



Where is the Post-socialist Working Class? Working-Class Lives in the Spaces of (Post-)Socialism

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ABSTRACT

In reflecting on two recent popular representations of Poland's working-class communities and ongoing work in one particular community in southern Poland, this article explores a range of literatures that locate working-class communities in both socialism and post-socialism. It draws attention to the dualities of representation of these working-class communities and seeks to explain these representations, connecting the specificities of the post-socialist world to wider social and economic shifts. Building on the 'new working-class studies' and other recent interpretations of working-class lives and cultures, it invokes alternative accounts of working-class lives after socialism, which move beyond the dualities identified, and seeks to reinscribe class as important in the discourses and materialities of post-socialism, East and West.

KEY WORDS

Poland / (post-)socialism / working-class communities

Introduction

In May 2004, as Poland acceded to the European Union 15 years after the fall of socialism in Europe, the country's two leading weekly magazines, *Wprost* and *Polityka*, published front-page articles that claimed to depict the country's working-class communities (Gmyz, 2004; Podgórska, 2004). In these articles, Gmyz and Podgórska constructed communities, both urban and rural,

which were hopeless, redundant, aggressive, miserable and pathological. In these accounts, fear, violence and criminality pervade the nation's urban estates and former state farms, inhabited by a generation of feckless, dependent and passive men (predominantly) who form tribes and wage war with 'traditional society'. Deprived of any sense of responsibility for their own lives and lacking in any 'innate' entrepreneurialism, these communities are reduced to poverty, filth and savagery (Podgórska, 2004: 5). The aspirations of post-socialist capitalism pass these spaces by as cultures of poverty are transmitted through the generations.

Corralling the support of academics, social service professionals and representatives of Poland's new middle class, Gmyz and Podgórska pedal representations of Poland's working-class communities which echo the archetypal depictions of the new Right of the West's post-industrial communities. The similarities with recurring tropes of 'ghettos of the workless and hopeless' (Reay and Lucey, 2000: 411) and newer constructions of 'chav' culture (Skeggs, 2005) are marked and, as such, these discourses can be seen as just another example of the Westernization of the post-socialist world. Yet the post-socialist context demands that we look again at this phenomenon, to explore how and why working-class communities in the region have come to be depicted in this way.

This article derives from reading these two articles, in both an immediate and more reflective sense, but rests more fully on reflections on ongoing work in one particular working-class community in southern Poland, the steel town of Nowa Huta (Stenning, 2000, 2003, 2005a, 2005b). This work, however, forms the context rather than the empirical foundation of this article. Instead the article is developed out of a review of a range of literatures on class, the working class and labour in socialism and post-socialism written both within and beyond east central Europe and the (former) Soviet Union. It seeks to locate studies of east central European working-class communities within a wider context, in particular highlighting connections to debates over the end of work, the place of identity politics and trends to 'individualization' and, using these literatures, to explain the misrepresentation and misplacing of working-class communities in post-socialism. After constructing this argument, I move to discuss the so-called 'new working-class studies' (Russo and Linkon, 2005) and other recent interpretations of working-class lives and cultures in order to identify and validate alternative accounts of working-class lives after socialism. While it touches on broader meanings of class, the focus of the article is very much on the place and transformation of working-class communities.

Working-Class Communities and the Spaces of Socialism

Across the Soviet Union and east central Europe, in the immediate pre- and post-revolutionary periods, the working class became the focus of political and economic attention, reflecting Marxist-Leninist priorities. Yet, the success of the revolutions in the largely rural and predominantly agricultural regions of

