

LIVING IN THE SPACES OF (POST-)SOCIALISM: THE CASE OF NOWA HUTA

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This two-year project, begun in November 2000, comes to an end in November 2002. Whilst the main phase of dissemination follows the completion of the project (with publication in academic journals in the UK and Poland), the following summary draws attention to the main features of the project and its key findings.

TIMETABLE AND METHODOLOGIES

Within the project timetable, ten months were spent based in Kraków and Nowa Huta from November 2000 to September 2001. In this time, the key foci of the research were:

- 1) a review of literatures on Nowa Huta, including reportage and propaganda from the 1950s and 60s; academic work (particularly sociological and geographical) written during the socialist period; and contemporary academic work which reviews the historical development of Nowa Huta in the light of new sources post-1989.
- 2) interviews with key informants in Kraków and Nowa Huta including representatives of the city and district councils, trade unions, labour offices and social services, and other community organisations; these interviews built on and complemented those carried out in an earlier phase of research.
- 3) a continuous review of local and national newspapers and collation of articles on Nowa Huta, Huta Sendzimira, the steel industry and more general themes such as unemployment, the Labour Code etc.
- 4) thirty two interviews with residents of Nowa Huta, identified through existing contacts in the district but chosen to reflect a wide range of perspectives within the community; these interviews followed an interview guide which explored relatively freely themes of work, home, social lives, relationships with friends and neighbours, Nowa Huta itself and Kraków, amongst others.
- 5) attendance at meetings of various bodies working in relevant areas, such as the Forum for Nowa Huta, the Stowarzyszenie na Rzecz Powołania Muzeum Nowej Huty i HTS.

KEY FINDINGS

The following paragraphs identify some of the key 'findings' of this research project. There are necessarily abbreviated and will be discussed in much more detail in forthcoming publications. This project was explicitly an academic project, funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. As such, many of the research findings are oriented to other UK academics and relate to the work of other academic geographers. However, I hope that some of the points which I make below will of interest too to institutions and individuals in Nowa Huta and Kraków.

Labour and Community Politics in Nowa Huta

Building on interviews and other research carried out in 1998, one of the key directions in which the research developed was in exploring the changing role of labour organisations in shaping Nowa Huta over the years. Nowa Huta's particular history as a 'Poland's first socialist city' and a bastion of the Solidarity struggles is reflected in an important role played by different labour organisations (trade unions, the steelworks itself, other allied organisations) in the lives of the community.

Under socialism, Huta Lenina was without doubt the central town-forming institution. The work it provided, the facilities it supported and the trade unions it housed played a major role in shaping not only the built environment of the community, but also determined the nature and scope of social, cultural, sporting and domestic lives. At least in theory, at this time, Nowa Huta was a town built by workers for workers. Formal institutions of work appeared to be the most important actors in the life of the community. Despite the years of hardship and shortage (most especially of housing) during the construction of Huta Lenina and Nowa Huta, the early to mid-1970s, when production and employment peaked at the steelworks, were seen to be a period of rising living standards. In Nowa Huta, the strategic importance of Huta Lenina assured the residents a particularly large share of these improvements and both statistical and interview material suggests that these were the town's glory years. Not only was production and employment at its peak, but the shops were full, the town's sports clubs and cultural associations recorded their heydays and the number of meals provided through collective facilities was at its highest.

This dominance of formal, state-sponsored organisations began to be questioned as opposition to the socialist regime arose from the late 1950s onwards. In Nowa Huta, these challenges clearly began with the struggle for the church but quickly spread to other issues. The relationship between workers and the formal institutions which were supposed to support and represent them was faltering. In their place, new looser movements were emerging to take their place. Nowa Huta became a bastion of the anti-communist struggle; its workplaces, churches and homes developed into sites of resistance and organisation as informal networks arose to challenge the state and provide for the community's everyday needs as the state increasingly failed to do so. These new networks continued to be rooted in workers' organisation but were founded also on alliances with groups both within and beyond Nowa Huta, such as students' groups, churches and other movements.

