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Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Cities. The City of Gdansk as an Example

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Abstract

The article is aimed to answer the question how, depending on the historical heritage, the collective memory, the physical space of the city and their images were shaped, through the politics of memory. All known cultures and languages distinguish the 'self' and the 'other', 'us' and 'them'. Neither do we know cities which wish to differ in some particular way, although they can have numerous identities. Their multitude and diversity may be a source of conflicts or contradictions in a creating their coherent image. From a sociological perspective, all identities are constructed. The real problem, however, is how, with what, by whom, and for what? Although identities are not time-proof, in favourable circumstances, they legitimize and rationalize dominant institutions of authority and culture. The public discourse on memory and identity of the modern Gdansk is dominated by multiparadigmatism, going beyond the authenticity of the material and cultural heritage and the state of knowledge presented by historians. Metaphoric and discursive ideas, already encoded in the language, such as: Gdansk is a multicultural city; the city of freedom and the city of solidarity are used to demonstrate the multiparadigmatism. Analysis has proved that the identity narrations were built mainly on myth-making constructions, especially on the myth of 'the Golden Age'. Nowadays, the selections of architectural forms, used as a base for the Gdansk's identities, have been extending with buildings from the Polish People's Republic (1945-1989) period. Their aesthetic and historic values were, until recently, almost completely negated. It was an unwanted heritage.

The attempts to build local identities in some of Gdansk's districts and to search for their architectural distinctiveness have been

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taking place which results in disconnecting from a hard, essential understanding of identity. Therefore, the dilemmas of identity affect an attempt to portray the identity, not necessarily as immutable and often contrasted with dominant categorizations. The visions of identity thus are becoming a product of discourse, something is that both potential and entangled in possibilities and limitations.

1. Introduction

Identity is one of the oldest metaphysical categories. This category, "tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity)" [1]. We consider multilateral criticism of the ways to use the notion of identity as quite problematic analytical category. We recognize it, however, as a very useful for a reflection over the city. The attitude toward identity formation has been changing. In the conditions of postmodernity "identity palimpsest's technique" is in force, as well as disembedding social systems in particular spaces and contexts and expanding the range of choices in the area of an identity. In modernity identities have been constructed for a long time, consistently and patiently [2]. In post-modernity the current trend is to create new forms on the basis of old ones. Thus, the term "palimpsest identity technology". Such identity, in which the ability to forget is more important that the ability to remember, suits the world far better [2].

The popularity of the identity concept germinated in sociology since the 1960s. It strengthened in the following decades and has been lasting. In the identity discourse, beside the main threads about the stabilizing function which is ascribed to the identity, the current discussions consider the processes of forming and transforming the identity and its new varieties. Together with the "rooting out" processes, crucial for a dynamic acceleration of time and space separation process associated with the modernity, "the social construction of reality" has been increasing its importance (3, 4). At the same time the criticism of an essentialist approach towards the identity has been growing. Anti-essentialist constructions, breaking the discipline in constructing the identity around one main axis, are linked to the alternative visions of identity with their dynamic and fluid character. More and more often, in the discourse categories they are said as negotiable products [5, 6]. Our text is aimed to present, on the example of Gdansk, the gradual process of receding from petrified and stereotypical identity to new identity concepts, present in the politics and discussion. New places, buildings and districts visualise the new identity concepts. They legitimise the way of seeing the world, being and auto identification. Architecture, urban planning and the city "are not just a metaphor of the episteme and identities characteristic for a certain period, they are narratives actively co-creating this episteme and identity" [7]. In the identity model built by centuries on the basis of various people's and cultures' traditions, numerous traces superimposed. The history of Gdansk, strongly rooted in Polish and German symbolic space, is not only the material heritage but also the ground of disagreement in both national historiographies about the identity. The heritage is not only the material culture but also the memory and identity [8, 9, 10]. The question how to protect the heritage nowadays sounds how to transform it. The Main Town, the heart of Gdansk, has been the guarantor of aesthetic order, stability and continuity. The narration about "Polishness" and "Germanness" focuses around it. The Polish and German researches have been trying to synthesize the whole historical culture of the city [11, 12], to describe the process of creating "Gdanskness" in architecture [13, 14] and in the post-war reconstruction of the city [15, 16]. The identity as an analytical category pluralises in a language (increasingly we speak about identities) and becomes emergent.

