

## **Postcommunist Citizenship? A Generational View of Social Microactivism Based on Surveys Conducted in Poznań**

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**Abstract.** The problem of civil activism is analysed in the context of the evolution of central European civil society. This evolution can be described as a cyclic process of loss and gain of social identity. Such a way of tackling the problem of citizenship seems to contrast the central European view of civil society – as a subjectivity gained through mass activism of a revolutionary character – with a view that is common in Western democracies (Marshall 1992). Contemporary sociological research in Poland shows that a “social non-movement” is one of the consequences of the transformation project that has been going on for several years. To describe: this social non-movement is to be understood as a crisis of cooperation and a proliferation of individualistic strategies, together with lack of trust, not only in relations between individuals, but also in relations toward most social institutions. This phenomenon can also be clearly seen at a “microsocial” level in neighbourly relations, and in the attitude toward collectively consumed goods. The problem seems to be far-reaching, and should be seen from a historical perspective. We suggest three types of cultural patterns which belong to the past, but which still direct people’s behaviour.

These behavioral patterns we describe are found to vary with the age of the respondents, which may indicate a change in perception of social microactivism over the last few years. The elements of a suggested diagnosis will be illustrated with the results of quantitative and qualitative research projects which were carried out among the citizens of Poznań in 2003 and 2006. We show several results from these projects.

## Theoretical Frame of Analysis

The issue of social activity seems to be one that differentiates historically distinct societies. This thesis refers to some variant of historical sociology and carries a number of metatheoretical assumptions – for example, the assumption that societies develop as a consequence of the influence of some inner factors. However, it is obvious from the point of view accepted here that the developmental model of central Europe deserves, as a specific and separate space of societal modernization, specific interpretations. The term *postcommunism* is understood as a type of order that is characterized by some ontological autonomy which can be a subject of historical analysis. How far these differences go, and where they come from, are the main questions of investigators of Polish civil society.

## Historical Assumptions of Central European Activism

In the point of view accepted here, we refer to the concept of *longue durée* postulated by Fernand Braudel (Braudel 1999, 152ff.). We can indicate three sources of the specific character of “mitteleuropean social activism.” The first refers to the model of growing differences between the eastern and the western parts of Europe which was outlined by, among others, Immanuel Wallerstein (1988). The main content of this model is related to the historical processes of society-building, and involves considerations connected with the process of “world system” development from the sixteenth century onward.<sup>1</sup>

The second source is connected to the development of a “national community” in the modern sense, which became real when the political sovereignty of central European countries was regained after the First World War.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Wallerstein (1988, 89-106), the factors which decide on position in the world system are geographical discoveries and the tendencies toward specialization in production that results from them. In addition, contrary to Wallerstein’s interpretation, certain observations of various inner factors which are understood to be elements of accumulating specificity are also decisive (Brzechczyn 1998).

The third source is related to a regional variant of egalitarianization and “communitization” which was a part of the project of “real socialism.” In looking for the conceptual basis of the above viewpoint, it is worth taking as a starting point the narration of Thomas H. Marshall (Marshall and Bottomore 1992, 8), who in the 1950s indicated three main stages of the development of the concept of citizenship in the West.

The first stage – **civil citizenship** – is connected with the acknowledgement of individual rights on the basis of a natural law. In the central European experience, examples of civil citizenship occur in regional political solutions such as the so-called Nobles’ Democracy in the First Polish Republic during the eighteenth century. This stage covers one of the earliest, prerevolutionary ways to find a formula to change a traditional and hierarchical society into a modern national community (in French, *le peuple*).

The second stage – **political citizenship** – refers to the acknowledgement and gradual propagation of political rights. In the central European context, this stage referred to the temporary development of a model of social participation based mainly on an attitude toward the so-called national issue. The crux of this tactic of politicization involves the consequences which arise from the weakening of the economic position of the landed aristocracy and nobility, who until then had been culturally predominant. Such consequences influenced the development of the central European public sphere among developing towns with diverse ethnic structures and significant social conflict.

The third stage – **social citizenship** – refers, according to Marshall, to the concept of the *welfare state*. In central Europe, social citizenship meant the realization of a communist utopia as a result of the political consequences of the Second World War. However, both “communism” (1949-55) and later “real socialism” (1956-1989) sanctioned and consolidated far-reaching changes in social structure, and changed Polish society from a peasant society into an industrial society. Special importance is attached to towns, which function as centres of industry and places of mass social advancement. This fact indicates that there are some aspects of “rusticity” in the model of town life, especially in those towns where the process of urbanization proceeded very quickly.

