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Social containers as a tool of social and spatial segregation

ABSTRACT

Our paper deals with the establishment of the container settlements in Poland and the grassroots response to it: by the inhabitants and by political activists. In particular we are interested in how local authorities strategically frame housing issues to create social acceptance of diminishing standards of social housing in Poland and the involvement of the mainstream media in the process. We are focusing on strategies as well as tactical efforts to overcome structural and discursive opportunities emerging in the process of the anti- container campaign. Exclusionary discourse about the 'container ghettos' becomes a justification for local authorities to use social containers as tool of social and spatial segregation as well as to discipline communal tenants. In response of this process activists had to develop new diagnostic mobilizing frames and put considerable effort into frame alignment processes and forged new alliances with other actors. We analyze the campaign from the perspective of social movement studies, in particular structural theories of collective action. One side effect of such policies is unspoken racism, which we – after E. Balibar – interpret mostly in class terms aimed at the economically maladjusted. Empirically, our paper draws upon sociological intervention and 40 in-depth interviews with the inhabitants of the container settlements in Poland in 7 different cities conducted in 2008-2012; participant

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observations of the settlements and of the campaign against them due to personal involvement of one of the authors.

Introduction

The idea of a free market in urban economy does not go hand in hand with the idea of social justice, attributing urbanization to a particular role and unique function in dynamics of capital accumulation. This article explores housing conditions in post-socialist environment focusing on social housing containers in Poland, which constitute example of substandard housing. Despite the rapid development of this new form of substandard housing which sprung up after the 1997 Central European flood, there has been no public debate nor academic attention given to that issue. The invisibility of this phenomenon can be partially explained by the fact that, firstly, the container housing was initially implemented as a temporary solution, and, secondly, the container settlements were located on the peripheries of the cities in areas hardly accessible and essentially hidden from the public view. What was supposed to be a temporary solution, for many people relocated to the containers has become a regular life condition, like in Nowa Sól where majority of the residents have lived ever since the flood in 1997. The residents themselves refer to the surroundings which they are forced to live in as 'container ghettos', displaying therefore the sense of isolation and separation. Drawing on the case of container ghettos, we look at the process of social segregation and attempt to show that this process can be interpreted as an example of class segregation based on the socio-economic status of the displaced. We are analysing the creation of these so called container ghettos as areas inhabited by individuals who incurred a negative impact of the systemic transformation of 1989, and neoliberal policies that arrived with it. Our secondary goal is to show the role of sociologists as researchers and activists whose activities have tangible political effects: they are a resource of continuous diagnosis of the urban situation and can push for changes in local housing policies. The discussion between academics and activists (in particular tenants' and squatters' movements) concerning the research process allowed to collectively redefine the research problem so that the research results can be used in future local activists' struggles. These results served as a tool of social change and were used in anti-container housing campaigns led by the activists of Poznań. Research on substandard container housing has revealed issues that would otherwise not be addressed by central and local governments, possibly due to the fact

that it could highlight morally-dubious housing policy and thus bring social unrest. Similarly to the research on the number of vacant buildings in cities, demand for social housing, displacements, real estate speculation, re-privatisation, financials or gentrification. In Poland, these data are mainly disclosed by activists from grassroots social movements. One should also keep in mind the differences in defining what is "urban" at all and what their hierarchy is, New urban movements and tenants' and anarchist movements.

The neoliberal housing policy leading to such processes as privatisation of housing stock, introduction of precarious housing conditions, resettlements to peripheries, are deliberately kept outside of the public debate since city authorities try to avoid social resistance against such antisocial solutions.

The article begins with the summary of the data sources and methods of analysis and the theoretical background (of the authors). Later we highlight the political and structural background of the housing situation in Poland with a short history of the phenomenon of container settlements in Poland. Detailed analysis, the study of the discourse on container settlements, social composition thereof, the emergence of the "punishment" narrative, and the victimisation of the inhabitants are discussed in the subsequent sections, as the article concludes by summarizing the argument.

Theory and method

Research problems within this paper have been constructed on the basis of issues prioritised by the tenants themselves. The subject of displacements, evictions and the scale of the phenomenon of vacant buildings has been little addressed in the last 26 years. Publications regarding arbitrary resettlements (fast relocations to container settlements, with no alternative) or gentrification in Poland have only started to emerge following the publication of the Polish translation of D. Harvey's *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* which has started a certain academic debate. In our opinion, research on the less-privileged urban citizens is worthwhile only when it has the potential of developing implementable solutions, and is not solely used for the benefit of a narrow academic circle (for more on the topic see: Czarnota, Kostka 2017). Emancipatory research requires blurring boundaries between the academic and the activist, which is problematic, because despite the declarative openness and engagement of social sciences, scientific and research institutions are very conservative when it comes to methodology and reluctant to engage in political disputes and social conflicts, preferring to remain 'objective'. This neutrality is perceived by activists as opportunism, highlighting the widening gap between the academia and current

social struggles. Publicising the results of research (in the form of public debate, workshops, knowledge transfer and discussions) is the moment when theory is transformed into practice, and has a potential to raise social awareness and therefore to implement changes. Lower social classes often have no way of articulating their main demands, as they do not have representatives among political authorities, and above all, because the decision-making system does not include their voice. Furthermore, neoliberal decision-makers seek to exclude the lower class from the decision-making process. In the light of such attitude of the authorities, the mechanisms of representative democracy are subjected to the reproduction of class and hierarchical social divisions. It can be often observed that the budgetary arrangements and city investments reflect the interests of active and engaged middle-class, and private companies, rather than the whole community. The hierarchy of budgetary arrangements points to the hegemony of middle class interests, and their representatives practically dominating the city councils. In the context of the debate on Polish cities, the investment priorities, even if they result from the so called new urban movements, the mostly concern issues such as: cycle paths, playgrounds, murals and the general aesthetisation of urban space. What is largely ignored in this process are matters such as the number of vacant buildings, privatisation of housing stock, resettlements and evictions, all of which lead to the change of social composition of city districts by 'pushing' the poorer residents out of the city centre.

