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## **Social activity of women in the Dobrzeń Wielki commune in light of anthropological critique**

The discipline of socio-cultural anthropology from its very beginning in the modern form provided the subsequent generations of its practitioners with devices to “cut against the grain” and to unveil “how culture makes us think that, in fact, socially constructed meanings and hierarchies are «natural»,” (Buchowski 2001: 19). Obviously, even though they usually stressed the need for combining ethnographic detail with theoretical insights, the changing patterns of anthropological critique reflected to a high extent disciplinary assumptions of the time as to the nature of the studied realities and adequate analytical equipment (see Baer 2014a). Today this is no different. Following Kim Fortun (2012), I personally believe that late modernity can be seen as a product of technical, biophysical, cultural, or economic nested systems of various scales involved in multiple and complex relations. Such context implies a multitude of interactions and makes keeping the analyzed problems “in place” impossible. The emerging phenomena constituted by numerous scales, variables and forces need rather to be followed through diversely defined, but continuous spaces (see Falzon 2009).

The above conceptualization of the anthropological present requires a type of critique that moves beyond the hitherto classical

models, which developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One of these models relates to the theory of practice rooted in critical humanism and puts human acting subjects at the center. While these subjects are, in a sense, the “products” of a social system, at the same time through their practices they are able not only to (re)create, but also to disrupt or to remold the system (Ortner 1984: 144-160). The other model is linked to the “postmodern turn” and advocates the strategy of “defamiliarization.” It aims at juxtaposing distinct contexts of the contemporary world in order to criticize all “ideologies in action” (Marcus, Fischer 1999: 156-159).

Until recently these two models defined my own anthropological work in many important ways. In line with popular anthropological saying that “what seems obvious is usually not so obvious”<sup>1</sup>, in research on “women” or “sexual citizenship” in Central/Eastern Europe I denaturalized normative concepts and assumptions of both “transitology” and gender/queer studies. However, my then trust in the critical power of ethnographically informed anthropology, which “tell[s] stories about particular individuals in time and place” (Abu-Lughod 1991: 153) and thereby destabilizes “enshrined and captivating discourses” (Buchowski 2001: 20), provided a specific shield that allowed my own normative concepts and assumptions to remain intact (see Baer 2017).

In my current projects I am therefore trying to move beyond such “norms and forms” (Rabinow et al. 2008: 73-92) of anthropological critique. To this end, I use a toolbox that contains some elements of “anthropology of the contemporary” by Paul Rabinow (2003), “para-ethnography” by George Marcus (2007) and “ethnography in late industrialism” by Fortun (2012). In this context I find particularly important “ethnography” understood as a device for “generating surprises” while “performing the labor of difference” (Fortun 2012: 451, 453); the concept of “problematization” that recognizes every “situation not only as «a given» but also as «a question»” (Rabinow

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<sup>1</sup> The credit for popularizing this phrase and the accompanying critical approach in Poland undoubtedly goes to Michał Buchowski (e.g. 2001).

2003: 18); and the idea of “contraption” which shows “data” as extending in many different directions and determined by different vectors of power. Even though anthropologists try to link the disjointed sets and processes, they are aware that this is a kind of bricolage, because the whole to connect to does not actually exist (Rabinow et al. 2008: 76-77; see also Baer 2014b: 29-30).

Exactly how this type of critical insight may work in practice, I show on the example of my own fieldwork research carried out in the Dobrzeń Wielki commune from February 2015 to November 2018. This was a part of the project on relationships between Opole Power Station (OPS) and the local community in view of the ongoing construction of the fifth and sixth blocks of the power plant.<sup>2</sup> In this context, I myself (along with Ewa Kruk) analyzed the gendered aspects of “late industrialism” (Fortun 2012). Here, I was mainly interested in the professional paths of women in the industrial workplace and in social activity of women in the commune. The latter topic was a point of departure for this article.

