



Reprint of “The Wild West. The reality of everyday social relations in gated communities in Poland”[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The crucial objective of the paper is an analysis of the gated community phenomenon in the local context of the formation of the middle class in Poland, in order to understand how these estates function, not as physical objects, but rather as socio-cultural constructs. The paper uses the local framework to describe the social reality of Polish gated communities, employing critical discourse analysis and in-depth interviews with their residents. The author, in applying the “Wild West” metaphor – used by the inhabitants themselves – focuses on picturing the everyday reality, social landscape, and social relations within the gated communities studied.

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Introduction

The aim of this text is to concentrate on everyday relations in gated communities in Poland in the context of class formation. To do so I follow Atkinson and Blandy's definition of a gated community as a type of estate which is “walled, with limited public access and internal regulations” (2006). Such a broad definition focuses more on the type of the ownership and management of commonly owned semi-public spaces than on the structure of the estate and description of its security facilities. This is useful, because gated estates in Polish cities are structurally differentiated, consisting of detached, semi-detached, or – in the majority of cases – multifamily buildings offering basic leisure and security services (see also: Bodnar & Molnar, 2009: 793). I focus on social profiles, cultural and lifestyle choices, and preferences of their inhabitants to understand the gated community as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Focusing on the discourse on gated communities and the everyday life of their inhabitants, I hope to offer a deeper understanding of changes occurring first of all in the social, but also in the urban, landscape.

To understand the role of gated communities in forming the social landscape I adopt the relational approach, taken from the comparative study of guarded and fenced estates in Berlin and

Budapest. The relational approach, proposed by Bodnar and Molnar (2009), allowed me to avoid statements about globalization or Americanization (see: Photo 1), which frequently appear in the Polish media discourse in the context of the popularity of gating processes.¹

The gated community is a site that allows us to deal with the specific conditions of post-socialist reality in a more ethnographic manner. As Kathrin Hoeschelmann and Aliston Stenning write in the context of ethnography of post-socialist change, this kind of research can contribute to “reconceptualizations of taken-for-granted concepts such ‘the market’, ‘class’, or ‘civil society’” (Hoeschelmann & Stenning, 2008). All these terms are especially crucial in the context of post-socialist cities which face rapid commercialization and simultaneous processes of suburbanization and gentrification (Sýkora, 2005). Such processes lead to the development of new and “metropolitan class” (Jałowiecki, 2007), which can be relatively easy to observe, in comparison to the still-disputed existence of a middle class in Polish society (Domański, 2004).

In such urban conditions, the space is becoming not only a territory of consumption practices, but also an object of that consumption. It has a sufficient potential in order to convert everyday consumerism and normal objects into symbols of the contemporary urban taste. The purchased social status, thanks to a specific lifestyle or ostentatious consumption, is not limited just to decorate private spaces, but requires a determined performance played out in an appropriately public view.

Analyzing the impact of such estates on the changes in social structure brings the notion of milieu, or modernized milieu (Alheit,

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¹ In doing social and cultural research one must bear in mind that globalization does not necessarily mean homogenization and Americanization (Appadurai, 1996).



Photo 1. The entrance to Laguna Estate, Warsaw, Poland. Photo by Magdalena Staniszkis.

1999). This concept of milieu is especially useful in the transition from the traditional perception of the class society to a society based on different lifestyles and events (Schulze, 1992). It is the category that allows the operationalization of the cultural approach to the examination of class proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (Alheit, 1999; Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Mochmann & El-Menouar, 2005; Vester, 2005). The concept of milieu enables the definition of social classes not according to the indicators of employment or income, but according to similarities in the field of housing, patterns of behavior and tastes as factors differentiating one milieu from another.

To see how those changes in lifestyle and social status occur one must point to the everyday relations played out in public, and semi-public, view. Although one is conscious of the fact that the relations and lives are played out in space, only recently have theorists – with the exception of Mikhail Bakhtin, Henri Lefebvre (2005), and Michel de Certeau (1984) – focused on this particular sphere. Each of these three theoreticians attempted to plug the spatial void by calling attention to language, material practices, or everydayness as elements filling in the geometrically delineated reality. To understand the everydayness of gated estates means to look at such estates as places gathering residents of a similar social status, setting certain aesthetic standards and influencing tastes, but at the same time, as spaces actively limiting freedom of individual choices and decisions, sometimes even controlling people's behavior.