Militant methodology approach as a research framework

In our research work, constructing knowledge usable only in the debates of a rather hermetic academic circle is not the priority. We refer to the experience with social conflicts and issues of activists and academics coalitions including Collectivo Situaciones (2003), or the Madrid Observatoria Metropolitana which describes itself as "militant research group that utilizes investigations and counter-mapping to look into the metropolitan processes of precarious workers, migrants, and militants taking place in Madrid, brought on by crisis, gentrification, speculation and displacement". Similarly to Russel (2015) or Juris (2007), we treat sociological research in this case as an tool of emancipation, at the same time questioning the paramount role of university as, in some cases, limited by hierarchic structure and thus limited in terms of possibilities of using research results in social practice. Relying on Choudry and Kapoor (2016), we view the researcher's engagement as having a positive impact on the research's quality, since an engaged researcher has the ability to obtain more

detailed information, acquiring knowledge of the wider context of the topics addressed.

At the same time, by using the term of militant research we wish to highlight the fact that we put strong emphasis on the goal of the research and application of its results. In recent years participatory action research methodology has become rather common, nonetheless, results are often available only to the academic circle and in reality do not improve the situation of its participants. Supporters of involving the community in defining the research problem believe that a critical sociologist should conduct research from the point of view of 'subordinate groups' (Gouldner 1976). It is argued that it is particularly important to show and focus on the problems and interests of these groups because of the general omission or concealment of these issues. According to Gouldner, the suffering of people is structurally conditioned, generally meaning that it is called by the systemic inequalities. What is interesting is that the causes of this stratification are analysed by both sides of the spectrum from two different perspectives. The difference between the Veberian-inspired 'ideal types' of orientations of 'neoliberals' and the 'radical opposition is significant here. 'Neoliberals' sometimes study groups from the poorer classes for mainly descriptive purposes, lacking deeper analysis of the systemic causes to this problem. The 'radical' opposition, on the other hand, uses the perspective of the oppressed groups to analyse structures of power and often does so in the political attempt to strengthen the position of the less-privileged social groups.

The conducted research was inspired by the model of sociological intervention (Touraine 2010) and comprised of multiple stages. The first stage included the analysis of press materials concerning each of the locations of container settlements. The analysis focused on the articles published in the years of 2009-2013 by *Gazeta Wyborcza* (one of the largest Polish dailies). Based on the results of this analysis we investigated how the rhetoric and the way of presenting the issue had been changing over time. The next stage following the press research involved field trips, where in-depth interviews with the inhabitants were conducted, accompanied by photographic documentation. In the case of 3 of the settlements, one of the authors revisited the locations to collectively analyse the data collected, and to select photographs which were to later become part of the brochure published during the Mediations International Biennial in Poznań. The final stage of an activist research can be considered to be the participation of inhabitants in the presentation of research results in public debates, television and radio programs, which emerged as a result of anti-container information campaign (which was also created on the basis of the results presented in this paper). We began the research with an initial hypothesis of the social composition of settlements being

diverse, and then on the basis of qualitative data collection (biographical in-depth interviews) we were able to discern certain categories of inhabitants. These categories included two main groups: people aged over 50, and single mothers. Other traits and characteristics were also observed which are described in the "social composition" subsection of this article.

The research included both cooperation with the tenants, meetings and lectures aimed at changing the discourse, actions of political nature, articles, interviews, and participation in TV programs. Some of the research results were publicized in a short documentary film (MrKontrplan 2014). Forty in-depth interviews that lasted from 30 minutes to an hour were conducted in eight Polish towns (Bydgoszcz, Józefów, Sławków, Skoczów, Bytom, Sosnowiec, Nowa Sól, Moczydłów). A total of 50 photographs from the housing containers were made.

Research objectives for the study included description of the phenomenon of using the container settlements as a form of spatial segregation of inhabitants due to their economic status. The intervention research was also defined as: (1) exposing the fact of replacing standard housing with container modules localised on the outskirts of Polish cities, or in the areas which are difficult to access and out of public view; (2) the disclosure of social and economic effects of such projects on the residents themselves; and (3) finally forcing the cessation of use of such settlement projects by the authorities and the return to a regular social housing (located in standard buildings with foundations, with access to all amenities and alike).

When it comes to the analysis of the public narratives concerning the subject of container settlements, we relied on the concept of Discursive Opportunity Structures. Since the late 1990s, more academic attention has been given to the cultural context in which social actions take place. This has, for instance, resulted in the emergence of the concept of discursive opportunity structures (Koopmans and Statham 1999), which emphasises that the ideas which the broader political culture presents as "sensible", "realistic", or "legitimate" significantly affect whether movements can get support for their "collective action framing" (ibid.). In summary, "discursive opportunity structures reveal that cultural elements in the broader environment facilitate and constrain successful social movement framing" (McCammon 2013). This seems to be a particularly important issue for social actions operating in a hostile discursive field, as well as in the case of creating empowering narratives about the studied groups. Using this approach we tried to see and show, how discourses about residents of container settlements are being constructed, imposed (by local authorities), and internalised by the public opinion (e.g. journalists and commentators online). Our goal was also to remain transparent about the process of gathering the collective knowledge of

the residents, and commonly agreeing on presentation of the findings which were then publicised by the researchers and activists. In some of the cases the most visible evidence of changes in discourses on container settlements was the rise of awareness among journalists and the subsequent shift in their outlook on this issue. The increasing awareness caused social upheavals within different environments causing the emergence of groups of protesters representing different social circles, including artists, academics, tenants, so called new urban movements, among others. Such a state of affairs led to the strengthening of anti-container campaigns in Poznań, which in turn forced the authorities to close one of the settlements and make the containers available for the use of the local animal shelter (2012).

