47–64 HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.18778/1506-6541.29.03 **ZESZYTY WIEJSKIE** · RURAL PERIODICALS · **29** (2023)
odebrano · received: 06.02.2023 — zaakceptowano · accepted: 10.05.2023

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Sources of left-wing attitudes towards the activism of local groups

Źródła niechęci lewicy wobec aktywizmu grup lokalnych

Summary: Some leftist intellectuals distance themselves from local activism and accuse it of neglecting political goals and being insensitive to cultural problems. Their critique of activism is based on patterns drawn from modernization discourse and often reveals classism toward the poorer strata of society. The deprecation of local activism is linked to the shift in traditional leftist discourse and its refocusing on cultural problems. Furthermore, it is associated with the political development of the metropolitan middle class. The radicalization of demands in the cultural sphere to politically win over the middle class means that, from the perspective of local communities, leftist discourse loses its credibility as a force capable of systemic change and poverty reduction. In addition, a leftist critique of local activism often repeats the value-laden models that were used during the systemic transformation of the 1990s and served at the time as an ideological justification for exploitation and middle-class supremacy. All this makes the leftist critique of local activism a *de facto* class critique, conducted in the interests of the middle class.

Keywords: local activism, left-wing, cultural revolution, neoliberalism, bourgeois bohemia, middle class, values and interests

Streszczenie: Część lewicowych intelektualistów dystansuje się od lokalnego aktywizmu i oskarża go o zaniedbywanie celów politycznych oraz brak wrażliwości na problemy kulturowe. Prowadzona przez nich krytyka aktywizmu opiera się na schematach zaczerpniętych z dyskursu modernizacyjnego i często ujawnia klasizm wobec

uboższych warstw społeczeństwa. Deprecjonowanie aktywizmu lokalnego jest związane ze zmianą tradycyjnego lewicowego dyskursu i przeorientowaniem go na problemy kulturowe, a także z politycznym zagospodarowaniem wielkomiejskiej klasy średniej. Radykalizacja żądań w odniesieniu do sfery kultury w celu politycznego pozyskania klasy średniej sprawia, że z perspektywy społeczności lokalnych dyskurs lewicowy traci swoją wiarygodność jako siła zdolna do zmiany systemowej i ograniczenia ubóstwa. Dodatkowo, lewicowa krytyka lokalnego aktywizmu często powtarza schematy wartościujące, które zostały wykorzystane w trakcie transformacji systemowej w latach 90. XX w. i służyły wówczas jako ideologiczne usprawiedliwienie wyzysku i przewagi klasy średniej. Wszystko to sprawia, że lewicowa krytyka aktywizmu lokalnego jest *de facto* krytyką klasową, prowadzoną w interesie klasy średniej.

Słowa klucze: aktywizm lokalny, lewica, rewolucja kulturowa, neoliberalizm, burżuazyjna bohema, klasa średnia, wartości i interesy

A significant number of leftist intellectuals strongly distance themselves from local activism, accusing it of neglecting political goals and being insensitive to cultural problems. Their critique of activism is largely based on patterns drawn from modernization discourse and often reveals classism toward the poorer strata of society.[1] All this leads to cognitive dissonance, which is characterized by a lack of congruence between the values proclaimed by the traditional left and the attitude of some leftist intellectuals toward local groups trying to put these values into practice. Animosity towards local activism, as a phenomenon that largely gears the leftist discourse about the latter, should therefore be discussed and its sources identified.

As Paweł Starosta argues, when defining a local community, three factors must be taken into account: space, the characteristics of social ties, and identity.[2] There are a number of competing definitions of local communities in social sciences, which generally fall into two strains: one emphasizing community, and the other focusing on the importance of space.[3] From the perspective of anthropology, the trend emphasizing community – which is based on tradition, shared benefits, mutual benefits,

1 As noted by Piotr Żuk, who cited Slavoj Žižek, discourse associated with progressive social theories in practice easily turns into an ideological tool for condemning the lower classes. See: P. Żuk, "Klasizm nasz powszedni," *Przegląd* 2012, no. 11. Available on-line: https://www.tygodnikprzeglad.pl/piotr-zuk-swobodne-mysli-wroclawia-41/ [accessed on: December 8, 2022].

2 P. Starosta, *Poza metropolią. Wiejskie i małomiasteczkowe zbiorowości lokalne a wzory porządku makrospołecznego*, Łódź 1995, pp. 30–32.