2. Historical foundations of identity

The first record of Gdansk is written in circa 1000. Many identities accumulated in Gdansk due to its rich history and the fact that it was a place of adjusting traditions of various nations and cultures. The city was inhabited by immigrants from various parts of Prussia, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands and others. In 1945 – one-thousand-year old city was burnt down in three days. After a stormy discussion, the decision was taken to reconstruct the major part of the city centre in former historical forms. After 1989 the time of "double" transformation has come – the system collapsed and the belated modernization commenced with a blistering pace. The process was accompanied by more and more frequently asked questions about the identity, about the selection of directions and values. At the beginning a bricolage was a method of the identity creation as it enabled easy choices of what "I/we like" – the selective identity forming from a "ready-to-use" set. On the one hand we dealt with the place-based, "little homeland of Gdansk" identity blur, on the other with the "return of a repressed content" reflected in "the bloom of interest in restoration of the

traditions, which is a response to the demands of changing modern and social circumstances" [3]. After 1945 the discussion on the city identity and its architectural past started. Two tendencies, either to preserve material heritage or to obliterate traces of the past, revealed. For many Poles coming since April 1945, Gdansk was a German city and it was quite a justified outlook. Since the 14th century, Gdansk used to be a city of the homogeneous German culture. In the new political, social and national conditions, in the society having little in common with German-speaking pre-war Gdansk, the action was taken showing the architectural similarity with the predecessors' projects. The idea of a hygienic, healthy city, impossible to implement in densely built-up pre-war centre, was applied which resulted in changes in its urban shape. The picture of ideal Polish Gdansk, wiped out of the German past, was implemented with the same means of expressions which 20 years later were to express the idea of Germans. The Germans who left their home town in 1945, at first sceptically observed Polish actions in Gdansk. They wrote about the city as "a copy of its history" or "an open-air museum". In 1970s this assessment began to change. New terms such as "European city of culture" or "the secret capital of the Baltic Sea" [17]. The Gdansk's residents ceased to understand the difference between the original and the copy made after 1945. Symbols valid for German-speaking residents of Gdansk have also become important for the Poles who came to the city after 1945. The disagreement which areas should have been preserved, or even reconstructed, and which should have disappeared into oblivion, or which forms were to be primary (removing or destroying the others), was the matter of questions and quarries. Only two decades ago we were inclined to perceive and shape these areas as a set of separated buildings, signs and places. We recognised the structure; however, the processes which fulfilled it, such as human activities and occurrences were not paid the same attention [18, 19].

3. Gdansk myths

In national (Polish and German) discourses the city of Gdansk was either Polish or German. Gdansk myths were built on "the Golden Age" which was timed variously, depending on the thesis to be proved - about the Polish, German or multicultural character of the city. For the Poles, the northern Renaissance was the memory carrier about the glorious history, while the Germans appreciated also the Gothic and the Renaissance forms as well. After the communism collapse, the city history became an important ground of multilevel system of various identities. The ready-made traditions were taken out and successively a foreign- domestic set of things, symbols and Gdansk's myths was composed as an answer to new challenges related to the market economy. The myths about the Polish, German or and multicultural character of the city [11], belong to the universe of symbols, disconnected form the real life and equipped with their own reality. The history of Gdansk is firmly anchored in both Polish and German symbolic space; however, it does not sanction only one identity. The academic narration about history of Gdansk created by Polish and German historians has begun to converge. "In the foreground the vision of Gdansk as a multicultural, multi-religious and multinational community is being propounded, a community in which-as suggested by the discourse-all the components were equally important and co-existed concordantly. This Arcadian picture, created by the new Gdansk memory, however, is based on significant omissions" [20].