Such turn of events could be considered a first step into the direction of providing the marginalised social groups with the ability to regain their autonomy. In this process we strove to avoid the morally-dubious and paternalistic notion of 'empowerment', and instead approached the residents as the experts on their own condition. J.M. Blaut, in his criticism of anthropocentrism, has pointed out that a seemingly universalist, tolerant, and open-minded policy may simultaneously include a system of valuation which is based on the presumption that the representatives of a certain cultural circle have better characteristics, predispositions, opportunities than others. 'Others' are more primitive, with less intelligence and motivation to fulfil their needs (Blaut, 1992). In such approach, the notion of higher race was replaced by the concept of higher culture in the 21st century, because the plotted contexts of power required a new set of arguments for specific historical-socio-political contexts. Thus, with the development of the neoliberal system – and in the case of Poland, political transformation – there has been a need for another set of arguments to legitimise increasing social inequalities.

The phenomenon of economic racism in the Polish context after transformation is described by Monika Bobako (2011), who in the text *Constructing class diversity as a Creation: The Polish case after 1989* introduced the notion of *raceifying*, in relation to those groups that have felt the negative effects of the transformation, linking the rising poverty or unemployment to their supposed inclination to the so called pathological behaviour. Bobako seeks to introduce class racism as a tool for analysing the emergence and enhancement of class differences in Poland (Bobako 2011). According to Bobako, this type of racism has allowed for an in-depth understanding of the processes of social segregation and hierarchy of people in modern capitalist societies. In other words, it outlines the context and working mechanisms of neoliberal narrative which becomes 'obvious' as described by Harvey, meaning that it is generally accepted as the only right outlook (2007). The narrative becomes 'transparent': is no longer

perceived as an ideology and sets the framing for other actors within the public sphere.

Social containers and the discourse accompanying these projects thus serve as a tool of social segregation, which we understand as linked to class racism. Using Bobako's notion of *raceifying* as a discursive process of extracting classes and assigning certain attributes to groups of people. A similar phenomenon is observed in the media discourse on the introduction of containers. Based on the economic status of the inhabitants, they are assigned predetermined characteristics (such as reluctance to work, abuse of alcohol and other substances, relying on social welfare, irresponsible family planning, among many others), *naturalizing* and *essentialising* what is supposed to justify discriminatory practices. Bobako's concept of *raceifying* applies in the context of deepening and justifying class differences after the transition. In a similar vein, Ewa Charkiewicz (2008) analyses stigmatization derived from economic racism aimed at transformation's victims in the context of the progressive dismantling of the state, including the privatization of housing stock, pointing out that the combination of economic, class, and racist issues in the capitalist system and neoliberal projects is not accidental. The inequalities of social classes were often described as inequalities of nature (Balibar 1991), while the racist discourse itself was necessary to create a relationship of economic exploitation, which was later justified by, first, quotations from the Bible[1] and then (after the second half of the 19th century) in relation to slavery (Wacquant 2002).

Immanuel Wallenstein (2007) argues that new forms of racism or modern racism characteristic of neoliberal discourse appear as a by-product of neoliberal society's appropriation of values related to universalism and egalitarianism. These, supposedly enlightened, terms are in fact manipulated to justify the assumption that everyone has equal chances. This is essential for the deepening and justification of social inequalities, and the occurrence of discriminatory and exploitative mechanisms subjected to the groups of low economic status under the guise of 'protecting decent citizens' The relationship of racism and capitalism, according to Wallenstein, is at the same time paradoxical but necessary for the functioning of the capitalist economy.

Blaut treated racism as a kind of practice which played a very important role in the formation of European societies for several hundred years, constituting a key component of the whole system of European

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[1] Although all humans were to come from Adam and Eve, the division of the world occurred after the flood, when Noah, Shem and Cham were joined by Africa and Asia, and Jafet and Europe. The attribution of the crass descent to the serfs was part of the noble ideology in Sarmatian Poland. The nobility of course came from Jafet (see: Tazbir 2001: 164).

capitalism (Blaut 1992). The issue of economic racism in the case of Polish substandard housing leads to different treatment of the poor, introduction of segregation projects, and marketing this modern development as a 'good solution'. According to this rhetoric, container dwellers are economically useless, it is therefore 'justified and obvious' that they can be condemned to life in substandard condition.

Charkiewicz (2008) writes that, „neoliberal racism is reproduced in a mentality by dividing into two categories of people: hard-working, economical and wary, and parasites that need to be sterilised". What she implies is that capitalist system imprinted this simplistic dichotomy on citizens' worldview, creating a dangerously easy tendency to categorise people. We therefore interpret the media discourse on the inhabitants of social containers as the essence of contemporary class racism. It leads to building social acceptance for different treatment of container occupants identifying them as 'savage' and 'difficult tenants'. These terms are very useful for local authorities who still want to pursue a policy that is not, in fact, designed to meet the needs of the lowest class citizens, but redirects the maximum amount of public money to meet the business-and business-friendly goals of 'the new bourgeoisie'.