3 Idem, "Społeczność lokalna," [in:] *Encyklopedia Socjologii*, vol. 4, joint publication, Warszawa 2002, p. 97.

and solidarity – is more interesting.[4] Ferdinand Tönnies' division of types of social ties into community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*) is undoubtedly a certain idealization, but it allows us to disregard the features of reality that are irrelevant to the purpose of our research, for there is little doubt that communities continue to evolve and share many characteristics with the world around them. However, the hypothesis about the twilight and gradual decline of local communities, typical of the modernization discourse, seems greatly exaggerated.[5] Thus, I consider a local community to be a community whose actions are directed toward the realization of social interests through local politics. At this point, I would like to distinguish between the logic of interests and the language of values. I assume that local communities tend to express their expectations according to the logic of interests, while the metropolitan middle class expresses itself mainly in the language of values.[6] This does not mean, of course, that local communities do not have their values and the metropolitan middle classes do not have their interests – we are talking about a general trend that can be observed within their public discourses.

Various forms of activism have been collectively termed folk politics by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams. The features of such politics are horizontalism, direct or consensual democracy, and an emphasis on action.[7] Horizontalism, whose sources include anarchism, among others, assumes the possibility of transforming the world in the mode of grassroots social action, based on a community of interests, without recourse to political power. Its hallmark is a rejection of all forms of domination and a critique of representation and hierarchical structures, which are typical of representative politics.[8] According to the aforecited American authors, folk politics fetishizes direct democracy, which in practice can only be applied within small communities, and its effectiveness depends on the longevity of the commitment of participating actors.[9] Folk politics is also supposedly characterized by an emphasis on direct action and an exaggeration of the importance of direct results and concrete manifestations of action. For Srnicek and Williams, "theatrical protests in the

4 F. Tönnies, *Wspólnota i stowarzyszenie. Rozprawa o komunizmie i socjalizmie jako empirycznych formach kultury*, Warszawa 2008, p. 31.

5 J. Turowski, *Socjologia wsi i rolnictwa*, Lublin 1992, pp. 167–170.

6 I am building here on the observations that Fred Rose made regarding the differences between the working class and the middle class. See: F. Rose, *Coalitions Across the Class Divide*, New York 2000, pp. 14–17.

7 N. Srnicek, A. Williams, *Inventing the Future. Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, New York 2015, p. 169.

8 Ibidem, p. 27.

9 Ibidem, p. 31.

vein of the Situationists," strikes, blockading, and acts of vandalism (such as arson) are forms of folk politics,[10] although they also strongly criticize any action limited to local communities.[11] The definition of folk politics discussed above is very capacious and covers the activities of various metropolitan resistance groups as well as local communities. The authors of this definition point out that localism as a form of new reasoning, which stems from the belief that the problems of the modern world can only be solved on a small scale, is less radical than horizontalism.[12] Ultimately, however, they lump together all the movements and forms of activity they describe. It appears that this is largely due to a misdiagnosis of the motivations that drive resistance movements and community activism. They fail to note that community activism tends to be motivated by communal interests, and much of the resistance projects are clearly driven by middle-class values. Admittedly, the category of "middle class" is vague and can raise many legitimate questions,[13] but the very concept of class is not a fiction that exists "only in the imagination of socialists and crypto-communists."[14] Moreover, as Jacek Tittenbrun observed, the fear of using the concept of class as a category for describing society is unfounded:

> Marxists have no monopoly on analyzing society in class terms. […] classes are an objective phenomenon, existing independently of individual human consciousness or will, so calling a given group something else and sticking a different label on it cannot change this basic fact of property-economic conditioning that exists, regardless of what politicians think of it.[15]

Distancing myself from Srnicek and Williams' assessment of folk politics and noting the overly universalistic nature of this concept, I propose to call its variant, practiced within local communities, the local politics. Such politics has some features that coincide with the description made by the discussed authors but is clearly oriented towards community interests and is characterized by a tendency to interpret values according to the logic of interests. This raises the question of the place of the local middle class in this type of politics. I assume that, functioning within the community and sharing its social and existential problems, the local middle class

10 Ibidem, p. 28.

11 Ibidem, p. 40.

12 Ibidem, p. 15.

13 J. Tittenbrun, „Klasa średnia – mit czy byt?," *Studia Krytyczne / Critical Studies* 2016, no. 2/26, pp. 62–85.

14 D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, New York 2005, p. 202.

15 J. Tittenbrun, op. cit., p. 82.

is inclined more often than its metropolitan counterpart to define its expectations according to the logic of interests.[16]

