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Degraded towns in Poland as cultural heritage

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This paper discusses how the concept of cultural heritage is currently used in relation to the so-called degraded towns (i.e. deprived of their urban status) in Poland. It shows the role of heritagisation in the process of restitution of urban status, and addresses the effects of the ongoing revitalisation of degraded towns in order to restore their lost urban glory. I argue that the Polish understanding of urbanity is ambiguous, muddling formality with cultural connotations. I address how such convolution both rewrites history and affects modernity by the imposition of values and foreclosures. I also discuss how alterations to the built environment made in the name of cultural heritage (revitalisation) are often conducted with disregard to identity, authenticity and historical hybridity, and how the introduction of 'history' into a modern arena affects the local society. I conclude that considering degraded towns as a special form of cultural heritage is a new construction, where coupling of the disconnected dimensions of the Polish understanding of urbanity becomes even more apparent. I stress that this field is neither sufficiently differentiated nor problematised, and that cultural heritage relating to degraded towns is often taken for granted.

Keywords: urban–rural; town privileges; cultural heritage; revitalisation; Poland

Introduction

This paper discusses the way the concept of cultural heritage is currently applied in Poland to towns deprived of their urban status. Poland is a country where urbanity is interpreted as both a formal and a cultural concept. Therefore, loss of formal urban status may, on the one hand, conflict with the long-standing urban identities of the residents; on the other, its recovery is greatly inhibited due to specific formal requirements. Such premises create tension that is dealt with by forging a new type of heritage, the degraded town. This paper discusses a range of aspects and problems of the heritagisation of degraded towns in Poland, which emerge as a result of the different understandings of urbanity, and of what urbanity actually does. It is argued that the degraded towns are used as attributes to give tangibility to the valued concept of urbanity, which has been lost under questionable circumstances and whose heritagisation occurs in order to secure that lost value in the struggles for restitution of urban status. Moreover, since urban status today is also associated with greater chances of development, it is unclear whether heritage is used to bypass or outsmart the law, or whether it is the law that stands in the way of fulfilment of a heritagisation process

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based on a recourse to urban traditions. This paper is an example of how the discourse of heritage is used in conversations between politicians and the general public, where heritage is advanced as something self-evident. It also provides a deconstruction of a type of heritage that is largely focused – often in an aesthetic manner – on material objects (mainly the towns' – often residual – urban morphology), whose 'revitalisation' is thought to facilitate restitution of urban status. Summarily, the paper juxtaposes the historical urban identity of degraded towns with the modern role of urban status as a catalyst in social and economic development, to which the discourse of heritage is being added. It is argued that this interface is neither sufficiently differentiated nor problematised.

Background

The term urbanisation denotes an increase in the proportion of the total population residing in urban areas (Pacione 2009, p. 68); however, the definition of what is urban varies widely around the world:

> Among 228 countries for which the United Nations has data, about half use administrative definitions of urban (e.g., living in the capital city), 51 use size and density, 39 use functional characteristics (e.g., economic activity), 22 have no definition of urban, and 8 define all (e.g., Singapore) or none (e.g., Polynesian countries) of their population as urban. (Vlahov and Galea 2002, p. 52)

The opposite of urbanisation may denote the social process based on the outflow of urban population to the countryside (deurbanisation) or refer to the introduction of rural elements within urban areas (ruralisation) (cf. Szymańska 2009). However, it may also occur by means of legislation; either by changing the national definition of urbanity, or by annulling the formal urban status of a specific, hitherto urban, settlement (in Polish literature, the latter is widely referred to as degradation). Because of constant spatio-temporal societal transformations, urban decline due to depopulation, economic stagnation or autonomy erosion (cf. Aydalot 1987, Clark 1989) is a common process around the world. Between 1790 and 1840, many English towns lost their urban status due to deteriorating service provision and lack of industry (Hann 2005). In India, numerous centres were eliminated from the town list in 1961 in the face of competition with the larger urban centres (Bhattacharya 2006). Placer depletion in the 1960s contributed to loss of urban status of several Soviet gold-mining settlements (Kaser 1983). The most drastic case is probably Sweden, where an administrative reform in 1971 dismantled the traditional concept of urbanity altogether. Although treated instrumentally by the concerned authorities, loss of urban status may effectively have negative social implications, especially regarding towns with long-standing urban traditions (cf. Nietyksza 1986). In Sweden, for example, 13 settlements have returned to the informal usage of the term *stad* (city), purely for image and marketing reasons. A similar – albeit formal – connotation is seen with the city status in the UK, with no special rights other than prestige. However, in both cases, lack of city status is not necessarily synonymous with rural status, as many towns are still considered urban areas.

In Poland, formal urbanity coincides with the administrative definition, yet it is formalised by using the traditional concept of town privileges (also known as civic rights) that gives the right to the city title. Dating back to the Middle Ages, town privileges, whose original meaning (right to trading, establishment of guilds, etc.) is

long gone, have no longer any practical importance per se; it is merely a cultural remnant (note that none of the countries listed by the UN employs a *cultural* definition of an urban area). However, unlike Sweden or England, lack of city status in Poland *is* equivalent with rural status, as the concept of town privileges is utilised to define urban areas according to the administrative criterion. The latter, in turn, presupposes a set of modern features like sufficient population, centrality, infrastructure, specific institutions, a pronounced non-agricultural employment sector and so forth. Such a combination of the two platforms is difficult to reconcile, and becomes explicitly apparent when the degraded towns apply for urban status on cultural, identity-laden grounds, which do not always coincide with the administrative requirements.