Political and structural background

Poland remains a country with one of the largest shortage of housing stock in Europe, and for nearly 30 years since the transformation, this condition has not significantly improved. In order to understand the conditions of housing activism in Poland, one needs to consider the situation in the housing sphere, as it constitutes the conditions for such activism. According to official statistics, as many as 6.5 million Poles lived in substandard conditions in 2012, and there was a shortage of 1.5 million dwellings in the country by that time (NIK 2012). Many buildings and land, nationalized during communism, were until recent times under municipal management, however re-privatization claims by former owners, their heirs and the buyers of these claims started to change the situation. Over 30% of Poland's population lives in bad or very bad housing conditions. Overcrowding (according to European standards - more than 2 people per room), in 2011 it affected about 12% of the population. More than 60% of people aged 18-29 live with their parents, and one in four will never move out. It is estimated that the number of homeless people in Poland is at the level of 40 000-70 000. Housing statistics published by GUS every year and research reports from many institutions and organisations show that since 2011 little has changed in the areas mentioned above.

The structure of the housing stock in Poland has been gradually changing since the 1990s up until today. During the 1990s about 50% of the newly built apartments were completed as the so-called "social projects". Apartments were built by housing cooperatives, municipalities and the Social Construction Society (pol. TBS). However, during the last two decades, the structure of housing has been gradually changing. In 2014, only 8% of the total of 4,485 new homes were social projects. At the same time, developers released over 53% of dwellings onto the market. Developers and private investors are putting up to 70% of all homes built right now, while in 1995 they amounted only at 6.3% (GUS 2016).

Shortage of social housing, higher rents and unstable rental conditions, combined with a high level of evictions led to a ver high demand for housing for the poor. It is worth noting that according to the Central Statistical Office, in 2015 municipalities provided the smallest number of communal housing since the beginning of the transformation in 1989.

At the same time, it should be emphasised that municipalities have for the last ten years been gradually selling their communal housing stock, despite the fact that housing needs remain unsatisfied. According to the NIK (Supreme Audit Office) report of 2011, none of the municipalities have been satisfactorily fulfilling the obligation to provide adequate social and communal facilities. In some cases the waiting time exceeds even 10 years, although according to the art. 75 of the Constitution, public authorities are obliged to pursue policies aimed at satisfying the housing needs of citizens, in particular at combating homelessness, and promoting the development of social and municipal housing. Unfortunately, this need is satisfied only in a small percentage (only 1–2%, according to the report of the Supreme Audit Office of 2011).

Due to the lack of the statistics, it is impossible to determine the exact number of evictions, which, however, are not rare. The scale of the issue can be seen it the constantly increasing number of people who – due to evictions – are forced to stay in homeless shelters. Between 1995 and 2009 the number of officially filed lawsuits for evictions remained more or less stable (oscillating between 31.2 and 41.2 thousand per year).

On the basis of this data, we can observe a distinct transition from the system of cooperative and tenant housing to developer market. Revitalisation programs often do not protect the interests of existing tenants residing in revitalised neighbourhoods (e.g. lack of legal regulations and measures to reduce rents in the revitalised neighbourhoods). This situation has led to the development of a new service market: illegal expropriations and the "cleaning" of privatised build-

ings (increasingly financed by banks), and buying reprivatisation claims by specialised lawyers.

History of container settlements in Poland

Social containers were first used in 1993 in Łodź (Suchecka 2012) and included th use of several shipping container modules as social houses, located on the outskirts of the city. On one hand, the project was a response to the shortage of communal flats, on the other – a "scare strategy" directed at the residents of Łódź who struggled to pay rent. In 1997, after a huge flood that affected large part of Poland, about 7,000 families lost their homes. This crisis has become an opportunity to implement the new solution on a larger scale, however the project was presented as temporary. It was realised in Wrocław, Nowa Sól or the small town of Święta Katarzyna. These "emergency temporary camps" of containers were not, however, removed after the end of the flood. Up to this day, containers are located on the outskirts of the cities, usually in close proximity to the railroad tracks, landfills etc. According to the Polish law, containers are not considered buildings. What is interesting is that two legal opinions were issued claiming that containers cannot serve as the housing stock by the municipality. These opinions have been ignored. In Święta Katarzyna, social containers were functioning for as long as 13 years. In Nowa Sól such modules are used, as part of the community's housing stock, until today, not only for the victims of natural disasters, but also for the poor. After a few years, the containers began to function as official social housing, where individuals were legally-assigned social housing.

It is impossible to specify how many people will potentially be forced to live in substandard container houses. Settlements exist now in over 30 cities. The Biggest settlement of barracks is located in Sosnowiec where around 100 units are present, and the local authorities want to introduce more. Typical apartment on the container settlement looks like a typical living container for construction workers. Inside there are usually one or two rooms with a total size of 10 to 20 square meters, bathroom with shower and a toilet and a kitchenette adjoined to the room. In winter, there is always a smell of damp and plastic walls are covered by, firstly, condensation and after a few months by mould. During winter time, it often happens that tenants are forced to enter through the windows of their homes, because the metal doors are often stuck-frozen.

