

Communism

Unwrapped

*Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*

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# 3

## “Knife in the Water”

### *The Struggle over Collective Consumption in Urbanizing Poland*

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Two commonplace assumptions about consumption in the Eastern Bloc remain largely uncontested in our understanding of the processes that took place in the postwar period. The first is that, fueled by a general dearth of consumer goods, individual consumption dominated consumption patterns in the region. The second is that socialist societies remained largely underurbanized since resources and state priorities favored industrialization.<sup>1</sup> Yet many socialist states did experience a success of sorts by rapidly turning societies that for centuries had remained deeply rural into urbanized ones. Moving beyond these assumptions thereby allows us to see what took place far more consistently: urbanization and its concomitant organization of collective consumption. Urban collective consumption might not always have been of the “glittering” variety, but it lies at the very heart of an emergent postwar Eastern Europe.

It was as true of the East as it was of the West: in response to the underconsumption of the 1930s, postwar cities turned increasingly Keynesian. This meant, as David Harvey has argued, that their “social, economic and political life [was now] organized around the theme of state-backed, debt-financed consumption.” The result of this was a radical shift in group identities and alliances. No longer were class alliances the principle organizing feature of urban politics. Instead, identities coalesced around “themes of consumption, distribution, and the production and control of space.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the urban crises of the 1960s can be seen as marking this shift toward a “new form of the class struggle.”<sup>3</sup>

This global transformation was by no means restricted to the West and can best be understood as a move away from “supply-side” (production-driven) toward “demand-side” (consumption-based) urbanization. “The urban question,” Manuel Castells famously argued, “refers to the organization of the means of collective consumption at the basis of the daily life of all social groups: housing, education, health, culture, commerce, transport.”<sup>4</sup> This chapter discusses how the urban question was central to the social conflicts of the 1960s, how the struggles over urban space and collective consumption fed into the dramatic events of 1968, and how all this left an indelible mark on contemporary Polish society.

Despite the fact that, as it is often argued, the West in 1968 “turned a deaf ear to rumblings of discontent in Warsaw or Prague,”<sup>5</sup> there are reasons to see events on both sides of the Iron Curtain as related: in both cases, we can understand the urban crises of the 1960s as a clash between conflicting visions of what constituted meaningful urban life. Indeed, 1968 breathed political life into Henri Lefebvre’s notion of the “right to the city,” which claimed that urban dwellers have the right to shape the space around them.<sup>6</sup> Poland’s 1968 was largely experienced as massive anti-Semitic rallies and a media campaign of anti-Zionist scaremongering that resulted in purges within the state apparatus (the Party, universities, administration, media, army, and the like) and the expulsion of more than twenty thousand people from the country. The Polish 1968 was a massive attempt at “state capture,” performed by those who felt disenfranchised by what they saw as a metropolitan, cosmopolitan, “neobourgeois,” and self-serving elite. The symbolic figure of the Jew tied all these attributes together and hence came in handy for propagandists who exploited social grievances that were aggravated throughout the 1960s. One cannot understand the peculiarity of the Polish 1968 without analyzing how such cleavages emerged in the course of struggles throughout the 1960s over the right to the city. This, in turn, is contingent on understanding the peculiar role the state played in urban expansion.

Capitalist suburbanization was achieved mainly thanks to the automobile and home ownership; in the socialist East, it was (largely, but not exclusively) based on public transit and cooperative housing developments. Yet this difference, East and West, was not necessarily parallel to an emphasis on the public versus the private. There would have been no automobile culture in the United States, for example, had there not been state subsidies of oil or a centrally financed interstate motorway system. By the same token, expansion of “public” housing in the socialist Bloc generated new strategies for appropriation of public space for private means. On the whole, in other words, the very same



FIGURE 3.I. The old and the new, side-by-side in Łódź's inner city. Author's collection.

general development toward urban Keynesianism invited contrasting particular solutions on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Together, they constituted different facets of the urban crisis of the 1960s.

These developments were especially visible in the Polish city of Łódź, a major industrial hub, where the events of 1968 were particularly dramatic. Here, the roots of the conflict lay in the postwar spatial transformation, notably in the pattern of Łódź's suburbanization and consequent tensions over the means of collective consumption. Public grievances over social mobility were tied to concurrent displays of conspicuous consumption (particularly centered around private leisure) as well as to consumption of urban (and "public") amenities such as water.

