

## **‘MEETING OF WATERS?’ RECONSTRUCTING THE LANDSCAPE OF THE POLISH RIGHT TO THE CITY ACTIVISM**

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**ABSTRACT:** For over a decade, the explosion of various forms of urban activism has been observed: so-called urban social movements or the right to the city (RTTC) movements actively participate in the realm of non-institutional politics. This trend has been observed both worldwide and in Europe, particularly in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Poland is also a clear example of this tendency. The paper presented aims to achieve two goals. First of all, it is based on desk research and offers a broad literature overview, indicating the main directions and results in urban activism research in Poland of the last ten years. Recalling and discussing the broadest possible body of literature, with particular emphasis on Polish-language references, should be useful for international readers and researchers. Secondly, the paper attempts to synthesize these current research results, including the authors own research results, identifying the complexity of the field of urban activism. As a result, it points to various entities using the RTTC slogan in their social struggles, consequently identifying two main types of RTTC activism: radical and middle-class petit-bourgeois movements.

**KEYWORDS:** urban social movements, the right to the city, middle-class-based / petit bourgeois activism, radical activism, anarchist activism, tenants’ activism

### **INTRODUCTION**

The phenomenon of the *meeting of waters* is well-known as one of Brazil’s natural wonders. Near Manaus, Brazil the streams of two rivers converge: the dark water of

Rio Negro and the pale sandy-colored water of the Amazon River. Differences in the rivers' physical characteristics cause the two rivers to flow together side by side, without mixing, for several kilometres. This phenomenon seems to be an apt metaphor for trends in urban activism in contemporary Poland, as urban social movements (hereinafter: USM) can similarly be distinguished based on differing characteristics. At the same time, as the author points out, the multiplicity of various backgrounds of civic engagements and different institutional forms it takes can be reduced to two key currents: the radical and reformist, i.e., new petit bourgeois urban movements.

The article thus pursues two aims: (1) to offer a comprehensive overview of existing – to a large extent Polish – literature, thus constituting a form of *desk research*, while at the same time referencing the principal directions and conclusions of studies of urban activism in Poland during a period approximately corresponding to the past decade (ca. 2010-2020). The body of literature referenced here, with a particular focus on studies published in Polish, can be useful for international readers and researchers interested in both urban activism, as well as social movements in general; (2) it offers an attempt at the synthesis of the conclusions of current studies, illustrating the complexity of the field of urban activism while attempting simultaneously to reduce said complexity. In this regard, the article follows the direction undertaken two decades ago by Margit Mayer: to streamline and simultaneously reveal the principal trends of activism by showing the richness of urban civic society. Mayer suggested that two types of self-organization emerged on the urban scenes of the contentious politics at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries: (1) “radical, ‘autonomous’ protest movements and marginalized protest of the new poor people’s movements” and (2) “middle-class-based, quality-of-life-oriented movements focused on protecting their home environments” (Mayer 2000: 138-139; 145).

### THE PREMISES AND LIMITS OF ANALYSIS

The article's primary thesis states that two principal trends exist in contemporary Polish urban activism. As highlighted previously, the article refers to the results of existing studies, including the author's own research results, then synthesizes them. Due to the synthetic character of the material, many detailed arguments are invoked here in an equally synthetic way, though always in a manner consistent with the elementary principles of academic analysis, referring the reader to primary sources and studies on the issues in question. References to two policy papers cited in the text (*Tezy dla kierunku* 2010, *Tezy miejskie*) and the surrounding discussion are an example of this type of approach.

### THEORETICAL APPROACH

Although the article is not primarily theoretically oriented, it is also not ‘transparent’ or utterly atheoretical. The background to the discussion proposed in the paper is a particular perspective within the field of critical urban theory: the concept of the right to the city (hereinafter: RTTC). Drawing on Engels’ and Marx’ intellectual heritage

(Merrifield 2002), the concept of RTTC was originated by the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre (2000), and then developed by his students and contemporary followers.

In Lefebvre's view, the right to the city is defined as a universal call for the radical transformation of urban, implicitly capitalist, reality. As a French thinker put it: "the right to the city is like a cry and demand (...). The right to the city cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life" (Lefebvre 2000: 158).

The openness of the idea of RTTC is, however, burdened with a considerable degree of ambiguity. This is, moreover, thanks to Lefebvre himself, who while constructing the RTTC category, on the one hand, openly referred to the activist perspective of social movements, using his experience and connections with the Situationist International, which Castells then developed sociologically proposing the concept of "urban social movements" (Castells); on the other hand, Lefebvre proclaimed the need to create modern urban studies, with the normative intention of going beyond capitalist social relations, which, in turn, was most effectively developed by critical human geographers such as David Harvey (2012) and others.

