Modes of knowledge production in the study of radical urban movements

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Abstract

Research on radical social movements in the context of recent Central and Eastern European political realities has brought attention to different forms of resistance: in terms of their strategies, repertoires of action, and opportunity structures. However, the advancement of social movement research corresponded with a growing isolation of intellectual endeavors from social movement practices. Especially in its abstract development of theory the field began to produce work that was distant from, and often irrelevant to, the very struggle it purported to examine. In this article, we analyze the research methods employed by mainstream academics studying urban resistance in Poland. We show that the detachment and distance from the phenomenon under study contributes to the widening gap between theory and practice. We then argue for the development of engaged, activist research able to build on and learn from resistance movement's experience and knowledge. We maintain that a collaborative approach conscious of cognitive justice can not only bridge the gap between theory and praxis, but multiply the practices of resistance and push forward alternative visions of a just society. We present a case study of activist research, undertaken by a collective of independent sociologists and activists associated with the Greater Poland Tenants Association and the Anarchist Federation of the city of Poznań, to demonstrate how knowledge generation can serve as a tool for challenging systemic inequalities.

Keywords: activist research, cognitive justice, urban resistance, Poznan, movement-relevant research

Introduction

In the last 40 years research on social movements has brought substantial attention to the role of historical, cultural, and political factors that facilitate or hinder social mobilization. The scholarship of the 1960s has been instrumental in moving the analytical focus from collective behavior to the ways in which the emergence and evolution of movements relate to the opportunities, threats, and resources available for achieving rational goals. Rather than seeing movements as irrational or destructive forces, the new line of social research began to acknowledge their constitutive potency in shaping modern society. This seismic change in scholarship resulted in large measure from a close interaction between scholars and movement activists (Croteau 2005). As university campuses became a site of contestation, scholarship benefited directly from its

close association with activism, and presumably social movement efforts benefited from the participation of social movement students and scholars. Moreover, there was a newfound conviction that social inquiry should be driven not mainly by the need to test and refine theories, but by the human need to know and to act (Mills 1959).

Ironically, the advancement of social movement research and its firm establishment within the academy corresponded with a growing isolation of studious endeavors from social movement activity. A growing cadre of social movement scholars seemed to be driven more by an ambition to revise and synthesize existing paradigms than to engage in inductive, empirically grounded investigation of social realities. In its abstract development of theory, the field produced work that was not only distant from but often irrelevant to the very struggle it purported to examine (Flacks 2005). This is not to say that activists disregarded theory per se, rather they grew impatient with the obvious, general, remote, and vague statements that often paraded as social science theory (Bevington and Dixon 2005). Many engaged scholars, including Paulo Freire, critiqued the abstractness and sterility of intellectual work arguing that it failed to create unison between theory and praxis. Already in 1968, the radical caucus at the American Sociology Association questioned the usefulness of social movement analysis: in what way does the validation, elaboration, and refinement of concepts provide usable knowledge for those seeking social change? This question continues to be raised by activists and communities actively pursuing transformative social change.

Academic knowledge production, be it mainstream, critical, or interpretive is valued for the specific ways it is created – for instance, that it is *transparent* about the steps it has taken (to be "verifiable" and "duplicable") and that it preserves *a critical distance* to its subjects (even if it incorporates the meaning-making practices or categories that its subjects use, i.e. it is "objective"). These values remain important for a rigorous analysis. However critical commentators argue that the domination of a positivist paradigm in social sciences creates "artificial" boundaries between the researcher and the researched (Juris 2007). According to Loïc Wacquant, the positioning of a researcher as an outside observer entices him/her "to construct the world as a spectacle, as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically" (1992, 39). The inability (or reluctance) of a researcher to enter into the flow and rhythm of ongoing social interaction, hinders his/her ability to understand social practice and move beyond purely "hermeneutic representations" (Bourdieu 1977, 1). Moreover, reliance on deductive methodology tends to dismiss the knowledge produced by those seeking social change. This is particularly distressing given that contemporary social movements articulate, produce, and disseminate critical knowledge in a way that does not need intervention of external observers, experts, or intellectuals willing to represent, code, or organize their practices. In short, it appears that the practice of "normal science" conflicts with the moral dimension of social movements' goals.

This article explores the possibility to break out of academic and activist *ghettos* in order to produce practically engaged and collaborative research that could serve as a tool for generating social change. In the context of Polish radical urban movements[1] united under the slogan 'right to the city', we examine mainstream research approaches and juxtapose them to methodologies promoted by people involved in political struggle. The aim is to problematize the purposes and uses of academic knowledge in this context and to explore ways in which it can build on and learn from a movement's experiences. We argue that movement-relevant research (i.e. activist research, participatory action research) conscious of cognitive justice could not only bridge the gap between theory and praxis, but could also multiply the practices of resistance and push forward alternative visions of a just society. We conclude that the collaborative and relevant research is not simply about navigating between the fields of 'activism' and 'academy', but it is about transforming the relationship altogether and reimagining academy as a machine for 'translating' between different visions, languages, and concerns, and for building alternatives to the status quo.

