*Zgoda buduje*), as Bronislaw Komorowski, who became president in 2010, argued in his campaign, and has insisted ever since. Instead, activists argued that agreement is actually destructive and conflicts are 'natural' to democracy; pretending that it is otherwise only aggravates. The city, they argued, brings very different groups together by default, and by doing so 'naturally' drags people into the public realm. So they understood public space in a very literal sense, not as an abstract sphere for the exchange of ideas, or for deliberation (as in the classic Habermasian sense), but as a tangible, material, political urban reality. In a country overwhelmed by symbolic politics (e.g. Ost 2005; Zubrzycki 2009) this was actually a very radical, and refreshing, idea.

Activism as knowledge production

My-Poznaniacy activists knew the power of scalar politics, perhaps because they had actually been doing it in a different (and actually more significant) field. The real political clout they mustered did not come from speaking to the media but from a discovery that had probably been made in 2007 by a

local ecological association called Silva (Mergler *et al.* 2013:90–96). In 2003, the residents of one neighbourhood had been confronted with a plan to build a golf course in a place they used for recreation. This was one of the most enduring spatial conflicts in Poznań – but it was salient mostly for revealing how residents are excluded from exercising their right to the city. This right was not executed in an abstract sense (Harvey 2008), but in law (cf. Holston 2008). They realized that the regime of the 'production of space' excluded residents participation by default. To cut the story short, it turned out that most building permits were given via a very non-transparent procedure based on something known in legal vernacular as *wuzetka* (*warunki zabudowy*). In most cases, residents would learn of a planned development after it was too late. But they realized if they run an association (*stowarzyszenie*) and filed a demand to become a legal party to administrative proceedings related to the issuing of a *wuzetka*, they were by default given access to all the necessary information and, most importantly, had the right to appeal. By 2009 My-Poznaniacy was involved in a dozen such cases – and many of them would also move to higher courts. Just like the workers brilliantly analysed by Timothy Mitchell (2013), they learned how to build political power through sabotage. But this also lifted their local struggle to 'higher' levels. I was often told that while the local courts were inclined to rule in favour of the municipal administration, once a case moved up the legal ladder, judges would give 'fairer' rulings – ones more favourable to the protesting residents. Thus they understood that the politics of scale actually worked.

They thus learned that operating at the local and city-wide scales was not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive. This was not, of course, a smooth process, and at my very first demo only a handful of non-local residents from other parts of the city came. But the important point is that scale-jumping had always been a possibility, and my own role had been in turning this idea into flesh. The 'field' had been ready for this – and I, somehow intuitively, got immersed in it. By then my work, or actually creation of a new field, had begun. One of the very first things I did after coming back from New York was to publish an interview with David Harvey on the 2008 financial meltdown (Harvey 2009). Although the interview was solely focused on the United States, I made sure that my biographical information under the text said that I was a member of the My-Poznaniacy movement. This was the very first time that name had appeared in the national media. One of the activists became so enthusiastic about it that he photocopied the article and handed it out to council members and other people who frequented sessions at the city hall. The content of the article was irrelevant. What mattered to him was that somebody outside Poznań took the movement seriously. This was the first confirmation that my strategy had worked: words had become
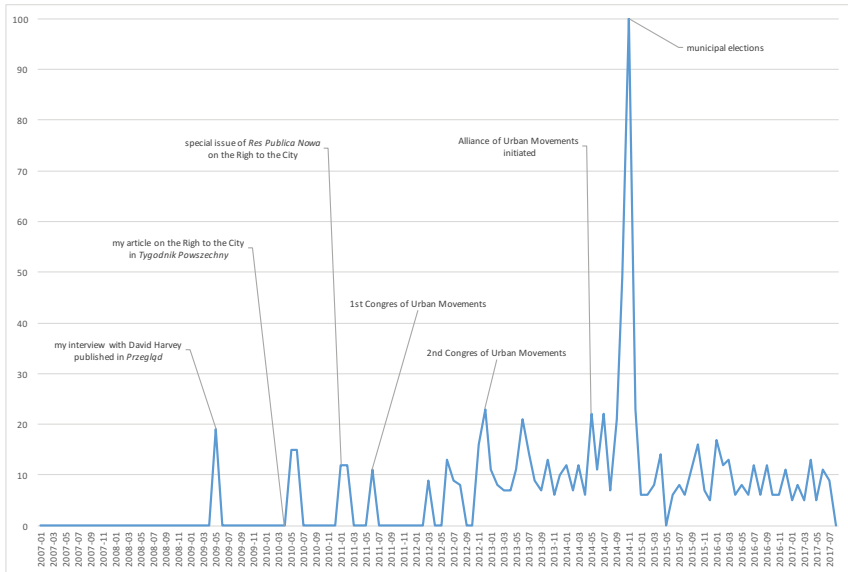
Figure 1   Google trends for *ruchy miejskie* (urban movements), 2007–17.
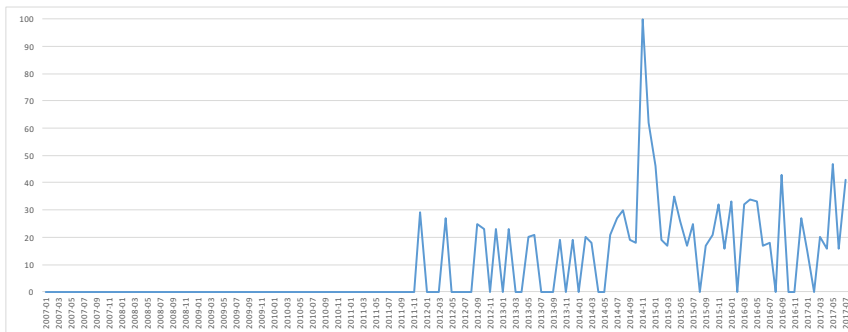