### *Knife in the Water*

Film director Roman Polański's 1962 feature debut, *Knife in the Water*, spoke directly to these very issues. In the same way as he would later portray the Los Angeles "water conspiracy" in *Chinatown* (1974), Polański brilliantly revealed how new social cleavages had arisen in postwar Poland from the struggles over



collective consumption.<sup>7</sup> In the film, water—consumed not only for basic needs but also for leisure—becomes a powerful symbolic vehicle for articulating pent-up grievances. It played on the common yet difficult-to-translate Polish phrase, often evoked in public debates of the 1960s, *jesteśmy narodem na dorobku*: “we are still a nation of upstarts” or “as a nation we are still getting ourselves established materially.”

The film describes how a successful journalist and his attractive wife, off for a sailing weekend, pick up a student hitchhiker in their posh automobile and later bring him onboard. A continuous rivalry between the two men is the film’s main dynamic. The older man, who has already “established himself materially,” seems to have a perpetual need to prove himself and his grit and comes up with countless dares. His ego is shattered when the younger man proves to be his superior in both audacity and cunning. The callow youngster, however, ultimately does not wish to denounce or ridicule the smug older man; quite the contrary, he is here to shamelessly take his place. The two male characters are, in effect, one—only in separate stages of life. “You want to be like him,” the seduced wife tells her young lover. “And don’t you worry—you will be, if you’ve got enough nerve.”

*Knife in the Water* managed to capture two popular notions of the time. First, the rift between those who had already “established themselves materially” and those who had not was more a matter of cunning than of some “objective” criteria; and second, there might not be enough space for everybody on the ladder of upward mobility. As one of Poland’s best film critics, Maria Kornatowska, pointed out in 1963, Polański “revealed with brutal honesty that we are becoming a nation of philistines,” and that “the new social stratification is based upon the distribution of television sets and automobiles.” Polański’s film, she argued, was the very first serious “polemic with the cult of refrigerators and television sets.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet as more and more Poles were getting established materially, critiquing these changes was an increasingly thankless task. The fruits of this national stampede to get established materially emerged in the 1970s during the decade of “socialist consumerism.” It was in this period, a leading dissident recalled, when “I got scared of Poles for the first time, as they had been largely bought off by the system.”<sup>9</sup> Usually this aspect of socialist consumerism is seen as having emerged in full force after two decades of isolation from the consumer-rich West, ignited by exposure to the wonders of the Western window display. The structure of socialist consumer “desire,” however, cannot be merely reduced to this; it was also anchored in deep internal social tensions arising from a postwar social mobility that became clearly visible by the 1960s.

Using consumption to cajole Poles into “amicable cooperation” with the authorities had already begun in 1947. Soon after the war, the communists, whose grip over the Polish population was weak at best, developed a strategy of marginalizing the prewar working-class elite, who in industrial cities such as Łódź were relatively hostile toward the Party, by promoting a young and unskilled labor force fresh from the countryside. This conflict dominated the wave of strikes between 1945 and 1947 that shook the city. Although the authorities found they could exert control over the “unruly youth” in the workplace, outside of it they were virtually powerless. As “hooliganism” became the bane of Stalinism, the disciplining of youth had to move beyond the realm of production. Hence, social conflict gradually expanded from the area of production to that of consumption, and the “Battle over Trade,” a countrywide campaign launched in May 1947 to nationalize both retail and wholesale commerce as well as to combat price gouging, profiteering, embezzlement, and high prices on staple commodities, gradually absorbed the bulk of working-class discontent.<sup>10</sup>

Yet Battle over Trade did not prove to be a surrogate for shop floor politics. Rather, it revealed that social conflict could spread to consumer items—a trend exacerbated in subsequent decades. During the 1960s, the Polish period codified in both historiography and popular consciousness as one of “crude socialism” (*siermiężny socjalizm*), when general consumption rates were still significantly lower than they would be in the 1970s, collective consumption was an increasingly significant topic of public debate. The “thaw” of 1956 opened up a Pandora’s box of grassroots discontents with the housing situation and, more generally, initiated public debate over urban reform. Socialist cities, the argument ran, were growing dangerous and unpleasant to live in, and the task ahead was to facilitate urban consumption for the wider public. This is how an urban planner explained the ideal of a socialist city:

A city adequate to our political system is one where everybody has equal access to public services. All districts ought to be equally saturated with services of mass use, and they should have an equal access to unique services located in the city center. In a socialist city it is unthinkable to make some districts better and others worse with regard to access to services.<sup>11</sup>

Although the post-1956 urban boom was in part a reaction to inequalities in access to urban amenities inherited from the prewar era and

the Stalinist period, the objective of equal access was hardly ever met in practice.