This irreconcilability becomes a major source of confusion, and is strikingly visible in central and eastern Poland, where the urban network is scarce and underdeveloped. This particular territory succumbed during the Russian occupation in the nineteenth century to a massive, mechanised administrative reform that deprived 338 Polish towns (75%) of their town privileges. Having been enforced by a foreign oppressor (and allegedly as a form of punishment), the reform differs from similar ones around the world whose initiator was the native government enacting a (supposedly) justified domestic strategy. The Russian reform is still emotionally charged amongst Poles, and is often brought up whenever the question of urban restitution (formal recovery of town privileges) becomes topical. Although many former towns have to date been restituted, the great majority remain rural (throughout the country there are currently about 1000 degraded towns). This situation is disadvantageous to the non-restituted (yet de facto urban) towns, as urban status does not merely boost the prestige of a settlement (cf. Sokołowski 2011b); it is also believed to have a significant impact on its development (e.g. eligibility to apply for urban-specific grants), but also in terms of greater visibility and, as such, increased attractiveness for investors and tourists (Borusewicz 1999, Drobek 2004, Pacholak 2010, Rosa 2010).

Until 1989, restitutions were conducted by central authorities, but after the democratisation of Poland, the mode was changed to require the initiative to come from local governments. Since the process itself remained contrived and the prospect of an application being approved was contingent on many uncontrollable factors, concerned local governments began appealing to the negative emotive aspects associated with an urban landscape made rural by force. That is when, in the early and mid-1990s, the concept of 'cultural heritage' was reinvented, and began to be heavily exploited as an argument within the fights for restitution, and continues to this very day.

I have examined nearly 60 different petitions, appeals, recommendations, declarations, newspaper articles and blog threads dedicated to the restitution of degraded towns, issued by actors ranging from county councils and local governments to local interest groups, cultural associations and individuals, including those with a prominent local profile. The discourse of heritage is quite simple: urbanity – as a historical concept – is seen as something valuable and a legacy that should be honoured by restoring the towns' formal urban status. As such, restitution is seen as a means of protection of cultural heritage. The relative scarcity of reference to the towns actually having achieved a sufficient level of de facto urbanity that should be indorsed by awarding them town privileges is very significant in the debate. Instead, the formal requirements are seen as something that must be overcome: 'Law is law but history

is history' (Grzegorczyk 2009). The more unachievable the requirements, the more pronounced the argumentation for the past, the old, history, the centuries-long tradition and particularly the injustice and the disgrace associated with foreign oppression. 'Reversal of historic justice by a free Poland' (Grzegorczyk 2009) is often addressed, and some claim that the towns should not even have to go through the restitution process, because the degradation was a violation of Polish law (Turobińszczyzna 2007). Restitution is also seen as an act of defiance towards the past Communist politics, whose lack of interest in the degraded towns and their 'glorious urban traditions' (TMZB 2006) was conditioned by their association with the development of capitalism – the antithesis of Communism – in the nineteenth century. Urbanity is romanticised in a variety of ways; it is seen as a determinant of development and of civilisational progress (urban superiority over rural), but also of the cultural and social lifestyle the degraded towns lack. Urban artefacts such as urban morphology, the market square and the coat of arms are put forward as evidence justifying restitution of town privileges. There is frequent stress on the prestige associated with urban status and on the preserved urban mentality amongst locals, detectable in, for instance, their use of language (I'm going to town). The will of 'the residents' (addressed collectively) for restitution is often put forward, not seldom with a hint of envy in references to nearby towns that appear less urban than some degraded towns. Summarily, restitution – here understood as the search for urban identity by appealing to the heritage of urban traditions – became a hot topic and an important issue for many towns (for instance, Bodzentyn applied seven times before it was restituted; Drobek 1999, p. 131). Consequently, more towns (44) were restituted in the 1990s alone than between WW2 and 1980 (40) (my calculations).

The new interest in degraded towns also caught the attention of academics (for instance, Górak 1990, Siemiński 1991, Drobek and Heffner 1993, Rykel 1993, Kazimierski 1994, Nawrot 1995, Demidowicz 1996–1999, Drobek 1999, Koprukowniak 2000, Kosiński 2000), who were concerned with the developmental potential of the degraded towns and the problems and conditions of urban restitutions, but also with the towns' history in terms of population, economy, morphology and heritage:

> [Degraded towns] are part of [Polish] history, heritage and culture. They constitute a specific element within Poland's spatial economic structure. They are also an integral part of the country's settlement system, a component unknown of in other European countries. They linger in Poland's local tradition, and, in spite of many historical storms, they have managed to survive in oblivion. They are a testimony of foreign violence, old injustice and present incomprehension (…). In an era of globalisation, internationalisation of the world economy, European integration and new regionalism (…), no perspectives of development and no rational way towards development can be sighted for this type of towns. (Siemiński 2000, p. 14, my translation)

Exploitation of degraded towns as cultural heritage was not only addressed by direct reference to their unfortunate past. The 2000s ignited a new wave of cultural heritagisation projects (largely subsidised by the European Union), conducted in order to physically 'revitalise' the neglected urban appearance of degraded towns:

> The planning of heritage should include rehabilitation, revitalisation and renovation of certain areas. The point of departure for shaping the environment should be striving for a holistic, sustainable recognition of socio-economic, cultural, spatio-technical and ecological aspects of lives of communities that inhabit that same environment.