The arguments presented in this article are a product of numerous self-reflective discussions we conducted over the past year. By comparing and challenging our different knowledge and experiences (that of a critical academic exploring theories and practices of injustice and inequality and of an activist involved in radical urban activism), we deconstructed prevailing methods of sociological inquiry and conceptualized ways in which activism and scholarship could reinforce one another. To illustrate our argument we outline activist research, undertaken by an informal collective of independent sociologists (graduates and students of sociology, pedagogy and art studies) and activists associated with the Greater Poland Tenants Association [Wielkopolskie Stowarzyszenie Lokatorów] and the Anarchist Federation of Poznań, aimed at producing knowledge which could be used to reshape the processes of urbanization. While we are not attempting to provide fixed answers or solutions, we do feel that there is an urgent need to open a discussion about current academic practices and their potential contribution to struggles for social change.

Mainstream approaches to the study of Polish radical urban movements

Collaborative approaches to knowledge production continue to be largely absent in mainstream scholarship on social movements in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). For the last 20 years, researchers have been constructing typologies of post-communist social movements and explaining why the levels of mobilization in CEE tend to be much lower than in other parts of the continent (Ekiert and Kubik 1999). The use of tools and metrics developed in the Western

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[1] In our understanding 'radical movement' refers to grassroots collective initiatives aimed at generating systemic change, rather than pursuing reformist claims.

context results in somewhat misleading and outdated interpretations when applied to a post-socialist society (Polanska and Martinez 2016, 31). In fact, the concept of a "weak civil society" continues to dominate the analysis of mobilization and contestation in CEE (Howard 2003; Petrova and Tarrow 2007; Ekiert and Foa 2011), even as mass protests unravel across the region. Spaces of mutual meaning-making are absent and there is little motivation to generate plural and democratic knowledge on issues that concern and mobilize communities.

While a burgeoning scholarship on radical urban movements pays more attention to the plurality of knowledge embedded in these movements, it still fails to identify grassroots ethical-political convictions and allow them to drive (even partially) the formulation of research objectives. The prevailing focus on standardized theoretical frameworks such as, alliance formation, resource mobilization, or political opportunity structures (see Polanska and Piotrowski 2015; Piotrowski 2011; Piotrowski 2014; Polanska 2015; Staniewicz 2011; Żuk 2001; Audycka-Zanberg 2014; Gajewska 2015) produces movement representations that plays into external framing and coding. It appears that scholars position themselves as theorists whose roles are limited to using movements as objects of observation, or as a case to test hypotheses. Thus, the researcher acts as external observant who accesses the movement, grabs its knowledge and leaves the scene without any substantial contribution (Graeber 2009).

The extraction of a movement's knowledge for cloistered academic debates is facilitated by data collection methods and dissemination strategies. Most scholars interested in social movements (whether politically involved or not) come from fields of sociology and anthropology[2]. Hitherto, the underuse of participatory action methods that warrant a researcher's participation in political struggle is rather striking. The inquiries into radical social movements are predominately based on semi-structured interviews and short-term participatory observations (often conducted during formal conferences). According to politically involved collectives (i.e. Rozbrat) the researchers are rarely open to communal discussions about the purpose of their research, and often impose pre-formulated and even 'ill-designed' questions[3]. The subsequent use/sharing of data collected from the sites is rarely disseminated beyond the

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[2] It is rather surprising that other fields including political science and economy, at least in the Polish context, provide limited analytical input to the research on mass mobilization and contestation.

[3] Qualitative method is part of a rigorous scientific inquiry, and in itself is not necessarily contested by radical collectives. The issue stems more from its inadequate use, which relates to a broader concern with the quality of the Polish academia, i.e. access to experienced academic supervision, meticulous ethics review processes, peer-group learning, independent study and reflexivity.

scientific journal articles and/or conference presentations[4]. It appears that the main goal of such research is career advancement and scholarly validation. Sometimes scientific jargon (and dominance of the English language) makes the research inaccessible even to those who contributed their knowledge, time, and experience to its creation. Not surprisingly, activists consider these modes of knowledge production invasive and voyeuristic, prone to misrepresentation of resistance perspectives, and unconcerned about the aims of political struggle. In line with Certeau's (1984) arguments, they regard the research on social struggle as a means for professional progression and academic prestige that (even if unintentionally) cements societal inequalities and threatens the very aims of radical struggle.