The first legal struggles opposing the neoliberal practices took place in 2010, when an opinion of experts from the National Commission of the National Trade Union Worker's Initiative (Komisja Krajowa Ogólnopolskiego Związku Zawodowego Inicjatywa Pracownicza) (FA

Poznań 2011) on Housing Law was issued. The opinion undertook an analysis of the compliance of the design of the container housing estate with the local law and the statute of Poznań's Municipal Property Resources Board (Zarząd Komunalnych Zasobów Loka-lowych – ZKZL). The second legal document was commissioned by Amnesty International. Attorney Katarzyna Rychtanek stated, among other things, that under the applicable law "social housing can only be located in a building [that meets certain standards], thus these facilities [containers] cannot qualify as social or replacement facilities. In any case where the court assigns the right to social housing, the evicted cannot be placed in a container facility in the light of the provisions of the applicable legal regulations" (Barka 2011). To sum up, the Housing Law does not recognise containers as buildings so they cannot be given the role of social housing. According to the report submitted later to the city council, "Poznań's housing system does not allow for the provision of temporary accommodation in any way other than in dedicated premises. It is not allowed, therefore, to use for that purpose buildings which do not belong to the municipal housing stock, nor rented properties. Containers, as they are not considered to be buildings (only a temporary building), cannot become temporary dwellings. Accordingly, they cannot be used to meet the housing needs of community of Poznań (Barka 2011).

Social composition of container settlements

The results of our research, which included forty in-depth inter-views allowed us to observe that the social composition of the container settlements is varied and analogous to a typical social housing estate. Each tenant has met the legal criteria for obtaining state aid in the form of social housing. The common denominator of the inhabitants is low, or no income at all. The majority of inter-viewed people, just over half, remained without permanent work. The peripheral location of container estates increased unemployment. As many as 25% of the respondents living in containers changed their current place of work or resigned due to inability to cover commuting expenses. Vast majority of the respondents were therefore still on a pension or other care and support.

Although the rent in social containers at a first glance does not seem excessive (within the range of about 100 to 250 złoty per month for a container facility – from 25 to 60 EUR), additional media costs (electricity, water, rubbish disposal, etc), consume more than half of the inhabitant's net income (according the Main Statistical Office rent usually constitutes just over 20% of the disposable income of the family per capita, which is often a cause of debt). In extreme cases, often in winter, fatalities were caused by power cut offs. S (In order to

protect the anonymity of the respondents, we decided to remove numbers of interviews or other data that could potentially identify them), one of the inhabitants of one of the largest container settlement recalls this tragic event:

> In the winter of last year, probably in February, they disconnected the electricity from us and three other neighbours. There [the respondent indicates the container opposite], he was 28 [also died of freezing]. Death, here is death (...) They were alone, no one helped them.

As many as 80% of the population of the settlements declared that their income was not enough to pay for electricity on a regular basis. The highest bills in the winter period (2 months) amounted to 1500 PLN (roughly 400 EUR, since 2018 this is also the amount of minimum wage in Poland, earned by around 10% of the working people in Poland (Polska Agencja Prasowa 2018). Energy poverty is especially felt by the elderly, sick and children. Inadequate heating also affects further deterioration of living standards such as dampening flats.

The isolation of settlements causes social tensions and conflicts. Neoliberal narratives justify attacks and economic racism. Residents of the estate in Jozefów described the following events:

> (...) car drove up, [they] threw a Molotov cocktail into the window. The neighbours' laundry was set on fire when it was hanging out to dry On the stairs, here at the main wall, one morning we found a bottle laying and part of it was petrol. The police arrived, something was done. The neighbour went everywhere to exchange her windows, because they are black and smelly. She went to the office, but found that her windows will not be changed. And so it is.

On the basis of the interviews, two basic categories of inhabitants can be distinguished.

(1) The first group consists of persons aged 50 and over, running the household together with a spouse or being a single dweller. Often, these people have disabilities and live off social welfare benefits. Typically, they indicate basic or vocational education.

(2) Another group of people were single mothers aged between 19 to 50, living together with their underage children, as well as families with children. In this group, most frequently mentioned was technical vocational education and secondary schools, rarely higher education. Declared sources of income were temporary or short-term contracts, mostly in services and education (two teachers), and support services.

Many people worked for various branches of national industry. One single mother, a resident of a container estate in Bydgoszcz, can serve as an example of such an inhabitant. She had worked in the meat industry for over 20 years as a butcher. Between 1988 and 2008 she had a fixed income and full social benefits. during the 1990's she gave birth to her first child. At present, she is single-handedly parenting 5 children. Her youngest daughter suffers from chronic respiratory

disease. The respondent resigned from work in order to care for her children. Since 2008 she has received additional financial assistance due to the health issues of one of her daughters and the difficult financial situation. She was allocated to the social housing in a container, which she was granted because she could not afford housing on the free market.

> I got this apartment assigned a as temporary, but actually [it functions] as a social one. It is only temporary that I have lived here for no more than 2 years. Here people live a little longer. Over three years and no one of them got an apartment (...) And they did not look at all whether the child has (...) asthma or not. [...] since [2008] I am not working. I do not have time in general, because I have a lot of these children and cannot afford a crčche.

In case of many women and single mothers, the loss of financial liquidity was often related to the need to take care of unpaid care work for family members.

The stories quoted during the interviews are a clear example of the fact that the social composition of container estates is very diverse (in terms of age, sex or occupation) and overthrows the common myth of a 'male, difficult, and dangerous occupant' (as it was created by the lawmakers and journalists). Residents undertook their own analysis of the rhetoric of the city authorities in the context of the composition of the social settlement.

> They wrote about us [that] it was a ghetto. That there is pathology here, no. It was written in the newspapers. Pathology. But there are also children here, but they wrote about all that here is the ghetto and pathology. That we are all handicapped and stupid. (...) Scrapping metal off old mine shafts is hard work. And how many empty buildings are there that apartment could be made of!