Temporary liberalization of the press (curbed again in 1963) allowed journalists to disclose the previously hidden “dark sides” of Stalinist urbanization. The local weekly in Łódź, called *Odgłosy* (The Echo), founded in 1958, followed this national trend. Workers’ hostels, for example, previously enshrined in propaganda, were described as “pockets of demoralization,” populated by boys and girls “overwhelmed by the whirl of play, pleasures, and unrefined love affairs,” who instead of attending evening schools “immersed themselves in the pleasures of metropolitan life.”<sup>12</sup> Soon it became clear that the only way to contain the unruly youths was to turn workers into parents—which, given that the fresh migrants from the countryside had started establishing families themselves, could be seen as responding to popular needs. The post-1956 public debate made a clear link between juvenile delinquency and the housing problem. If people stopped living in “inhumane conditions,” and children were given their own rooms, or at least could sleep separately from their parents, then juvenile crime would decrease. In old inner-city tenements, two generations often shared sleeping space, and this was believed by some to be a source of demoralization among young people.<sup>13</sup> In the new suburban apartments, youths would have the proper conditions to do their homework, which would mean fewer dropouts, and the school, together with official youth organizations, would be more effective in organizing youngsters’ leisure time.<sup>14</sup>

This campaign was accompanied by the promotion of quasi-consumerist suburban lifestyles and the beginning of popular mass culture, both of which were intended to bolster the role of the family as the “elementary unit” of society. “Fridges, furniture, apartments are as difficult to divide as they are to get hold of,” a journalist commented, further noting how suburbanization was bringing down the divorce rate: “Washing machines and the television set strengthen the solid character of the family-centered structure of the whole society. They create a new type of a cage, where people divided into families swarm with great enthusiasm. And objects such as the television set further solidify the family by closing it within the four walls.”<sup>15</sup> In theory, getting established materially was a nationwide phenomenon, open to everybody. The fact that it was not accounts for the widespread view that the Polish 1960s were a period of “austere” or “crude” socialism, that is, one marked by deficiencies in consumption. Behind this belief lurks a more fundamental one: complaints about the low level of consumption during the 1960s were not about some universal absence of goods, but rather about some small, privileged groups having access to consumption items, while most of the rank and file did not.

This was as true of luxury items as of the more “ordinary” items of collective consumption, such as water.

### Urban Waterscapes

The nationwide push to get established materially unfolded against the backdrop of often very local trajectories. Polański’s film *Knife in the Water* mentions no city directly. But a close reading of local newspapers from 1960s Łódź reveals that Polański, a student of the Łódź Film School, perfectly captured the local “key symbol”: water.<sup>16</sup> In the early nineteenth century, Łódź became “Poland’s Manchester” precisely because of its springs, which made it the ideal location for water-powered manufacturing.<sup>17</sup> Later, when the steam engine took over, water continued to be consumed by the textile industry in enormous quantities. Eventually, depletion of water resources called for municipal action. Yet the industrial elite lobbied to prevent the city from partaking in the all-European “era of reconstruction” that elsewhere erected municipal water and sewage networks.<sup>18</sup> As a result, from the very outset the “urbanization of water” unfolded in Łódź against the backdrop of exclusionary politics;<sup>19</sup> the dearth of clean water available to its residents became the hallmark of Łódź well into the socialist period.