Another problematic aspect of research on radical urban movements is that it places excessive emphasis on the identity building process. The effect is often a distortion of radical urban sites (i.e. squats) and those associated with them. Squatters tend to be presented as a fervent "urban tribe" (with the specific dress code, discourse and original customs) or a subcultural and "hard to reach group". The inquiry is one-sided and undialectical; it makes identities and their equality with other groups (movements) the basis of political activity. As such, identity becomes the main (and often the only) explanatory variable used to expound mobilization, contestation, and alliance formation. Once set, identity becomes a trap from which no one escapes. Thus the movement's activities are mapped solely against predesigned and rigid identity templates rather than wider political processes. In effect differences among various groups are exaggerated while solidarity among oppressed, disenfranchised and contesting individuals is under conceptualized.

The domination of an identity perspective in literature on Polish radical movements is further reflected in the residual attention to wider economic inequalities and practices of capitalism. This trend goes beyond the Polish context and could be attributed to the "cultural turn" in academia. Goodwin and Hetland (2013) in their work "The Strange Disappearance of Capitalism from Social Movement Studies", demonstrate that recent scholarship on social movements tends to focus on short-term shifts in cultural framing, social networks, and especially political opportunities; rarely examining such shifts against macroeconomic conditions. As a result, focus on redistributive justice, class struggle, and politicization of public goods is substantially if not wholly detached from the dynamic structures and practices of (neo)capitalism. This detachment however seems even more exaggerated in Polish sociological scholarship, which seems strongly embedded in the neoliberalist paradigm. Political collectives maintain that academics have an individualistic understanding of social problems facing the impoverished, dispossessed, and disenfranchised citizens. Their reluctance to engage in systemic analysis of socio-economic forces affects the very formulation of research questions. As a

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[4] The expectation to 'publish or perish' creates significant challenges for activist-academic collaboration, particularly as universities increasingly value refereed publications in prestigious international journals.

result, there are few comprehensive studies that problematize accepted political and economic models, and their long-term effect on those who 'do not fit the accepted norms'[5]. Rarely do scholars venture beyond the sanctity of property rights and/or challenge monetarist doctrines and governance practices.

By dismissing the lived-experience perspectives, the existing research does not only fail to grasp the concrete logic and essence of urban resistance but also neglects to address the scale and scope of ongoing contestations. This is particularly visible in the conceptualization of squatting as an ideologically charged activity as opposed to the need for shelter, which is the primary (and often the only) motivation to squat. More importantly, the analyses of urban social movments gloss over the ongoing curtailment of social and political rights, not just for traditionally disadvantaged and marginalized groups, but also as Mayer (2012) observes:

> for comparatively privileged urban residents, whose notion of the good urban life is not realized by increasing privatization of public space, in the 'upgrading' of their neighbourhoods or the subjection of their everyday lives to the intensifying interurban competition (pg. 63).

By silencing these issues social movement scholars once again run the risk of presenting urban contestation as a disruptive (irrational) force that *unnecessarily* defies the status quo, which they assert functions according to democratic principles.

Overall, the methodological and moral principles underlying Polish scholarship on radical urban movements preclude an in-depth understanding of the mentalities, objectives, and techniques of urban resistance and, perhaps more importantly, fail to analyse political norms and hidden power asymmetries. This brings us back to the initial question – who is the beneficiary of research on social movements?

Alternative research methodologies and their 'transformative potential'

In this light, the current analysis of radical mobilization in Poland seems abstract, diffused, and weak in highlighting systemic inequalities. As the authors gain scholarly recognition in international journals, their work remains either unknown in the circles of Polish radical activists or considered of little value (both in practical and analytical terms). While a gap between academia and

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[5] The absence is also driven by a shrinking number of independent grants that breeds conflicts of interests and pushes scientists to engage in commissioned work. Short-term, overly-bureaucratized grant schemes are not conductive to ethnographic participatory research schemes, which build on perspectives of 'disenfranchised' groups. More importantly research funds provided by the state come with carefully outlined research goals that are of interest to policy-makers rather than communities.

activism at times seems irreconcilable, due to conflicting interests, epistemological orthodoxy and privileging of certain types of data, we argue that rigorous, collaborative and movement-relevant research is indeed possible and should be applied. Several authors, including Bevington and Dixon (2005), Croteau, Haynes and Ryan (2005), Flacks (2005), Dadusc (2014), and Choudry and Kapoor (2010) have highlighted the importance of engaging with knowledge produced by, and internal debates within, social movements and activist networks in order to more fully understand the collective dynamics. Others, including Juris (2007), Colectivo Situaciones (2003), Russell (2015), insist that research must problematize hierarchical relationship between academia and activism and connect with the deepest dilemmas that movement organizers have to deal with. Thus, it is plausible that *activist research* is indeed able to build on movements knowledge, problematize structural power, and serve as an emancipatory tool. However, to bolster the quality and relevance of produced work such research must challenge the very function of the university and strive to reimagine it as a machine for the production of *other* worlds.