The ambiguity of the RTTC category mentioned here, which is for some of Lefebvre's followers one of its most vital advantages (Purcell 2002; Marcuse 2009; McCann 2002) – for example, allowing David Harvey to treat the RTTC concept as an empty signifier (Harvey 2012: XV) – was also subjected to critiques, both from the activist (de Souza 2010) and academic perspectives. Some academic critics refer to the argument that the concept of RTTC is rather an ideological slogan than a scientific, analytical category (Gottdiener, Hohle, & King 2019: 385). They offer, therefore, a narrowing understanding of what the right to the city is. Other critics, in turn, point out that for years too much emphasis has been placed on the category of RTTC, which has led to other conditions of urban mobilisation being ignored. They, therefore, offer a perspective beyond the RTTC (Uitermark, Nicholls, & Loopmans 2012).

The article, in turn, adopts a broad understanding of the RTTC concept – treating it as a kind of umbrella concept combining the activist perspective that provides a framework for social mobilization and political action, as well as ontological and epistemological, knowledge-based approach (Pluciński 2020b). Nevertheless, in its core, analytical part, the article focuses primarily on urban activism, indicating which social forces use RTTC categories and how they understand them. This follows David Harvey's observation as "everything depends on who gets to fill" the RTTC category "with meaning" (Harvey 2012: XV).

### FROM URBAN BOOM TO THE NEW URBAN QUESTION

Cities and urbanity around the world, and by extension, within Poland, have been particularly popular topics for well over a decade. The reasons for this are, of course, complex, though one fact is significant: in 2007, the *United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs* (UN DESA) announced that over 50% of the global population lives in cities. Despite doubts as to the UN's demographic criteria (Brenner 2013: 101-102),

the horizon of our experience is no longer a predictor of an “urban society” (Madden 2012), but the reality of an “urban explosion” and planetary urbanization (Brenner 2014).

The apparent results of such intense and unprecedented urbanization are tensions and crises. These tensions were pointed out roughly five decades ago by Henri Lefebvre, for example, in his *The Urban Revolution* (2003), with a multitude of continuators in tow. These include both more sociologically oriented researchers such as Manuel Castells (1977) or Mark Gottdiener (2010), as well as human geographers (Harvey 2003; 2012; Purcell 2002). Aside from internal differences between disciplines and positions, these researchers are in agreement as to the inherent relationship between capitalism and its crises, and cities (Brenner & Theodore 2002).

Contemporary urban crises are thus a derivative of neoliberalization<sup>1</sup> (Brenner & Theodore 2005; Harvey 2007; Juskowiak 2015; Szmytkowska & Sagan 2012; Sagan 2016). This neoliberalization resulted in the acceleration of specific processes, which shared in common advanced commodification as well as striving toward successive mitigation of collective consumption (Castells 1977; Forrest 1991). One of the main features of neoliberalisation process has been the dismantling of the welfare state, which for several decades has effectively reduced systemic tensions through interventions and provision of „housing, socio-cultural facilities, public transport and so on, i.e. the whole sector which the economists call ‘collective goods’ and which are characterized (in terms of liberal economics) by the fact that they do not meet the price of the market” (Castells 1978: 18). In other words, the intervention of the state, “in order to take charge of the sectors and services which are less profitable (from the point of view of capital) but necessary for the functioning of economic activity and/or the appeasement of social conflicts”, as Castells put it (1978: 18), was defined as unnecessary.

Consequently, interest in cities as spaces for just and egalitarian living was consistently reduced. The result of all of these processes is the birth of the new urban question (Merrifield 2016; Baranowski 2016). Merrifield, one of the principal protagonists of the abovementioned perspective, in constructing his urban narrative, was not only a co-creator of a sociologically-supported *urban theory*, oriented both towards

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<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, the neoliberalization process is universal, but on the other hand, it has taken on different forms in different regions of the world, due to local, sociohistorical conditions. While in the countries of Western Europe there was a welfare state to dismantle, in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe it did not even exist. Neoliberalization was therefore, in a sense, more efficient here (Hardy 2009), and certainly it was introduced in a ‘time compressed’ manner. As stated by Kerstin Jacobsson: ‘while processes of privatization have of course taken place in the West as well, these adjustments in the urban patterns have been taking place much more gradually. Moreover, urban development in the West has been more strongly guided by public planning and the negative effects mitigated by public policies. The post-socialist countries, on the other hand, moved from central planning to a haphazard and chaotic urban development following a permissive *laissez faire* during the first 15 years of economic transformation’ (Jacobsson 2016: 11). The specificity of urban struggles against neoliberalisation, their significance for the birth of a new urban question and the structural conditions for the birth of urban movements in a certain, Polish context, are discussed in this issue in more detail by Marek Nowak (2020).

the descriptive (how it is), and the normative (how it should be), but also advocates open engagement with urban reality. This post-Lefebvrian perspective is currently experiencing its second life as a reference point for the most recent wave of activism under the umbrella term of USM. These volunteer pursuits focus on crises (as poorly solved urban problems), yet are anchored in set normative visions, whose endpoint is the ‘dream city’ (Pluciński 2018).