eastern Europe created a major challenge for the new regimes – the need to create, materially and discursively, a working class. Increasingly, historians have turned their attention to the discursive construction of a socialist working class, highlighting the ways in which the ‘making of the Soviet working class’ (Siegelbaum and Suny, 1995; see also Fitzpatrick, 1993; Kotkin, 1997) was both a state-led and more popular process. Kotkin, for example, explores how the new working class was ‘taught how to work, and ... to understand the political significance of their work’ (1995: 281). At the same time, state bureaucracies set about defining and categorizing the working class administratively and statistically to enable the identification of those to be rewarded in the new system (Fitzpatrick, 1993). These processes were coupled with a propaganda campaign which constructed hero workers as mythical figures in the construction of socialism (Bonnell, 1995). These processes of ascription and construction were not only top-down; workers learned to ‘speak Bolshevik’ (Kotkin, 1995: 303) and sought to acquire a working-class identity when their inherited position was stigmatized (Fitzpatrick, 1993, 2001).

Tied into this process and more central to this article was the material construction of a set of working-class communities across the region, a process focussed on creating a geography markedly different from the bourgeois structures of old. Marx’s ‘idiocy of rural life’ (Marx and Engels, 1967[1888]: 84) was coupled with the drive for economic ‘catch-up’ to stimulate massive programmes of industrialization and urbanization (Hamilton, 1979; Koenker, 1985). In tune with the discursive construction of a working class, each of the new regimes was tasked with creating an urban working class to deliver the political and economic goals of the regime, to cement the revolution and to contribute to the rapid development of the socialist bloc. New districts, towns and cities were built around new workplaces – a new steelworks, a chemical plant, a collective farm – seen as ‘axiomatic to Soviet definitions of the proletariat’ (Crowley and Siegelbaum, 1995: 62). In both urban and rural areas (Buchowski, 2003; Lampland, 1995), these spaces of socialism came to represent and exemplify the regimes’ efforts to remake their societies. The workplace was turned into ‘the main axis of organization of social life’ (Ciechocińska, 1993: 32) around which political, social, cultural and economic spheres revolved, reflecting ‘the interlocking and institutional arrangements of Soviet society and factory’ (Lane and O’Dell, 1978, cited in Hamilton and Hirszowicz, 1987: 250). The residents of these new spaces were created as worker-citizens whose ‘collective survival and individual status’ (Offe, 1996: 235) were founded almost entirely on the relationship to production. Social lives too were constructed through the workplace and, through the particular pattern of employment, housing and social mobility, domestic lives were shaped in large part by relations of production and work status (Ashwin, 2000; Kideckel, 2004; Kotkin, 1995, 1997; Stenning, 2005a, 2005b). The rhythm of life was ‘linked to the rhythm of work at the plant’ (Niward, 1997: 78). For many in these new spaces, the articulation of work and non-work enabled the expansion and consolidation of their lives, as new workers spent their relatively high wages on

'domestic investment' (Siemińska, 1969; Giddens, 1980) and began, it is argued, to form 'a new sense of identity and develop new forms of collective activity' (Hamilton and Hirszowicz, 1987: 236).

While there was a literature, produced predominantly in the region, which analysed these working-class communities as they developed and adapted to their new environments (see, for example, Fisher, 1962; Siemińska, 1969), far greater attention in the West was focused on stratifying class, on exploring the formal spaces of labour politics or on connecting class positions closely to the workings of the socialist economy (see, *inter alia*, Giddens, 1980; Hamilton and Hirszowicz, 1987; Nove, 1984; Parkin, 1971; Pravda and Ruble, 1986). Despite the massive scale of the social and spatial transformations underway, there were very few studies of working-class places, cultures and practices and some even dismissed the notion of 'a distinctive "working-class subculture"' (Parkin, 1971: 157). This was perhaps not as surprising as it first seems – research within the Soviet bloc was delimited by the ideological demands and political structures of the state while Western research in the region was limited, often, by the gatekeeping role of local institutions. As important as these practical limitations, however, were theoretical approaches to the study of socialism in the West, most especially the totalitarian school, which appeared to be epistemologically opposed to seeing even semi-autonomous spaces of everyday life and thus all but obliterated the rich detail of working-class lives. It was only really with the promotion of revisionist histories of 'everyday Stalinism' (Fitzpatrick, 2001; see also, Kotkin, 1997) that the distinctive spaces and cultures of the working class under socialism were increasingly illuminated.