Various faces of activist research

Critically engaged sociologists remind us that activists actively analyse and theorise, and do not shy away from exploiting the existing body of work towards their own aims. As noted by Juris (2007) the movements currently gathering under the claim for the 'right to the city' have been uniquely self-reflective, as activists produce and distribute their own analyses and reflections through global communication networks. The activist research breaks down the divide between participant and observer and aims to carry out theoretical and practical work in collaboration with and full engagement of *subaltern* knowledges. It is committed to the significant knowledge people have about their lives and experiences and a belief that those most intimately impacted by research should take the lead in shaping research questions, framing interpretations, and designing meaningful actions (Pain 2004). Such engagement could lead to emancipation and empowerment of communities whose interests, ideas, and narratives have been silenced or pushed out of mainstream political, social, and economic spheres.

The move away from didactic approaches to knowledge production is attributed to critical adult educators from Latin America, Asia, and Africa (see Kindon et al., 2007) who developed and popularized Participatory Action Research (PAR). They focused their attention on how social science research could be used to "move people and their daily lived experiences of struggle and survival from the margins of epistemology to the centre" (Hall 1992, 15-16). There are multiple paradigms and tools subsumed under the term PAR (see Jordan 2003), but the common particularity lies in the shifting role and definition of the researcher, who becomes a facilitator, rather than an expert, and the research process that strives towards the emancipation of silenced voices. The task of PAR practitioners is to let the researched participate in the definition of the research

focus, by asking research questions and deciding on research objectives. As noted by Dadusc (2014, 52) the entire process prompts "a bottom-up discovery of local, situated knowledges with methods based on inclusion rather than extraction, on participation rather than appropriation". This has primarily been achieved through the inclusion of disenfranchised groups within the key decision-making procedures of the research process and their ownership of its outcomes (see Boston *et al.*, 1997). Prefiguring post-positivist critiques, PAR acknowledged that research is an inherently political process that is embedded in the "relations of ruling" (Smith 1990). Consequently, the notion that social research can be value-free, objective, or scientific is viewed as an ideological position that expresses prevailing power relations within capitalism (Jordan 2003).

While PAR has become an influential methodology of the marginal, promoting the interests of the poor and disenfranchised, with time it lost its militant edge (Jordan 2003; Fals-Borda 2006). Institutional mainstreaming of bottom-up approaches in the 1990s made PAR attractive to organizations such as the World Bank, eager to undertake development projects that were more locally appropriate. Yet rather than emancipating the marginalized so they could change their structural conditioning, research was done mostly 'on' (rather than with) the marginalised "to provide policy-makers with information about poor people's perspectives on poverty" (Brock 2002, 1). Vincent (2012) has shown how this idea of participation is often used by those external to the communities, to construct collectives that undermine histories of struggle. Similar tactics are used by scholars engaged in research on Polish social movements[6], resulting in picture of 'weak' and excessively fragmented mobilization.

Not surprisingly, radical urban movements have become skeptical about the emancipatory potency of PAR and its capacity to advance movement-relevant knowledge. The critics have argued that it is not enough to merely amend methodological approaches. Rather, for research to become meaningful to and reflective of the struggle, it should push the boundaries of academy from within. In other words, social movement researchers should use the academy as a site of struggle to challenge academic prescriptions that make the academy inaccessible to those on the outside. A growing number of activist researchers including those involved in militant ethnography prioritize research that values embodied experience and reflexive accounts (see Colectivo Situaciones 2003). They are concerned with the capacity for struggles to read themselves and consequently, to recapture and disseminate the advances and productions of other social practices. As such, they embrace research in which the academic component is often irrelevant precisely because it does not take the university as a referent (Russell 2015).

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[6] As stated in the first section of this paper, the analysis of social movements is fully disconnected from the lived experiences of people – both under neoliberal policies and under state-run socialism.

Movement relevant research and cognitive justice

Activist research speaks directly to whose knowledge counts and how this knowledge is used, bringing forward the concept of "cognitive justice" coined by Indian intellectual Shiv Visvanathan. Cognitive justice asserts the diversity of knowledges and the equality of knowers. While attempts to do justice to other ways of knowing has been strongly criticised for promoting "anything goes" relativism and the inclusion of pseudo-science in the canon of "Science", Visvanathan (1998) maintained that cognitive justice is not a justification for abandoning critical inquiry but a call for a democratic, pluralist understanding of science. According to his conceptualization:

- All forms of knowledge are valid and should co-exist in a dialogic relationship to each other.

- Cognitive justice implies the strengthening of the "voice" of the defeated and marginalised.

- Traditional knowledges and technologies should not be "museumized".