Figure 2   Google trends for *prawo do miasta* (right to the city), 2007–17.

a political weapon. A few months later I published a piece where I described how space was 'produced' in three different Polish cities: Wrocław, Łodź and Poznań (Pobłocki 2009). The first two I had done academic research on, while I had obtained all the information on Poznań from activists. Not only was this the very first time the term 'urban movements' (*ruchy miejskie*) appeared in the Polish language (Kokoszkiewicz 2012), but also it was one of the very first articles that used the practical and legal knowledge accrued by activists to describe in a totally new fashion how Polish cities worked. It caught on. As Figures 1 and 2 show, these early publications generated interest (measured by Google searches for 'urban movements' and 'the right to the city'). A few years later, peaks in interest in both concepts were no longer linked to a specific publication but instead to activist activities. In 2009 the idea that there was

something such as 'urban movements' in Poland was a hypothesis at best. Five years later, no pundit had any doubts that the phenomenon was real.

Yet my involvement with the movement was primarily a way of finding out how Polish cities were actually organized. I felt that the activists were on to something, and I used their increasing legal and political knowledge for my own project of fashioning a new narrative about Poland. My primary motivation behind moving to urban studies when I started my PhD in 2004 had to do with my dissatisfaction with the postsocialist debate. I felt that the terms of the debate, the concepts used and the questions asked (as much as the answers given) were actually hiding more than revealing to us. I had read Mike Davis's work on Los Angeles (Davis 1990) and Stephen Kotkin on the Russian industrial city of Magnitogorsk (Kotkin 1995), and both books, in their very different ways, were examples of the fact that a local study, showing global process at the grassroots, is able to tell a different story from the typical one of the transition from socialism to capitalism. This of course is banal. But back then most of research, even anthropological, on Eastern Europe was done in remote, rural locales (Buchowski 2004). Although Poland had been an urban country for over half a decade, this was hardly reflected in the scholarship – both international and local.