The way in which Srnicek and Williams describe the genesis of folk politics is worth noting. They believe that this politics emerged in particular as a response to the collapse of the post-war social democratic system, which combined social goals with political liberalism.[17] After the collapse of the social democratic model of the welfare state, neoliberal hegemony took hold, and the left moved away from traditional forms of organization. As a result of neoliberalism, "trade unions were demolished and labor regulations dismantled. Capital controls were loosened, finance was deregulated, and the welfare state began to be scavenged for profitable parts."[18] Consequently, "we have the collapse of the traditional organizations of the left, and the simultaneous rise of an alternative new left predicated upon critiques of bureaucracy, verticality, exclusion and institutionalization, combined with an incorporation of some of the new desires into the apparatus of neoliberalism."[19] There is a tendency among many social movements to interpret problems in neoliberal terms – using "articulated around market-centered claims, liberal rights and a rhetoric of choice."[20] If the primary goal of the left is to offer a better vision of the future, then folk politics, seen from such a perspective – as a politics of local defense – cannot solve the world's problems.[21]

In describing the processes of 20th-century politics and culture, the American authors draw conclusions that are, in part, perplexing.[22] To understand the animosity that leftist intellectuals display toward local activism, we must therefore explore a slightly different angle of looking at the transformations that the left has undergone.

16 Such a conclusion can also be drawn from the difference between the motivations of left-wing voters from big cities and small centers. The former declare support for the left because of values (e.g., equality for women, anti-clericalism). The latter, on the other hand, are moderately progressive on worldview issues, and are most interested in the quality of public services (health, education) and quality of life. See: P. Sadura, P. Sierakowski, *Polityczny cynizm Polaków. Raport z badań socjologicznych*, Warszawa 2019, p. 33.

17 N. Srnicek, A. Williams, op. cit., p. 16.

18 Ibidem, p. 62.

19 Ibidem, p. 22.

20 Ibidem.

21 Ibidem, p. 3.

22 Jan Sowa seems equally perplexed, saying in his introduction to the Polish version of this publication that the authors' exclusionary thinking is questionable, and the book makes a weak argument against folk politics. See: J. Sowa, "Przyszłość odzyskana. Wstęp do wydania polskiego," [in:] N. Srnicek, A. Williams, *Wymyślając przyszłość. Postkapitalizm i świat bez pracy*, Toruń 2019, p. 15.

Leftist ideology, which emerged in the 19th century, was an expression of disagreement with the economic exploitation of the working class. The realization of most leftist demands under the conditions of a capitalist economy gradually undermined public confidence in the political and economic utopias of the left. In addition, in the 1960s, the social discourse was dominated by cultural issues, which forced the left to change its paradigm. The traditional leftist discourse, focused on economic problems, became largely reoriented on cultural problems, which was accompanied by the political development of a middle class characterized by a counter-cultural attitude.

The realization of the promise to raise the quality of life, made in the post-World War II period under the conditions of a capitalist economy, allowed for presenting the future in terms of economic success that could also be enjoyed by members of the working class. What seemed a utopia only a few decades earlier, at the time, became achievable. Richard Barbrook, describing this change, discusses the World's Fair, which was held in New York in 1939.[23] At this exposition, the main theme of the American section was the then-utopian vision of living in a house in the suburbs and owning a means of transportation. Barbrook writes of the New York exhibition that it projected a future in which

> most workers would live in family houses in the suburbs and commute into work in their own motor cars. However skeptical visitors might have been back in 1939, this prophecy seemed remarkably accurate 25 years later. […] The imaginary future had become everyday reality.[24]

The realization of the dreams of the working class was expressed in increasing consumption, which was focused on fairly standardized goals. Thus, basic desires were gradually satisfied, but at the same time, the lack of new goals that could define the horizons of social expectations became drastically apparent. Indeed, the version of the future articulated in terms of economic success, once its goals were reached, required outlining new perspectives. A sense of emptiness growing among parts of society, combined with opposition to the dominant model of consumption, led to the cultural revolution of the 1960s.[25]

The impetus for this cultural revolution was a critique of the dominant culture in capitalist countries, particularly the lifestyle, consumption model and bourgeois values.