Both the Opole Silesia and the Dobrzeń Wielki commune, including its connections with the OPS, have long been the subject of interest for social scientists. They primarily focused on ethnic identities, intergroup relations, and industrialization (e.g. Nowakowski 1960). The construction and currently ongoing expansion of the power plant brought analyses of the social, economic, and environmental aspects of the project. All of them contribute significantly to scientific knowledge on the accelerated change and industrial processes in general. But, most of these studies refer to quantitative methods and/or examine macro- and microstructures separately. Furthermore, they often approach “local community” in terms of a coherent whole, whose “essence” can be extracted analytically (e.g. Rosik-Dulewska, Kusza 2009).

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<sup>2</sup> The project was titled *Conflict, Tension and Cooperation. A Case Study of Mutual Impact between Opole Power Station and the Community of Dobrzeń Wielki* and it was implemented from September 2014 to January 2019 at the University of Wrocław with Petr Skalník as the Principal Investigator. It was financed by the National Science Center, grant number 2013/11/b/HS3/03895.

In the context of gender, topics in literature are usually limited to marriage, family, or household organization understood as normative categories. Within these categories, “women” are perceived mainly through the prism of their reproductive functions and thereby become somewhat “naturalized” social beings. Additionally, as representatives of “Silesians,” they are seen as permeated with “Silesian culture” (e.g. Swadźba 2012). Because the dominant analytical approach adopts a unitary concept of personhood, it assumes that “society” and “the individual” are mutually forming antinomies. Moreover, in line with capitalist commodity logic, it considers specific individuals as defined by discrete attributes (Cornwall, Lindisfarne 1994: 41; see also Strathern 1990: 3–40). Taken together, all these assumptions bring studies which concentrate first and foremost on the characteristics, social roles, and/or status of “women” in the (Opole) Silesia. In more recent publications, discussions on the demographic situation, family relations, migration, or vaguely defined “Silesianity” activate discourses of “collapse” or “disintegration” (e.g. Rauziński, Sołdra-Gwizdź, Geisler 2010). Here, women are sometimes openly declared as guilty of this situation (e.g. Obserwatorium Integracji Społecznej 2011).

In order to avoid simplifications, generalizations and essentializations present in the above type of studies, in my own research on social activity of women in the Dobrzeń Wielki commune, exemplified by four groups of people of different ages and involved in different activities, I proclaimed “the obviousness of the uncertainty” (Strathern 2006: 203). In reference to the aforementioned premises of anthropological critique in/of late modernity, I analyzed how such concepts as “(Silesian) women,” “family,” “tradition,” “identity,” or “local community” were being produced, sustained or destabilized at the intersections of the “individual” (discursive practices of specific persons) and the “supraindividual” (local, national, European, or global conditionings) (see Boellstorff 2007).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I discuss these problems a bit further and in a slightly different context in Baer 2017.

The fieldwork research involved 32 open, in-depth, partially structured and structured interviews carried out with persons operating in the groups in question and more or less directly related to their activities<sup>4</sup> as well as informal chats. The groups comprised an educational forum focused on family issues, an association working for local community, a vocal ensemble and majorettes. The interviews were supported by participatory and non-participatory observation during groups' meetings and at other venues, including social events which were significant for groups' members and/or for other residents of the Dobrzeń Wielki commune. In addition, public discourses were analyzed, mainly in the form of media publications, websites, social media fan pages, and other information sources.

"Social activity" is used here as an umbrella term to cover activities perceived by the interviewees as serving "common good." While the "common good" may be diversely defined and "community" may involve only several people, these activities undoubtedly fit in an anthropological understanding of "civil society." It goes beyond the conventional Western models of liberal individualism and draws attention to interpersonal practices (of "formal" and "informal" type) which contribute to social cohesion (Hann 1996; see Baer 2003: 29-38). Consequently, "social activity" is not necessarily seen as antithetical towards the work relationship. For instance, senior activity coordinators or majorettes trainers define their activities in terms of a social mission aimed to please and bring joy to people they are addressed to, but they do collect remuneration for the said activities.