In our opinion the model of “socialistic social activism,” which arose during the Polish People’s Republic (1946-89), and which of course made reference to historical sources, seems of great importance. Its traces are visible in the materials we gathered during our research, and elsewhere.

All three types of historic considerations can be thought of as overlapping but distinct features which are each specific cultural sources of modern forms of central European activism. It seems possible to treat such historical types of “civic activism” in general as a “toolkit” used to build biographies of particular activists. This is to say that people’s typical actions – and their ways of thinking – reflect what is inherit from the past (as cultural inheritance), as well as “habits of the heart” or the atmosphere of the epoch (as the impact of the present). In a particular era, a particular action may be more, or less, common. More importantly, this variation could be measured.

What is social activism? Let us try to operationalize this term to a quantitative point of view, by looking at the result of the quantitative research (2004 data).<sup>2</sup>

When we asked respondents the open question, “What does ‘being socially active’ mean to you?” they answered in three ways:

1. Most frequently, being socially active meant “being active for society,” but “society” in this sense should be understand as something closer to the local community, than to general society in the political sense (44.06%) what will be discussed later.

2. “Doing something for others,” a response close in meaning to “doing social work” (35.62%).

3. “Working for an organization” (34.30%).

When we suggested possible answers to the same question, the most common answer was “taking part in formal deliberation,” to which 86% of respondents answered “yes, I think so.” This next most common answers were “signing petitions” addressed to government or local authorities (85%), and “responding when somebody needs help” (81%). Significantly less often did respondents consider that “being active”

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<sup>2</sup> We interviewed 401 inhabitants of Poznań, selected by quota sample. The basic criteria for selection were sex, age, and city district. Some problems were found in achieving a representative sample. This can be seen in table 2.

Table 1. *Selected answers to the question, “What does ‘being socially active’ mean to you?”*

Somebody is socially active, when they:	Yes, I think so*	I don't know	I don't think so*	%
take part in formal deliberations (formal meetings)	86%	6.5%	7.5%	100%
sign petitions addressed to government or local authorities	85%	6.5%	8.5%	100%
respond when somebody needs help	81.6%	7.5%	10.9%	100%
give money to those who need help (participate in remedial charity action)	76.5%	10.5%	13%	100%
help neighbours	74%	13%	13%	100%
run as candidates for local or national power	71.7%	12.3%	16%	100%
participate in democratic elections	68.5%	9%	22.5%	100%
care about local environs	56.5%	15%	28.5%	100%
publicly present their own opinion on various subjects	52%	20%	28%	100%
participate in a political party	47%	15%	38%	100%
take part in discussions between neighbours	40.6%	21%	38.4%	100%
have a positive attitude toward the institutions of state democracy	33.4%	22%	44.6%	100%
regularly go to church	22.5%	16.5%	61%	100%

\* These heading summarize the responses “I definitely agree” and “I rather agree” on one hand, and “I definitely disagree” and “I rather disagree” on the other.

means publicly discussing different topics relevant to society (52%), or – surprisingly – “being involved in political parties” (47%). One in three respondents agree that “being active” means “having a positive attitude and orientation toward the institutions of state democracy” (the Sejm, the Senat and the President). Maybe the most significant aspect for us is the attitude to “political parties.” We can diagnose that Polish people don't trust politics, although it may reflect something more basic.

In our investigation, the most important point is the correlation between age and attitudes toward being active. It should be emphasized

that there are correlations between the age of the respondent and their way of answering the question, “What does ‘being socially active’ mean to you?” In particular, younger respondents more often indicated formal affiliation than older respondents. For older people, being active more often meant being personally helpful to others, or to society in general. Let us now examine how people in different age groups answered the question, “Is participation in political parties a form of social activity?” Comparing the oldest and the youngest respondents, we see a significant difference: young respondents seem to agree that participating in political party is kind of social activism.