> Sustainable development is unthinkable without concern about cultural identity and sense of community, nor without responsibility for the environment on a local level. (Przesmycka 2001, my translation)

Along with revitalisation projects, the number of restitutions rampantly increased during the 2000s, and the interest from academics in degraded towns was kept alive (cf. Sokołowski 2002, 2008, 2011a, 2011b, Murzyn and Gwosdz 2003, Szmytkie 2003, Drobek 2005, Krzysztofik 2006, Miszewska 2007, Szmytkie and Krzysztofik 2011). However, the focus became more geographic, that is more concerned with the towns' contribution to Poland's urbanisation, rather than with their cultural dimension. Still, with the restitution process being continuously driven by forces nested in a heritage discourse, degraded towns created a peculiar phenomenon, where development-oriented issues of urbanisation became irredeemably entwined with emotional issues. These interrelations are discussed below with the help of a theoretical framework from the field of ethnology. The discussion is also based on my own fieldwork, conducted in 130 degraded towns between 2009 and 2011, and from previous and ongoing research on various problems of this type of settlements (Dymitrow [2010] 2012, 2012).

Production of cultural heritage

Heritage can be understood in many ways. It may denote

> a process that uses objects and sites as vehicles for the transmission of ideas in order to satisfy various contemporary needs (…), a product of the present yet drawing upon an assumed imaginary past and an equally assumed imaginary future. (Ashworth 2007)

It can also be defined as the legacy of tangible things (artefacts) and intangible attributes (mentifacts and sociofacts) of a society that are inherited from past generations and maintained for the benefit of future generations. While the latter two denote values that are expressed through oral traditions and customary behaviour, artefacts constitute the material culture of a society. Collectively, the material culture comprises the built environment, that is, the landscape created by humans (Fellmann *et al.* 2007, p. 217). An example of a human-made landscape is an urban settlement network; it takes centuries to develop and becomes part of a country's cultural heritage (Jażdżewska 2006, p. 254). Heritagisation of townscapes is a global process (cf. Ashworth and Tunbridge 2004) driven by a societal urge for nostalgia (Viken and Nyseth 2009), where townscapes become the entity, heritage the method and identity the goal (Ashworth 2007). Heritagisation covers human settlements of all sizes and contexts, from bustling Havana to Croatian Hum, the world's smallest town of only 20 inhabitants, but it is also pertinent to rurality (cf. Munkejord 2009). In Europe, it is campaigned for by, for instance, the European Council for the Village and the Small Town (ECOVAST), operating in 20 countries with the goal to safeguard the well-being and heritage of rural communities. In Poland (a member state), heritagisation is similar to that of other places; however, *urban* heritagisation may become problematic, in that its close association with town privileges is affected by administrative constraints.

In the modern developed world, the progressive urbanisation of the traditional rural landscape renders the concept of rural–urban dichotomy anachronistic, and the

phenomenon is today more accurately described as a rural–urban continuum (cf. Sokołowski 1999, Champion and Hugo 2004, Dahly and Adair 2007; note how ECOVAST merges villages and small towns into one group). In this context, the very usage of town privileges may be regarded as inadequate; not only do town privileges per definition uphold the antiquated dichotomy, but the mere usage of this expired mediaeval charter may be challenged. Given their lack of contemporary significance (other than historico-symbolic), town privileges can be seen as a form of cultural heritage of its own. Therefore, heritagisation of degraded towns is based on a strange force of equilibration, where loss of one form of cultural heritage (town privileges) creates another (the degraded town). Moreover, should restitution occur, the process becomes reversed.

As the preceding quotations indicate, the new production of degraded towns as heritage material is depicted in an array of mindscapes. Developmental issues notwithstanding, cultural heritage is clearly extended towards both the physical (revitalisation) and the mental dimension (perception), while it is being assigned a collective past (cf. Ronström 2005). Siemiński's quoted text has a strong focus on uniqueness, integrality, locality, robustness as well as destitution, while Przesmycka's is solution oriented with an inclination towards social aspects such as local identity and community. The described mindscapes can be subsumed into three major domains that are subject to different actors: physical (spatial planners, urban designers and architects), administrative (local governments) and emotive (residents, aesthetes–amateurs and traditionalists). Although these domains operate in different ways (cf. Ronström 2005), their goals may either interact or compete. The physical and administrative domains are economically oriented (possibility of applying for urban-specific EU-grants to avert economic stagnation, depopulation etc.); at the same time the physical domain – along with the emotive domain – are also non-economical (aesthetisation, social sustainability). All, however, imply some kind of development and appeal to locality. Tourism, seen as a way to develop degraded towns (cf. Murzyn and Gwosdz 2003), is currently establishing itself as a fourth domain, where the specificity of the towns' built environment is utilised to appeal to the preferences of potential visitors, in order to strengthen the local economy. As shown by a recent wave of books, degraded towns are frequently depicted in terms of their historical and cultural, as well as recreational and aesthetic values (cf. Kwiatek 2006, Sołtyk 2009, Fronczak 2010, Sańko 2010). Such encapsulation creates a socially constructed gaze of degraded towns (cf. Urry 1990), which, further assisted by mediated messages and foresights, renders a combined, anticipated mindscape (cf. Johansson 2009, pp. 259–260). A mindscape constructed in this way falls within the social frame of will, goal and control (cf. Goffman 1974); the will to eschew degradation by striving for restitution by means of controlled transformation of marginalisation into prosperity.