The aim of the paper is to reach the everyday dimension of gated communities, by using critical discourse analysis and, through in-depth-interviews, to see how social relations in the gated communities look, and to find the answer to the fundamental question: are Polish estates are merely “gated” or are they real “communities” (see Photo 2)?

Method

The paper is based on critical discourse analysis (CDA: Fairclough, 1989, 1995). Apart from a contextual definition of text, CDA's intertextual approach allows for the observation of not only discourse dynamics but also of the dynamics of social and cultural transformations in Poland (Duszak & Fairclough, 2008). Constructivist epistemology and the methods of discourse analysis have gained much recognition among the still-growing community of researchers dealing with urban affairs (Lees, 2004, 101; works of Bob Jessop and the members of the Language Ideology and Power Research Group at Lancaster University). Those approaches were also successfully applied to the analysis of gating, also in Poland

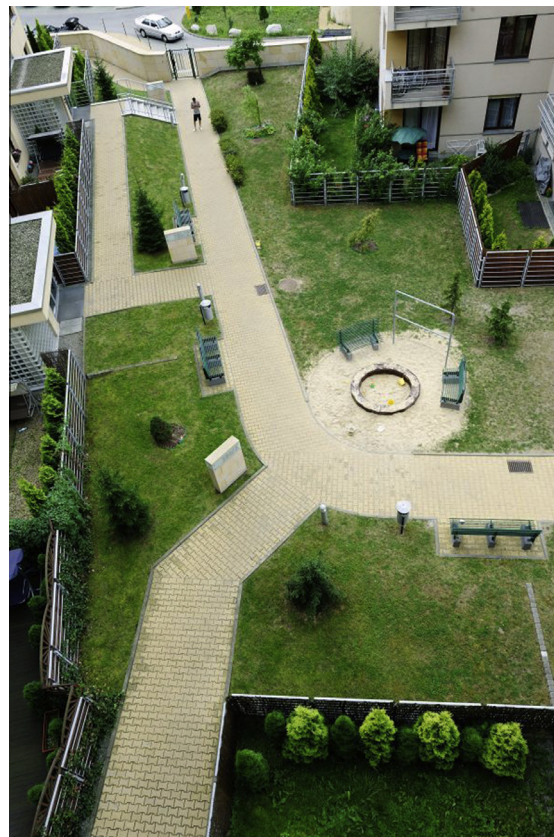


Photo 2. Semi public space at Europejskie Estate, Kraków, Poland. Photo by Jarosław Matla.

(based on Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse: Gąsior-Niemiec, Glasze, and Pütz (2009) or, as in my case, based on CDA: Polanska, 2010).

The analysis is based on 165 articles published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* over the past 12 years and a number of articles from the Polish weekly magazines *Wprost* and *Polityka*. Several reasons led to the decision to choose *Gazeta Wyborcza* as the main source of texts. *Gazeta Wyborcza* is the second-biggest Polish daily newspaper (with a daily circulation of 426,515 in December 2011) with as many as 21 local sections.²

Although I find CDA a powerful and useful method I must admit that, through analysis of press discourse (Gądecki, 2009), I was not able to fully penetrate the daily life of GC inhabitants. I suppose that many regional sections of *Gazeta Wyborcza* make it easier to look into the everyday life experience of the inhabitants of gated estates. However, the descriptions of relations in gated communities and the life of their residents within the period of analysis are not only limited, but also highly structuralised. If any activities or relations are described it is always only an illustration to back up a given statement of the sender. The process of framing, which is used to control and define the situation is quite evident, and it is used by critically oriented journalists. Negative opinions about gated estates manifest themselves not only through ironic and metaphorical use of language such as “golden cages” and “marble ghettos” but also through the selection of patterns, frameworks and scenarios used to describe the estates and their inhabitants.

² This fact made it possible to analyze gated and monitored communities in different local contexts, which was a crucial precondition for the research project. A body of 165 texts from the national newspaper is highly significant: the small number of articles on the topic over the years indicates a high level of social acceptance for the phenomenon of gated communities. In other words, the lack of public discourse is as relevant as its presence.

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