In light of the original project topic, a reference needs to be made to the OPS and its current expansion. Until the plan of incorporation of the OPS and a part of the Dobrzeń Wielki commune by the city of Opole was announced in the end of November 2015, the power plant remained a "natural" element of the commune landscape and was not perceived as specifically important by our interlocutors. A couple of interviewees talk about picnics, which the OPS organized for

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<sup>4</sup> The first category consisted of 18 persons with the key interlocutors interviewed repeatedly on subsequent field trips. The second category contained 5 persons.

the Dobrzeń Wielki residents and about other forms of cooperation, but that belongs to the past: “They kind of withdrew. (...) And the rest of the community is somewhat on the side.” People trying to obtain funds for their activities, both from the power plant itself and from the consortium involved in its extension, say that they were not able to contact the company’s authorities in person and that their written applications met with a complete lack of response from them. This, in turn, would bring frustration as disruptive for their previously formed ideas about the role that the enterprise should play in the life of the commune.<sup>5</sup> The positioning of the OPS and its expansion in the local social imaginary changed dramatically during 2016 when in many telling ways they organized narratives on the commune partition (see Baer 2018). But this article focuses primarily on the pre-partition realities of the research sites.

### **Conscious parenthood**

The first of the groups discussed here is basically of educational type. It is defined by the space in which open meetings are held for everyone – at the Communal Cultural Center (CCC) – and not by formal rules of membership. Although it does not target any particular age group, its activity – according to the founder and leader of the group – concentrates on issues which are interesting especially to “young moms,” who want to know how to raise their children in line with the latest state of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the persons it attracts

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<sup>5</sup> Earlier strategies of cooperation with the OPS ceased to be effective, because in 2012 the power plant lost its separate legal personality and became part of the bigger concern, PGE GiEK S.A., controlled by the Polish State Treasury. When people applying for funds adapted their strategies to the new legal situation, obtaining funds was possible. PGE GiEK S.A. co-financed twice summer camps for children from a village severely struck by expansion, which was organized by the association discussed below.

<sup>6</sup> I use the present tense to describe the activities of all groups, although some of them suspended their operations. The current situation is outlined later in the article.

are mostly educated and usually professionally active women aged thirty-thirty five. Even though the leader admits she would be happy to see more men at the meetings, "they are rarities," who attend the meetings encouraged by their wives. In general, the character of the participants depends on the topic of a given meeting. Those addressed directly to women automatically exclude men in the organizer's opinion. Nonetheless, the group entered into informal cooperation with a men's group from Opole, which promotes the role of a father in childrearing: "That it doesn't have to be all about the firm hand."

The group's activities include mainly lectures or workshops, where invited experts speak on topics related to children's health, their upbringing, or family relationships, but also less formal meetings for a coffee or on a playground. The beginnings of this initiative were exactly social in character: it was about "leaving the house, leaving the child with daddy (...) and spending some time in a different atmosphere." As one of the regular participants of the meetings says, an important aspect of them is still the exchange of views "between moms who face similar problems." But with time, the group became more formalized and entered into cooperation with communal units (especially with the Communal Social Welfare Center - CSWC) which support its activities mainly in material terms. This cooperation undoubtedly facilitates the organization of meetings, but it also has a disciplinary character. Some of the issues discussed respond to the needs of the financing institution. Others evoke critical opinions from them, although this does not lead to topics' withdrawal. For example, people who did not take part in the meetings thought that it was "inappropriate" to organize a discussion on sex life, because these were "intimate" problems. However, even though the topics proposed by the organizer infringe in a sense the conventional approaches to gender/sexuality<sup>7</sup>, they do not break with the naturalization of gender/sexual difference. As part of the meetings, the obviousness of the

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<sup>7</sup> Apart from the aforementioned issues of sex life, which introduces "privacy" into the "public" debate, another example is the departure from the medicalized constructions of pregnancy, childbirth, and post-partum period.

difference is supported by scientific authorities who seek its sources in the physiology of the human body.

In general, most participants of the meetings emphasize they have rather conventional families: "Just like (...) it should be (...). A husband, a wife, children." Some openly connect it with "regional traditionalism." However, it is primarily having children, and not a husband, that defines a family: "I feel more rooted in this regional traditionalism and I was surprised that a young girl (...) doesn't want to have children, doesn't want a family.(...) Not to mention (...) having a husband. That's a different story."