Both current restitution trends and revitalisation trends are geographically clustered as a result of a process known as 'diffusion of innovations'[1] (cf. Krzysztofik 2006), and both may influence each other. A return to urban status may spawn a revitalisation procedure in order to 'live up' to the regained honours. Conversely, revitalisation may visually enhance the perceived urbanity of a *de jure* rural degraded town, its appearance may then become imbued with a new meaning (urban identity), which in turn may be enunciated as a desire for legal action (application for restitution of urban status). However, restitution achieved by means of cultural heritage production rather than by some other, more pragmatic means,

may prove unsustainable, as urbanity is not merely a valued concept, but a synergy of many other, more concrete traits (cf. Drobek 1999, Sokołowski 1999, Dahly and Adair 2007). Therefore, envisioning degraded towns as an unconditional manifestation of cultural heritage entails a special perspective that needs to be scrutinised further.

The case of Szydłów

Szydłów (1100 inhabitants), sometimes called 'the Polish Carcassonne', was one of the towns that had joined the 1990s heritage-towards-restitution hype:

> Request nr 823 to the President of the Council of Ministers: (…) During the deputy meeting in Szydłów (…) the issue of restitution of town privileges has emerged. Szydłów – a settlement of glorious history and a beautiful heritage of national treasures – lost its town privileges as a result of Czarist authoritarian politics after the fall of the January Uprising [1863]. The ambition of Szydłów's residents is restitution of town privileges (…). (Jaskiernia 1999, my translation)

In his reply, the Secretary of State responded that deprivation of town privileges was not only the result of political repression, but also of the towns' prior economic collapse. For this reason, any automatic restitution would seem doubtful. He also mentions that the majority of residents are not always in favour of restitution, as reflected by local consultations (Borusewicz 1999). The last point is instructive. As Szmytkie and Krzysztofik (2011, p. 33) speculate, the strongest factor for initiating a restitution process today is actually the lobby of the local community and the local governments. It means that if such lobbying is only pursued by a few local patriots (often by the means of fierce blog propaganda), or by a small career-oriented local elite (a mayor's post is more prestigious than that of village head), then such action is not really the ambition of the residents, despite what the request quoted above implies. Indeed, to this day, Szydłów remains rural. That, in turn, marks the presence of the local, rural voice. Borcz *et al*. (2009, p. 60) found that despite developmental incentives from urban-specific grants, many degraded towns do not strive for restitution, probably as a result of the more favourable rural taxes or due to poor identification with the town's urban identity. I would also add a third reason: some people may just not care. However, the situation is quite differentiated. Of the 106 'new' towns created between 1980 and 2011, 67.9% were restitutions (Szmytkie and Krzysztofik 2011, p. 28). This shows that urban identification is indeed an important factor, despite occurrences of towns that have actually experienced a developmental decline *after* restitution (cf. Drobek 2005).

In his response to Szydłów's request from 1999, the Secretary also gives evidence that the prospect of urban restitution entails a creative process that triggers many initiatives amongst the locals, such as improvements to the town's appearance and infrastructure, but it also strengthens community cohesion. Despite Szydłów's unsuccessful initial request, the restitution issue was raised once again during a presidential conference in 2010 (Walczak 2010), probably an inspiring one, as in mid-2011 extensive revitalisation of Szydłów's market square, town hall and curtain walls was initiated. Likewise, restitution of urban status is now inscribed into the 2015 municipal strategy towards sustainable development, as the final objective for protection of cultural heritage. Urbanity is now being approached from another angle – the physical.