The narrative of the life-story of the informant continued:

> I was in Greece still during the times of communism. Well, to improve the living conditions of my family. Well, but there was also bad luck that wound up on the end on the street [in Greece, as a black market labourer], and I actually ended up without anything. And as we came back here, it was already after the transformation, and it was hard work already. I was 51 then, and everywhere I tried to look for work I was too old for.

An interesting example is the town of Jozefów, whose authorities seem to ignore the composition of the container settlement. As one of the residents of the settlement described:

> There are about 16 families in containers. There are still a few cottages – 10 families. But I have no idea how much [people are] in this brick building, maybe 14 families. Six small children live in the containers and two more minors. I do not know why they say that children do not live here. The contract is for me, but I also have a baby and this is in my files.

Bytom respondents outline one more important topic. At the initial stage, the authorities decided that people who had previous criminal sentences for previous crimes would be relocated there. A narrow

group of "experts" decided on such a form of additional punishment for "bandits." During the study in 2012 it turned out that almost half of the respondents from Bytom actually had been sentenced earlier. However, it is particularly informative to analyse the reasons for the court sentences, as explained by those directly affected:

> Well, we have a sentence because it was hard. In the previous house as we lived, the electricity was being stolen.

Similarly, the 58-year-old scrap collector, who is still living on a social pension, is describing the details of her sentence:

> It's obvious that [people] have previous convictions here. Every second one here has convictions, because they were steeling electricity or water in the previous house. I also have one. [it is] Cold, [I have only] two hundred and forty złoty, the cans, and how am I supposed to pay?

In Poznań, a two-year verification process of "difficult tenants" ended with selecting 19 men who would live in containers. It turned out that some of the selected residents were disabled and ill. A local newspaper described the situation as: "A few disabled people, a 75 year old senior and a recovering alcoholic were put on the list of container residents by the Municipal Property Resource Board. According to the City Centre for Family Assistance, none of these people should be living in a container" (Annanikowa 2012).

Containers as the punishment for "problematic tenants"

Neoliberalism as a political doctrine is based on the construction and use of language tools and arguments in such a way that they become some kind of "indisputable manifestation" in the social sense (Davis 2009: 142). In order to make property rights appear more dignified, the public authorities created a mythical figure of a 'difficult and burdensome tenant'. This construct has become an inseparable part of the discourse, for many years effectively blurring within the Polish public debate the complexity of antisocial housing solutions for the poorest individuals. As a consequence, evicted residents who have been allocated social housing (meeting the conditions set out in law, such as illness, unemployment, raising underage children single-handedly) are often pathologized and identified as 'difficult tenants'. The poor themselves are blamed for poverty, categorised as 'lazy' or 'unfit' for the free market. This narrative was present in the Polish mainstream as well as academic discourse on excluded societies since the early 1990s (see Buchowski 2018 for a general analysis).

The public discourse on container estate developments in Poland is essentially the same in all cities. City authorities attribute certain

cultural and social features to a given social group with a low economic status.

Container estates are usually referred to as 'punishment only for difficult locals'. "Another group – 20 non-paying, abusive and vandal-isingtenants – will be transferred to containers which will be located at Średzka street" – Jaroslaw Pucek, director of ZKZL, announces that he will not withdraw his decision (Kopiński 2011). The presentation of containers as a new standard of social housing (which in fact they are, but the city does not openly admit it), peripheral location, tin walls, low quality of infrastructure, where poor people are expected to live, waiting in a never ending legal limbo for a different allocation.

A general scheme of media rhetoric, that allows making decisions on tenants without undergoing democratic scrutiny, may be presented in the four following stages:

1. Before the commencement of construction works. When the decision to implement the project has already been made (without public participation), the public authorities identify the group as 'difficult tenants'. „This year Bialystok is planning to buy 30 so-called containers (...) There are people living with evictions here. But not all [...] Officials from the Bialystok municipality want to find first of all men who disturb the lives of neighbours and their families" (Perkowska 2008).

2. Start of implementation. Often (but not always) there is a conflict between the representatives of public authority and the local community whose members do not want to live – as they often say – in the proximity of 'bums'. In general, the project "punishing difficult tenants" is not socially questioned. Container housing becomes something of an unwanted "rubbish dump". Nobody wants to live in the immediate vicinity, but everyone recognises the supposed need for its existence. "In the fall of next year 25 tin containers (such as on construction sites) will be at Ugory, Forteczna and Kopanina streets (all located close to the city limits). Off the beaten track, away from new housing estates. - We do not want private investors to say that because of our program their housing prices dropped – explains Jarosław Pucek, director of ZKZL." (*Dłużnicy za karę…*)

3. Resettling the evicted to the containers. It turns out that the social composition of the container estate is quite different from the presupposed one. Public authorities, through the use of containers, shorten the „allocation waiting lists". The rhetoric of "difficult tenants" is changing into entrepreneurial rhetoric: despite the housing crisis and the shortage of social housing, municipalities are capable of creating new housing stock. The example of Bydgoszcz, where container estates operate since 2009, shows how a mechanism of social consent is built. When the idea was accepted by the public opinion, it turned out that the main goal was simply to provide housing in barracks as

a cheap way to address social housing shortages. Consequently, the rhetoric of the punishment changed to the rhetoric of success, according to local *Gazeta Wyborcza*: (April 19, 2009): "A small settlement on the edge of Siernieczka, just off the railroad tracks, consists of several new barracks. There are one and two bedroom social housings. In each – bathroom with shower and sink, radiators, and kitchenette. In a month there will be 16 families with eviction titles." Bydgoszcz authorities in this case have already promoted the selection of tenants based on the 'award' principle where a new housing standard is given to those who 'deserve it most'".