Children as a family-defining aspect are also essential when it comes to their circles of friends. Childless families are those who cannot have children, not those who do not want to have them. Recalling the importance of children and the family as important aspects of "Silesianity," they also emphasize that in many respects their own families differ not only from the families of their parents, but also from those of many of their peers. This concerns above all the more partner relations with husbands, especially in the context of delegating household chores, more democratic ways of raising children, and also attempts to connect family life with professional or personal development. One of the dimensions of this difference is participation in the group's meetings: although they encourage their friends who do not work professionally, taking care of the house and the children, they do not want to come to those meetings although "they whine they're miserable."

Our interlocutors themselves emphasize the difficulty or even impossibility to perfectly fulfill all the roles in their family, social, and professional lives:

In this (...) Silesian mentality (...) perhaps there's this thing that (...) this woman or this girl is so resourceful, (...) she goes to work, she has a family, she does everything around the house and the children. (...) But (...) when I talk to (...) women of similar age to mine, they admit that they are just so tired sometimes, that they would want to have everything (...) and on the inside they're simply falling apart. (...) This



might not be easy to admit, but I think that once one woman opens up more and confesses, then others eventually follow.

Accordingly, even if the group's meetings are primarily educational and do not serve to solve individual problems, there are "women's circles" within it who share similar experiences. Thanks to this, participation in meetings is a form of support in dealing with various challenges faced by women and men, and created by the departure from traditional scenarios of "femininity," "masculinity," or "family." At the same time it creates a space in which these categories are (at least to some extent) destabilized.

### **Local agency of women**

The second group is an association bringing together persons (mostly women) of different ages (from twenty- to sixty-year-olds). Its beginnings go back to the decoupage and sewing courses offered by the CCC. Its founder says that initially her aim was to gather women with artistic skills who did not present their works to a wider public:

I knew there were plenty of people in the area who did something, had talent, but were sitting at home and could not present themselves, so to speak. And I wanted them to show themselves somehow. At the first meeting there must have been about forty people. A sculptor, a painter, and what not.

But when it turned out that the group in question was supposed to work socially first of all, for the benefit of others and not of the members, many people gave up. People who remained were those actually interested not only in artistic activity within their own circle, but also addressed to the residents of the area (not necessarily limited to the Dobrzeń Wielki commune). The members explain the efficiency of the group's activities saying that "each one here knows how to do something" and "everyone knows how to do something

else.” As a consequence, together they have potential for proceeding with diverse kinds of initiatives.

The transformation of an informal group into an association that does not focus only on “typically feminine” handicraft activities (such as decoupage, scrapbooking, or sewing) resulted primarily from the need to raise funds for expanding activities. The statutory goals of the association include educational, cultural, and tourist activities, addressed in particular to children and young people, as well as supporting children, young people, and families in a difficult life situation. In addition to the activities aimed at the group members themselves (in the form of craft projects) to simply “spend time together,” the association is the organizer of several cyclical events that have been permanently inscribed in the social landscape of the commune. These are, for instance, intergenerational workshops in decorating Easter eggs or baking gingerbread cookies, a party for children with disabilities on St. Nicholas’ Day, and summer camps for the children from a village severely struck by the OPS expansion.<sup>8</sup> The association also coordinates one of the biggest outdoor initiatives in the area, which combines artistic and sporting events. Its main component is an intergenerational cross-country run.

The implementation of the above projects requires collaboration with many institutions from which funds can be obtained, as well as adequate social capital facilitating both generating material help and solving various types of organizational problems. In this context, the social (and educational) resources of individuals involved in the association’s activities are important, as well as their characterological features:

I have a lot of flaws, but I have one asset, I can organize everything, I’m not afraid of anything, I make decisions quickly. (...) I don’t throw my hands up. I have positive adrenaline. Obstacles motivate me instead of breaking me down. My husband’s a pessimist, maybe that’s why. You need a really big dose of optimism to get through this life.

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<sup>8</sup> In 2016 the camp was organized with financial support from the Commune Office and PGE GiEK S.A.