23 R. Barbrook, *Imaginary Futures. From Thinking Machines to the Global Village*, London 2007, p. 27.

24 Ibidem, p. 32

25 See: A. Bednarczuk, "Requiem dla przyszłości, która nie nadejdzie," [in:] *Kultura, media i społeczeństwo w czasie pandemii Covid-19*, eds. A. Bednarczuk, K. Walczak, Poznań 2022, p. 186.

As Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter have noted, the representatives of the youth revolt had no problem finding themselves in the realities of the consumer capitalist economy:

> There simply never was any tension between the countercultural ideas that informed the '60s rebellion and the ideological requirements of the capitalist system. While there is no doubt that a *cultural* conflict developed between the members of the counterculture and the defenders of the older American Protestant establishment, there never was any tension between the *values* of the counterculture and the functional requirements of the capitalist economic system.[26]

The countercultural movement of the 1960s not only did not attempt to overthrow capitalism, but paradoxically spurred it to further development and exploration of new areas. As Thorstein Veblen argued, the essence of consumption is the competition that arises after society has satisfied its basic needs. After acquiring the goods necessary for survival, members of society begin to compete for goods of social importance positioning them within the group. The need for such goods will never be satisfied, because competition is a constant feature of society, stimulated by constant comparison with others.[27] For the rebel generation of the 1960s, their parents' consumption was devoid of deeper meaning, as it was focused on standardized basic goods conceived in bourgeois terms (such as a house and a car). Continuing to position oneself in the model of consumption that had been in place until then did not lead to increased happiness, but only meant frustration caused by constant comparison through material goods. This does not mean that the rebel generation of the 1960s was indifferent to finances and possessions. On the contrary, it displayed a great deal of entrepreneurship and creativity,[28] which, however, were directed primarily towards new lifestyles, entertainment, fashion and experiences. Thus, the quality of life, level of happiness, sense of freedom and self-realization began to be largely determined by the broader cultural sphere. This consequently led to a change in thinking about freedom and equality as basic values of a democratic society. For previous generations, freedom and equality had a formal and legal meaning, and equality was additionally linked to the economic standard of living. The 1960s generation associated freedom with the possibility of self-realization, and understood equality as a cultural issue. From then on, any leftist slogans that were based on economic equality began to lose their power to mobilize society

26 J. Heath, A. Potter, *The Rebel Sell Why the Culture Can't Be Jammed*, Toronto 2004, p. 3.

27 T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, ed. and intro. by Martha Banta, New York 2007, p. 168.

28 J. Heath, A. Potter, op. cit., pp. 174–175.

and ceased to be a guarantee of political success. As a result, many representatives of the left "had long given up even mentioning capitalism."[29]

The changes that took place in the 1960s forced the left to search for a suitable target group to which it could direct its new message. In the face of the working class's growing indifference to leftist utopias, such a group became the metropolitan middle class with bourgeois bohemian characteristics. Bourgeois bohemians constituted a peculiar social group, which David Brooks called Bobos for short.[30] According to Brooks, it was formed as a result of a combination of capitalist values and countercultural slogans. Back in the 1980s, the most prominent social reference group with political potential was the Yuppies, or "young urban professionals." However, due to their penchant for luxury, their focus on career and financial success, they were indifferent to leftist ideals. Bourgeois bohemia had already formed in the late 1970s, but it was not until the 1990s that it replaced the Yuppies. Although Bobos, like Yuppies, love money, they have a different approach to life. Representatives of the Bobo class are focused on professional and financial advancement, are characterized by pragmatism and valued comfort, but want to give their life a deeper meaning. They do not see a point in the ostentatious consumption that characterized the Yuppies, although they appreciate financial independence and material goods. Their main goal, however, is not so much to accumulate material goods, but to collect experiences and unique sensations. For them, money is not an end, but a means to self-realization. Bobos are as much a product of capitalism as they are of the counterculture.[31] They are full of contradictions, with "their lucratively busy lives a seeming synthesis of comfort and conscience, corporate success and creative rebellion. Well-educated thirty-to-fortysomethings, they have forged a new social ethos from a logic-defying fusion of 1960s counter-culture and 1980s entrepreneurial materialism."[32] It can be said of the representatives of the Bobo class that they are:

> indifferent to economic exploitation, but fight fiercely for the rights of minorities and the excluded. They are tolerant, but only if they tolerate what promotes their self-realization. By maneuvering between the values of neoliberalism and counterculture,

29 T. Eagleton, *After Theory*, New York 2004, p. 52.

30 D. Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise. The New Upper Class and How They Got There*, New York 2001.