### URBAN CRISES IN CONTEMPORARY POLAND

The universal processes referenced here, are of course mirrored on the national and local levels. The reality of post-transformation urbanization in Poland is a model example of capitalist remodernization. The shift from real socialism to actually existing capitalism (Brenner & Theodore 2002) is a process, through which, partially as a result of time compression (Jacobsson 2016: 13), cities became arenas for numerous conflicts (Sagan 2000; 2016), that comprised sensitive urban crises. They can be characterized as follows:

(1) urban modernization in Poland – just as the process of transformation itself – was imitative but at the same time on a wholly different scale. Showy projects (Gądecki & Kubicki 2014: 145; Rek-Woźniak 2017), predicated on the belief in the ability to reproduce the Bilbao effect, a phenomenon whereby cultural investments and spectacular architecture are supposed to spark developmental impulse for cities (Plaza 2000), became the symbols of progress. In times of a public finance deficit, this resulted in a policy of cuts in spending on mass consumption;

(2) in turn, there was a radical withdrawal by the public sector from active participation in housing policy, which was intentionally left to the free market (Tsenkova & Polanska 2014), or the pursuit of land rent by developer capital (Domaradzka 2019). Housing became commodified (Kostka & Czarnota 2017; Polanska 2010; Stephens, Lux, & Sunega 2015) and financialized (Aalberg 2016), which led to a massive divestment of communal housing stock by city government, as property restitution (Kusiak 2019), and such pathological phenomena as “unrestrained reprivatization” (Ciszewsk & Nowak 2016; Śpiwak 2017; Siemieniako 2017) and “tenement cleansing” or the widespread implementation of “social containers” (Czarnota & Piotrowski 2018). Gentrification also began to increase (Pobłocki 2014a).

(3) The radical commodification of urban space and the pursuit of land rent also intensified spatial conflicts (Mergler 2008; Mergler 2011) as well as spatial disorder. The neophyte cult of the free market, in its exploitation of the oversights of the era of real socialism in this aspect, resulted in the rejection of spatial planning and of the institutional and social oversight of urban space (Kusiak 2018).

(4) Suburbanization also increased (Kajdanek 2012). The relatively low purchasing power of urban dwellers along with the rising prices of land and housing in



city centres – a result of, among other causes, Europeanisation of the real estate market – pushed some real estate buyers outside the cities and popularised the “suburban perspective”, turning cities into transit zones between urban workplaces and suburban residences.

(5) Consequently, transportation slowly became an issue (Filar 2012) – primarily as an effect of suburbanization and policies of limiting expenditures on public transport. This bolstered the tendency to transform the transport needs of residents into private trouble (Krysiński, Uss-Lik, & Szczepańska 2020).

(6) At the same time, ecological crises become more apparent. Tensions surrounding urban ecologies in general (Mergler 2008), whose departure points were numerous locational conflicts and the related clearing of urban green spaces, served today as an exclusive departure point for crises of a more complex composition related to air quality (Grzechnik 2018), access to water or energy-related problems and climate change.

(7) The final element of these crises – one that plays out primarily in the symbolic domain, but mirroring nevertheless the “hard” processes referenced here – is the urbanization of consciousness, constituting to some extent an element of, as Paweł Kubicki put it, the “invented urbanity” (2016). At stake in this process is the redefinition and construction of a new urban identity built on a relatively strong and well-nurtured legacy of an agrarian and to some extent “non-urban” society (Jedlicki 1991). This is, to a certain extent, a continuation of the processes of urbanization of identity through the proletarianization of the peasantry that settled in the cities (Pobłocki 2011).

These crises are intersectional in nature, mutually determining one another and creating complex networks of connections. For example, the housing crisis that pushed residents into the suburbs (while in turn pauperizing other segments of the population), generates increased commuter traffic, transforming the city into transit zones and strengthening local policies that privilege individual automotive transport, often at the cost of urban greenery, at the same time generating additional ecological problems – such as those related to energy consumption and air quality. This chain of connections is, of course, a simplified one. The complexity of these crises is mirrored in the complexity of conflicts fought over the city itself, in correlation with Castells’ classic hypothesis, who openly wrote that: “the plurality of contradictions occur through the agents being in contradictory places within the same (...) urban system” (Castells 1977: 270-271).