I surveyed libraries as well as bookshops and learned that although there was a substantial number of books with 'urban development' or 'city' tags, they were either outdated or overly quantitative. For example a monograph about Warsaw written in the 1940s by Jan Stanisław Bystroń (1977), a towering figure in Polish anthropology, that I thought might have been the 'founding' text of Polish urban anthropology, is a gross disappointment. Warsaw is shown as a dead space, a static canvas on which Bystroń paints national narratives. Another tradition (which I learned about only later on) was represented by some ethnographies of small-town life in the 1960s (e.g. Szyfer 1982). The Łódź school of urban ethnography (Karpińska *et al.* 1992; Kopczyńska-Jaworska 1999) was a little more interesting, but still obsessed with a very local predicament: how Łódź as a place did not 'fit' with national history. Its comparative ambition was limited to comparing Łódź to Warsaw and Manchester – and this stemmed from a common-sense, knee-jerk comparative framework that, in my view, explained very little about the specificity of urban processes in Poland. Many anthropological studies, helpful and illuminating in their own little way, were classic anthropologies conducted *in* a city but ignored more fundamental questions. In sociology there was a more substantial body of work to draw on (e.g. Czerwiński 1974; Jałowiecki 2010; Rybicki 1972; Wallis 1967), but most of it was decades old. Works written after 1989 on cities simply treated them as places where national processes (such as the 'transition' from socialism to capitalism) unfolded.
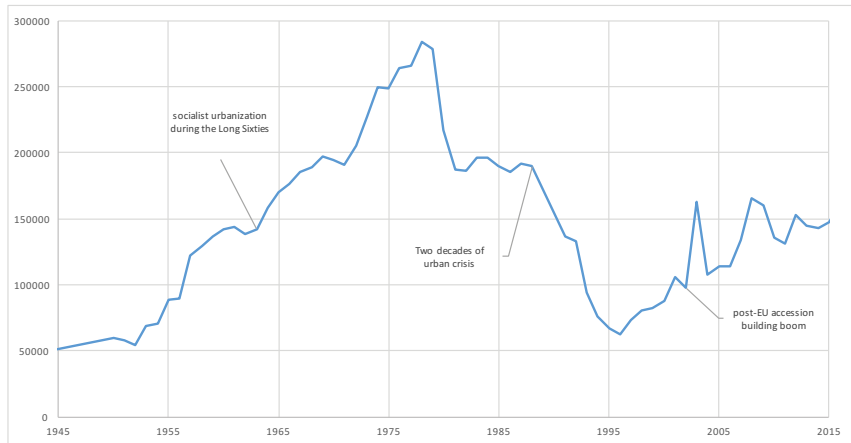
Figure 3   New construction in Poland, 1945–2015.

It was only retroactively that I realized that 2004 was actually a turning moment as far as the mode of production of space was concerned. As Figure3 demonstrates, Polish (urban) history can be divided into three parts: the gigantic building boom of the 'long 1960s' (cf. Pobłocki 2012), lasting roughly between 1956 and 1979, then two 'lost decades' of urban crisis, followed by a building renaissance starting with Poland's 2004 accession to the EU and its opening up to the global flows of capital. This tripartite division is actually reflected in the scholarship: it is hardly surprising that during the 'lost decades' very few people were interested in researching cities. The procedure of *wuzetka*, as with the entire legal framework for producing space in Poland, was actually born around 2004. Thus activists, who were following these developments at the grassroots, were uniquely placed and could use their actions for actually doing research. My knowledge of the general rules and global trends of the urban process was useful, if only intellectually, to help them place their very local and very specific knowledge in a new context. For me, these insights were extremely valuable as they opened a window onto a reality that a vast majority of researchers were totally oblivious to. This is how politics became a method of conducting research.

But research also quickly became politics too. Because I was the person with the most extensive set of supra-local contacts, I gradually became the 'foreign minister' for the movement. I do not think I was considered an important asset, however. I never ran for an official position within the movement, for example. I was not involved in any of the legal battles and I could not mobilize residents. The municipal elections of 2010 changed this. Despite the fact that opinion polls ignored us, My-Poznaniacy got nearly 10 per cent of the vote. This changed everything. The newly formed urban

movements (*ruchy miejskie*) struck a chord with residents in a way that the usual political players were unable to do. But we also realized we had hit a (political) wall – we were very present in the local media, but we knew that most residents in Poznań followed elections in the national news. Thus since 2010 my supra-national context became of apparent value. In spring 2011 I co-organized the very first get together of movements from other cities, which was covered by two of the biggest national newspapers. Over 130 people from nearly 50 different organizations met over a weekend in June. The jumping of scales to the national level had became a tangible reality.