- Every citizen is a scientist. Each layperson is an expert.

- Science should help the common man/woman.

- All competing sciences should be brought together into a positive heuristic for dialogue. [7]

Cognitive justice resonates with scholars who recognize that all knowledge is positioned. Haraway (1988) has argued that *all* researchers always speak from a particular location in the power structures and do not escape the class, sexual, gender, spiritual, linguistic, geographical and racial hierarchies of the 'modern/colonial/capitalist/patriarchal world system'. In this understanding, the role and the standpoint of the researcher shape and affect the knowledge that is produced. Consequently, the notion that social research can be value-free, objective, or scientific is viewed as an ideological position that expresses prevailing power relations within the status quo. To understand the relations of power, it is important to use the gaze of practices of resistance that question and subvert the very relations of power one is analysing.

The negation of objectivity and adherence to cognitive justice attracted critique from various academic fields, including those championing critical outlooks on knowledge and development. Activist research has often been dismissed as 'political' or even as mere propaganda that opens up science to all form of abuses. These arguments have been effectively challenged by post-colonial, feminist, and critical race scholars, however, the tensions remain. Speed (2004)

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[7] He recognises the risks of this project, for example in terms of its appeal to fundamentalisms, but argues that Science contains its own grammar of violence that needs to be addressed.

acknowledges that tensions do exist between political-ethical commitment and critical analysis of universalism, relativism, or particularism. Yet, she also points out that these tensions are present in all kinds of research. Hale (2001, 14) in turn writes that these tensions can be resolved by activist research that makes politics explicit and up-front, and reflects honestly and systematically on how they have shaped researchers understanding of the problem at hand. He also reassures that activist research contains a built-in inoculation against the excesses of radical relativism and nihilistic deconstruction (where all knowledge claims are reducible to underlying power moves). It comes with well-developed methodological cannon that can guide production of the best possible understanding of the problem at hand, can distinguish between better and less good explanations and communicate the result in a clear, transparent and useful manner.

What we can infer from these debates is the assertion that the voices of those involved in the struggles are distinct from the social science literature that seeks to study and explain such struggles (Routledge 1996). Yet, we agree with militant researchers (Russell 2015, 227) that the problem lies not in maintaining and negotiating this distinction, but in ensuring one is conducting research as a subject orientated through struggle, rather than as an 'academic' producing disembodied – 'dead' – information about movements. This requires academics to self-reflect and as argued by (Holloway 2010) exploit the few remaining 'cracks' in the institutionalized academia in order to contribute to antagonistic social change. While this might be a difficult task given the ongoing neoliberal assault on independent research institutions (see Harvie and De Angelis 2009), universities must support the non-experts in knowledge production and continuously address the power effects of different modes of knowing.

The next section of this paper reflects on the activist research project undertaken by an independent collective in the city of Poznań. We present the efforts undertaken to unveil the housing crisis in the city and use the collected knowledge as a tool for progressing the movement's demands. We outline the entire research process, focusing on its collaborative dimension and political aims. We critically analyse its contribution to social change (as perceived by those involved) and the challenges encountered along the way.

Filling the gap: unveiling the housing crisis in Poznan

The 2011 marked the formation of a new alliance between the Anarchist Federation associated with the squat Rozbrat and tenants mobilized under the Greater Poland Tenants' Association. The alliance emerged as a response to the neoliberal urban development characterized by massive privatization of social housing, housing foreclosures, growing numbers of illegal resettlements financed by the banks, and de facto erosion of social/housing rights. The leading aim was to publicize the scale and scope of these infringements, which remained absent from public discourse. While the alliance possessed necessary skills in terms of campaign organization, media contacts, and demonstration, its

members felt that stronger resistance tools were needed to progress the demands. An agreement emerged that in order to effectively contest urban development policies, one must define, map, and analyse the scale of social conflict from a bottom-up perspective. It was recognized that the existing data on housing has been compiled by economic elites who extoll economic growth and private gain at the expense of equity and broader social development. In effect, the analysis of escalating inequalities and disenfranchisement in Polish urban spaces was largely absent.

Census data and research undertaken by international organizations have shown that approximately 15% of the population lives in poverty housing, defined in terms of substandard and unsafe living conditions (e.g. no bathrooms and toilets, no central heating, exposure to asbestos and mould), and 44.8% of Poles are living in overcrowded conditions with the EU average standing at 17% (Habitat for Humanity 2015). Compared to the EU average (5.2%) the severe housing deprivation rate stands at 10.1% (Housing Europe 2015). Poland also ranks in the bottom third of the OECD countries in terms of housing conditions for children (average rooms per child and children in homes that lack basic facilities). In 2012 there was a shortage of 1.5 million dwellings (NIK 2012), a direct effect of aggressive privatization of public housing stock and limited construction of affordable housing. According to the Central Statistical Office, no social housing was provided in Poznań in 2010-2013, and the completed municipal dwellings amounted to 0.7-7.6% of the total housing production in the same years (CSO 2014). As evidenced in Poznań's public housing registry, close to 2000 persons await social housing, while the waiting period can reach up to 10 years. At the same time, the number of evictions and foreclosures has been on the rise. The Greater Poland Tenants Association estimated that in 2011 close to 140 families have been evicted from publicly owned housing and in 2013 the number reached 183 (in previous years the number rarely exceeded 50).