### **THE COMPLEX LANDSCAPE OF URBAN ACTIVISM**

The above catalog of post-transformation urban crises allows for initial identification of the complexity of the field of conflicting interests. Their cause was the ineffectiveness or – according to social opinion – an unacceptable trajectory of particular urban policy. Ryszard Grobelny, the long-time president of Poznań and a symbol of unilat-

eral transformation with a neoliberal bent, upon losing power after 16 years of office, quipped anecdotally during a subsequent interview about the urban social movements that contested his policies: “I created them myself” (Bojarski & Lipoński 2014). In a manner similar to Grobelny, the presidents of Łódź, Gdańsk or Warsaw also created their local “critics”. The result of the gradual appearance of more and more new conflicts, reactions and protests (Urbański 2002; Mergler 2008; Pobłocki & Mergler 2010) was the progressive crystallization of the wide spectrum of social forces that constituted the resistance against neoliberal urbanism, thus defining the field upon which “conflicts over the city” were conducted. Necessarily, various propositions to describe said field began to appear. Studies that eventually appeared on the topic defined the following actors:

(1) (neo)anarchist movements, which were also closely tied to squatter movements. Organisationally, they are comprised primarily of urban divisions of the Anarchist Federation (though not exclusively), among which the most active groups are those in Warsaw, Poznań, Kraków and the Tri-Cities; primarily limited to large urban centres;

(2) tenants’ movements. While these movements are a country-wide phenomenon in Poland, they tend to primarily operate in larger urban centres. However, they are also active – with various levels of success – in smaller cities. The most recognizable entities are Wielkopolskie Stowarzyszenie Lokatorów [Greater Poland Tenants’ Association], Warszawskie Stowarzyszenie Lokatorów [Warsaw Tenants’ Association] or the Warsaw-based Komitet Obrony Lokatorów [Tenant Defence Committee] (Polanska & Piotrowski 2015);

(3) workers’ movements, which at first glance are peripheral from the perspective of urban problems. They do openly define the question of labour as a crucial urban problem, directly tied to issues related to spatial order and the housing question (Urbański 2011b). They are often closely tied to (neo)anarchist and tenants’ movements;

(4) so-called petit-bourgeois movements, occasionally defined as new petite bourgeoisie movements (Kubicki 2011) or “middle-class urban movements” (Mayer 2000). Structurally and in terms of discourse, they are the strongest and equated by certain researchers with the entirety of the phenomenon of urban movements;

(5) local and grassroots initiatives. These are quite numerous but less institutionalized. They tend to most often emerge around auxiliary councils, schools, playgrounds and neighbourhood communities (Pokrzywa, Prokopczuk, & Tarkowska 2017);

(6) third-sector organizations active in the field of city policy and urban issues (Lewenstein, Gójska, & Zielińska 2020). They tend to be institutionalized and formalized. They are, at the same time, as diverse in their ideological backgrounds,

social base or even practices and operational strategies as the third sector itself. At one extreme are associations with a low level of institutionalization, while at the other, entities that are at significant risk of *quangoization* (Drozdowski 2011);

(7) activists operating as individual agents of change.

It should also be noted that political parties and local administrative bodies are also active in the field of urban problems (Pluciński 2014b; Kowalewski 2016). Aside from the normal responsibilities of political parties, particularly parliamentary ones as the “forces of authority” responsible for urban policies, the problem of “logics of interception”—sometimes realised by parties and local administrations in the field of urban conflicts—will be briefly addressed below.

They took the form of colonization through “programme borrowing”: attempts to appropriate the labels of urban movements<sup>2</sup> or open recruitment of notable activists into party ranks. Of course, this essentially pertains only to petit-bourgeois USMs. Two relatively young, left-leaning and progressive parties were particularly active in this area: Partia Zielonych [The Greens]<sup>3</sup> and Razem [Left Together]<sup>4</sup>. The latter is an intriguing case—initially clearly appealing to grassroots activism and the social movement tradition, with an emphasis on a horizontal organizational structure. Liberal parties were also “poaching” in the field of urban activism, parties such as Nowoczesna [Modern]<sup>5</sup> (which in 2015, during the 8<sup>th</sup> parliamentary term, brought two female MPs with previous ties to urban movements into the Polish Parliament) as well as Platforma Obywatelska [Civic Platform]<sup>6</sup>, who at the turn of 2014/2015 attempted unsuccessfully to court urban movements.