This distinctive politics was reflected also in the wider depictions of these communities when they did appear. On the one hand, in both material and discursive ways, these new working-class communities were placed at the centre of the socialist regimes of east central Europe and the Soviet Union, in stark contrast to the construction of the working class in the West (Skeggs, 2004). Thus, and this is important in thinking through the more recent fall from grace, working-class communities were not just distinctive but venerated, seen as the archetypal spaces of socialism, home to the 'proclaimed vanguard' (Słomczynski and Shabad, 1997). And, critically, the working class was proclaimed as a vanguard not only by communists but also, in the late socialist period, by intellectuals and opposition activists who saw in the disillusioned worker and the disillusioned spaces of socialism the hopes of undermining communism from within (Ost, 2000).

On the other hand, however, this disillusionment points to problems in any singular interpretation of the socialist working class and reflects the fact that working-class communities under socialism were not always and everywhere reified and celebrated. There were very clear proscriptions of working-class identity and behaviour which were reinforced by processes of regulation and self-regulation (Fitzpatrick, 1993; Kotkin, 1997). Thus, as elsewhere, the economic and political construction of the working class was always already a moral one too (Skeggs, 2004). Through propaganda and shock worker

campaigns (Siegelbaum, 1990), and their extension beyond the workplace, notions of respectable and deserving workers became critical in shaping access to the tenets of security and social mobility. Since these trends were founded on particular constructions of gender as well as class, feminists have rightly drawn attention to the favouring of the male worker under state socialism (for example, Ashwin, 2000; Einhorn, 1993). More generally, Parkin identifies a long term process of 'deproletarianization' (1971: 150) through which the achievements of earlier phases were undermined and the fictitious nature of the processes of political representation was revealed (Hamilton and Hirszowicz, 1987). After vocal support for working-class communities in the early years of socialism, such communities were 'steadily thrust into the background' (Schwarz in Parkin, 1971: 151). Moreover, in many parts of the region, forced proletarianization, especially in connection to large-scale construction projects, fed historical antagonisms and condescending depictions, largely by the urban intelligentsia, of the new working class as ignorant, backward and suspect,¹ which challenged the official celebration of working-class spaces and cultures. The central importance of working-class communities within the socialist regimes of east central Europe and the Soviet Union tended to encourage extreme representations of working-class communities – ranging from the heroic to the ridiculous.

Misplacing Class: Post-socialism and the Working class

While the oppositional movements of late socialism heralded a certain rapprochement between the region's working class and its bourgeoisie (epitomized, for example, by the alliance of workers and intellectuals in Poland's Solidarity), the developing agendas and experiences of post-socialism since 1989 have marked new forms of representation. Without doubt, workers and the working class in post-socialism have attracted the attention of researchers, both East and West. After a brief period in the very early 1990s when little was heard from the region beyond stories of capitalist success, Simon Clarke and his collaborators, perspicaciously asked *What about the workers?* (Clarke et al., 1993) and set an agenda for research which focused attention on those at the 'receiving end' of economic and social change. Perhaps, given the particular place of labour in the 20th century history of the region, it is not surprising that so much attention, has been paid to the restructuring of labour politics in the region (see, for example, Ashwin, 1999; Clarke et al., 1993; Crowley, 1997; Crowley and Ost, 2001; Kramer, 1995; Pollert, 1999). Given this heritage too, it is also not surprising that the overriding picture painted is of declining influence and fragmentation. Single, Party-sponsored unions, responsible for the transmission of welfare, policy and ideology under the old system have been replaced by multiple, smaller unions, organized on regional, sectoral or skill bases, which find themselves questioning their functions, competing for declining memberships and suffering from significantly reduced funds. The troublesome position of