A much-quoted passage about the city described how the “lymphatic children” of Łódź’s slum district of Bałuty had never seen clean water, only “rainbow-hued gutter slime,” and whose main amusement was sailing paper boats, afloat alongside rats, in open sewers.<sup>20</sup> A similar image of a bone-dry landscape was evoked in the most famous book on Łódź, Władysław Reymont’s *Promised Land* (1898). Here, the city is dominated by clouds of dust that “hovered over the lanes, begrimed the dwellings, destroyed every speck of verdure on the crooked, sapless trees, whose gnarled, twisted boughs bent over the fences or stretched before the houses like dry skeletons.”<sup>21</sup> These dry “skeletal” patches were “guarded,” as a journalist recalled of his prewar childhood in Łódź, “with utmost care, because they were the only enclaves of greenery, and even the most mischievous kids in the neighborhood would not dare to pick a leaf from them.” Since parks then charged entry fees, children were confined to play in the contaminated landscape.<sup>22</sup> After 1945, parks were opened up to everybody, and the new housing developments had running water. But the problem was hardly solved.

Usage of running water in postwar Łódź certainly increased at a brisk pace: from 2.4 cubic meters per inhabitant in 1946 to 34.5 in 1968. Yet access to water remained highly uneven. By 1966, 63 percent of apartments in Łódź

were connected to the water network (in other major Polish cities this varied between 80 and 90 percent), and only 33 percent had their own separate bathroom.<sup>23</sup> Of course, all of the new suburban housing projects were connected to the system, whereas in the former industrial-cum-residential districts the struggle over water between workers and industry continued. In the district of Chojny, *Odgłosy* reported, many working-class families took “Saturday family baths” (i.e., washed themselves in the very same bathwater, usually in order of seniority) because water was still purchased.<sup>24</sup> In Widzew, another “old” district, more than 250 old-fashioned wells with wooden cranes were still the major source of water in the 1960s. Yet many (around 12 percent of Łódź’s population) could not access water even in this way, and they were serviced by municipal water trucks.<sup>25</sup>

An inhabitant of a detached house in the district of Widzew recalled that around the year 1950 water from his private well disappeared. He drilled a deeper one, but it lasted only a few years. Then a public well was drilled in the vicinity of his house, but that too quickly dried up. In 1984, the year when he was interviewed, carrying plastic barrels every day to the place where water trucks arrived was the only way he could obtain water.<sup>26</sup> As water consumption in Łódź doubled every five years, by the late 1960s pundits spoke again of a dearth of water. Even people living on the highest floors of the new apartment blocks often had to walk to a downstairs neighbor to fill their water kettle.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the overall quality of water had in fact deteriorated. Tea brewed in Łódź, *Odgłosy* noted acerbically, “tasted of modernity—and more specifically of phenol,” as water in the Pilica River (Łódź’s primary water source since the 1950s) was contaminated by adjacent factories.<sup>28</sup> Only in 1974, when construction of a dam and an artificial lake in Sulejów was finally completed, did Łódź gain new access to fresh water. With this, the water crisis was somewhat mitigated,<sup>29</sup> only to return with a vengeance in the mid-1980s.<sup>30</sup>

Water was essential for more than satisfying the most elementary human needs. It was not only consumed for drinking or hygiene but also represented the most desirable recreation. Perhaps because of the special place of water in the industrial relations of the textile city, the favored form of leisure for the Łódź working class was a family picnic next to a water reservoir. The significance of water for textile workers is illustrated by a grassroots initiative during the peak of the urban boom to turn an old park into a recreational complex 170 hectares large and equipped with a waterpark to accommodate four thousand people.<sup>31</sup> Not incidentally, when the park was closed down in 1992, the surge of “nostalgia” for the socialist past focused on the old waterpark and the lost accessibility to on-water leisure in the urban milieu. During the post-2004 wave of reindustrialization and urban renewal in Łódź, a foreign investor erected

Poland's largest waterpark in place of the old socialist one. The symbolic significance of water was enormous; the happy ending to a popular 1970s television series, *Daleko od Szosy* (Away from the Bustle), which unfolded in Łódź, was played out in a poetic swimming pool scene. When the 2009 financial crisis set in and the developer announced the waterpark might be closed, the Łódź Council decided to buy up all the shares. Today the recreational complex is again entirely publicly owned.