31 See: R. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class. And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, New York 2002, passim.

32 Anonymous, "Are you a BOurgeois BOhemian?," *The Guardian*, May 27, 2000. Available on-line: https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2000/may/28/focus.news1 [accessed on: March 1, 2021].

> and emotionally engaging in public life, they can push away the odium of narcissism, maintain their self-respect and inspire esteem among others.[33]

Because of its focus on cultural equality and individualistically conceived freedom, bourgeois bohemia has become the ideal addressee of the new leftist message. However, the reorientation of leftist discourse and addressing it to Bobo-type groups causes the left to distance itself from various forms of activism that are carried out within local communities. Bourgeois bohemia is a group typical of the metropolitan community, while small local communities tend to face different problems than residents of big urban centers. Even if it is not always the case, very often the exclusions that affect residents of local communities cannot be reduced to cultural problems. These usually concern the labor market, difficulties with transportation, access to education and health care, etc. Such problems usually do not affect the metropolitan bourgeois bohemia, which tends to show little understanding towards them. The metropolitan middle class also does not understand that the logic of common interest often leads local communities to interpret values according to this logic. Such conclusions can be drawn, among others, from the now classic research conducted by Robert and Helen Lynd, which showed the ways in which small-town communities coped with the consequences of the Great Depression.[34] It showed that the survival of the crisis depended largely on the quality of community relationships, building ties on the basis of shared religious practices, mutual benefits and solidarity. What from the perspective of the metropolitan middle class is an abstract value, in a community is its vital interest and a prerequisite for its survival.

Bourgeois bohemians, along with some leftist intellectuals, view local communities with suspicion and regard their frequent indifference to cultural problems as an expression of conservatism and backwardness.[35] From such a perspective, localism is a foredoomed, defensive and parochial attitude toward the world around it.[36] In contrast, a politics that is based on turning the world into local, feuding groups, as David Harvey argues, loses sensitivity to diversity and can lead to fascism.[37]

33 A. Bednarczuk, op. cit., p. 195.

34 R.S. Lynd, H.M. Lynd, "Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts," *New York* 1937. Available on-line: https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.166212/page/n5/mode/2up [accessed on: September 12, 2022].

35 N. Srnicek, A. Williams, op. cit., p. 32.

36 D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Social Change*, Cambridge–Oxford 1989, p. 351.

37 Ibidem.

In sum, the refocusing of leftist discourse on cultural problems, accompanied by the political development of a middle class characterized by counter-cultural attitudes, has at the very least reinforced the left's aversion to community activism. Community-oriented activism conflicted with the value-based language of the new "proletariat," which is now the metropolitan middle class with bourgeois bohemian characteristics. As a result, activism began to be treated with suspicion as an expression of downplaying cultural problems and the need to change the hegemonic culture.

Another reason for the aversion to community activism, found in many currents on the left, is the traditional way of thinking about local communities, and rural communities in particular. In Karl Marx's thought, the problem of local communities was never very strongly present. According to Marx, society is divided into a possessing class (bourgeois) and a working class (proletariat). Marx assumed that only within the large industrialized urban centers could a working-class consciousness develop, which he identified with the workers. In Marx's view, socialism could only arise after capitalism was overcome, while there was no possibility that it could come into existence immediately after pre-capitalist labor relations were overthrown.[38]

The problem of the superficiality of this class typology was revealed forcefully in Marx's correspondence with left-wing activists in Russia. In the case of Russia, the fundamental problem for Marx was the prevalence of pre-capitalist economic relations and the dominance of local communities in the type of municipality. In the structure of Russia's agricultural property, he saw a socially destructive mechanism: common labor on the land does not prevent the accumulation of wealth and can be a source of new economic and social inequalities.[39] In the end, conditionally and with reservations, he allowed the possibility of transforming the municipal community into a higher form of collective (local) economy, but justified it by appealing to ethics (relieving the plight of the peasants). However, he failed to argue this convincingly within his system.[40] Frederick Engels saw the question of local communities in a similar way, but he explicitly stressed that the transformation of municipal communities in Russia could only be achieved through the victory of the proletariat – a structural change that occurred via revolution.[41]

38 W. Wic, *Stanowisko Karola Marksa i Fryderyka Engelsa wobec kwestii agrarnej i chłopskiej w Rosji*, [scan of the typescript]. Available on-line: https://rep.up.krakow.pl/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11716/6360/RND127–01–Stanowisko-Karola-Marksa–Wic.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y [accessed on: November 30, 2022].