post-socialist unions is complicated still further by the particular political settlement of post-socialism which sees labour and union politicians promoting policies for economic 'restructuring' which force closures, job loss, lower levels of job security and the erosion of workers' rights. It is against this background that a number of authors (Ashwin, 1999; Ost, 2001) have drawn attention to the apparent passivity of workers in post-socialism. In part, this passivity is explained through the particular connection between the worker and enterprise under socialism – the post-socialist worker, it is argued, is, in the face of social and economic strife, reluctant to antagonize their employer for fear of even greater losses. Ost (2000) adds that this quiescence is reinforced by a crisis of class identity, in the particular sense of workers' understanding of their position within capitalism. He draws attention to popular support among unionists for an imaginary capitalism, resting on capitalism's construction as the previous system's other. This association of organized labour with capitalism results in the unions failing to act as a source of collective identity, and a weak political identity among workers. There are, of course, exceptions to such a general image of passivity – some sites of worker militancy have taken on significant symbolic value. Regions such as the Kuzbass (western Siberia, Russia), the Jiu Valley (Romania) and Ukraine's Donbass (see Ferguson, 1998; Kideckel, 2002, 2004; Siegelbaum and Walkowitz, 1995, respectively) are often cited as examples of the contestation of neo-liberal restructuring by workers. Nevertheless, the focus of these literatures, both those which represent industrial action and those which identify passivity and quiescence, is very much on workers acting (or not acting) politically in public spaces and on the consequences of this political (in)action for future developments at the national scale.

Elsewhere, a second body of literature explores issues of social stratification after socialism (see, for example, Evans and Mills, 1999; Słomczynski and Mach, 1997; Słomczynski and Shabad, 1997) and investigates the re-making of classes in new social, economic and political conditions. The aim of this literature is very much on the quantification and categorization of class and on the relative class structure of post-socialism (in contrast to the structure of classes under socialism and under western capitalism). It pays rather less attention to structural and social accounts of class formation and the lived experience of class. In these new stratifications, class is more likely to be used in explaining political behaviour (Szelenyi et al., 1997) or accounting for attitudes to change (Słomczynski and Shabad, 1997) than on documenting the impacts of class position on issues of everyday life. The novelty of the middle class in the region attracts much more attention to the sphere of the entrepreneur, the new professional classes and the 'rehabilitated' bourgeoisie of old (Eyal et al., 2001; Słomczynski and Shabad, 1997). For Słomczynski and Shabad, for example, the key question is the creation of new classes; the middle class is seen as emergent and the working class as in a process of 'dissolution' (Słomczynski and Mach, 1997).

These dispossessed groups do however form the focus of the third set of literatures, which explores the growth of poverty and the emergence of an

underclass in the post-socialist world (see, for example, Domański, 2002; Szelenyi and Emigh, 2001; Tarkowska, 1999, 2002; Wódz, 1994). Research in Poland has suggested that this underclass finds itself in precisely those two locations identified above as key spaces of socialism – in housing districts in old industrial cities and on former state farms. In an echo of Western discourse, many of these accounts depict the new underclass as ‘lacking’ in both material and cultural assets (Domański, 2002), not only poor but also marginalized through low levels of education and restricted access to employment. The core of the underclass is seen to be made up of the long-term unemployed, dependent on benefits and transmitting this poverty through the generations (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, 2000).² In this way the literature trips into notions of ‘cultures of poverty’ (Karwacki and Antonowicz, 2003) and moves away from a class-based interpretation of poverty. Indeed, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska argues that ‘one can hardly find explanation identified with the Marxist tradition, which sees unemployment and poverty as generated by the core dynamics of class exploitation in capitalism’ (2000: 2). Instead poverty is seen as a temporary, transitional result of the shift from plan to market, and more specifically of certain communities’ inability to adapt to the new situation, echoing the accounts from *Wprost* and *Polityka* discussed above.