In the 1960s, people traveled mainly by foot or public transport and so could not go much beyond the vicinity of Łódź for their Sunday trips. Water usage for recreational purposes in Łódź was therefore highly stratified. Open-air swimming pools were mainly frequented by well-to-do youths, sportsmen, actors, journalists, and lawyers—*Odgłosy* reported—and for the most part workers swam in a pond in one of Łódź's main parks.<sup>32</sup> In fact, it was in one of Łódź's swimming pools where Polański met the previously unknown actress who would play the part of the beautiful wife in *Knife in the Water*.<sup>33</sup> While the small car-owning elite could go out to the countryside, soon yachting became the most fashionable form of leisure. *Odgłosy* wrote a year before Polański's film was released that

until yesterday, the automobile, scooter or motorcycle was the most attention-grabbing gimmick. Nowadays, urban life is tight and stifling. The ring around the city has become overcrowded with tourists too. Where is one to have real rest? The answer is: on the water! Solitude, the chance to get drawn away from the world's nuisances for a few days or even weeks guaranteed! This modern form of leisure is now being promoted all over the world.<sup>34</sup>

The yacht and the automobile were the instruments that allowed the protagonists in the *Knife in the Water* to appropriate water for leisure. On their yacht, they alone seem to consume the vast lake and its beauty. As Lefebvre argued, the nascent postwar technocratic elite embraced the consumption of suburban leisure; turned away from the working classes and the "noise, fatigue, and concentrationary universe of cities"; and made nature into "the separate place of pleasure and the retreat of 'creativity.'"<sup>35</sup>

### The Automobile and Suburbanization

Separation of the place of work from the place of residence became one of the hallmarks of modern urban life. This seemingly banal detail had profound consequences for contemporary political life.<sup>36</sup> Demand-side urban expansion



further exacerbated this trend; whereas earlier, mobility was largely a middle-class prerogative, and the working classes were essentially “fixed” in place, traveling to work by foot, the increased role of mass transit further divorced the place of work from the place of residence. This meant that the masses were increasingly “freed” from their local community and started inhabiting more than one place of the city. The erstwhile “urban villagers” gradually turned into full-fledged urbanites, whose allegiance to a single neighborhood (of their residence) grew increasingly loose. As a result, mobility became an important part of the urban experience. But access to it was ever more dependent on one’s “pull” with the state authorities who decided how collective consumption was to be organized.

One pundit, who waxed enthusiastically about the emergent Polish “automobile fever,” noted that Americans “claim that the twentieth century has discovered a new freedom that the human race should strive for (except for the freedom from hunger, fear, penury, war etc.)—the freedom of movement.”<sup>37</sup> “It is hard not to realize,” noted another journalist, “that the automobile has become one of the most important measures of one’s social worth. If there is an automobile owner amongst the new inhabitants of a housing development (who do not otherwise know one another yet), then his neighbors will speculate and come up with wild conjectures about him being ‘a somebody’ [*to musi być ktoś*].”<sup>38</sup> The automobile expressed the possibility of escaping from the community and of finding a safe, isolated haven solely for private pleasures. The yacht represented even higher status than the automobile—but certainly one could never go for a weekend of sailing without a private automobile. By 1963, therefore, owning a car was no longer sufficient to place its owner at the very top of the hierarchy. The dynamic of escalating competitive consumption could be found elsewhere too: initially an apartment in a housing development was a status symbol, but at the point when it became widely available to the population, more and more voices could be heard (beginning as early as 1969) that described such dwellings as “noisy” and “crowded,” and that argued a detached house in a “real” suburb was the ideal dwelling for the socialist middle classes.

Nevertheless, in the 1960s still, Łódź’s nascent *crème de la crème* were content to reside in a housing development named Włada Bytomska. This is also where the unscripted prelude (in a sense) to Polański’s film was played out. One of the main protagonists of this real-life drama was Leon Niemczyk, the actor who would later play the well-to-do journalist in the film, who was a resident of this “posh” housing development and an automobile owner. This elite housing estate was located in the former slum Jewish district of Bałuty. Unlike others in the city, the district had been destroyed during the war and thus was ripe for urban redevelopment. The suburbanization of Łódź started with

renewal of Bałuty. Yet the change from old, dilapidated, inner-city tenements to new suburban housing projects, where all forms of collective consumption (water, electricity, gas, etc.) were available, was not experienced by everyone as a bonus or privilege.<sup>39</sup> In many cases, Łódź's working-class sociability was destroyed by this suburbanization. In fact, members of a single community were purposely given apartments in different parts of the new city so that old solidarities could not be brought to the new apartment complexes. Initially, the working-class community resisted the changes, but by the 1960s the grit and distinctiveness of the old urban community had been substantially diluted, and a spirit of envy eclipsed that of defiance—the attitude of Polański's hitchhiker being a case in point.