The association cooperates not only with the communal structures (the Commune Office, CSWC, CCC) and other local groups, institutions and companies that support their activities in different ways, but also with enterprises and institutions of supralocal levels, mainly national, which in turn are inscribed in the wider context of European Union (EU). In the future, members do not rule out applying for funds directly from the EU. This is where their skills in preparing grant applications count, but also less formal contacts, thanks to which they get advice on how to apply for funds effectively. The sources of financing to a certain extent determine the nature of the activities (defined by the possibilities of procuring funds), but also of the group itself. As the leader says, in order to apply for funding the association would have to encourage men to join, so as to meet the requirements of the “fourth EU directive”<sup>9</sup>: “there have to be those equal rights, that equality. Here it is sort of feminized.”

Nonetheless, although there are individual men involved in the activities of the association, the main driver of activity is the specific “agency of women,” embedded in a more or less essentialized gender difference. The said difference is associated most of all with psychological dissimilarity. “[Men] think a bit differently than us.” In general, many of them believe that women are more likely to take on additional activities: “It seems to me that men can only focus on one thing. And they don’t do anything else, they come from work and they don’t feel like doing anything.” On the other hand, they indicate that perhaps gender affects the type of social involvement: activities

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<sup>9</sup> Directive (EU) 2015/849 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2015 on the prevention of the use of the financial system for money laundering or terrorist financing, amending Regulation (EU) No 648/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing the Directive of the European Parliament and Council 2005/60 / EC and Commission Directive 2006/70 / EC (Text with EEA relevance) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/PL/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32015L0849>, accessed: 29/05/2018. However, I did not find references to gender in the above directive, which shows the specific efficiency of legislative systems: not only the legal provisions, but also the discursive practices focused around them become a significant tool in constructing reality.

connected with sport, both in the Dobrzeń Wielki commune and in the Opole region, are dominated by men. Moreover, although they consider gender to be a crucial determinant of the divergence of social roles, the members of the association emphasize that a lot depends on upbringing as well: "It really shows. When a boy falls down, it's like: you're okay, keep on running. When a girls does, there's panic. And this is the way it works later on, everything results from upbringing, girls need to be well-behaved, pretty dresses, legs together, and boys are boys."

Both the association's activity and the discursive practices of its individual members problematize the image of "passive femininity" as a characteristic feature of the Opole Silesia. Conventional, somewhat "private" activities of women become a point of departure for creating wider networks of cooperation which result in "public" events addressed to all the residents of the commune and neighboring areas. What is important, the most spectacular one - the intergenerational cross-country run - enters the domain of sport, which is perceived by many of our interlocutors as a "typically masculine" sphere of social activity.

### **Silesianity full of singing**

The third group is a vocal band comprising eight women in their sixties and seventies, which originated in the local church choir. As its members say, this and similar ensembles (relatively numerous in the Dobrzeń Wielki commune) were created in the 1990s, when it was no longer forbidden to disclose one's Silesian or German identity. They were encouraged to form the group by a local activist of the Socio-Cultural Association of Germans in Opole Silesia. Musically, the group is run by a person employed by the CCC. Rehearsals take place in the fire station of the local Volunteer Fire Department. From its very beginning, the band participated in the Festival of Choirs and Singers' Ensembles of the German Minority of the Opole Voivodeship in Walce, where - as the group members say - it

won many awards. They also performed in the commune's partner towns in Switzerland and Germany, the trips being financed by the CCC. According to the official information, the band sings in Polish, German, and Silesian. However, the members report they also sing in Czech and Ukrainian, and with the choir - in Latin and Italian. In the narratives of our interlocutors, the stories about singing in the ensemble are strictly connected with the stories about singing in the choir, and often they do not distinguish between them. Their discursive practices focus around singing as such, presented by all the members of the band as a passion realized from childhood, while its concrete location seems of secondary importance.

The group members recall that when their children were little, going to rehearsals or performances (at that time of the church choir) posed a challenge to many of them: "In the countryside, it wasn't that easy to just go to a rehearsal. (...) First you had to listen to all those: »Where have you been for so long?!«" Mothers or neighbors would help them combine their passion for singing with household chores. Some of the husbands would also join in to help. Taking into account that the stories told often tend to say more about the present than the past (Moore 1999: 153), the image they construct of their (most probably idealized) youth as a colorful world full of joy and laughter, where in various ways they would negotiate their rights to sing, is actually a critical commentary on their present situations or life possibilities.