The idea of urban movements as a new political actor was not our only invention and discovery. Another one that the activists were particularly keen on was that of *ekspert społeczny*, or 'grassroots expert'. Back in 2009, the urban politics (and knowledge) field was divided in such a way that experts and local government were the only ones with knowledge, while residents were seen to only have interests. Because of their growing legal and political experience, my activist colleagues felt increasingly competent in areas that had been previously been the preserve of urban planners and architects. So they came up with the idea of the grassroots expert in order to show that residents can also produce expert knowledge, and that this knowledge, because it combines a grassroots perspective with a mastery of general (supra-local) rules and trends, is actually superior to the knowledge produced in the ivory towers of universities and administrative halls.

In 2011, My-Poznaniacy applied for a research grant to an NGO-funding foundation in order to make a map and list of all the 'spatial conflicts' in Poznań. Because I was the only person with academic credentials, I was asked to become the scientific coordinator of the project. I agreed, but left the application details to the activists.

Once we obtained the grant we had to confront the reality of actually doing research. I looked at the application and had to fundamentally change the methodology. As I was dealing with unprofessional researchers with virtually no experience in the humanities or social sciences, and had neither time nor room to train them, I got two of my anthropology students involved in the project in order to work with at least one or two people who knew how to conduct research. Again, the activists perceived this project mainly as a political one – extending their clout to areas in the city where they had had little support before. We conducted over twenty interviews with activists from local community boards (*rady osiedla*), but they were of little actual value. The major problem was that my colleagues were unable to ask questions but instead were themselves providing answers to the questions posed. In other words, since for them this was about politics, they felt compelled to demonstrate to our interviewees that they were competent in the subject

matter – that they themselves were grassroots experts. Thus in many of the sessions they were actually arguing with interviewees instead of asking them questions.

Meanwhile, the movement started experiencing internal tensions and it split into two factions in spring 2013. We completed the research project and wrote a book in which My-Poznaniacy's legal and my theoretical knowledge on the 'production of space' in Poland was combined (Mergler *et al.* 2013). The book was a big success. There were even reviews in the daily press, and it won a prestigious award from the Association of Polish Urban Planners. However, the book was not really based on the research project – it was based on the knowledge My-Poznaniacy accrued via litigation. With another election year approaching, many people expected the urban movements to run for office. But since there were now two, and not one, urban movements, and the division between them generated nasty ripples in the media, it was pretty clear that competition between activists was not going to help. The hostile takeover of My-Poznaniacy by a minority faction forced most members (myself included) to form a new organization called Prawo do Miasta, 'Right to the City'. Much of autumn 2013 and spring 2014 was devoted to clandestine talks between the two movements to ensure that there were no competing urban movement candidates. In the meantime, the minority faction who remained in My-Poznaniacy experienced yet another breakup. So by April 2014 (and with elections were scheduled for November) there were three competing urban movements in Poznań.

Competing scales

At the same time, unexpected things happened elsewhere. In Cracow a grassroots movement lobbying against hosting the Winter Olympics organized an extraordinary campaign that turned the tables. While 80 per cent of Cracow's residents were in favour of hosting the Olympics in November 2013, by May 2014, in a referendum the activists forced the mayor to organize, more than 80 per cent were against. Urban movements were not only a political idea but a reality. In Cracow they started not from the neighbourhood level but from the city-wide level, expanding to a national one – they were the very first urban activists to be present in major national media outlets. There were similar new movements springing up in Warsaw, Toruń and Gdańsk. All were interested in municipal elections. By late May I realized that a national alliance of at last five movements from major cities was possible. Since I was the only person who actually knew everybody, I initiated the talks, and we held a first (and as it turns out the very last) meeting in Poznań. We started working on a common platform and announced an alliance a month later.

My work here was, again, rather invisible. Although I decided to give the very first interview (together with a Warsaw activist) that kicked off the movement, I quickly went backstage and withdrew from the spotlight. I did not run for office, and we wanted to have media exposure for those who did. Over the summer I had to manage negotiations over our platform and managed talks with new potential candidates – we were in all the major news outlets and over thirty groups from as many cities wanted to join. Becoming the co-coordinator of the alliance was a difficult decision for me, for I had other plans (I was in the midst of writing a book). But I decided to do it because I knew that if I did not link the movements, probably nobody would. And, more importantly, I wanted to see how the process I had become part of back in 2009 would end. I used to have a 'narrative' about urban movements that I used in public talks (one about jumping scales) but since I did not know how the story ended, I did not really see the actual meaning of the discovery process yet. Thus I decided to go with the flow.