While the housing shortage appears to be well documented, its deeper causes and effects continue to be obscured as few (if any) universities conduct comprehensive analysis of the legal provisions, costs of development strategies, and, most importantly, the experiences of those affected (tenants, urban squatters, evicted or homeless persons[8]). There are also no reliable situational reports or policy documents critically evaluating housing policies in Poznań, one of the largest cities in Poland with a population of 0.7 million. This lack has allowed politicians and administrators to belittle or even deny the precarious living conditions of a growing number of Poznań's citizens. Instead, inability to secure quality housing has been strongly linked to embedded benefit dependency and pathology. Individualization of housing problems has legitimized further budgetary cuts, evictions, and forced re-location of "lazy

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[8] It is important to mention that one of the most prestigious Polish sociological journals, the *Review of Qualitative Sociology* [*Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej*] has not published a single research article concerning tenant issues or decreasing social housing stock, since its initiation in 2005.

tenants who abuse alcohol, devastate their living spaces, and deliberately do not pay rent" (Kopiński 2016).

What also remains unproblematized in the context of Poznań (but also in other Polish cities and towns) is a growing number of 'vacant abodes'[9]. While the Public Housing Management Agency accounts for approximately 800 empty publicly owned flats, there is no record of unoccupied buildings with an 'unclear' ownership status, or privately owned flats (often entire buildings) acquired for speculative purposes. There is also no register of publicly owned, non-functional buildings, i.e. old hospitals, military barracks, or police stations, which many believe could be converted into residential spaces. This dearth of data is especially distressing given that a growing number of families have found themselves residing in hazardous conditions - summer cabins located on allotment gardens, abandoned barracks on the city's outskirts, or flats in tenant housing earmarked for demolition[10]. While the authorities insist that these 'wild tenants' are an exception, mounting anecdotal accounts prove otherwise. Over the last decade, numerous self-help informal networks have sprung across Polish cities keeping people well-informed about the location of vacant/abandoned living spaces and passing on information to those in dire situations. However, these new forms of resistance to dispossession were not identified or addressed by academics working on urban development. The daily struggle for housing was also absent from research on the so-called New Urban Movements, which focused predominately on NGOs and charities involved in human rights issues and neighbourhood development programs[11].

Given this immense knowledge gap the members of the alliance decided to design and implement research that would generate compelling analyses of the empty abodes in the boroughs of Poznań. Compiling data and exposing it to rigorous analysis was seen as an imperative tool for raising awareness about the scale of the problems and politicizing ongoing gentrification processes. The alliance also wanted to acquire reliable material which could be used to pressure the authorities into meeting the real housing needs of the dispossessed tenants.

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[9] Vacant abodes [pustostany] are potentially liveable spaces (flats, houses, lofts, factories, etc.) which stand empty as a result of bureaucratic mismanagement and intensification of speculative strategies.

[10] In Poznan close to 4000 people illegally reside in allotment gardens due to poverty and lack of means to access proper accommodation. See

 http://poznan.wyborcza.pl/poznan/1,36037,19549822,ogrodki-dzialkowe-koniec-z-mieszkaniem-na-dzialkach.html

[11] In general, the New Urban Movements and affiliated NGOs are not concerned with problems that affect the most disenfranchised residents. Issues promoted by these activists adhere to urban esthetics (i.e. garbage collection, gardening), security issues, and access to citizen friendly services (i.e. bike trails, organic food shops, artistic happenings). In the view of evicted tenants all these issues are aimed at well-off citizens and in fact lead to accelerated dispossession of the poor.

Turning towards activist research

From the very beginning, there was a consensus that the research should be driven by political aims and guided by knowledge accumulated among those involved in the struggle. Driven by a critical approach the research strived to problematize the neoliberal paradigm and theorize possible alternatives to individualization, marketization, and economic development. At that stage, the cooperation with critically minded scholars willing to reach out and join the local struggle was welcomed since the force of numbers was considered a prerequisite for systemic change. The emancipatory power of resistance lies also in its diversity - academics can raise awareness about social issues among the middle class, while activists and local communities can expose hidden struggles which affect those silenced by the system.

