New Urban Movement As A Field Negotiated Into Existence: The Case Of Poland

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With more than half of the world’s population living in cities, and our lives becoming increasingly globalized, many important social conflicts nowadays concern urban issues, or are at least played out in urban contexts. They often center around spatial and social segregation, and put the searchlight on gentrification processes pushing low income-groups to the city margins. At the same time, many public spaces are deteriorating, or being privatized and shaped by capital and commercial interests rather than citizens and public will, making the cities less livable and less answering to the needs of their inhabitants. Such processes, we argue, lead to emergence of new global social movements such as “Right to the City”. Up to now, however, we believe urban social movements haven’t been paid sufficient attention, neither by social movement theorists nor in civil society studies in general.

Since 2008 we observed the intensification of grassroot neighbourhood activism also in a number of Polish major cities, along with popularization of the Lefebvre’s idea of the “right to the city” among urban activists (Lefebvre 1968, Harvey 2012). Urban grassroots activism also became an important and visible part of polish third sector, while remaining strongly embedded in the specific context of big cities and the problems of their inhabitants. With a number of international actors on global level promoting the ideas of “placemaking” and people’s “right to the city”, Poland becomes a country where a new and very dynamic urban movement is inspired by specific local problems fused with external influence (what we in this paper call norm entrepreneurs, Finnemore & Sikkink 1998).

The paper discusses both the genesis of the neighbourhood movement and the role it plays nowadays, when, due to the weakening of the welfare state, neither local nor central government is able to satisfy the changing needs of different social groups. In this context, local civil society actors, like neighbourhood associations and community groups, play an increasingly important role in providing better and more efficient solutions for local problems as well as in strengthening democratic mechanisms at the city level.

We specifically focus on understanding the dynamics of this emerging urban movement and the importance and role of its wider international as well as national context. We argue that the visibility of the ideas and actors of the new urban movement is the result of growing severity of urban problems as well as a rising awareness of cities’ inhabitants, as individuals as well as groups, willing to participate in the city governance and striving to become an important force at the “urban scene”. Furthermore, we claim that this process and the resulting actors, although very diverse in nature, can be described, understood and explained by using a recently developed framework for field theory and analysis (Fligstein & McAdam 2011, 2012). We posit that this phenomenon is both a reaction to a dominance of neo-liberal rules of city planning and an example of global trends adapting to local needs through civic engagement.

We use qualitative data from observations, content analysis and in-depth interviews with both local and international key urban activists, as well as with experts in the field, to examine the processes that shape the new and emerging movement and its early development in Poland. We claim that urban renewal can be viewed as a distinct field, as defined by Fligstein & McAdam (2012), where the involved actors interact around a set of more or less distinct rules of the game, in a social landscape that has formed and developed in the intersection of, as well as by the tensions generated by, a number of earlier and more established fields. In this process, we argue that we can already observe the process of “field-maturing”, with a number of already well-established main actors and common definitions emerging, although the field in itself is far from being institutionalized. On the other hand, since there is not yet one dominant discourse and even the language and terminology of what is going on is still developing, clear tensions exist between
different parts and actors of this rather heterogeneous movement which can be understood as an on-going negotiation of the boundaries as well as the core of the field. Also, a growing division between formal and informal local urban initiatives can be observed, which could be interpreted as a backlash against growing NGO-isation of civil sector in Poland (Graff 2010, Korolczuk 2011).

While our paper focus on the Polish situation, we will contextualize our analysis within the global environment of the “right to the city” movement, thus drawing conclusions that can be relevant also in a wider international sphere, as well as theorizing our material in a broader context than the urban Polish case only.