I cannot describe in detail here the campaign, but wish to focus instead on a single aspect: knowledge production and distribution. While work between most of the activists within the alliance was pretty smooth (everybody was busy with their local campaigns and the degree of consent on the basic issues was pretty large), I increasingly stumbled upon resistance within my own organization. I downplayed it initially, but by August and September it had started getting nasty. The main bone of contention was that I was unwilling, in their view, to 'use their expertise'. Indeed, the nationwide campaign we were conducting as an alliance had to differ, in my view, from local ones in a number of ways. My Poznań colleagues, for example, said that we should conduct a 'positive' campaign, while I, and most of the other members of the alliance, felt that we should first and foremost critique the status quo. Those who were actually most successful (like the movement in Gorzów) of course did both, but discussion about the issue became quite heated at various points. What all this showed was the failure of the 'jumping-scales' strategy as I had envisioned it back in 2011. The actual election results in Poznań in 2014 showed that the two urban movements that ran got very localized support (and this was substantially smaller than back in 2010). In other words, the project of building a city-wide alliance failed – let alone a national one.

However, this became productive in an unintended way. The language of politics invented by urban movements in Poznań was taken over in other cities (such as Cracow, Toruń and Gorzów Wielkopolski) and put to new use there. And the initial 'discovery' that engendered the movement in Poznań (the one about *wuzetki* that had, on the one hand, given it its initial political clout, and on the other a unique window into the mode of the 'production of space' in Poland) turned out to be its only significant discovery. While the election

situation became increasingly difficult in Poznań – the two competing local movements found themselves increasingly marginalized by political parties who had learned the urban movement lingo – and increasingly favourable at the national level, the Poznań activists turned increasingly defensive. In other words, the strategy they adopted and that worked very well in 2010 was no longer effective four years later. But because they did not manage to effectively jump scales (doing so only in theory) they clung on to an increasingly ineffective strategy. Consequently, the movement got actually significantly fewer votes in 2014 than four year earlier.

Yet something of a miracle occurred too: the incumbent mayor in Poznań was defeated, something that most political commentators hardly believed was possible even two weeks before the elections. But he was defeated not by the activists, however, but instead by a savvy candidate from a major political party who had 'roots' in urban movements. But for me the learning process turn out to be a curve, and by late 2014 I felt that the body of knowledge accrued by activists no longer adequately described what was happening on the ground. My (new) vantage point was generated by a jumping of scales that, as it had turned out, I did on my own. And it was the scalar disagreement that eventually led me to resign my membership (the day before the elections, when the campaign was officially over).

The serendipitous aspect of action-research is important here. Just like Anna Odell, I did not know where the (collective!) discovery process I embarked on would take me, but I intuitively knew when it was over. What I wish to show with this story are the ups and downs of engaged anthropology as a knowledge-producing process. Politics of course was important, but since the very onset of My-Poznaniacy it had only been auxiliary. Unlike many researchers who decide to study urban movements (the phenomenon I helped to midwife became an object of proper scientific inquiry), I joined movements in order to acquire a new window onto reality that had been unattainable to me (and most academics) before. Figures 1 and 2 show that it was a (moderate) success. Google trends for 'right to the city' show that peaks for searches were initially clearly linked to our publishing efforts. The first three peaks occurred when I published my interview with David Harvey, my first article on the right to the city (Poblocki 2010) and a special issue of the quarterly *Res Publica Nowa* on the right to the city (Pobłocki and Celiński 2010). But then the idea turned to flesh: further spikes are clearly linked to national meetings of urban activists (the so-called Congress of Urban Movements). A similar pattern emerges for 'urban movements'. Both searches peak in November 2014, when municipal elections occurred. And we can see that before June 2014, when the Alliance of Urban Movements was formed, interest in urban movements was sporadic. Only between June 2014 and July 2015 was there a sustained

interest in the topic. After that, searches for 'urban movements' return to their previous pattern, albeit they are now more substantial than before. This is, I guess, the legacy of the alliance – in both a political and epistemic sense.

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