Beyond the parties themselves, local authorities also practiced “interception logic”, employing prominent activists in appropriate specialist departments dealing with urbanism, transport, and revitalisation. This occurred most often in Warsaw, Łódź, Poznań and Kraków, and is a complex issue. To reduce it to two mutually exclusive themes, it is worth considering that on one hand the capacity for the “neutralization” of activists as critics of local city policy through employment, and on the other, the

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<sup>2</sup> During a local election campaign in Lublin in 2018, there was a controversy concerning the use of the urban movement label by right-wing and liberal-conservative groups tied to the Kukiz “15 political movement and the “Wolność [Freedom]” party. This caused a conflict with activists previously operating under the name “Lubelski Ruch Miejski” [Lublin Urban Movement]; Cf. T. Maciuszczak, *Lublin: Kto jest ruchem miejskim, a kto nie* [Lublin: Who Constitutes an Urban Movement, and Who Does Not]. Retrieved May 10, 2020 (<https://www.dziennikwschodni.pl/wybory-2018/kto-jest-ruchem-miejskim-a-kto-nie,n,1000225571.html>).

<sup>3</sup> Partia Zieloni [The Greens] – a Polish political party with a progressive, pro-ecological platform, and an emphasis on social justice and sustainable progress.

<sup>4</sup> Lewica Razem (Razem) [Left Together] – a leftist political party with a social-democratic stance, close to that of democratic socialism.

<sup>5</sup> Nowoczesna [Modern] – a Polish centrist/liberal party, with a strong emphasis on free-market ideology.

<sup>6</sup> Platforma Obywatelska [Civic Platform] – a political party with a primarily liberal-conservative stance, with some consideration of Christian democratic values.



activists' own belief in working more effectively from inside the administration (this happened in Poznań, where an urban activist named Maciej Wudarski became the vice president of the city, whose responsibilities included overseeing transport between from 2014 to 2018).

### THE DISCUSSION AROUND THE ONTOLOGY OF URBAN MOVEMENTS

The proposal for a description of the field of urban conflicts outlined above, inclusive in its intent, was discussed by, among others: Anna Domaradzka (2018), Joanna Erbel (2014), Maciej Kowalewski (2013, 2016), Przemysław Pluciński (2014a; 2014b) and Marek Nowak (Pluciński & Nowak 2017), Kacper Pobłocki (2012), Tomasz Sowada and Jacek Kotus (2015, 2019), Joanna Grzechnik (2019), Grzegorz Piotrowski and Mats Lunsted (2016), Piotr Żuk (2018) and finally Barbara Lewenstein (2020). Though it is not the only viewpoint present in the discussion surrounding urban movements in Poland, other proposals have been of a restrictive nature.

Marta Żakowska, an activist and editor of “Miasto” [The City]—an important magazine to the fraction of petit-bourgeois USMs that are likely to work with local governments—outlined, in turn, five types of urban movements: redistributive, social (focused on helping to create local identities), civic (interested in participation and decentralization), ecological, and gender (Żakowska 2013: 17). This view, though adept in its reconstruction of a significant part of the urban activism space, marginalizes the importance of movements of neo-anarchist origin. Assuming that in the author's view, there is indeed space for neo-anarchist, squatters', and tenants' movements, they would in all probability constitute a fraction of redistributive movements, which is not an entirely accurate depiction of their identity.

Another activist, Lech Mergler, places neo-anarchist movements distinctly outside the sphere of USM, in writing that they are not: “an agreement between non-mainstream political movements, such as anarchists, feminists, alterglobalists, greens (...)” (Mergler 2014: 90); a perspective similar to that of other researchers: Karol Kurnicki (2014), Paweł Kubicki (2016a, 2016b), Joanna Kusiak and Wojciech Kacperski (2013), Jan Śpiewak (2015, 2016), Katarzyna Łuczak (2013, 2015), and also to some extent Tomasz Sowada nad Jacek Kotus (2015, 2019). There was also a lively discussion on the topic during a panel entitled “Social Self-organization in the City: Unity in Plurality?” at the last nationwide conference held by the Polish Sociology Association. Restrictive approaches, however, are nothing new here. These tendencies, which highlight petit-bourgeois actors primarily, could also be observed for many years in other countries (Lowe 1986).

This restrictive view was already contested two decades ago by Margit Mayer. Mayer wrote: “the current urban social movements are far more fragmented and play a more contradictory role, not just because there is little overlap or resonance between different and more distinct movements (...). At the same time, the incorporation of many of these groups into the established political process has created new problems of complex governance: the new forms of regulation, which increasingly involve tripartite negotiation frameworks, have to be broad and flexible enough to process the

complex antagonisms” (2000: 149-150). Others unequivocally identified tenants’ and squatters’ movements as right to the city movements (Ciszewski 2014; Polanska & Piotrowski 2015).