39 Ibidem.

40 Ibidem.

41 Ibidem.

If for 19th-century theoreticians of proletarian revolution, the most important issue concerning local and rural communities was their place within Marxist thought, by the 20th century, the leftist critique of these communities began to take a different shape. From at least the 1920s, Russia began to see the countryside and the local environment as a place dominated by conservative thinking and traditional attitudes, resisting the progress brought by the proletarian revolution. This way of thinking still appears today in the reflections of some representatives of the left. For example, Srnicek and Williams write the following about local communities: "These 'intimate' communities are often home to the most virulent forms of xenophobia, homophobia, racism, pernicious gossip, and all other varieties of backward thinking."[42] In a similar vein, Andrzej Leder captures the countryside and small local communities in Poland as places where an "extended Middle Ages" prevails.[43] One of the main reasons for this is supposedly the fact that the rural population is completely passive and inert, and their view of the world is dominated by religious templates upheld by representatives of the Church. Leder bases his presumptions on a dichotomous scheme, in which, on the one hand, there is the "good" modernization that has taken hold in metropolitan centers, and on the other hand, the "bad" tradition of passive rural communities, whose modernization is superficial. According to him, rural residents do not understand the cultural changes associated with the modernization process imposed on them, and on the rare occasions when they revolt, they are driven only by a desire for revenge and redress.[44] Thus, the author, while overlooking the problem of poverty and exploitation of the working class under capitalist modernization, entrenches the liberal interpretation of modernization as an essentially positive process. In addition, he replicates the liberal way of thinking about society, in which the masses have no subjectivity of their own, and the driving force for change is exclusively the metropolitan elite.[45] It is an elitist vision in which all peasant resistance is ignored and the bourgeoisie is the only revolutionary force.[46] In such optics, where the bourgeoisie is responsible for the social "awakening," there is no room for a strong critique of the Western European process of rational

42 N. Srnicek, A. Williams, op. cit., p. 32.

43 A. Leder, *Prześniona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej*, Warszawa 2014.

44 Ibidem, p. 92.

45 M. Pospieszyl, "Prześniona walka klas. Leder, Marks i mieszczańska rewolucja," *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 2013, no. 10(4), pp. 205–215.

46 Ibidem.

modernization, and the dichotomously treated notions of "city" and "country" are synonymous with modernity and a state of barbarism.[47]

Some representatives of the left continue to slide into the pattern of thinking about the countryside and local communities, rooted in the Enlightenment paradigm of rational progress, which has long been criticized from a leftist position as a form of oppression.[48] They reproduce a one-sided assessment of the modernization process and, in the spirit of bourgeois bohemianism, emphasize the importance of cultural problems, while downplaying the social and economic conditions of existence. They also deny local communities' "awareness," and see in them nothing but passivity, from which they are shaken only by reactive anger. All this is reminiscent of the neoliberal paradigms with which attempts were made to diagnose social reality during the post-1989 political and economic transition.

The neoliberal discourse based on separate valuations of different social groups appeared in Poland in the 1990s and accompanied the changes taking place in our country at that time. Michał Buchowski found that its feature was internal colonialism, which consisted in diagnosing the dissimilarity of groups in society according to the criterion of their support for democracy and willingness to adapt to the ideas of the free market.[49] By creating a division into winners and losers of the transformation, and attributing to the latter the attitude of helpless *homo sovieticus*, the elites established criteria for judging the masses.[50] Legitimization of inequality took place through the creation of the figure of the Other, who became a local devoid of civilizational and intellectual competence, lazy, demanding, prone to alcoholism and theft, and only happened to be a fellow citizen.[51] Buchowski has made a number of interesting observations using the figure of orientalization and colonialism, but it remains problematic whether they are applicable to the specifics of the situation in post-socialist countries.[52] Thus, it is worth recalling here the research of Elizabeth C. Dunn, who was employed at the Alima factory and observed the mechanisms of

47 A. Bilewicz, "Przebudźmy się?" Available on-line: https://nowyobywatel.pl/2014/11/14/przebudzmy-sie/ [accessed on: January 22, 2023].

48 M. Horkheimer, T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford 2002. See also: A. Bilewicz, op. cit.

49 M. Buchowski, "Widmo orientalizmu w Europie. Od egzotycznego Innego do napiętnowanego swojego," *Recykling Idei* 2008, no. 10, pp. 98–108.