Clearly the issue of post-socialist poverty is a very important one. The years since 1989/91 have been characterized by rising unemployment, declining real incomes and the wide-scale emergence of poverty. Notwithstanding official rhetoric, poverty clearly did exist under socialism, but it was limited to around one in 25 of the region’s population (in 1988, World Bank, 2000: 1); in contrast, it was estimated that in 1998 one in five was living in poverty. There is, thus, a very real need to document the impoverishment of particular communities in post-socialism and to draw these concerns into popular and political debates over the meanings and experiences of ‘transition’. Yet, as the citations from the *Wprost* and *Polityka* articles suggest, there is a fine line between accounts of structural processes which marginalize working-class communities and discourses which see the source of exclusion in the activities (or more likely passivities) of the communities themselves. In the construction of an ‘underclass’ and the reversion to cultural explanations of poverty and exclusion, it is too easy to reduce representations of these communities to ones of failure, loss and struggle, and lose sight of both the wider processes of structural change and the more positive practices of kinship, friendship and pleasure and the mundane practices of getting by and making out (McCrone, 1994).

While each of these bodies of work promotes debate around the meanings and experiences of working-class lives after socialism, there remains a gap between the depiction of the working class as an occasionally conscious proletariat actively engaged in industrial action and as a suffering class of the marginal and excluded, passively experiencing the dissolution of their livelihoods and collective identity.³ This criticism is not intended to devalue the critical importance of working-class activism (and reporting on it) nor to detract attention from the painful materialities of poverty (and the need to document

these), but to argue that alone these represent a partial account of working-class lives after socialism. In this post-socialist binary of activity and passivity, we can see clear echoes of the heroic/ridiculous dualism of socialist-era accounts of the working class and in both we can see the need for more work on the in-between, the everyday and the grounded spaces of working-class lives.

Against this background, it is easier to see how Gmyz and Podgórska can create their representations of Poland's working-class communities. On the one hand, notwithstanding a few notable exceptions (Ashwin, 1999; Kideckel, 2002, 2004; Siegelbaum and Walkowitz, 1995) and despite the increasing attention focused on the everyday transformations of post-socialism (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999; Hann, 2002), very little research pays attention to the transformations of working-class lives, for themselves. On the other, the remaking of political and economic priorities after 1989 has refigured the dominant depiction on the working class. The post-socialist era has been marked by a denigration of workers (Kideckel, 2002), manifested not only in the demonization of working-class communities but also in blaming workers for the woes of society and the vocalization of 'a desire that society be re-ordered to reward non-manual labour' (Walkowitz, 1995: 163). This call for a re-ordering reflects both discursive and more material trends. In stark contrast to the official rhetoric of socialism, more common tropes today, as Gmyz and Podgórska's articles exemplify, are of the working class as useless, worthless and an obstacle to the 'transition' and of their spaces as grim, grey ghettos. This results not only in the characterization of working-class communities as undeserving and intransigent, resting on the unearned laurels of socialism but also in renewed judgements of the embodied working class. In Poland, for example, parts of the working class are labelled as 'dresiarze' (those who wear tracksuits or *dresy*) and 'blokersi' (those who live in tower blocks) to reductively frame the working class as tasteless and anonymous, yet somehow threatening.⁴ Both terms, though employed in an incredibly diverse and diffuse number of ways, are used to describe the apparently criminal and aggressive, yet also wasteful and passive (sub)cultures of working-class life in Poland.

The End of Work, Class and Socialism?

Lampland (2000: 213) rightly identifies the roots of this displacement in a reaction against '[t]he rhetoric of socialist empowerment of the working class' but I wish to argue here also for the explanatory power of other material and discursive structures attached to the neoliberal project of 'transition' (Kennedy, 2002). In insisting on this, I am arguing that the place of the post-socialist working class can be explained by a combination of wider social and economic shifts – the so-called 'end of work', the rise of identity politics and 'individualization' – and the particular expression of these trends in a post-socialist context. Debates over the disappearance of 'traditional' working-class communities have been widespread in Western contexts, where this shift appears to be driven