### TOWARDS THE MEETING OF WATERS

The urban crises discussed here and the multiplicity of actors on the urban scene overlap in part, with the tendency to develop a certain “functional differentiation”. It, therefore, leads to a “complexity reduction” of the field of urban activism. Consequently, we can identify two principal currents of RTTC activism: radical urban movements, and middle-class-based movements of the new petite bourgeoisie. That both types of movements can be labelled as urban movements is lent legitimacy by the fact that – as revealed by previous studies – both cite RTTC as their underlying ideology, even if each fills it with a different meaning. It can thus be assumed that both types of USMs are affected by the same global factors that generate “matters to attend to” in local and urban structures. The processes of the urbanization of capital and the pursuit of land rent whose beneficiary is global capital transforming cities into growth machines affected not only the most vulnerable but also undermined the prerogatives of the nascent post-transformation middle class. Nevertheless, the reaction of both currents to this “capitalist steamroller” were quite different.

These differences became apparent quite quickly; over a decade ago. They were expressly articulated during two crucial moments for each of the primary USM fractions: the nature of the so-called city theses, which each grouping presented, as well as the ideological confrontation that came to pass during the 1<sup>st</sup> Urban Movements Congress (hereinafter: UMC; Kongres Ruchów Miejskich)<sup>7</sup>. One of the main accepted reference points in the analysis of USMs in Poland are the so-called *Urban theses* [“Tezy miejskie”]: initially ratified as “9 Urban Theses” at the 1<sup>st</sup> UMC in Poznań in 2011, then expanded to “15 Urban Theses” in the course of deliberation at the 4<sup>th</sup> UMC in Gorzów Wielkopolski in 2015. Meanwhile, anarchist circles in Poznań prepared a prepared a political manifesto similar in nature as early as the beginning of 2010. This manifesto, entitled *Theses for the Development for the City of Poznań* [“Tezy dla kierunku rozwoju miasta Poznania”] tends to be omitted in analyses of urban movements, despite presenting the most complete picture of the contemporary tendency towards urbanising anarchism<sup>8</sup>. Though these anarchist theses at times tackle the same problems as those

<sup>7</sup> The UMC can be understood in two ways. In its primary understanding, it was the first congress of activists from the entire country, which took place in Poznań in June, 2011. Congresses, thus understood, have taken place five times since then. In its secondary understanding, the UMC is an organization of the most important urban movements in Poland, called into being after the first meeting in Poznań. In time, it was formalized into a country-wide association, still in the form of a network, but no longer ephemeral, and centred around the so-called ‘urban theses’.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting a significant difference here: as much as the UMCs’ urban theses were conceived from the start as a universalizing factor for the multiplicity of local experiences (intended to give a consistent frame of interpretation to the multitude of social organizations active in the cities and hitherto unaware of one another), the anarchist theses cited here were not utilized in such a manner. The opportunity presented by ideological programming was better used by new petit bourgeois USMs, and

from the UMC a year and a half later (Pobłocki 2014b; Pluciński 2020a), these are issues surrounding housing, labour, the city as an object of communal ownership or radical democracy that they place at the forefront (Baranowski 2011). Defining these as strictly *urban* issues, they are unequivocally cast as anti-capitalist. The UMS Urban Theses are, in this regard, decidedly reformist.

This exact tension was palpable during the 1<sup>st</sup> UMC in Poznań in 2011. Also present were delegates from anarchist movements, who were active in the proceedings, including the plenary session that closed the congress, during which the UMC Urban Theses were ratified (Pobłocki 2014b). Their reception of this event, however, was to be ambivalent at best. Ultimately, it led to discord between the new petit bourgeois and radical perspectives. This is very clearly seen in Jarosław Urbański's assessment, who ascertained that:

“I do not want to (...) say that the problems and conflicts around spatial issues or spatial planning are not important. That said, any abuses on these grounds are merely the consequence of the omnipotence of certain social groups, whose roots can be found in the structures of ownership in the city (and not in “bad law” which is merely a reflection of said structures). There was little discussion of ownership—especially private ownership—at the congress. The capitalist domination of urban space arises not only, and today not even primarily, from political relationships, but economic ones. We can observe how the interests of developers often infringe upon those of local communities at the level of real-estate development planning, yet it is with great difficulty that many admit that these same interests generate conflicts at the tenant or employee level” (Urbański 2011a).

The above diagnosis thus reinforces a genetic, materialistic reading of the RTTC concept, which—when confronted with an entirely different set of priorities on the part of the new petite bourgeoisie—resulted in what can be termed a centrist political/ideological framing of new petit-bourgeois movements.

A closer examination of the two primary types of USMs is presented below, alongside the following differentiation criteria: (1) interpretations of the idea of RTTC and the identification of key urban issues; (2) the social base; (3) organizational forms; (4) tactics.

**Radical urban movements** are movements with anarchist origins, socially-oriented, and strongly tied to tenants' and squatters' movements and initiatives through personal alliances, well as, to some extent, the labour question. It is important to note here their radicalism<sup>9</sup>, which should in no way be equated with revolutionary tendencies. Described elsewhere as “radical reformism” (Pluciński 2020a), this is the most accurate assessment thus far, considering that radical urban movements remain essentially non-violent. The appearance of movements that originated from anarchist

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neglected by representatives of radical movements. It is fraught with consequences, although a detailed analysis of the problem presented here requires its own treatment.