4. Container dwellers begin to identify themselves as container ghetto occupants. Public authorities comment on deteriorating quality of the premises, which in turn impacts health conditions by saying that „the premises at the time of commissioning were in an ideal state. If they are not now, it is the fault of the users, they have only themselves to blame because they used the premises badly. However, it should be mentioned that this attitude is not shared by all Polish municipalities. In some municipalities public debate caused the project to be rejected as morally or economically questionable (e.g. in Warsaw).

In Poland, there are several thousands of people living in containers. Containers are still presented mainly as "the way the city deals with the problem of difficult tenants. Living in a container will discipline them" (Mikulec 2010).

The message based on the rhetoric of punishment is designed to convince the public that the people affected by this policy are particularly deserving living in these substandard conditions which are far worse than those of the 'normal' (i.e. earning) citizens. In addition, the authorities gain the effect of increased discipline over the inhabitants in difficult financial or living circumstances resulting from the fear of 'punishment'. Essentially, some characteristics of economically disadvantaged groups are produced by the economically racist rhetoric perpetuated by the local government and some media. The characteristics ascribed to the evicted in this discourse are then identified as the cause and the justification for inequalities. This mechanism can be seen in many neoliberal discourses accompanying systemic transformations (from communism to neoliberalism), which emphasise issues of mentality, values, 'civilizational competence', personality and intellectual qualities, stating that these aspects are the cause of the success or failure of individuals.

Such an understanding of the reasons for inequalities within society is generally accepted by the public, while at the same time it is the main cause of conflict between local communities and the authorities. Local communities, exemplifying a typical NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) attitude, do not want to be neighbours of the

'difficult and unfit' (in the context of transformational discourse). As a result, a process is launched in which these communities force the settlements to be located even farther away, which in turn requires an even more complex justifications.

Officially, containers are increasingly being presented to the public as the only remedy for housing shortages. The lack of alternatives is becoming more and more predominant. This is well illustrated by the statement of Janina Żagan, acting as the mayor of Skoczów: "Every Tuesday I see the inhabitants in my office. Most beg for social housing. The city has no money for the construction, so it decided to relocate people to containers (...) Six years – such a long wait for a social apartment in Skoczów. The municipality has no money for the construction of social houses, so did not even plan such a budget investment" (Furak 2007). Such narration makes the public opinion accept this state of affairs as the only possible solution. No objective factors indicate that the housing situation nor directions of its development will change. Moreover, it can be assumed that the current economic and housing crisis will deepen and force more radical reactions of authorities. Łódź can serve as an example of large scale controversial solutions. In response to the lack of social housing combined with the revitalisation strategy of the city, three container estates have been built to provide about 400 temporary dwellings. At the same time, it is assumed that further privatisation of a fully-fledged municipal resources will be achieved through the sale of 1.200 dwellings. In this situation real change means a very large reorganisation of urban construction programs.

Reflections come only after this "experiment" has in been place for some time, but not in all cases. The authorities of Bydgoszcz after several years decided to abandon the plans of new container settlements construction. However, initially the tenants who already lived in the container settlement were still forced to do so, due to the deficit of premises. The situation changed recently, following a large-scale public debate, and the inhabitants were relocated to different social houses. The low profitability of the investment was also noted: the spokesman of the commune, Leszek Słodowy from the town of Margonin, pointed out: "Unfortunately, they [containers] do not work in our climatic conditions, we will not use anymore, because we have to insulate them, and then it costs 2000 złoty (about 500 Euro) per square meter. In addition, for moral reasons, these people do not feel good in these conditions, they are stigmatised." In spite of this, social stereotypes are already firmly established (all quotes from discussion forums of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, collected under the articles mentioned here and *Stawiają kontenery…* 2011):

> "In containers… hmmm, I do not know what kind of people live there, but I think some alcoholics. At least that's what newspapers say"

"It was not like they were supposed to live there, but if someone is a vandal, then I do not mind."

Building an image of a new class of poverty

In the spring of 2010, the "Containers: Exclusion Policy" brochure was published for the first time, which was one of the elements of the exhibition by Canadian artist Michel Teran during the international Arts Biennial in Poznań. Women who gave interviews and allowed photographic documentation included in this work, expressed their criticism of the substandard housing. They have taken the first step in the fight for the rights to decent dwellings. Thanks to them the problem of container settlements was articulated and noticed within the mainstream discourse. Other journalists, NGO representatives, public figures and the arts community have begun to address the issue of a new substandard housing (Babacz 2015). A coalition of academics, artists and city residents was established that formulated an appeal to the city authorities about terminating the container settlement. NGOs such as Fundacja Barka initiated local information campaigns.

The voices of women from Bydgoszcz were almost immediately undermined, both by city officials, councillors as well as on online forums in statements regarding articles in local and national press. The vast majority of posts we have seen on the Internet appeared in January 2013, when the subject was taken up by the mainstream media, and they were negative towards the inhabitants of containers. The opinion of Internet users stigmatised the inhabitants for being poor; women for being 'irresponsible' mothers that have kids without securing sufficient income; men for not being able to provide care to their families (they do not fulfil the patriarchal family gender roles). Most of the analysed comments identified the inhabitants of containers as 'parasites', 'living at the cost of society', 'dangerous for the development of healthy social tissue', or simply as 'bums', 'outcasts' etc. All comments suggested the necessity of poor people and the need to get rid of them as a useless group. This narration was supported by the rhetoric of the punishment, which was presented and introduced by city administrators (containers are punishments for "difficult tenants").