Table 2. “*Is participation in political parties a form of social activity?*” (by cohort)

Is participation in political parties a form of social activity?	Cohort					
	> 1985	1972-84	1959-71	1946-58	< 1945	Row total
Definitely yes	44.0%	19.4%	27.9%	15.5%	24.4%	22.3%
Rather yes	16.0%	40.8%	25.6%	18.6%	18.9%	25.7%
Neither yes nor no	12.0%	12.6%	7.0%	20.6%	14.4%	14.5%
Rather disagree	20.0%	18.4%	16.3%	27.8%	25.6%	22.6%
Definitely disagree	8.0%	8.7%	23.3%	17.5%	16.7%	14.8%
Column total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

In answer to the earlier questions concerning the nature of social activism, older respondents had much less precise opinions, but more often answered that this consisted of “reacting when somebody needs help” (Spearman rho coefficient 0.230), “taking part in deliberation in the neighbourhood” (Spearman rho coefficient 0.204), “caring about the local environs” (Spearman rho coefficient 0.262), and “helping neighbours” (Spearman rho coefficient 0.268).

Generally, the answers of older respondents more often addressed the community – understood as charity work, work for the local environs, and so on. Here, “social activity” means reacting when somebody needs help – we help them because we know them – or ensuring cooperation

between close neighbours. Why does this occur? Perhaps because of feelings of mutuality which arise in shared living spaces.

We can find here the so-called traditional or conservative attitude, which is more common among the older generation, but nevertheless still exist in the younger – see table 3.

Table 3. *Correlation between cohorts and selected answers to the question, “What does ‘being socially active’ mean to you?”*

Spearman rho coefficient		By cohort	Somebody is socially active when they			
			give money to those who need help	respond when somebody needs help	help neighbours	give money to those who need help (participate in remedial charity action)
By cohort	Correlation	1.000	0.123*	0.230**	0.268**	0.133*
	<i>N</i>	376	370	371	368	370
give money to those who need help	Correlation	0.123*	1.000	0.331**	0.371**	0.538**
	<i>N</i>	370	375	371	368	371
respond when somebody needs help	Correlation	0.230**	0.331**	1.000	0.413**	0.371**
	<i>N</i>	371	371	376	370	371
help neighbours	Correlation	0.268**	0.371**	0.413**	1.000	0.356**
	<i>N</i>	368	368	370	373	368
give money to those who need help (participate in remedial charity action)	Correlation	0.133*	0.538**	0.371**	0.356**	1.000
	<i>N</i>	370	371	371	368	375

\* Significance level 0.05 (two sided).

\*\* Significance level 0.01 (two sided).

It should be pointed out that there might also be traditional remnants of “peasant culture” within this urban culture. The main generational difference is that the older groups have a much more traditional definition of activism, sometimes even using the premodern sense of activism as work for the local community.

When we investigate the relationship of “civic activism” in relation to social protest (in the legal sense), older people – those above sixty – are much less likely to mention this kind of action than are younger people. This, in our opinion, describes a common generational experience. We can find, for example, correlations between age and the experiences of civil activism, such as “putting up posters,” or “taking part in demonstrations.”

Answer to enquiries about participation in hunger strikes and sit-down protest reveals a similar situation. Respondents between the ages of 37 and 59 more often answer “Yes I did,” when asked if they have ever participated in such action. Asking why they undertook such behaviour shows that it was correlated with the “Solidarity revolution” at the beginning of the 1980s, and the wave of strikes in at the beginning of the period of transformation (1987-90). Generally the 1980s seems to have been a much more fruitful time for gaining experience in opposing the state, or gaining “power” generally, than do the 1990s. This regularity can be clearly seen in the collected qualitative data.

The above-mentioned results serve as an introduction to the qualitative analysis of generational differences in attitude toward “being active” among citizens of Poznań. Now we will describe three important assumptions for such analyses.

## **Assumptions for Qualitative Generational Analysis**

### *First Assumption*

Here we understand “urban activism” as to refer to human actions – based on communication, and on dyadic or triadic social interaction – oriented toward the community. This model of activism is understood in the context of potential spatial contact, which is typical of towns. A feature of this activism in the limited range of action connected with,

for example, places of living, working, and so on, and with solving problems typical of urban life. Ethical motivations, though to varying extents, are one of the most significant types of motivation.

This way of understanding activism does not reach beyond the local community. It is, however, the most widespread such understanding, so it is worth special attention.