<sup>9</sup> This is important due to, for example, numerous backlash reactions to social movements—urban movements included— with a clear leftist and/or anarchist provenance.

is the result of clear urbanization of anarchism, a process set in motion primarily as a result of the progressive erosion of the alterglobalist movement<sup>10</sup>.

Adherents of radical UMCs accept the RTTC ideology as a frame for their activities, infusing it with materialistic sensibilities. At the same time, they remain true to Henri Lefebvre's goals, referring to its anti-capitalist elements and mechanisms of class organization against capitalist urbanization. An important element of this interpretation is the position taken on the issue of the first two crises identified in the article: a critique of the unilateral, exclusionary monologue of capitalist remodernization as such, as well as the placement of the issue of housing in the centre, thus arranging urban issues in a manner akin to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, with the right to housing and decent living conditions deemed the most important. Additionally, it is important to seek potential for decommodification (present, for example, in the slogan "a city is not a company") or the demands of "radical democracy"—itself as horizontally structured and participatory as possible.

The social base of radical USMs is narrow, and so they are not mass movements. The class/socio-economic aspect of the base is significant here—in spite of a lack of studies that would allow for precise categorization of USM participants and sympathizers along class lines, the consensus among researchers is that they can be considered poor people's movements (Mayer 2000; Pluciński 2020a). A real problem the movement must contend with is the "lack of widespread acceptance of anarchist practice and theory in society" (Sinewali 2009: 114). Relatively speaking, the most effective mobilization occurs around the issues of labour and tenancy, though even here there are caveats: though the anarchist movement is effective in animating labour and tenants' movements, it's difficult to speak of a reciprocal effect of anarchist activism working in the opposite direction. The anarchist movement thus plays an avant-garde role – raising awareness as an agent of change (Pluciński 2020a). A real problem for the base of radical movements is also a high degree of fluctuation in participants. The great majority of those active in the movement, aside from its intellectuals or opinion leaders, are short-term and issue-focused participants. They enter the movement primarily, sometimes even exclusively, in order to solve individual problems, only to leave the movement immediately after a resolution is achieved—be it positive, or negative. In this sense, these movements, especially those of tenants, become a kind of "registry office", which allows for the enabling of freeloading strategies.

The movement is structured in a horizontal manner, on the basis of voluntary participation and engagement. Furthermore, it is worth pointing out adopted formal and legal frames—particularly in the case of renters' and labour initiatives. Associationalism serves to strengthen the movements' ability to mobilize to some extent, though is itself treated as a tool. Consequently, these movements are much more closely aligned with the vision of radical democracy.

The movements are also no stranger to cognitive and autodidactic practices: discussion of existing literature, activist conferences, workshops and seminars or publishing

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<sup>10</sup> The historical presence of the urban perspective in Polish anarchism should also be pointed out (por. Pluciński 2016; Pluciński 2020a; Pluciński 2020c).

activity, permeated by academic and activist analyses, as well as the organization of grassroots research processes (Kostka & Czarnora 2017; Pluciński 2020b).

In spite of radical USMs' constant identification as protest movements, their ongoing pragmatization becomes increasingly clear. One author described this tendency as “constructive anarchism” (Głaz 2017). A “legalistic shift” can be observed, or a turn towards, as Habermas might say, systemic media of control such as law or expertise, which took place, for example, in the case of the struggles against an attempt to use containers as a form of social housing. New forms of social pressure are also being used, making use of online tools (mail bombs, for example) and new media, particularly social media and channels. Some of these actions were unorthodox; a trip through local poverty ghettos in February 2012 organized by neo-anarchists (Błoszyk 2012) or the Tri-Cities' “march of empty pots”<sup>11</sup> are two noteworthy examples. In spite of the fact the tactics employed by radical movements are becoming increasingly legalistic, direct actions, such as blockades of evictions, remain in use as secondary forms of protest in their repertoire.

**New petit-bourgeois urban movements** are movements whose social base is comprised of progressively-inclined factions of the middle class, as discussed by Claus Offe in his classic paper *New social movements: challenging the boundaries of institutional politics* (1985). These middle-class factions, as Offe pointed out, while forming social movements, do not always act in their own objective class interest, at times even acting in opposition.

The petit-bourgeois current of urban activism is comprised of a myriad of third sector organizations—ones both poorly institutionalized as well as those practically quangoized—informal movements, individual activists, grassroots initiatives, and single-issue movements. Their reading of RTTC ideology, however, assumes a deradicalized nature, transforming it into an overtly reformist political tool. Thus, selective civic engagement becomes viable that does not delegitimize—even in discourse—the capitalist foundations of social order. Some members of new petit bourgeois USMs openly distanced themselves from the Marxist origins of the RTTC idea, treating it—and here, in the interest of fairness, the context of the strength of discursive anti-communism in the post-transformational Polish public sphere must be pointed out—as heavy ballast.