by two related issues, the material decline of industrial work, in particular in old industrial regions (Bauman, 1998; Beck, 2000; Sennett, 1998), and the emergent centrality of a politics of representation, in contrast to an earlier politics of redistribution (Fraser, 1997). The politics of class is seen to be declining alongside the growing struggles for recognition (of gender, race, sexuality etc.). These two shifts are themselves connected to an apparent process of individualization (Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gersheim, 2002) in which, through the exercise of 'choice', 'people are now the reflexive authors of their own biographies' (Duncan, 2005: 50). Class is a 'zombie category' (Beck and Beck-Gersheim, 2002), meaningless and half-dead, which plays little part in shaping our identities and life chances. Instead, new forms of subjectivity rest on individualized discourses of the self, most especially the enterprising self (see, for example, Du Gay, 1996).⁵ In representing class as fragmented and of declining importance, these trends are especially problematic in working-class communities where processes of misrecognition (Fraser, 2000) are coupled with markedly differential access to spheres of employment and education which might support an improvement in economic and social well-being (Skeggs, 2004).

In exploring the specificities of the post-socialist world, perhaps the most obvious difference is the question of scale. The impact of these three shifts has been rapid and wide-ranging. Although the place of the working class was changing before the collapse of socialism, 1989/91 nevertheless marked a clear point of transformation as endogenous and exogenous pressures led to the Westernization of both theorizing about social and economic change and many of the material pressures of late capitalism (competition, downsizing etc.). This resulted in a period of rapid deindustrialization, not only at the hands of 'market forces' but also imposed by the more bureaucratic diktats of the European Union and its accession agendas. At the same time, other economic spheres and activities – noticeably enterprise, innovation, the service sector and small business – came to be increasingly validated, once again through a process that incorporated both national policy-making and international flows of welfare reform and entrepreneurial capitalism (Deacon, 2000; Haylett, 2003b). In many ways, the old institutions such as trade unions, state enterprises and the extensive paternalism of the socialist welfare state, are lost in the centring of the market and ideological, institutional and material displacement of the workers' states.

Rukszto argues that central to the project of transition was the 'creation of a new model of citizenship' (1997: 103), which combined the personality characteristics required of contemporary capitalism with a historic and 'romantic portrayal of the patriarchal family, Catholicism and capitalism' (1997: 104). In combining these two, the enterprising, and middle-class, citizen is seen to represent a historical continuum from the pre-socialist past, interrupted only by the aberration of socialist industrialization, whose sites of working-class employment (or, increasingly, unemployment) are seen to be antithetical to revived capitalism – for Podgórska (2004: 6), working-class neighbourhoods are

'anti-entrepreneurial cages' (see also, Davidson-Schmich et al., 2002). In promoting a particular form of capitalism, the transition agenda adopts and promotes widespread discourses of enterprise,⁶ consumption and individualism which work against other notions of community and collective action and which validate other spaces – such as malls, supermarkets and new office blocks – which are articulated with working-class lives in new ways. Those who were once seen as heroes of socialist labour are seeing their position usurped by new 'heroes of free market ideology' (Walkowitz, 1995: 165). For those most celebrated by the old system – skilled, male manual workers – the loss of status is most extreme, and this concern is one which is highlighted in the growing literature on post-socialist masculinities (Kiblitckaya, 2000; Kideckel, 2004). Despite the central role played by workers' movements in the events of 1989, we see 'the inheritors of the revolutions ... rather to be the nationalists, the neo-liberals, the ambitious entrepreneurs and the Eurocrats' (Einhorn et al., 1996: 2).