Design and configuration

> [O]nce towns, now deprived of their town privileges, these small villages have retained the attributes of an urban appearance and the nostalgic 'townish' ambitions of their residents, who try to distinguish themselves from their 'peasantish' neighbours, despite lack of occupational differences. They are associated with words like sleepy, quiet, (…), neat, (…), picturesque. (…) [T]here is often a central market square, once a bustling place for local commerce and social meetings (…). The painted houses drown in greenery and flowers in the summer. The tiny shops, until expelled by supermarkets, still tempt customers with sometimes very original display windows (…). Despite widespread lingering poverty, a resurgent local initiative is arduously trying to change this state of lethargy. (Kwiatek 2006, p. 5, 6; my translation)

> The positive factors [of degraded towns] are their advantageous natural conditions, friendly environment, lakes, ponds, rivers and forests, which may serve as a basis for recreation and tourism development. (Borcz *et al*. 2009, p. 129)

The excerpts above quite accurately capture the way degraded towns in Poland are currently being commodified. They appeal to the microcosm of scale, legibility, delineation, aesthetics and social interaction. A degraded town is given physicality in terms of spatial dominants, heedful ornamentation and small-town architecture. There is a strong emphasis on the core-periphery relationship, where the periphery of degraded towns is also associated with natural and environmental attractions, thus extending the scope towards new domains. Interestingly, such commodification opposes commercialisation inherent to big cities, while at the same time commercialising small towns

Figure 1. A peaceful market square in the degraded town of Kromołów (photo by the author, July 2011).

by appealing to their non-commercialised nature – the authentic and unspoiled experience market (cf. Svensson 1997, p. 69; see Figure 1):

> Being brutal, one can already say that you can make money on history, landmarks, beauty, peace and quiet. (Siemiński (2000, p. 22, my translation)

Nevertheless, the authenticity of degraded towns may be debated, as many of them were destroyed or gravely deteriorated by years of neglect and misuse by the Communist authorities (cf. Adamczewka-Wejchert and Wejchert 1986, pp. 123–130). Market squares were seen as pieces of empty space that could be customised accordingly to prevailing needs; it could involve cramming the interior with bland industrial and retail establishments, or demolishing parts of frontages and replacing them with hulky, contextually alien, edifices. Today, these disharmonies are being tended to by various revitalisation projects, but those tend to give the towns a very dated look from a specific era, or, more alarmingly, a hotchpotch of incoherent styles that is more subject to artistic latitude than historical conformity. Revitalisation in Poland is contemporarily understood as granting the place its lost values, which, to be effective, must go hand in hand with the intellectual process of restoring memory (Batko 2010). A successful project should therefore adhere to some basic, historically shaped, design principles, capable of capturing the essence of the townscape being redressed. It would require both careful morphogenetical townscape analyses (cf. Conzen 1960) and subsequent adaptations to a modern context (cf. Ashworth 1991). However, this is not always the case, and inadequate proceedings oftentimes result in towns assuming a 'fairy tale look' (cf. Johansson 2009, p. 126), or the characteristics of historical theme parks. In the centre of the newly 'revitalised' market square of the degraded town of Radoszyce, a conspicuously placed sign reads:

> Project: Restoration of Radoszyce's former glory and augmentation of the functional aesthetics of its public space by revitalisation of the market square. (as of July 2011)

In fact, the market square, although pleasant, bears no resemblance to its former appearance. With a minimum of open space (a characteristic of historic squares), mostly taken up by lawns and trees, the market square consists virtually of a clutter of objects: marble chess boards, Parisian street lamps, a modernist military stele, a gazebo/well hybrid, a defunct fountain and an exotic oversized sundial. At the same time, the surrounding buildings remain in a very poor state. Is this the contemporary understanding of former glory? Despite historical mockery, such demonstration of an instantly recognisable image of a chimeric small town must nevertheless be considered as at least an improvement in *functional* aesthetics (prior to revitalisation it was a thicket). On the whole, the concept of small traditional town is experiencing a renaissance in Poland. This is demonstrated by the addition, in 2011, of two open-air museums – in Sanok and Nowy Sącz – dedicated to the small Galician town (Galicia is a cultural region associated with the Partitions of Poland), using reconstructions of buildings from degraded towns from the time of Poland's occupation (Ginalski 2011, Muzeum *et al*. 2011). Such development suggests that the small town is contemporarily seen as something valuable, a fact that may actually aid the degraded towns in regaining their urban status.

The realm of values

> [Cultural heritage sites] are (…) powerful and symbolically charged spaces of experience, with an ability to channel important values such as identity, authenticity, and authority. (Svensson 1998, p. 16)

In order to understand the value-ladenness of such symbolism, it is necessary to deconstruct it. Cultural heritage has widely become divided into a cultural process (cf. Eriksen 2001) and an institutional process (cf. Beckman 1998). Studies of cultural processes depart from empiricism in search for meaning and understanding of cultural practices, although not necessarily in an administrative sense, something that studies of institutional processes do. In application to degraded towns, both themes can be discerned. On the one hand, past urban traditions that are still visible in the towns' urban morphology may spawn a sense of urban consciousness amongst the towns' (rural) residents and initiate a spontaneous cultural process. On the other, due to the formality of town privileges in Poland, heritage can also be achieved by institutional means, that is, when urbanity is approached from an administrative angle (application for restitution automatically raises the question of lost urbanity). Both urban morphology and town privileges – seen as urban-specific features – are two forms of cultural heritage; the first material, the second immaterial. Both are remnants of past traditions and ideals that still define Polish society; they are expressions of local and national identity. According to Ronström's (2000) classification, both correspond to the fundamentalist definition of cultural heritage: they are both 'old' things. Seen with the eyes of more moderate fractions of scholars (focusing on the aesthetics or uniqueness), such classification becomes problematic. Town privileges are neither aesthetic nor unique, while urban morphology may very well be both, but it may also be neither. Since aesthetics is in the eyes of the beholder and uniqueness may be debatable, then the cultural impact of any of them should not be taken for granted. The interface between the two spheres is intricate, and needs further elaboration in order to make it more transparent.