In the post-socialist period, we can see the legacy of many of these movements, both formal and informal, as structures have been set in place, or maintained, to ease the transformation of the community which accompanies the restructuring of Huta Sendzimira. The proliferation of trade unions within Huta Sendzimira is just one example of the continued presence of labour organisations in Nowa Huta; the activities of many of these organisations beyond the workplace builds on and reflects the history of community activity experienced both under socialism and during the Solidarity years. Whilst attention is still paid by the unions to issues within the workplace and to representing individual workers, the threats to the survival of Huta Sendzimira shifted the focus to the scale of the community; through the negotiation of very generous redundancy and early retirement packages and through lobbying for the future development of HTS at the regional and national scale, the unions have in fact focused much of their attention on the survival of Nowa Huta itself, recognising that without HTS Nowa Huta is at risk of extinction. Through their social funds, the Towarzystwo Solidarnej Pomocy, the joint union pensioners' centre and a range of other less formal organisations, Nowa Huta's trade unions are acting well beyond the workplace, in the community, to ensure its survival. All of this contributes to an amazing network of support provided within and beyond formal labour organisations which undoubtedly does much to assist the lives of those most disadvantaged by the economic and political shifts which have occurred since 1989.

Work and community

Nowa Huta's particular labour history is reflected not only in an important role for various labour organisations but also by a central place for work within the life of the community. The nature of work, especially industrial work, under socialism meant that the experiences of employment in Nowa Huta at that time were of ubiquity, security and social advance. Interviewees spoke, almost without exception, of the opportunities presented to them by work in Huta Lenina and Nowa Huta more widely; those opportunities not only existed in the world of work, but also in domestic and social lives too as work provided access to somewhere to live and to facilities for leisure, health, education etc..

In clear contrast to earlier times, the characterisation of Poland's labour market today as one of significant unemployment, fragmented and insecure forms of work and a growth in service work offers none of the benefits which older interviewees spoke of. Today, the experience of my interviewees was more likely to be one of insecurity (both within and beyond work), fear of job loss, increasing pressure to work overtime and commit more and more of their lives to work and a erosion of domestic and social lives as a result of the changing nature of work. This erosion takes at least two forms. Work available today rarely offers the chance of supporting a whole family; the low level and insecurity of pay doesn't allow for families to buy or rent housing as they might wish (especially new families and young people trying to enter the property market) nor does it support participation in social and cultural activities which are becoming increasingly commercialised (see below). In addition to this financial deterioration, interviewees repeatedly noted that the prevalence of fear and envy at work was eroding the quality of personal relationships at work. As a result, the social lives built up around work were being destroyed and more and more people were retreating to the home, reluctant to engage in activities of any kind in the wider community.

This withdrawal to the home and destruction of the quality of personal relationships was having a knock-on effect on the community as a whole. Though by and large despair and deprivation are rarely seen on the streets of Nowa Huta, many interviewees noted that the impacts of economic restructuring were increasingly visible. Numerous interviewees described a listlessness, a demoralisation, especially amongst young people, and this loss of direction was seen to characterise not only individuals, but also the community. That the community is increasingly seen as one with less and less work, and with work which is of a poorer quality than before, has had a significant impact on the identity of Nowa Huta. Much academic work in the UK and North America has suggested that work is no longer as important in shaping people's lives as it was under the post-war regimes in both east and west. What my research in Nowa Huta has demonstrated, it seems, is that work is just as important, but in very different ways. Rising poverty and the withdrawal from public leisure spheres to the home raise significant questions about the ability of those interviewed to shape new identities on the basis of consumption. Despite the fact that work now no longer offers the security, benefits and community once experienced in Nowa Huta, many of my interviewees testified to the continuing dominance of their lives by work, the search for work or the absence of work. People were spending more and more time and energy working, to the detriment of their lives outside work; the absence, or low value, of work was shaping, particularly, young people's lives as they had no access to other forms of stability – an apartment and the income to support a family; and the loss of work was ruining relationships built around it. There is some evidence that some people are developing newer identities through activities such as entrepreneurship, and others are returning to older identities based around land. Nevertheless, work remains central.