The post-revolutionary success not only of neo-liberals and entrepreneurs but also of nationalists is indicative of a further trend which displaces the spaces of working-class lives; that is, the recourse to other spaces such as the nation, the church, the family and pre-socialist discourses of class (the peasantry and the nobility, for example). While many of these spaces were visible during socialism as sites of opposition and/or cooption, the post-socialist period has either seen the strengthening of their political centrality or their increasing presence in everyday lives. Thus, for example, the League of Polish Families successfully invoked Catholicism, the family and the nation to achieve considerable electoral success in Poland's first European elections. Across the region, ethnographers suggest a return to the home as domestic spaces are marked no longer as a retreat from the ubiquitous state and its security organs, but instead from the hardships of the market (Ashwin, 1999; Stenning, 2005a).

In all this, we can identify the influence of both wider trends and specifically post-socialist transformations. The 'end of work' and its concomitant transformations is coupled with the 'end of socialism' to figure a double ending. Common discourses of work, identity and self reinforce more traditional notions of responsibility and initiative and clash with dogmatic and now rejected idealizations of the socialist working class. The more general challenges of post-industrial worlds articulate with particular post-socialist experiences to shape not only working-class lives in the region but also their representations, and indeed the range of research. Yet, as I have already suggested, poverty and unemployment are becoming more and more common in the region. Incomes and assets are becoming increasingly polarized and class is becoming, if anything, a stronger and stronger influence on life chances and well-being. That these processes of social exclusion are also spatialized, impacting most particularly on certain communities in particularly places is one of the central points of the two articles I began by critiquing. Thus, despite (or as a result of) the end of the work/class debates, there is an urgent need to research and highlight the changing shape of post-socialism's working-class communities.

Another Take: Rethinking Working-Class Lives after Socialism

Another reading of working-class lives and communities in post-socialism might take its lead from two particular sources – poststructural (and post-socialist [Fraser, 1997]) readings of equality and class and recent developments in the so-called ‘new working-class studies’. Firstly, we can identify attempts to connect the emancipatory politics of class with the multiple politics of identity, exemplified by Nancy Fraser’s (1997, 2000) deliberations on reconciling the politics of redistribution and recognition. Fraser’s ideas are taken up in the context of working-class communities by Chris Haylett (2003a) who argues against reading working-class cultures as simply the expression of economic inequalities and central to the reproduction of such inequalities (as the ‘cultures of poverty’ school might suggest). In hegemonic accounts, such as those explored above, working-classness is too often seen as ‘a condition in need of alleviation’ (2003a: 56). In contrast, Haylett echoes Fraser’s call for a social justice which alleviates inequalities but also creates space for the celebration of (at least some) working-class cultures which ‘are not always and ever problematic’ (2003a: 57).

Many of these challenges are taken up, if in quite different ways, by the emerging field of the ‘new working-class studies’. For those within this broad field, the challenges of identity politics and of remade worlds of work ‘raise new and significant questions about class in general and working-class culture specifically’ (Russo and Linkon, 2005 forthcoming). The shift away from the formal spaces of workplaces and unions as the primary sites of the economic, social and political construction of the working class calls for new ways of studying and representing working-class lives, cultures and politics. These new ways incorporate a focus on processes of both representation and the more material processes of everyday life (and the interrelationship between the two); a recognition of the ways in which ‘the experience and meanings of being working class is grounded in everyday life, human interactions and the relationship between work, place and community’ (2005 forthcoming); and an expanded notion of working classness which moves beyond the binaries of manual/non-manual, blue collar/white collar, industrial/service (see also Southern, 2000). An alternative account recognizes the radical transformation of the landscapes and practices of work but sees, alongside the real experiences of loss, new, renewed and persistent forms of working-class politics, values, cultures and communities, founded on new forms of organizing, new strategic alliances and new representations.