What is also observed is a slow, though noticeable, withdrawal from a narration concentrated around the historical downtown as the foundation of all identities. A slow but recognisable withdrawal from the dominant narration focused around historical city centre as the foundation of every identity can be observed. The residents of districts such as Wrzeszcz or Lower Town seek for "fuel" for their local activities. They find it in a local history and architectural character of their districts. The repertoire of architectural forms, which were the basis for the Gdansk identity's creation, has been extending about the unwanted heritage from the communist era. The local identities' creation is a bottom-up process, it is marginally supported by local authorities still focused on the official Gothic and Renaissance heritage as well as on the city centres historical forms rebuilt after the war damages. The permanent position of the historic and cultural symbols embedded in the architectural structure of the oldest, part of the city is present in the narration based on three myths – Polish, German and multicultural character of Gdansk. The aggregation of a similar features' set enables the recognition of continuation and individuality signs by following residents' generations. Elements strengthening the sense of belonging to the city play the important role in a narrative discourse. "Somewhere in the background there have to be some facts, of course, but they are not the most important, what really matters are which part of them is remembered and equipped with the meaning" [21]. All of these make people need history but

not necessarily such which would tell them about how it really used to be. Social demand for history has the practical nature.

4. The identity of the place and people in recent studies

The sociological research project (supported by the National Center for Science: "Identity of the city and its residents in relation to public space", 2015) was aimed at an attempt to capture the four aspects of the functioning of a modern city at the same time: the both city and its residents' identity, the meaning how the past influences these two phenomenon, the role of the past in processes of city identity's creation, and the crucial role of public spaces in creating both the city and its residents' identity. A sociological research, indicate that the greatest impact on contemporary identity of Gdansk has its location historical buildings, World War II and new, post-war residents. As the most significant historical episodes linked to the city, the residents acknowledge the post-war events, events immediately preceding the World War II as well as pre-war historical events. As a feature distinguishing Gdansk respondents recognized firstly the aesthetic order (beauty of the city, the historic character of the centre), the second is its unique location, and the third its historical character. In a spatial identity the crucial are: symbols, cultural peculiarities, local history and a landscape. In this mental representation and emotional-affective evaluation of selected parts of the city, it is clear that the residents of Gdansk include the most representative space to the concept of ourselves and perceive it in terms of identity. They identify with places functional for their feeling of belonging to the city, of being a Gdansk's resident. When asked about their city from the past, before 1939, they follow the ongoing narration about the former multiculturalism. Recalling the multicultural-based identity composes the policy of creative transformations of the city's historic symbols into new ideas and projects in both culture and architecture.

5. Conclusion

In the process of shaping Gdansk identity, we have noticed a kind of Halbwachs's "silent coalition", in which the memory and space are crucial factors. The new Gdansk memory discourse, based on attempts to deconstruct the myths throughout their creative transformation, is present in both of them. In Gdansk residents' collective memory, which is not very homogenous, the space for the memory about the others materialised. In the collective memory of Gdansk inhabitants, which is neither homogeneous nor consistent, there is more and more space for the memories of outsiders, or foreigners. New ways of consorting with this heritage have also appeared. More audacious attempts have been made of deconstructing the "old" myths through their creative transformation. Since heritage is of necessity selective, the choices connected with it also comprise neglecting certain elements and constructing the identity on the basis of new urban myths. Thus a question returns about the city identity's construction as a reflective project, based on the palimpsest past and superimposed various memories. If at the end of the 20th century the urban politics of identity and memory focused on the apotheosis of the past, so much at the turn of the 21st century a local historical culture opened towards a new story – a new urban mythology. All of these serve to domesticate the foreign memory and (un)wanted heritage.

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