50 Ibidem, p. 101.

51 See: ibidem.

52 See: M. Nowicka-Franczak, "Ucieczka w postkolonialność. Pułapki wschodnioeuropejskiego dyskursu teorii postkolonialnej," *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace Etnograficzne* 2017, no. 45(4), pp. 403–414.

producing the "New Capitalist Man."[53] Tracing the process of neoliberalization of labor relations, Dunn noted that the working people were divided into two opposing categories. On the one hand, there were "normal" employees: adaptable, capitalist, good, rational, active and flexible. On the other hand, there were "abnormal" employees: unadaptable, communist, bad, irrational, passive and backward. Interestingly, this division was created *a priori*: managers and sales representatives were considered "normal," while workers were considered "abnormal." The purpose of this division was not to actually diagnose the problem, but to ideologically justify exploitation.[54] This process was brilliantly described by David Ost, whose argument I will briefly discuss.[55] According to him, Polish society in the 1980s was fascinated by the economic efficiency of capitalism and, equating political liberalism with economic liberalism, initially saw no alternative to it. However, it quickly became apparent that capitalism was leading to drastic inequality and the deterioration of living standards for some social groups, especially those living in rural areas and small urban centers. While those in power continued to understand democracy as an inseparable link between political liberalism and economic liberalism, the working class began to insist on the realization of the capitalist welfare state model. The ruling class, while embracing the neoliberal model of capitalism as the only rational one, simultaneously refused to recognize the rationality of the protests directed against it. They established rationality not on the basis of proving the rationale for their systemic choice, but based on dismissing all protest as madness.[56] In doing so, they applied the rhetorical gesture of Descartes, who, finding no evidence to doubt his own rationality, decided that it was irrationally behaving others who were mad.[57] The self-presentation of power as the only rational force made it possible to dismiss any accusations against it and allowed for treating them as frivolous. It opened doors to ridiculing any protests and blaming the economic situation and failures on individuals who were unable to adapt to the occurring changes. This was a method of creating winners and losers in society, where the losers are presented as

53 E.C. Dunn, *Privatizing Poland. Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor*, Ithaca–London 2004.

54 Ibidem.

55 D. Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity. Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe*, Ithaca–London 2005.

56 Idem, "Jak liberałowie utracili poparcie robotników," [in:] *Idea solidarności w kontekstach filozoficzno-historycznych*, eds. D. Dobrzański, A. Wawrzynkiewicz, Poznań 2006, pp. 167–222.

57 M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. J. Khalfa, trans. J. Murphy and J. Khalfa, London–New York 2006, p. 184.

> inept, wicked, fickle, depraved, improvident, or morally contemptible: that is, lacking the very qualities that are assumed to be necessary for the competition that contributed to this state of affairs in the first place. Then, so defined, the losers are denied legitimacy for their grievances.[58]

According to Ost, in the 1990s, a number of methods were used to manipulate society to defuse social anger and render it aimless.[59] Fearing strikes and social unrest, great efforts were made to marginalize the workers politically and culturally. In the succor of the authorities came a number of intellectuals, who only yesterday doted upon the workers, yet today do everything to denigrate them. Even the narratives of the communist period were refreshed and the strikers were accused of lacking patriotism, sabotage and alcoholism. Those in power acted as if the nation, which did not deserve them, consisted mainly of the mythical *homo sovieticus*.[60] The paths of the working class and the middle class finally diverged at that point. The former continued to express its demands according to the logic of interests, while the latter relied on language referring to values.[61] Workers felt betrayed, and residents of villages and small towns – abandoned. No one understood that the unity previously experienced, occurring under a common protest against the communists, was the outcome of a convergence of interests and shared poverty, and that the material stratification that followed 1989 resulted in the reactivation of social classes.

Ost's consideration of the discourse that accompanied the transformation process in Poland has the advantage of highlighting its class character. Like Dunn, he recognized that the assumption of rationality or lack thereof is not, under neoliberalization, a diagnosis of the actual state of affairs, but a construct to justify inequality and exploitation. This is done in the typical manner of neoliberalism – on the basis of the thesis that there is no alternative to it.[62] Such a thesis becomes society's "common sense," that is, a set of sentiments that are widely accepted, but deprive the subject of the ability to think critically about reality. This is further fostered by defining all political and social questions as cultural issues.[63]