Perhaps the most important effect of employment restructuring at the scale of the community has been the shifting commonality of experience. Many of my interviewees discussed the ties, both within and beyond the workplace, which bound the community together. People worked together, drank together, holidayed together and shopped together. Their lives were bound to each other

through the routines and institutions established around the workplace. Children followed their parents through the markers of adulthood and extended families often formed the hub of active networks of social contact. Today, the common experiences are more likely to be of job loss and insecurity than social progression and achievement, and they are less likely to be experienced collectively. The withdrawal to the home and the erosion of the bonds and spaces of community life has meant that the problems of the present tend to be lived alone. What is more, the achievements of the new system – consumption, enterprise – are more likely to be experienced individually too. The wider political implications of this fragmentation of experience means that it is more difficult to question and deal with the ongoing transformations.

Access and mobility

A further theme which has emerged from my research explores the changing experiences of mobility, stability and security in the everyday lives of Nowa Huta, Poland. Much recent work in social science has drawn attention to the new patterns of mobility and security emerging in the light of economic restructuring and globalisation, highlighting the uneven mobility of people in a globalising era and noting that whilst for some travel and social mobility are improved by the expansion of opportunities and the technical advances of late capitalism, others appear instead to be experiencing the increasing spatial restriction of their lives. These stories of mobility and insecurity are especially interesting in Nowa Huta as a result of its history as a town of migrants, of people moving to seek security. There is an apparent paradox in Nowa Huta now being characterised as a place of insecurity, declining mobility and uncertainty, in contrast to its earlier characterisation as a place of opportunity and stability.

As we know, Poland's immediate post-war years were characterized by an ideology of construction which called on Poles to join the task of founding a new Poland, full of opportunities and offering long-term stability. It was within this context that Nowa Huta was founded and developed; the town and steelworks were seen as a site of stability, opportunity and migration, offering possibilities for social mobility and (eventually) security. There were certainly terrible early years when the promises of stability seemed very distant but by the 1960s stories of stability, opportunity and security came through. Material produced by Polish sociologists and geographers in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, explores the ways in which migrants to Nowa Huta swiftly embarked on the stabilisation of their lives, spending their relatively high wages on 'domestic investment' (furniture, kitchen equipment, clothes, etc.) and rejecting the day-to-day uncertainty which had characterised their immediate post-war lives in favour of planning for tomorrow, building rooted social networks and forging a deep local patriotism. This phase of settling down fed into the years of rising living standards through the late 1960s and 1970s, which I have already discussed above.

Clearly the experiences of the 1980s were marked by dislocation and insecurity in multiple spheres of life but the transformations which these political challenges brought on have led to the characterisation of Nowa Huta rather as a place of insecurity, restricted mobility and 'entrapment'. This characterisation takes a number of forms. Nowa Huta's early years were characterised, perhaps paradoxically given the prevalence of migrants in the population, by a relatively small everyday geography. According to Renata Siemieńska's important book *Nowe Życie w Nowym Mieście*, lives were focused on work in, and construction of, the town and steelworks; social networks, echoing the rural traditions of the migrants' home communities, were centred on neighbouring blocks; and a distinct division was maintained between Nowa Huta and Kraków. The loss of financial support from the steelworks and the growing commercialisation of social and cultural facilities has destroyed the 'self-sufficiency' of Nowa Huta. For my interviewees, particularly young people, Nowa Huta offered little for entertainment, in terms of either quantity and quality. The proliferation of opportunity in Kraków has run alongside the closure of facilities in Nowa Huta. Nevertheless, just three of my thirty two interviewees expressed any desire to leave Nowa Huta permanently. All but those three in fact expressed a very clear and strong positive

identification with Nowa Huta as a distinctive part of Kraków, with its own identity. The increasing need, and desire, to visit Kraków for entertainment, education and employment does not seem to have significantly reduced the strength of ties in Huta. Low levels of housing mobility and the association of housing tenure with the workplace have meant that networks of acquaintance and friendship tend to be long-standing and stable. Often neighbours all moved into their flats in the same week, and there has been little turnover since. Such neighbourly networks form a significant, but almost taken for granted, source of support.

