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Grassroots culture. Activist practices in a medium-sized city. The case study of Włocławek

The subject of study in this thesis are individuals and groups who actively shape the cultural life within their communities. These actors organize outdoor cinemas and poetry slams, gather for collaborative activities, and work to preserve the historical heritage of their cities. They curate diverse cultural landscapes, integrating both amateur and professional endeavours. Through their efforts, they supplement — and at times fully substitute — the offerings traditionally provided by the public cultural sector.

A supporting character of this thesis is Włocławek, a medium-sized city and former capital of the voivodeship. As a case study, it illustrates culture-forming activities within a distinct center-periphery context—differing both from the cultural dynamics of villages and small towns, as well as from the urban culture characteristic of larger cities.

The objective of this study is to investigate the culture-forming role of grassroots initiatives in a medium-sized city, with a particular focus on their influence within physical, cultural, and social spaces. Through a case study approach, this work adopts a holistic perspective, exploring three central areas: identity, social power relations, and the role of grassroots culture in processes of change.

The identity perspective delves into the inner world of grassroots activists. Here, the primary aim is to examine the individual creativity and autonomy cultivated by these activists. By reconstructing the world of cultural creators, I explore who they are, their motivations, and how they construct their identities through their practices.

The power perspective explores grassroots activists within the framework of domination and subordination, addressing both the symbolic (what culture represents) and material dimensions (access to resources, people, and audiences). This section highlights the position of local activists within social networks and local hierarchies.

The change perspective centres on the action and influence of grassroots culture. In this section, I examine how grassroots initiatives drive change, both in the short-term through events and in the long-term through sustained processes of transformation.

My aim is not only to highlight the distinctiveness of these activities within the context of an emerging and developing civil society, but also to address the challenges faced by activists. To achieve this, I adopt an autoethnographic approach, positioning myself not only as a researcher but also as an activist and central figure in this study.

Grassroots activists function as a mesostructured, mediating between various agents—communities as well as power regimes. To quote Bruno Latour, “they participate in the process of translation—constructing social reality using micro-interventions”. These micro-interventions, by being repeatable, have the potential to effect significant change over time.

Even short-lived initiatives can serve as the catalyst for broader transformations, akin to a snowball effect that sparks further change. These efforts are often sustained by the same leaders, who become “serial” initiators of subsequent actions. In some cases, their ideas are adopted—or even appropriated—by other activists, while at times, initiatives that originated from grassroots efforts are integrated into institutional frameworks.

The relationality of grassroots activists is defined not so much by the quantity of connections they establish, but by the distinctive nature of these connections. Activists do more than simply transfer cultural elements between spheres; they actively filter and transform them in the process. Crucially, they challenge the status and rigidity of the boundaries between these spheres, making them more fluid, porous, and permeable. In this sense, grassroots activists can be likened to air bubbles within a sponge, absorbing external influences and converting them into a vital social reservoir, one that can be drawn upon during critical moments of change.

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