A person from a younger generation who positions himself as a distanced analyst of Silesian reality claims that the popularity of singing bands in the regions is connected with the process of depopulation: women whose children and grandchildren live in Germany and whose husbands are dead treat their own participation in such groups as an antidote to loneliness. That is undoubtedly true, and the circumstances that some of the members have to face confirm that thesis. Only the youngest one of them, still professionally active, says that belonging to the ensemble gives her the opportunity for personal development: she meets new people, learns new languages and new songs. For the older ones, it is primarily a form

of entertainment and social life. They say the group members are "like a family": they celebrate birthdays together, wedding anniversaries, they have coffee, and sometimes "a bit of cognac." However, this is why it is worth noting that despite difficulties they try to remain active and enjoy life. As a senior activity coordinator in the Dobrzeń Wielki commune says, seniors are "aware," it is not difficult to "get them out of the house." They are "modern" and they want to travel, and not just crochet or knit. At the same time, she emphasizes that women significantly more often than men are interested in participating in the activities prepared for them. Older members of the ensemble, apart from singing or participating in the life of the parish, take advantage of the commune offer: they go to the swimming pool, to gymnastics-educational meetings, they practice Nordic walking.

The activity of this and similar bands disturbs the thesis of the collapse of "Silesianity." Undoubtedly it is true, as one of our interlocutors claims, that both the performed songs and the stage costumes are not "typically Silesian," that is, as presented in conventional ethnological literature: "one [lady] could sew and she would sew as she wanted, as it seemed right to her, but that was not Silesian culture at all." However, the social space of the discussed group as well as of other groups, also serves the performative (re)creating of "Silesian identity." The process acquires a somewhat imagological (in the Milan Kundera's sense of the word) character. The specificity of the region is linked to the borderland, which is sometimes associated with the terrains of Austria, Bavaria, and Silesia, and some other times with the Polish-German-Czech territory. Regardless of the concrete geographical location, the "Silesian cultural intimacy" - in Michael Herzfeld's terms (2004) - is seen as combining different traditions: "Being a person of the borderland does not have to limit us (...). It can only enrich."

According to our interlocutors, a very important aspect of "Silesianity" so understood is precisely passion for singing, which is supposed to connect all the cultural circles described here. Singing in Silesian and German, often to the accompaniment of an accordion,

squeezebox, or other instrument, constituted a meaningful part of their families' lives for many generations: it accompanied both work time, and family meetings. The interviewees also emphasize the significance of maintaining those traditions. Their passion for singing was instilled in them by older members of their families: grandmothers, grandfathers, mothers, or fathers. Love for music (as a profession or a hobby) is also continued by the generations of their children and grandchildren. Also the unconventional choice of songs and stage costumes criticized by persons from the outside is interpreted by the members of the group in the categories of "Silesianity." They say that the lyrics of Silesian songs were given to them by a woman who had an extensive knowledge of the subject. She composed the lyrics herself and performed them "just like they used to sing." The designs for the costumes are selected by the members of the band and they are in Bavarian style. Thus, they comply with aforementioned concept of "Silesianity," created at the intersections of several regional or national traditions. At the same time, our interlocutors admit that the younger generation is not interested in singing in such groups. Nonetheless, they emphasize that young people in the Dobrzeń Wielki commune engage in other activities, for example majorettes.

### **Forging (Silesian) character**

In recent years, the majorettes operating at the CCC have become one of the essential elements of the commune's identity landscape. Not only do they participate in most of local socio-cultural events, but they are increasingly successful in Poland and abroad. As a consequence, they appear to function as a specific "emblem" of Dobrzeń Wielki.

According to the originator of the group's founding, due to the fact that the CCC orchestra was "getting old," he decided that "pretty girls could attract young people." Initially they were supposed to be a formation marching in front of the orchestra and not

a dance group, which they eventually became, and the group consisted of seven people. In 2016, there were already almost 160 girls divided into six groups: seniors, juniors, two groups of cadets, and two preschool groups, taken care of by two trainers: "First they go to «momma,» whom the children adore, and then they move on to «harpy,» who prepares juniors and seniors for championships." Our interlocutors claim that the popularity of majorettes in Silesia, including the Opole Silesia, results from the fact that in Poland this sport was initiated in this very region in the late 1980s. Nonetheless, the majorettes from Dobrzeń Wielki are trained by coaches from Czechia and Slovakia, where professional schools have been operating for years. It is the Czech and Slovakian teams that usually score high in championships. Until the administrative division of the commune became effective, most costs related to the functioning of the team, including participation in competitions, were incurred by the CCC.