Beckman (1993, pp. 97–100) suggests four analytically discernible values (instrumental, educational, moral, pleasure-laden) based on two sets of juxtaposed dichotomies: emotion/cognition and materiality/idea. In this vein, heritagisation of degraded towns can be seen as an 'instrumental value' because it facilitates restitution of town privileges, which in turn provides a wider variety of means for local development, and the provision of a better life for its residents. Since degraded towns are formally synonymous with the 43,000 other rural settlements in Poland, heritagisation also delivers them from obscurity and oblivion, making them a new object of study and interest (as illustrated by the new wave of books, open-air museums, scientific studies and so forth that has occurred since the emergence of degraded towns as cultural heritage in the 1990s). As such, heritagisation of degraded towns also brings about an 'educational value'. Furthermore, the prefix 'degraded' is a reminder of past foreign oppression, especially for towns degraded during the reform of 1869–1870, which is widely regarded as the epitome of depreciation. Given the currently deployed populist recourse to patriotism in Poland (Sidorenko 2008), heritagisation of degraded towns stays in line with generic national norms, and its value becomes imbued morally. This can be clearly seen in the statements regarding urban restitution, some of which smack of strong reactionary aspirations. There are also traits of a fourth, 'pleasure-laden value'. The sudden, heritagisation assisted emergence of degraded towns

'creates' unexploited areas, which attract tourists sporting *genius loci* qualities like 'magic', 'cosiness', 'homeliness', 'timelessness' and 'serenity'; this in turn makes the towns perfect vacation spots. Furthermore, tourism entails improvements to infrastructure, the service sector and the built environment (most notably by revitalisation), which also makes heritagisation of degraded towns valuable to their residents in the pleasure-laden terms of assortment, aesthetics and comfort.

Characteristics of heritagisation

Regardless of the nature of value, the sheer context of adding value is important. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998, p. 150) contends: 'Heritage adds value to existing assets that have either ceased to be viable (…) or that never were economically productive (…)'. Geopolitical circumstances notwithstanding, the main reason why most degraded towns were degraded in the first place was their economic inefficiency within trade (Kołodziejczyk [1961] 1979). Because of that, they lost their urban viability and importance. Now, some 130 years later, these towns emerge as something forgotten and misunderstood, whereupon extensive measures are being undertaken to revitalise their morphological structure and to regenerate their urban character. Nevertheless, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998, p. 151) puts it, '[d]espite a discourse of (…) revitalization and regeneration, heritage produces something new in the present that has recourse to the past' and the heritagisation is nothing short of a 'transvaluation of the obsolete, the mistaken, the outmoded, the dead, and the defunct' (1998, p. 149). Indeed, it is all about 'selling the good old days' to achieve something else, even though those good old days may sometimes be difficult to visualise. On the peripheries for years, the rural locals of degraded towns may be unable to see beyond the reality of their everyday life and those past traditions seen as something valuable may just be too far away. Therefore, in order to become recognised as cultural heritage sites, degraded towns must be observed from the outside and that is what is happening in Poland right now. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's point on 'alienability of inalienable possessions' (p. 165) is useful here. This applies particularly to those degraded towns that have become heavily altered through the course of time. In order to become aligned with history, modernity must be historicised. That is where revitalisation comes in. However, revitalisation is also important for the tourist stream, as it must accommodate the preconstructed virtuality of anticipant visitors (cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, p. 166). Although we are capable of channelling our vision to find exactly what we are looking for, the gap between virtuality and reality should not be too wide, otherwise the interest may simply die out. From what I have seen during my field studies (2009–2011), many towns appear very neglected and unattractive; maybe consumption of these – in defiance to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's contention (1998, p. 153) – should *not* be consumed locally; maybe they are better off as a figure of imagination or a subject for distant analyses? Such a solution is also tantamount to the feelings shared by some residents of the more rural degraded towns. Judging from their reactions, many just want to be left alone; they do not want their property photographed and trampled and their privacy disturbed. This creates tension, which in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1998, p. 156) words, could be described as a 'problematic relationship of [the heritage's] objects to the instruments of their display'. We must not forget that degraded towns also include people who inhabit them. When socially constructed 'cultural heritage' is attributed to the socially constructed concept 'degraded town' that in turn is imposed *in situ* on socially constructed local – often

Figure 2. Man on the porch facing the market square in the degraded town of Janowiec (photo by the author, July 2011).

rural – norms, conflicts are bound to arise. The old man on the porch may simply not see himself as a 'degraded citizen'; this is his home – as it always has been. No more and no less (Figure 2).