Although during the 1970s many of the housing developments were erected literally on empty fields, in Bałuty new apartment blocks were initially built among war ruins and dilapidated capitalist tenements. Włada Bytomska, dubbed the “symbol of great hope,” was to be everything that the once-capitalist Łódź was not. It was peopled with Łódź's best: all of its thirty-seven hundred residents had been carefully selected as exemplary workers and citizens. No one had moved there from the ruined old tenements, notorious for their unedifying character, and no one was an alcoholic. Or, to be precise, one of the inhabitants had a drinking problem when working for a private company, but living in this new milieu served as the best therapy; “the ambience of the housing development cured him.”<sup>40</sup> Forty percent of inhabitants were classified as working-class, and 60 percent as members of the intelligentsia. Here, *Odgłosy* claimed, prewar class divisions were becoming obsolete:

The intelligentsia and the proletariat dwelling here are actually of the same ilk. Both are reliable employees, both plan their families responsibly, both are frugal and scrimp and save in order to get established materially. Even their tastes are increasingly alike, only that in one apartment there is a kitschy oleograph, and in the other there is a modern folk-styled plate, hanging on the wall above the ubiquitous television set. . . . Furniture is nearly identical in all the apartments: rather expensive, heavy, with no modern flamboyance. There is a dining room and a bedroom in each apartment. The only exceptions are the apartments of the artists and other members of the ‘creative intelligentsia’ [*inteligencja twórcza*], represented in droves here.<sup>41</sup>

This was not entirely true. As sociological surveys confirmed, working-class sociability was centered around the kitchen, and they preferred to share living space with other family members; the intelligentsia, on the other hand, had a



preference for living in apartments where everybody had their “own” room. The houses built in the 1960s in Poland, where living space was divided into tiny rooms, were clearly fashioned after the intelligentsia’s tastes.<sup>42</sup>

What distinguished Włada Bytomska from other places in Łódź and made it the ideal location for the new cultural elite was not only its new amenities but also its location. It was referred to as a “housing development where one can breathe,” a place where “industrial odors do not reach, and the vivid colors of the plaster are not dampened by the dust from metropolitan thoroughfares.”<sup>43</sup> It was a suburban paradise—especially desired by the creative intelligentsia, such as writers, journalists, or composers, who often worked at home and required peace and quiet for their labors. Although not in the midst of the overcrowded inner city and its noisy street life, Włada Bytomska was right next to a new highway leading to and from Warsaw. Hence it also became Łódź’s most “representative district” precisely because it could change the stereotypes Varsovians held about Łódź. Arriving by car from Warsaw, they would first see this “wide highway, an interesting panorama of the city and the colorful houses.”<sup>44</sup> It was living proof that “Łódź was getting richer” and that it could now “cast off that fetid capitalist cloak of the past” in becoming a “colorful socialist city.”<sup>45</sup> Although being located right next to a major highway is today considered a nuisance rather than a privilege, at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, when there were only around thirty-eight hundred automobiles in the whole of Łódź (of which eight hundred were company-owned and a further nine hundred served as taxis), having direct access to Warsaw was especially attractive to the creative intelligentsia, who often traveled between Warsaw and Łódź.

Włada Bytomska was both suburban and very central; thus, while enjoying the peace of the suburbs and the amenities of the housing projects, the creative intelligentsia could also travel by foot to the cultural institutions located in the center of the city. This was not gentrification in the strict sense of the word (as in high-income residents moving into old neighborhoods, thereby triggering revitalization of old housing stock), but it was clearly linked to the remaking of the Old Town District (*Dzielnica Staromiejska*), a part of Bałuty that was now being revamped to resemble Krakow’s and Warsaw’s historic old centers, which Łódź, a city largely formed in the nineteenth century and marked by a grid structure, clearly lacked.<sup>46</sup> Bałuty used to be the district of lymphatic children, but now some of its streets, and especially the Old Town Market (*Rynek Staromiejski*), “resemble[d] pictures from photography albums on Warsaw,” *Odgłosy* wrote, promoting Łódź’s new cultural spaces as the ideal site for a romantic stroll.<sup>47</sup> The suburbanization of Łódź implied that the inner city was losing its erstwhile industrial and residential role and was becoming an artifact of consumption. Young professionals living in the refashioned Bałuty were to become

the bellwether of that cultural change. The widening social rift between the residents of Włada Bytomska (a veritable forerunner of gated communities) and the “regular” Łódź population soon became associated with the marginalization of Łódź as a whole within Poland’s cultural, political, and economic space—which would be the very context for the social unrest of 1968.