58 Z. Bauman, T. May, *Thinking Sociologically*, Oxford 2019, p. 69.

59 D. Ost, *Jak liberałowie…*, p. 191.

60 Ibidem, p. 199.

61 Ibidem, p. 214.

62 See: J. Żakowski, *Anty-TINA. Rozmowy o lepszym świecie, myśleniu i życiu*, Warszawa 2005, p. 8.

63 D. Harvey, *A Brief History…*, p. 39.

Currently, the middle class is reactivating the exclusionary neoliberal discourse of the 1990s, which is based on cultural or class criteria, depending on the circumstances.[64] However, this discourse has largely lost its credibility and is no longer an alternativeless model for interpreting reality. The hard-won economic success shared by the society as a whole has caused local enclaves of poverty to largely disappear. Residents of villages and small towns are still struggling with their problems, but through determination, diligence and dedication, they have managed to overcome systemic constraints. It has become clear that they are not to blame for the poverty they once fell into, as reality has shown that the neoliberal description of it was planted in a lie designed to protect those in power from social protests. The lack of credibility of the liberal elite's discourse was exploited by the right, which distanced itself from the neoliberal economic model and questioned the values of the metropolitan middle class. Some leftist intellectuals have been surprised to note that in terms of worldview, the electorate of the right is sometimes akin to the opposition, but pragmatically votes for the right.[65] It seems that this pragmatism stems largely not from "bribing" some voters with social benefits, but is the result of the right restoring their dignity, voice and visibility.[66] Indeed, the current divisions in Poland deviate from the traditional categorization into left and right, but are becoming, according to Jarosław Flis, "top-bottom" divisions.[67] Within such a division, the "bottom" believes that the community is important, wants taxation of the rich, social welfare of the state, public health care, and values collective success and moral principles. The "top," on the other hand, thinks the community is ballast, advocates for greater individualism and low taxes, and conditions happiness on changes in morals allowing for a life without any paradigms or boundaries.[68] The rhetoric of critique of the "bottom" is organized around the familiar neoliberal model, where the "bottom" is supposedly poor, maladjusted, irrational and inert. This break-up has the characteristics of a class division, is organized according to class logic and, it seems, should be openly called a class division.

64 A. Radukiewicz, "'Twardogłowi fanatycy' i 'beneficjenci dobrej zmiany' – o 'innych' Komitetu Obrony Demokracji," *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 2018, vol. 62, no. 1, pp. 123–139.

65 P. Sadura, S. Sierakowski, op. cit.

66 E. Korolczuk, "Populizm, nierówności i uwiąd obywatelstwa socjalnego." Available on-line: https://tiny.pl/wjvh4 [accessed on: March 11, 2023].

67 J. Flis, "Toksyczna opozycja. 'Żarty z Obajtka, że jest z Pcimia, to przepis na przegrane wybory,'" transcribed by G. Sroczyński, *Gazeta.pl.*, 13.02.2023. Available on-line: https://next.gazeta.pl/next/7,151003,29458120,toksyczna-opozycja-zarty-z-obajtka-ze-jest-z-pcimia-to-przepis.html [accessed on: February 14, 2023].

68 Ibidem.

In the perception of local communities, by focusing on cultural problems and appealing to the values of the metropolitan middle class, the left has ceased to be credible as a force that wants systemic change and poverty reduction. Both the left and the neoliberals appeal to the same cultural values and the same social stratum, which is the metropolitan middle class of the bourgeois bohemian type. For neoliberals, the most important value is individualistic freedom. They also programmatically support equality in cultural terms. However, it is not a goal for them; they treat it instrumentally, as a tool for disassembling the freedom-restricting cultural norms of traditional society.[69] As we remember, for bourgeois bohemia, the most important values are those of cultural equality, which it understands in the spirit of counterculture, and it is inclined to combine political liberalism with economic liberalism as the basis of democracy. Its "leftism" therefore fits perfectly with the operational goals and objectives of neoliberalism. Hence, the struggle for the votes of the bourgeois bohemia, played out between the left and the neoliberals, often takes place not in the arena of mutual critique of programs, but through the radicalization of demands in relation to the cultural sphere. Based on such demands, however, it is difficult to rally local communities that face different problems. Thus, all some leftist intellectuals do is try to convince local communities that they are pursuing foredoomed, irrational and unnecessary politics. In this way, the leftist critique of local activism is *de facto* a class critique, conducted in the interests of the metropolitan middle class.

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69 See: P.J. Deneed, *Why Liberalism Failed*, London 2018, p. 143.

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