The importance of familiarity in today's Poland was stressed in particular by older residents who are feeling increasingly threatened by the emergence of street crime and perceive a decline in safety. Although none of my interviewees had been the victim of street crime, rumour and feelings of infirmity caused many of them to characterise their community as a threatening one. For older people particularly, the experiences of mobility in youth are contrasted with the feeling of entrapment today. This differentiation in the experience of security links to the commodification of mobility and access; access is limited by money now. People no longer have to holiday in set destinations, the workplace pension in the mountains or subsidised apartments on the Black Sea, but this also means that there are no longer any guarantees for travel. The provision of leisure opportunities through the workplace made trips to the cinema, theatre and opera, for example, accessible for all. In a community like Nowa Huta oriented to the needs of a strategically important steelworks and its workers, the level of recreational provision was particularly high, and embedded within the community's urban fabric. This contrasts markedly with the current situation, which though characterised by a plethora of sophisticated new facilities such as multiplex cinemas, shopping malls and a water park (all located on Nowa Huta's north-western edge), only serves to highlight the exclusivity of leisure today, with access controlled by budget.

Heritage, identity and tourism

Nowa Huta has been represented as many things in its relatively short history – a socialist city, a town of labour, a town of peasants and immigrants, a bastion of the Party, a city without God, a town of struggle, later a bastion of Solidarity. All of these different Nowa Hutas can be found in propaganda from the 1950s, academic work from the 60s and 70s, reportage from across the decades, international press coverage in the turbulent years of the 1980s and in the imaginations of people living and working in Nowa Huta.

In recent years these debates surrounding Nowa Huta's history and identity have become more important as the post-socialist decade, in Poland and elsewhere, has been marked by a re-writing of history and a promotion of different histories for the purposes of heritage tourism. An important element of the development of tourism in central Europe, targeted both at outsiders and insiders, has been a dramatic growth in what has been called 'communist heritage tourism'. There are a number of dilemmas which the promotion of this kind of tourism suggests. In some cases, we see a 'snipping out' of the communist period and a recourse to earlier, more palatable histories. In others, we see the removal of the artefacts of socialist realism to a distant site or a museum, where they can be consumed very much as artefacts, as faintly ridiculous remnants of the past. In places like Nowa Huta the questions are trickier – its embedded sites, buildings or communities, which though important in their socialist and Solidarity era heritage, continue to be places in which people live, often with the legacies of socialism. Nowa Huta is not a skansen; it is home to 250,000 people.

The value of Nowa Huta's heritage works at two, intertwined levels. The valuing and promotion of community heritage plays a part in the attraction of external capital, but perhaps more important than the external projection of the town's identities is the perception of such images internally. The stereotyping and negative representation of Nowa Huta by outsiders undoubtedly has an impact on those living in the town. Whilst the town's particular histories have without doubt engendered a very clear 'local patriotism', the use this could be put to in supporting initiatives for community

development is undermined by the defensiveness often invoked by derision from outside. In work on the Welsh coal mining valleys and their heritage, a British academic distinguishes between two different ways of talking about and presenting communities. A more political view sees “community as a resource for future-oriented political action”; a more anthropological view focuses “less [on] the potential for communal action, and more in the enterprise of documentation and preservation”. The former aims to shape the future, the latter simply hopes to represent the past.

Recent plans to promote Nowa Huta’s heritage and develop the tourist potential of its history have taken a number of forms. The plans of the *Stowarzyszenie na Rzecz Powołania Muzeum Nowej Huty i HTS*’s for a museum of Nowa Huta and Huta Sendzimir aim to present the economic and social significance of the town and steelworks against the wider political and economic context of Poland and Europe whilst also promoting a development programme for Kraków East; the city council’s tourist trails, after much discussion, present an interesting, but fairly narrow image of Nowa Huta’s history (though, as Tomasz Urynowicz notes, they cover “not only the socialist realist part of our district, but also those places which lived in the shadow of the socialist legend”) and SocLand’s plans for a multimedia museum reflect a desire not to tell the story of Nowa Huta but to caricature socialist realism and “create something like Disneyland, a living skansen, where we can show the reality of the PRL” (SocLand’s Krystyna Zachwatowicz). Whatever the other rationales behind these programmes, the promotion of Nowa Huta’s economic development is an important aspect of each.