### Playgrounds for the Elite

Automobiles stirred highly contentious emotions precisely because they were both the mark and the instrument of social isolation, symbolizing appropriation of public spaces for private ends. In Łódź this was played out in conflicts over garage space. Already in 1959, when cars in Łódź were not yet a common sight, and when street space was still dominated by pedestrians, the twin problems of parking and garage space had emerged. There were officially only eight hundred garages in Łódź—and often car owners had to travel a long distance (by public transport) to get to a garage located far away from their place of residence. In 1960, the state authorities announced their support for the “healthy civic initiative” of building private garages. *Odgłosy* quickly picked up on this, even printing detailed sketches and cost estimates for those who desired to build them.

This was perhaps the reason a group of four “creative intellectuals” from Włada Bytomska (including the actor Leon Niemczyk, from Polański’s film) wrote a letter to the Łódź authorities that was then reprinted in the press. They had been granted permission to build garages, but then the permission was revoked. “We feel we’re being treated like criminals,” they wrote. “Not only are we guilty of buying automobiles—now we are also guilty of demanding some garage space for them.” They explained: “It is enough for a single neighbor to oppose such a construction for the permission to be withdrawn automatically.” “The social climate,” they continued,

is unfortunately such that an automobile-owning citizen is a victim of local envy and his every step is carefully watched by the neighbors . . . the local, traditional and backward public opinion [*opinia magła i podwórka*] that usurps the mantles of the administration has a powerful influence on what kind of decisions are made. Often authorities surrender to the demagogy that automobiles “ruin the air,” “make noise,” or “pose a threat to children.”<sup>48</sup>

*Odgłosy* recognized their right to the garage space and wholeheartedly supported their plea.

Yet protests over the garages continued. “Early in the morning,” those living in the tenements of Bałuty, the district’s longtime residents, purportedly “pour[ed] dirty waste water under the windows of the apartment blocks.”<sup>49</sup> The inhabitants of the new blocks responded in kind: in the morning they too “wait in ambush by their windows so they can chase away ‘the rabble’ coming with bucketsful of dishwater.”<sup>50</sup> On the surface, it seemed to be a conflict between the old and new inhabitants of Bałuty, divided by their different “attitudes” toward modernity and change. Indeed, many journalists noted the strained relations between the two groups. Those living in the weather-beaten tenements “look[ed] up to the block residents [*blokowi*]: to their material standing, their lifestyle, their peaceful way of life,” whereas the new inhabitants “did not really notice” what they called “the rabble” (*hołota*). “When I’m looking at these two distinct universes,” the journalist Julian Brysz noted, “then maybe an ungrounded but certainly a lucid fear comes over me—the fear that the affluence of the new inhabitants may usher in some enduring forms of separation and egoism.”<sup>51</sup>

It seemed for many that this was why the “rabble” opposed the building of garages. But the reasons were in fact more complex. The new inhabitants might well have wished to “prohibit their children from visiting friends who dwell in the dirty hovels,” but the so-called rabble longed “for the times when everybody was equally poor, when nobody called anyone else rabble, when all children had parents living in similar houses, and when weddings were celebrated by the entire street.”<sup>52</sup> Yet it soon turned out that some of the new inhabitants of Bałuty also opposed the building of garages, and they did so for reasons other than sheer envy. They argued the garages would take up space that should be designated for children’s playgrounds. If Niemczyk and others built their garages, they argued in a letter to *Odgłosy*, some hundred or so children would be deprived of playing space. The four men, the letter read, “placed automobiles above human beings.”<sup>53</sup>