There are no men among the majorettes from Dobrzeń Wielki. On the one hand, it results from formal requirements, since in dance formation championships boys and men largely perform solo, because only one can participate in group performances. On the other hand, however, the lack of male majorettes is the effect of the Polish (or Silesian) specificity of this sport. As the originator of the group's foundation says, in Western European federations the percentage of boys and men is higher. Moreover, "typically feminine" costumes are only attributes of dance formations. In other Western European formations, sports outfits dominate. The statement made by an interviewee, who appreciates the mastery of male solo dancers performing in competitions, clearly shows that engaging in this particular type of sport is, at least for some of them, strictly associated with "femininity" and "simply does not fit" men:

Majorettes is a way to femininity, way to elegance, and as far as little girls are concerned, they are definitely attracted by the colorful costumes, all the sequins on those costumes. (...) Well, first and foremost, these are always showy girls who walk in front of the orchestra, shapely, elegant. (...) These girls have to be superbly dressed, everything has



to be fitting and steamed, with diamantes attached, make up - this teaches them being women, taking care of themselves (...) so that they look good for later.

However, although being a majorette is obviously linked to a performative femininity, embodied by a pretty, graceful and elegant young woman, this aspect is also in many ways destabilized in the discursive practices of the interviewees. Although they all admit that the feminization of this sport is connected precisely with it being perceived as “typically feminine,” there are voices saying that it is too bad that no more boys are training. On the one hand, some believe that they would be a catalyst of “womanish” behaviors: “Only women (...) it’s hard this way, some men would be of use (...) at these championships. (...) This one’s prettier, and that one was uglier, and yet something else, and that one was worse.” On the other hand, the presence of boys would open up new choreographic possibilities. Yet, they still have not succeeded in attracting one to the Dobrzeń Wielki team.

All the interlocutors clearly emphasize that being a majorette is not just about being pretty, but it is in the first place a school of character. Belonging to the team teaches healthy competition and creating relations within a group. Majorettes are “one big family:” “Between these instructors, we really do support one another, help one another, and it is just a pleasure. The girls between teams, between towns separated by many kilometers, they keep in touch and it is beautiful that this connects them.”

The stage is related to competition based on fair play. On the one hand, they absolutely do not spy on the other teams to steal elements of their choreographies. On the other one, they do not disclose the details of their own choreographies even to their schoolmates who dance in other teams. These are kept secret until the competition. Although in every team there are obviously conflicts and the Dobrzeń Wielki team is no different, this cannot translate into neither training nor competition: majorettes must trust one another and cooperate.

Being a majorette teaches also many other things useful in adult life: courage, effective time management, discipline, perseverance, not giving up in case of failure, and the awareness that only hard work brings the desired results: "If they want to achieve something, they cannot slack off, they have to practice." And these elements are frequently evoked by our older interlocutors, who consider them as significant features of Silesian people.

The above analysis concerns the "pre-partition" situation, which changed after January 1, 2017, when some of the villages (*sołectwa*) of the Dobrzeń Wielki commune together with the OPS became part of the city of Opole. However, contrary to the concerns voiced by the interviewees and the fears that the division of the commune would prevent any social activity (see Baer 2018), by November 2018, which was the last time I had a chance to contact them, it did not happen.

Two of the groups discussed here suspended their activities: an educational group for "young moms," and the vocal ensemble. However, as my interlocutors emphasize, this situation is not a result of the commune's partition but of other circumstances. In the first case, the leader of the group had another child and could not continue to coordinate the group's activity. Although it was possible to procure funds from the CSWC for this type of activity, there was nobody willing to "take over" and prepare a program or handle organizational matters. The vocal band, which operated in one of the villages attached to Opole, lost its musical guidance financed by the CCC. However, the main reason behind the dissolution of the group was the life situation of some of its members. Despite the possibility to obtain subsidies from the Opole municipality for further activity of the ensemble, they had to give up due to their own health condition or health condition of family members. But, they remained in the parish choir. Those who wanted to do something more, realize their passion in another band and/or a vocal and theater group. They also continue to frequent animation classes for seniors, which are conducted by the same person, now employed by the Opole

municipality. As one of them says, in the context of the impact of the commune's division on the offer for seniors, "everything is great and nothing has changed."