However, cooperation with academia proved difficult from the very start. Researchers who visited Rozbrat and sites of evictions were predominately interested in causal enquiry embedded in a positivist research design. They arrived with pre-formulated questions and hypotheses, at best hoping to interest squatters with their assumptions and "hinges". They opposed any redefinition of their questions and tended to abandon their endeavour as soon as their modes were challenged by the squatters[12]. It seemed that those affiliated with local universities were reluctant to cede control over research design and engage in collective decision making about the aims, principles, and practices used to conduct social research. Those scholars who did show interest in a participatory endeavour were constrained by rigid grant rules, the epistemological regimes of their departments, and a lack of collegial support. It became clear that in the Polish context most of the academic endowers constitute an extension of the capitalist system. As such, partnership between those arguing against capitalist modes and those immersed in them proved antagonistic. Activists feared that opening up to academia could result in the co-optation of research goals and subjugation of the struggle. On their end the academics lacked reflection on the power exercised by their modes of knowledge production and theoretical perspectives on social movements.

The reluctance to engage in institutionalized research prompted the alliance to form an independent collective of sociologists (no longer affiliated with academic institutions but with post-graduate training in sociology, pedagogy and art studies) and activists associated with the Anarchist Federation and the Greater Poland Tenants Association. Independent of grant schemes and departmental orthodoxies, the collective proceeded to design research that drew on the practices of resistance and valued the embodied experience and reflexive accounts. The concept of cognitive justice was built into the project in an effort to fully incorporate not only the voice but also the knowledge of those most

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[12] It was very common for researchers to contend that squatting sites are 'difficult to reach', 'closed off', 'hostile', however very few researchers have treated squatters as equal partners, or reflected on the ethical dimension of their inquiry. While Rozbrat opened its door to various individuals, it resisted those who 'poke around' and were determined to extract knowledge for the sake of research that contributed little to Rozbrat's activities and aims.

affected by neoliberal housing policies (i.e. evicted tenants, those living in precarious conditions). Engaging with activist research methodology, the investigation was based on collective, inductive processes of knowledge generation, open to re-direction and reformulation of research questions. Like the research conducted by Routledge (2008, 2009) and Juris (2007, 2008), this resulted in attendance and participation in local organisational gatherings, coordinating workshops, facilitating information sessions, discussions on e-lists, coordinating publicity, distributing literature, participating and speaking at protests, and so on. In other words, the participation was wholly contingent on the nature of the specific political milieu within which the collective was a constitutive participant.

Investigation and findings

The collaboration and process of data collection was inspired by methodology developed by Right to the City-NYC Alliance[13]. Over a period of six months the collective canvassed census tracts in six strategically selected boroughs to identify vacant sites. The vacant spaces were categorized by location, date of construction, ownership status, size, technical conditions, and capacity to house tenants. All forms of ownership (i.e. private, public, unsettled) and types (i.e. barracks, hospitals, military garrison etc.) were taken into consideration. The researchers covered the areas in search of empty units, at times conducting informal interviews with the residents for verification and identification of other sites through a snow-balling technique. The identified spaces were catalogued and photographed, adhering to a strict policy of confidentiality[14]. The vacancies belonging to the city were the easiest to identify, since each vacant space is monitored by a private security firm, and the windows are marked with their logo. Once the canvassing was completed the researchers triangulated the findings with data from the National Statistical Office and available policy documents. Following this process, the findings were collectively analysed and discussed.

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[13] In 2009, the Alliance (of grassroots activists, critical academics and low income residence) launched a citywide participatory research project to locate and record information about vacant residential buildings in the communities where the members lived. By walking the streets in targeted low-income neighbourhoods, RTTC-NYC has been able to identify thousands of units of vacant housing that have not been accounted for by the city, the media, or any other means. The findings were incorporated into Policy Platform and used to outline the principles and policy recommendations most important to the low-income residents. From a list of 33 demands included in the platform, RTTC-NYC prioritized a campaign to convert vacant residential buildings into low-income housing.

See

http://righttothecity.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/02/People_Without_Homes_and_Homes_Without_People-1.pdf

[14] Collected data was secured, addresses kept confidential, and all efforts were made to prevent collected data and information from reaching the wrong hands.

The research confirmed that there were in fact numerous vacant units suitable for occupancy held empty either for speculative purposes or as a result of ineffective public management. The collective estimated that in Poznań alone there are between 15 and 30 thousand vacant abodes. These estimates clashed dramatically with data provided by the authorities. The discrepancy confirmed that the issue concerning the availability of housing has been severely distorted by public officials who insist that the city has "no money and no space" to meet the housing needs of low-income citizens. The research thus became a strong argument for challenging these claims and delegitimizing urban development strategies based on evictions, rigorous entitlement criteria, and privatization of social housing. Perhaps more importantly the movement was now in possession of tools for opening up the public debate about the negative impacts of economic development policies, such as the proliferation of luxury housing development in low-income neighbourhoods.