The observed class-based hate speech revealed the most negative behaviours and attitudes. The purpose of the following subsection is to highlight how strong the economic racism is rooted in the mentality of the Internet forum users. The comments can be treated as a sample of social attitude towards the less privileged strata of the society. Below are a few of the most typical comments:

"What? Maybe build villas for bums? The container is too much for someone who does not intend to earn a rent."

> "Let them enjoy the containers. And not the pavement. Someone who does not pay rent and vandalises tenement houses and disturbs neighbours, do not even bother to go to the toilet, only shits in the apartment into the bucket [sic]."
>
> "The fact is, these people are a problem and you have to solve this problem. Do you have any suggestions for a final solution (German Endlösung) of this problem? I suggest humanely enough vodka for each one of them, how much he will be able to drink [...]."

Noteworthy, in Poland the use of term "final solution" has obvious and direct connotations to the Third Reich and WWII.

These statements are addressed to container dwellers who, in accordance with the law and with no alternative have de facto been forced to live in container modules. The problem gains on complexity when viewed from a broader perspective because the city authorities see such settlements as a chance for cheaper and faster substitutes for fully fledged social housing. This is observer country-wide. The social composition of the container estates described in one of the sections above of this article, and the life histories of the interviewed inhabitants, undermine the concept of 'difficult tenants' who would be the legendary 'parasites' living off social welfare. Additionally, the concrete statistical data of the Central Statistical Office (GUS) show that the main cause of poverty is unemployment or work for minimum wage, not necessarily alcoholism and laziness – unlike what the neoliberal commentators persistently claim. Most respondents can be classified as ill or the so-called 'working poor' (i.e. people with precarious working conditions, whose salaries cannot satisfy their basic needs). Although there are residents of social and container settlements who do have an alcohol problem and have a very noticeable helplessness, but they are a statistical minority. Current economic situation (growing debt, inflation, and the economic crisis) contribute to a further deterioration of an already dire situation of the less privileged strata of society affected by the housing shortage.

The research clearly shows that isolating people touched by the poverty problem, who often already struggle to adjust to demands of the urban life dynamics, does not help to solve their problems and integrate society. Conversely, such solutions further increase social inequality by segregating residents into categories based on their economic status. Spatial segregation is also an important tool for the maintenance and and construction of ethnic and class prejudices (Węgliński 1988, Buchowski 2018). The modern ghetto in a neoliberal society takes the shape of spatially isolated areas, which come into existence out of the desire to segregate less economically viable individuals, which results in implementation of a long-term and gradual political change. This political change is aimed at creating a situation when municipal authorities increase the public's acceptance of substandard social housing – containers become normalised. At the same time, the discourse of authorities presents this dubious solution

as designed only for the marginal, most problematic and dysfunctional, members of society, which in turn generates the wide acceptance for this phenomenon. As the majority of citizens learn to accept the containers as a marginal solution for vandalising and alcohol-abusing individuals, the sense of social injustice disappears. In such an atmosphere of social acceptance, the municipal authorities are free to use containers as a cheap substitute for fully fledged social housing where, in fact, all poor people are being relocated (single mothers, the elderly, the sick, etc.). Such a state of affairs constitutes a part of what can be referred to as neoliberal racism, which deepens social inequalities through solutions such as substandard social housing.

Today's Polish cities are in a situation that which could be described, using David Harvey's (2012) terms, as half-hearted solutions to a fundamental problem of social inequalities. Capitalism, as the author aptly notes, does not solve this systemic problems, but moves them geographically. In the context of Polish container settlements, the displacement of poor people is a perfect example of – quite literally – pushing the problem aside, which does not cause it to disappear but rather to explode elsewhere.

The phenomenon of economic racism is only possible the system where an individual's value is considered mainly in term of one's financial position. The low socio-economic status of certain groups in this context becomes an "obvious" justification for segregation processes that aim to defend those 'socially useful' against the 'useless', using the instruments of spatial isolation. Container projects are an illustration of this viewpoint. Ewa Charkiewicz wrote about similar issues in the context of a mass attack on low-paid women who voluntarily occupied Wałbrzych's vacant flats to find shelter for themselves and their children.

Neoliberal ideology, as David Harvey puts it in his book *Neoliberalism: A Brief History* (2007), needs to produce just such 'obviousness', turning essentially controversial solutions into an unquestionable state of affairs. The main characteristics of the ideal social unit in this hyper individualistic system, are: flexibility, ability to satisfy all of one's personal needs, and the ability to adapt to dynamic labour market conditions. This is accompanied by the disappearance of social relationships, which do not bring measurable profit in the form of financial gain. Within the neoliberal discourse, grassroots and self-help organisations, and all activities based on the idea of social justice, which are not aimed at individual profit are deemed unjustifiable and irrational.

One of the arguments which we hope to have highlighted in this article is that people living in container estates and other substandard dwellings are stripped off their political subjectivity and made unheard and invisible, due to the fact that they are seen as

representing a low economic value, which according to the ideas of neoliberalism categorises them as excluded from the ability to participate in decisions concerning their situation. Criticisms of divisions based on socioeconomic status are referred to as economic / class racism. Zygmunt Bauman, pointed out that „racism occurs when, despite all efforts, a given category of people will always be excluded from rationality. This exclusive mechanism is based on the claim that they are particularly resistant to control and change" (Bauman 2004). Neoliberal values imprinted in social consciousness allow for the emergence of a new type of segregated communities and justify an increased control exercised over less privileged strata of the society. Activist research has brought this issue into public attention, causing city residents and various social movements as well as members of academic and artistic communities to express non-acceptance for substandard social housing. This proves that studies concerning this subject are very important and needed as they carry the potential of opposing antisocial developments promoted by neoliberal city policies.

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