Problems and downsides

Degraded towns are often perceived as *Polish* heritage, whereas many of them were largely inhabited by Ukrainians, Belarusians, Lithuanians, Germans and particularly Jews (note that anti-Semitism has a strong presence in Poland).[2] Furthermore, many of the towns were privately owned, as feudalism was abolished only years before the reform of 1869–1870. Within the production of cultural heritage, there is oftentimes only one type of dominating heritage, while anything that departs from it is detached or obscured; as such, production of cultural heritage is difficult to reconcile with cultural diversity (Johansson 2009, p. 44, 254). Heritagisation of those degraded towns as 'Polish heritage' or as 'people's heritage' forecloses their history of multiculturalism (cf. Klein 1997) and aristocratic heredity (cf. Bendix 2000).

Degraded towns lost their urban status during a time when Poland ceased to exist; when 'Polishness' was confined to mentifacts and hope for a future independence; Davies (2001) calls this period 'the legacy of spiritual mastery'. Moreover, the degradations occurred following bloody Polish nationalist insurrections. Accordingly, the radical reform became interpreted by contemporary and later historiographers – sometimes without proper recognition – as an act of repression (Kołodziejczyk [1961] 1979, p. 65). This theory is so widespread that the reform has become notorious. Clearly, punishment was never stated as the official reason

for the reform; only logically acceptable benefits in terms of tax reliefs and freedom from feudal owners were specified. There were even instances of voluntary requests for degradation (the town of Tarnogród), issued by the residents themselves to avoid the costs of town administration (Nietyksza 1986, pp. 89–90). Furthermore, the reform occurred at the time of Imperial Russia's peak in terms of political power and territorial expansion.[3] In other words, if the reason for degradation were punishment, then, given its power, Russia could state that, and do so 'legitimately', as the Polish uprisings did in fact break Russian law. Therefore, it all breaks down to the aspect of retroactively constructed valorisation propelled by sheer nostalgia: degraded towns are more willingly perceived as treasuries of patriotism and spiritual mastery than as economically depressed rural pockets of the Polish hinterland. An approach such as this also helps crystallising and cementing a Polish identity that uses a Whig history outlook,[4] where the preferred historisation of past national memories is not interpreted from the circumstances of their time, but is rather chosen to fit into the contemporary ruling master narrative (cf. Kearney 1971, Davies 2011). In such a perspective, heritagisation works as 'a beautifying gloss, rendering the specificity of past political, economic, and social experiences into far less complex whole than what socio-historical scrutiny would reveal' (Bendix 2000, p. 38).

There are also more concrete examples of aspirations for timeless purity and authenticity. Given the multicultural past of most degraded towns (ethnicity, creed and ownership), it is interesting how slickly heritagisation is used to erase traces of historical hybridity. I was amazed how the ongoing revitalisation homogenises towns belonging to different historical regions, with their own architectures, norms and habits. The revitalisation scheme is very much the same everywhere (dated wells, benches, street lights and cobblestone pavement), modelled upon Kazimierz Dolny – the epitome of a Polish small town (cf. Adamczewka-Wejchert and Wejchert 1986). This may be due to the local planners' high susceptibility to fashions to avoid risk by 'using a catalogue of heritage clichés' (Ashworth 2007). Such sameness, despite the call for uniqueness, is also a money issue, as many towns seem to use the same entrepreneurs, or at least the same raw materials and mass-produced elements. Still, as Sumień (1989, p. 138) has noted, uniformity destroys the specifics of *genius loci* – the fundamental characteristic of historic towns. Indeed, the revitalisation hype has oftentimes resulted in ad hoc alterations, and its lack of proper supervision inevitably adds to further loss of cultural hybridity.

Tradition vs. modernity

Physical historisation of degraded towns not only vanquishes hybridity, it also has practical implications. Many market squares of degraded towns lost their function as urban spaces during the Communist era, when they were transformed into lawns or parks, some of which evolved into dishevelled, inaccessible tracts or into dark thickets serving as dens for alcoholics. Emergence of the cultural heritage discourse entailed heavy revitalisation of market squares, primarily by removing vegetation and driving out alcoholics from their ordinary venues. Since alcoholism is one of the main social plagues in Poland, and whilst the number of social health care centres is still insufficient (cf. Wojciechowski 2009), 'history' can be said to have collided with modernity. Morphological alterations automatically imply a change of function, and such change entails consequences; not only for delinquents and addicts, but also for diligent citizens who find themselves exposed in a previously sheltered environment.

Complications at the expense of history may also be regarded from another perspective. Eriksen (1993, p. 23) contends that tradition, despite being created by modernity as its *opposition*, is actually *part* of modernity itself, because without modernity as a context, tradition would have no meaning. Indeed, why would degraded towns become 'discovered' right now, and not some 50 years ago? Perhaps, because the modernity of the Communist era was more concerned with progressive and futuristic aspects of development, whilst the (post)modernity of the 2010s is more in line with sustainable development. In the latter case, human well-being is considered to include subtleties like identity and belonging derived from tradition. Eriksen (1995, p. 46) attributes provision of these qualities to history by means of the social production of memory. She also sees the academic discipline of history as a major contributor to such production, rendering history a 'mythology of modernity', that is, a linear metanarrative capable of supplying contemporary populations with roots and answers to existential questions. This is very much in line with what I implied earlier about the Whiggishness of national histories and their unifying power. Such reasoning can also be found in Nora's (2001, p. 365) thoughts on the recent 'acceleration' of history, where the shortage of environments of memory (milieux de memoire) is supplemented by artificially created sites of memory (lieux de memoire). Given that loss of urbanity is beyond the memorial reach of individuals, urbanity must be reconstructed, even if in disregard to time, scale and local needs. In fact, excessive 'prefabricated aesthetisation' of degraded towns may actually erase the last bastions of memorial environments, hitherto preserved by the absence of exploitation. If not tended to, not only may precipitous heritagisation result in strangely misplaced, windswept 'urban' market squares amidst tiny agrarian villages; it may also hollow the specificity of townscape heritage.