Dissemination and exploitation

Throughout the research process there were many collective discussions concerning the final usage of accumulated data - when and where the data should be publicized, who should become its main audience and through what channels. In the end, the findings were incorporated in the campaign "Recovering 30 Thousand Vacant Living Spaces" to facilitate wider dissemination. The results became an integrated part of the campaign's material, which aimed to raise awareness about urban policies that measure success not by the quality of life or social protection they provide for citizens, but by accumulated profit. Information on vacant abodes and housing policies appeared on billboards erected in the city centre, and on fliers distributed across the most impoverished districts of Poznań[15]. The findings were also distributed during demonstrations in support of the squat Odzysk[16] where activists demanded decriminalization of squatting and called for the opening of vacant housing to those in need. Subsequently, the findings were regularly featured and discussed during local protests, eviction blockades, community meetings and citizen debates. They were written up in an easily accessible manner supported by audio-visual material, and made available in social centres and community halls across Poland.

Although the impact of the research is difficult to measure and one cannot talk about definite success, certain positive developments can be identified. Firstly, as envisioned the research became an imperative tool during negotiation with the authorities. For the first time the Poznań's authorities have found it difficult

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[15] See http://www.rozbrat.org/dokumenty/lokalizm/4101-odzyskujemy-30000-pustostanow

[16] Odzysk, refers to a squat functioning in Poznań between 2013 and 2015. In 2013, the Anarchist Federation occupied an abandoned tenement building located in the city center. The building stood empty for several years reflecting a lack of housing policy in Poznań. The Anarchists converted the building into a socio-political center. In 2015, the building was taken over by a new owner. However, the building remains empty.

to rationalize and legitimize ongoing harassment of tenants and curtailment of housing rights.[17] Secondly, the research prompted timely and needed public debate about the dwindling quality of public housing, dubious legality of forced eviction, and mismanagement of public housing stocks by the authorities. The reframing of the housing issue in terms of rights not privilege has been picked up by the media resulting in a surge of critical stories and editorials concerning evictions, housing budgets, and housing rights. As a result, there seems to be a turn in public opinion which is now more supportive of evicted tenants and families and more critical of the state's action. Finally, the discourse on squatting is slowly becoming more sensitive to its structural dimension, recognizing precarious living conditions as an effect of neoliberal policies rather than personal choice or subcultural trend.

Concluding remarks

The lack of balanced cooperation between academia and activism, and the ongoing depreciation of activist knowledge and modes of learning, constitute a major barrier in closing the gap between theory and practice. The differences in empirical approaches, interests, and aims often prove too difficult to overcome, eventually leading to a falling out with the academic cadre. Yet it does not have to remain so. Those involved in the urban struggle are aware that wide coalitions among academics, activists, artists etc. have the potential to unify a multiplicity of urban demands under one common banner. The strength in numbers and solidarity among diverse groups and opinions can effectively challenge the neoliberal paradigm so strongly embedded in the Polish politics. We showed that various scholars and activists alike successfully demonstrated that rigorously designed, collaborative activist research can not only challenge or undermine the prevailing neoliberal thesis but can also serve as a mobilization tool and awareness raising mechanism. Rather than dismissing activist research as an ideologically biased exercise, it could serve as a means to expand our understanding of on-the-ground complexities, and give a real voice to those who have been silenced by the prevailing norms.

Despite the present inability to consolidate collaboration between academia and political activism in Poland, we are not contending that such a relationship is impossible. As activists become more proficient in using sophisticated research methods for gathering data and analysing ongoing struggle, academic circles are becoming more open to inventiveness and impact-driven research. Although in the Polish context researchers continue to be constrained by departmental orthodoxies and ongoing commercialization of universities, the spaces for

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[17] Although the authorities are reluctant to admit that current housing policies reinforce social injustice and have disenfranchised a large part of the population, they are no longer able to rely on an old argument: lack of housing stock. By now the findings are always brought to the discussion table during city council meetings and urban planning sessions.

http://www.radiomerkury.pl/informacje/pozostale/rozmawiali-o-pustych-mieszkaniach.html

critical inquiry are now more accessible[18]. Critical and self-reflexive engagement in research of a growing number of scholars can indeed prompt experimentation with alternative modes of knowledge and can challenge the power relations embedded in academic institutions. Activist research (or other methods based on cognitive justice) neither attempts to represent a social world nor empower social movements. Instead, it learns from and embodies movements' experience and modes of knowledge. In this way, the movement becomes an active force in the production of knowledge, and strives to use this knowledge for generating social change.

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[18] If nothing else the new academic cadre has a greater access to English publications, is able to travel abroad, and participate in various international grant schemes and projects.

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