RTTC in accordance with new petit-bourgeois values primarily deals with crises arising from commodification of space, suburbanization, the problem of transportation, and urban ecologies, as well as becoming an active part of the narration around urban identities. The RTTC idea thus became an ideological basis for all of these essential progressive struggles that ultimately revolved around quality of life: attempts at spatial order, the protection of green spaces, participatory budgets, or sustainable transport. In essence, all of these problems can be interpreted as anti-capitalist struggles, which new bourgeois USMs, however, avoid. In doing so, they transform the RTTC idea into an ideology of the progressively-inclined middle class (Czarnota 2014). The

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<sup>11</sup> March of empty pots [pol. Marsz pustych garnków] was a protest against sudden rent increases, during which the participants banged on empty pots as a metaphor for poverty.



socio-demographic profile of activists is a characteristic one, demonstrating fluidity over the last decade and slightly beyond (Kubicki 2016b). Initially, these were “older people, with an average age over 50—owners of small businesses, houses, apartments and apartment buildings, representatives of technical, trade and economic intelligentsia”, decidedly outside the “stereotype of the urban activist, generally thought to be ecologists, cyclists, rebellious young hipsters, etc.” (Mergler 2018). There was an inter- and in-class conflict of interest lurking here: between these representatives of the newly-created middle and upper classes who were the beneficiaries and stakeholders of global capital installed primarily in urban or suburban Poland, and representatives of the lower or so-called old middle class, in situations when “a large, commercial business entity defeated a small, personal, local one. Resistance was possible only by working together” (Mergler 2018). In time, the new petite bourgeoisie attracted activists roughly a generation younger, with a stronger emphasis on the presentation of public concerns in terms of the common good.

Neither did new petit bourgeois USMs become mass movements. The vision of urban democracy that they shared is decidedly closer to representational democracy—their representatives, after all, take part in local elections—than to radical democracy (Purcell 2008). They also accept much more commonly occurring types of organizations, in order to, among other things, be a party to administrative legal proceedings (Pobłocki & Mergler 2010). Some movements and initiatives also volunteer in the Kongres Ruchów Miejskich [Urban Movement Congress]—a relatively powerful, country-wide organization that functions as a federation—with which the entirety of the phenomenon of new petit bourgeois activism should not identify with.

Furthermore, it is the new petit bourgeois USMs which, among the social movements currently active in Poland, are the ones most profoundly professionalizing, with a particular emphasis on expertise and the cognitive aspects of their activism. For years, they have maintained dynamic institutional and personal relationships with academia. The ranks of urban activists comprise representatives of the humanities (sociologists, lawyers), as well as those of the technical professions (urban planners, architects, transport specialists), which activates learning processes *in their praxis* and often leads to the co-production of knowledge (Skórzyńska 2017; Pluciński 2020b).

These movements’ tactics are openly legalistic: their activities rely on knowledge and expertise, skilful use of their relationships with academia, the social processes of learning, participation in administrative proceedings concerning local spatial management plans, engagement in auxiliary councils, the “long march through institutions” through deliberately “entering the system” as public servants or through participation in city council elections (Pluciński 2014a), or, less often, political lobbying. It is paradoxical, though naturally only in part, that the urban space itself is used relatively rarely in this manner, serving most often as a backdrop for occasional single actions, such as happenings.

## CONCLUSIONS

The article presented the problem of internal differentiation within the field of urban

activism in contemporary Poland. It defined the crucial actors on the urban activism scene on the basis of a review of literature tackling the new urban question in Poland, and the overview of urban crises. Next, using Margit Mayer's intuitions, a synthesis was performed, and the two currents of urban activism defined: the radical and the new petit bourgeois.

As discussed in the article, the two currents have a different understanding of the RTTC ideology, filling its empty signifier with their own meanings. They constitute two distinct currents of urban activism, being at the same time – what is indicated by the title metaphor used in the article – as respectively the dark- and sandy-colored water of the Amazon River.

If both these currents of Polish USMs were to be considered answers to specific urban crises, these currents should not be considered in competition with one another. They are two different responses to the same process of neoliberalization of cities that rather transforms them into spaces for profit and not for the people. In other words: both types of USMs deal with different, related challenges. Though the factions examined here entered into conflicts with one another, they were also capable of forming *ad hoc* alliances. They can thus be seen not so much as rivals, but instead engaged in a unique activist and cognitive division of labour, where the stakes are a city organized as well as possible.

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