Each of these projects involves a range of actors, from members of the community, to district and city councillors, representatives of Huta Sendzimir, the European Union through offers of funding to SocLand, private investors and potential visitors from the rest of Poland and beyond. The involvement of so many different bodies and the promotion of so many different ideas have inevitable led to debate and conflict over the presentation of Nowa Huta’s history, much of which has been verbalised on the pages of *Gazeta Wyborcza*’s local supplement, *Gazeta w Krakowie*, as well as in other local fora. Local people have expressed concerns about ‘living in a zoo’ but also seem proud that their community is seen as special; others in Nowa Huta are worried about a one-sided portrayal of the community and its history; still others are excited by the prospect of tourism developments in the town.

The SocLand project perhaps acknowledges an unpleasant truth about Nowa Huta – tourists, both Polish and foreign, are unlikely to visit it to see prehistoric relics and medieval buildings. Poland and Europe are full of these. What Nowa Huta offers is an unrivalled example of socialist urban planning, a unique collection of Stalinist architecture and a colossal steel plant which continues to dominate the physical and social environment. In short, Nowa Huta’s attraction lies precisely in those representations for which it in other circumstances derided. The community faces a difficult task – to balance the representations of Nowa Huta as nothing more than a town of Stalinism, socialism and hero workers with a rich story of diversity and the complexity of everyday life. That these discussions are going on, and are going on in the public sphere, has to be seen as a positive thing; the success with which these conflicts are resolved and the extent to which these developments contribute to the regeneration of Nowa Huta in practice are open questions.

POLICY SUGGESTIONS: RESOURCES FOR THE FUTURE

As I have already suggested, the project was very much an academic one, aimed primarily at achieving a more grounded understanding of the meanings and experiences of post-socialism, as it is being lived in Nowa Huta. For this reason, many of my conclusions are explicitly academic. Nevertheless, a secondary intention was to consider Nowa Huta’s future and to think through some possible policy directions. I am not a policy expert; these suggestions are made simply by an interested outsider, with an academic knowledge of the issues.

There has been a growing body of work, much of it based in communities experiencing severe economic decline, which argues that more attention should be paid in development strategies to the stories and experiences of economic change which are important to the community itself. This work argues that often a key problem is the overriding sense of failure which dominates communities through the focus on economic decline and job loss; in place of these negative stories, it is argued that an effort should be made to gather alternative stories of economic change which validate the multitude of positive community-led activities which have been pursued to ease the process of economic and political restructuring. Development then should be based on supporting and developing the community's existing assets, based on a wide-ranging audit of community resources, institutions and experiences.

This work on asset-based development strikes me as a very appropriate way of thinking about Nowa Huta's future because, as I have discovered in the course of my research, it possesses an amazing range of networks and structures supporting the lives of people within the community, which are currently not only taken for granted, but also fragmented and uncoordinated. The presence of organisations such as the Forum dla Nowej Huty and the Nowohuckie Forum could facilitate a community audit and a strategy for asset-based development.

THE NEXT STEPS?

Following from the two main themes drawn from the research – the meanings and place of work and the experiences of mobility, future plans lead in two distinct directions. The first is a deeper exploration of mobility, with a twin focus on the labour and housing mobility, linking patterns and understandings of mobility to more formal analyses of the development of housing and labour markets. This strand asks how growing mobility will affect the form and value of the local networks identified throughout the research. The second path leads to a more rigorous exploration of the variety of economic strategies employed in Nowa Huta to ensure 'survival'. As I have already suggested there is a vast network of formal and informal organisations working in Nowa Huta to assist people in the management of their daily lives, lives being constructed in a new world of state withdrawal, the commercialisation of social services and the loss of secure and paternalist work. These alternative economic activities range from household production of food to employment on the black market, to taken-for-granted networks of support amongst neighbours. In short, I am interested in what the myriad economic activities which have taken the place, at least in part, of paid work might be.

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