Bringing these overlapping but distinct conceptualizations together, we can construct alternative readings of working-class communities which present (and represent) working-class lives as complex and embodied practices played out in wide variety of spaces, neither reified nor vilified, but explored and analysed, which validate representational and material accounts of working-classness and interrogate the articulation of these accounts and insist on the intersection of

class with gender, race, generation, geography and so on. Such accounts might simply lie in a re-reading of existing accounts, allowing for other voices and for alternative interpretations. Thus, for example, through the online fora for the discussion of *Wprost's* 'Polski Apartheid' article, we can hear numerous residents of the estates depicted insist on both political interpretations of the estates' 'hopelessness' and on other stories of talented and active young people who continue to make their home on these estates. We can also read for the elisions and absences to re-evaluate the material currently presented; thus in both *Wprost* and *Polityka*, notwithstanding the particular interpretations presented by the authors, we can find numerous accounts of solidarity, community and multiple forms of work which animate the post-industrial housing estates and former state farms represented in the articles and counter the 'workless and hopeless' tropes. We can explore these networks of labour, care and support and their diverse economies through ethnographic accounts of key sites such as workplaces, homes, and neighbourhoods⁷ and document the multiple cultural forms – film, music, literature – which seek to 'talk back' and 'to explore how ordinary people – in quite extraordinary ways – comprehend and engage with the complexities inherent in their everyday lives' (*My Town: About the Film*, 2002).⁸

What, then, are the purposes of such alternative accounts? Most straightforwardly, they draw attention to the broader, heterogeneous spaces of working-class lives, which are not 'always problematic' and move away from both the duality of passivity and activity and from some of the more simplified and marginalizing accounts of working-class lives after socialism. In part this reflects a particular approach to post-socialism, driven less by the overwhelming metanarratives of transition than the complex, diverse and everyday transformations of peoples' lives, which create space for the discussion not only of workers' changing economic positions but also changing cultural forms, changing gender and domestic relationships etc. and call into question unremitting accounts of transition success, pluralize and problematize notions of capitalism and identify alternative spaces of economic activity. However, most immediately my aim is to evoke and employ more appropriate, more hopeful accounts of working-class communities which go beyond the violence of the more dominant representations and reinscribe class as important in the discourses and materialities of post-socialism, East and West.

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Notes

- 1 Nowa Huta's new workers, for example, were referred to as *gumiaki* (or Wellington-boot wearers, indicating both their peasant pasts and the ubiquitous mud of the building-site present) by many in bourgeois Kraków. These caricatures persisted throughout the socialist period, to be transformed in post-socialism.
- 2 The underclass has also been racialized; in many countries of the region, minority ethnic communities, especially the Roma, have been especially hard hit by poverty and unemployment (see, for example, Stewart, 2002). These growing connections between race and class set in particular light the racialized representations of the white working-class communities depicted in the two articles cited in this article's introduction.
- 3 Thanks to Ian Roberts for serendipitously identifying this duality as I was trying to work through my unease with these bodies of work.
- 4 A sociolinguist could dedicate an entire study to these terms. They appear to be distinctly post-socialist, coming into popular usage throughout the 1990s. In an unpleasant echo of chavscum.com (Skeggs, 2005), Poland has an anti-*dresiarze* website (www.pad.foxnet.pl).
- 5 Thanks to Helen Jarvis for discussions on individualization and choice.
- 6 Most recently, in Poland, this commitment to enterprise is embodied in the current government's economic development programme entitled 'Enterprise – Development – Work' (KPRM, 2002). The government's focus on 'Above all entrepreneurialism' not only discursively constructs the employee as antithetical to the task of development, but also materially reshapes the world of work through the introduction of more flexible labour laws which ease health and safety burdens for employers and make it easier for employers to hire and fire.
- 7 David Kideckel, for example, draws attention to the importance of 'bench work' – that is neighbours meeting and talking on benches – in shaping working-class communities (2004, p.46).
- 8 In the Polish context, with which I am most familiar, a recent wave of such representations includes not only Marek Lechki's *Moje Miasto* (*My Town*) but also Radosław Markiewicz's *Złom* (*Scrap*) and Piotr Trzaskalski's *Edi* (both 2002), Sylwester Latkowski's 2001 film *Blokersi* (which documents the hip hop, breakdance and graffiti cultures being created in tower blocks) and the varied works, including the hypertext tales at www.blok.art.pl, of Sławomir Shuty.

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