Avenerable institution also stood behind them and their claims: the Association for Children’s Welfare (Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Dzieci, the TPD), a non-governmental organization formed in 1949 with significant prewar roots and enduring moral clout. A journalistic investigation revealed the TPD had been very active in organizing extracurricular activities for the children of Bałuty because, in many ways, the children’s circumstances had not changed much since the war. “The air smells of gasoline, rotten cabbage and steppe grass,” *Odgłosy* reported. Children still had no playing space and spent most of their time on the dangerous streets, playing next to barrels with decomposing rubbish. Those who wanted to use the space between apartment blocks for their own garages favored privatization of space and championed the “splendid isolation” from the rest of the community. Others, however, still embraced a vision

of urban life that was public and open and harked back to the old inner-city neighborhood-based sociability. Their vision for the urban future—based on the tacit assumption that the lot of the “lymphatic children” was a public and not a private (i.e., family) matter—was deeply anchored in the capitalist experience of Łódź. Throughout the 1960s, such working-class visions were increasingly on the wane; one might well say that today they have vanished altogether.

## Conclusion

It may seem counter-intuitive to think of socialist-era apartment blocks as suburbia—and, indeed, at first glance, they have little resemblance to the American tract developments of detached houses surrounded by well-trimmed lawns. Yet there is a distinct correlation between the urban processes on both sides of the Iron Curtain, and it lies in the social linchpin of spatial processes. The American suburban expansion that unfolded between 1945 and the late 1970s produced a distinctive landscape (and a distinctive way of life attached to it) that represented a break from older European urban forms, as well as standing in stark contrast to “ways of life” promoted (at least officially) in the Soviet Bloc.<sup>54</sup> Yet postwar cities, East and West, both being a product of urban Keynesianism, displaced working-class communities and, despite grassroots resistance in both cases, increased social exclusion and restructuring. Still, the processes of social polarization unfolded in East and West according to differing spatial logic.

The shift from production-driven to consumption-driven urbanization did not necessarily entail building more equitable cities. Suburban expansion already bore the germs of what is known as “parasitic urbanization”—a model of urban expansion fueled on social exclusion and spatialization of social differences.<sup>55</sup> In the United States, this was manifest in the racialization of space and the increasingly sharp distinctions between white middle-class suburbs and black working-class inner cities. Race was not the central category in the shaping of socialist cities, where spatial pathways toward exclusion took a different turn. Instead, the new social cleavages coalesced around consumption items, especially around the issue of collective consumption.

The Polish 1968 was a rebellion against figures, such as the cocksure journalist in Polański’s film, whose top positions in the (broadly conceived) state administration privileged their path toward getting materially established and gaining access to consumption items. Members of the creative intelligentsia—included in this category of the elite and residing in the new showcase apartment blocks of Bałuty—became objects of particularly virulent attacks (in Łódź,

this centered on the Film School, the alleged “hotbed of arrogance”). Popular accusations of cosmopolitanism and “detachment” from the rank and file were the most important components of the anti-Zionist rhetoric of 1968, and they need to be embedded in the context of the 1960s. The centrality of water in the social conflict, so well captured in Polański’s poignant film, stemmed from its links to the consumption of leisure, the automobile, and the use of urban space, but it was also a peculiarity of Łódź. Likewise, Włada Bytomska, the privileged apartment complex, as both a spatial and a social form was largely an outcome of many local forces at play, yet coupled with developments being experienced across Poland.

The web of forces that produced Włada Bytomska has vanished. Today, it no longer exists as a separate administrative unit in Łódź and has even disappeared from maps and vernacular spatial consciousness. Yet all of Poland’s future urban processes can be found here in a microcosm. Although in the 1960s the “colorful” and modern Włada Bytomska was considered urban eye candy, today a passerby would be hard put to differentiate it from other dull and nondescript socialist housing developments. In the 1980s, the seat of the city’s elite moved geographically, to the so-called Manhattan of Łódź, a high-rise housing development in the very center of the city, and more recently to scattered gated communities and suburban villas. Yet, as one Polish geographer noted, after the fall of state socialism “affluent areas became more affluent, whereas poor ones grew poorer”; that is, the *making* of these spaces occurred precisely during the socialist urban boom.<sup>56</sup> The social processes of spatial segregation and private appropriation of public space, already so visible in Włada Bytomska, were only aggravated in the decades that followed. From the urban point of view, in other words, 1989 did not constitute a major watershed. Looking at postwar Poland through the lens of urban studies, a different narrative emerges altogether, one in which postsocialist developments had already been “inscribed in space.”<sup>57</sup>

#### NOTES

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