Conclusion

The Polish administrative system utilises town privileges – a mediaeval cultural remnant with no contemporary significance – to define symbolically its modern understanding of urbanity. This in turn creates confusion as to what urbanity exactly means. Town privileges are primarily associated with historical events, such as the 1869–1870 administrative reform enforced by the Russian occupation of Poland, depriving 75% of towns of their urban status. The issue of the history of foreign oppression, as well as Poland's chequered relations with Russia, makes this particular loss of urbanity an important identity issue for the towns concerned. Loss of urbanity is further enhanced by the fact that the lack of town privileges in Poland reduces a settlement to rural status – seen in this particular context as being pejorative. Furthermore, since degradations are no longer employed with respect for local identity, some dubiously urban centres retain their formal town status (like Wyśmierzyce with 850 inhabitants); it adds to the confusion: 'why can they, and not we?' Such a situation cannot be satisfactorily accommodated today. Although town privileges have a clear cultural connotation, they stand for something quite different – an administrative definition of urbanity accompanied by certain prerequisites that must be met, which is not always the case. However, the vague definition of these prerequisites gives leeway for arbitrary evaluations in favour of the applicant towns (as seen in the progressive departures from the minimum required population number). Although beneficial in terms of local identity building, such

proceedings are likely to contaminate the Polish definition of urbanity. Most countries rely on more rigid criteria to define their urban areas. In Poland, however, there is an opportunity for heritage to enter this formal arena. There is nothing unusual about the heritagisation of urbanity and it is a global process; however, it is a totally different platform, one that has recourse to urban identity rather than to urban-specific governance and development. In Poland, this is a major source of conflict, yet the division seems to prevail as a hegemonic discourse. If we regard the cultural landscape as a form of human heritage, it would include all settlements: cities, towns and villages, including degraded towns. Bringing forth the latter as a 'special' form of cultural heritage appeals in some morbid way to the very act of degradation, making them a heritage of foreign oppression (not all that different from Holocaust heritage). Statements depicting degraded towns as a testimony of foreign violence, old injustice and present incomprehension may very well be true in ideological terms, and probably in social terms too, but not necessarily so in economic terms. As such, they may unwittingly pave the way for either arbitrary evaluations on behalf of the legislative bodies, or for unrealistic local restitutionary aspirations, nurtured by issues of urban identity.

In Poland, the distinction between formal and cultural urbanity is neither sufficiently differentiated nor problematised. This means that when degraded towns strive for urban status cultural heritage is often used as an argument. However, this is done without accounting for, or at least acknowledging, heritage's subjective nature, and its socially constructed mode and intricacies. Questions need to be asked, such as whose heritage is it, what is included and what is excluded, what does it actually do, and, most importantly, is urban heritage really a purpose of its own, or merely a 'free ride' towards restitution, the latter regarded as an incentive towards development. The production of cultural heritage often becomes internalised as a specific mindscape, a stereotype of a small cosy town that is being replicated by the force of the diffusion of innovations under the auspices of patriotism. Further aided by hasty physical 'revitalisation', heritage becomes instead synonymous with aesthetics and technical maintenance, irrespective of the essence of what is being preserved actually being lost. Urbanity can be enhanced by stylisation, but can it really be conjured by a replica of a nineteenth century street lamp and some paint? Urbanity *does* include morphology and other visual tropes, but the concept is foremost a synergy of many different traits that takes time to evolve and consolidate; it is not merely an administrative label that can be achieved by uninformed reference to an old reform and a quick makeover. Therefore, degraded towns – as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) would put it – are not lost and found, despite increased interest from tourists, academics and local governments; they are imbued with a new meaning to serve some other purpose. Understanding this relation is crucial for understanding the new role of degraded towns that has adapted to reflect a changed reality.

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Notes

1. Innovation and diffusion are two ways in which change in regard to human behaviour is induced. While innovation refers to change resulting from ideas that were created within a specific social group, diffusion is the process by which such innovation is transmitted to another group across space (cf. Fellmann *et al*. 2007, pp. 54–57).
2. A European Parliament resolution (15 June 2006) mentions Poland as a country with troubling occurrences of anti-Semitism (Czarnecki 2007, p. 328).
3. Besides portions of Poland, Russia reigned over territories similar to those of pre-1991 Soviet republics, but also Finland (wrested from Sweden in 1809) and – until 1867 – Alaska.
4. According to Kearney (1971, p. 17), *Whig History* is 'a historical outlook which tends to dominate and distort general accounts'. These distortions occur because 'standards of the present [are imposed] upon the past' and 'explanations based on logical progression [are substituted] for a less rational and more complex interpretation of the past'.

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