Also the members of the association and the trainers of the majorettes, who remained within the limits of the Dobrzeń Wielki commune, reports that not much has changed in their operations. The association implements the current program partly on the basis of external financing, and partly thanks to the support of communal institutions, although they admit that the communal funds, compared to previous years, are reduced. The only change consists that the 2017 summer camp for children from the village which is now a part of Opole, being financed - excepting PGE GiEK S.A. - by the Opole municipality, not the Commune Office. However, the importantly worse financial situation of the commune influenced to a certain extent the situation of majorettes. The classes are now paid, and the CCC can no longer finance the costumes. Yet, as one of the trainers says,

It's not bad (...). We collected as much as we could in our current situation. We have these fees that we keep an eye on, we pay for everything from them, we want to acquire sponsors and so on. Last year [2017], when it all started, we were in the black, on a low level, but still in the black. So it's not like we didn't have enough. All the accreditations, buses, etc., we managed to cover.

The coaches are still hired by the CCC, and the commune continues to pay for the rental of gyms for practice. Trainers from abroad are still involved in training the Dobrzeń Wielki majorettes, although currently it is to some extent owing to the private contacts of the Dobrzeń Wielki coaches. The parents "calmly accepted" the fact that they would have to pay for the classes, as they "understood the situation." However, as the classes ceased to be free of charge, the recruitment diminished by half in the youngest group in September 2017 compared to the previous year. Persons whose social activities are still located in the commune admit that the situation worsened in many ways: "It's not as it used to be, but then again it's no major

tragedy.” For instance, although the CCC’s offer of classes decreased significantly, many new options appeared, often organized by private persons, although they are obviously paid.

In conclusion, the critical perspective proposed here, which attempts to “unsettle the subjects and discursive forms with which [it] deal[s]” (Fortun 2012: 459), allows for a different perception of the situation in the Opole Silesia from the one offered by literature on the subject. Obviously in many ways the discursive practices triggered by this fieldwork research support the analyses advocating “dark” traditions in the social sciences (Ortner 2016). They do reveal conventional ideas about “masculinity,” “femininity,” or “family,” problems brought by migration and depopulation of the region, the reluctance of many people to engage in social activity, or unwillingness of the younger generation to cultivate traditional “Silesianity.” But, they also prove that instead of mourning “disintegration of family,” “collapse of Silesian identity,” or the parted Dobrzeń Wielki commune, one can recognize new forms of “family life,” the transgressive potential of “women’s agency,” discursive (re)constructions of the “region,” new emblems of the “local community,” or possibilities emerging in the post-division realities.

Certainly I do not assume that the proposed form of anthropological critique is innocent and provides an absolutely truer picture of the world than the literature cast here as the foil. My theoretical stance undoubtedly reflects the intellectual climate intrinsic to global “flexible capitalism” (see Harvey 1990) and should be problematized in this light. Moreover, the adopted methodology, while combined with time limitations of actual research in the field due to policies of a funding institution and professional responsibilities of a university teacher, makes it difficult to achieve actual “intimacy” with the people met at research sites. Thus, it allows mapping processes and phenomena rather than an actual immersion in the field. An open issue is also the extent to which the analytical attention can be actually shifted from human acting subjects treated as a source of knowledge to the creative potential of cultural, social, political, or economic relations. An experience of collaborating with particular

people living in the particular time and place somehow naturalizes the neo-humanistic philosophy of “possessive individualism” (see Morris 2007). Taking all of the above issues into account, I believe that the advocated form of anthropological critique is not a satisfactory alternative, but just a provisional strategy among many other critical insights offered by social sciences (see Abu-Lughod 1991).

*Translated by Anna Pilińska*

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