### *Second Assumption*

Now we introduce the next stipulation: the model of postcommunist urban activism in a town differs between generations. This means that the above-mentioned “toolkits” are used differently by people from different generations. We can express this by indicating the contrast between generational visions of activism. To this end, we will use the term “exit generation” to refer to people above 60, “peak generation” to refer to those between 29 and 59, and “entry generation” for those under 29.

The crux of these differences concerns two dimensions. First, the “cohort dimension” refers to the perception of differences that result from a respondent’s age and individual experiences in growing, maturing, and aging. The second dimension refers to the “generational concept” of Karl Mannheim or Helmut Shelsky: a generation’s self-image has historical sources. A similar point of departure can be found in studies of emigrants families, gerontological, and educational studies. For example, from English-language studies of Russian society: “A social portrait of age cohorts in post-Soviet Russia” (Beliaeva 2006), or “The next generation: Pragmatic perfectionists or romantics of consumption” (Lisauskene 2007). The latter describes the cultural consequences of transformation using Piotr Sztomka’s sociological interpretation of “trauma.” The young generation, in this sense, has a chance of differentiating itself from the older generation, other than simply by age. The empirical question is, “How different are they?”

### *Third Assumption*

The last assumption refers to the perception of a second type of difference – the appearance of a generation in Shelsky’s sense – among

people in their twenties. We can verify the hypothesis which refers to the significant generational difference which resulted from the transformation of the system in the 1990s.

## **What is “activity” in terms of generational perspective?**

### *Exit Generation*

Let us start the analysis with the oldest of our three generations. The first noteworthy feature is the respondents' rejection of a mercantile attitude toward social activism: social activism is procommunity action, undertaken out of concern for others' interests. The contents of this activity can be divided into two main areas. The first of these can be described using the most traditional interpretation of “being a citizen” in a conservative, traditional society.

According to one respondent (W54M/66), “... in my opinion social activism means just acting out of concern for others' interests, not asking for money, but simply following human and patriotic principles,” and an active person is understood as “... one who desires to act out of concern for others' interests from the bottom of their heart, and who doesn't ask for any money for their action.” This understanding arises from being involved in creation of the Solidarity social movement at the beginning of the eighties, and the activity of the sightseeing movement (PTTK, the Polish Tourist and Sightseeing Agency).

Another response (W49K/62): “In my opinion, being active means being sensitive, seeing someone as human, whether they are a new-born child or an old person passing away.” This is a reflex of the Christian ethic, in the traditional way. Both varieties of “social affiliation” (that is, relations with the political events which occurred from the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies to the “Solidarity” period) involve opposition to the state, and a strongly accented ethical subject. Helping others is a condition of being more human. We can call it the “traditional” or “conservative” type of social affiliation.

The second area we examine in relation to the exit generation's response involves that equation of social activity with action in formal, centralized organizations. We often observe references to certain or-

ganizations that were subordinate to the state. Such references are a widespread regularity, typical of the Polish People's Republic. We can describe such responses as the "substitutive type."<sup>3</sup> An activist is a person who (W50M/75) "... does socially useful work [or work useful to the state]." Such work may refer to biographical experiences from the fifties: "At that time the trade unions created different committees (...) for example ... [a committee concerned with] the lack of bread being baked. They were searching for stores of flour in bakeries, and I participated in those committees," or a later involvement as a juror in court. There are further examples available, such as activism concerning work in labour councils, youth organizations, or the units of the Polish United Workers' Party.

We should add that membership in parties which are supervised by the state can be treated as one of the sources of "civic competence," in the case of at least some of the examined activists. This certainly affects the notion of organized activity.

### *Peak Generation*

Understandings of activity among the peak generation depend mainly on the respondent's profession. Reference to the "missionary" character of actions is rare.

The following response, from a teacher (M/56), may seem to be symptomatic of a certain type of activity: "Social activity is an after-work activity in fields that are not connected to professional work. I think social activism includes all our activities which influence society. So, social activism may include both all our after-work activities, as well as our tasks at work. Of course, it all depends on your profession." Thus, a socially active person is one who "wants to take up various activities connected with society," and the opposite of activity is "... being insensitive to what surrounds us."

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<sup>3</sup> "Substitutive type" in this sense means being a substitute for a natural process such as the "creation" of a social group or civil institution by the state. Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński uses this word to describe the strategy of government under "real socialism" (Wnuk-Lipiński 1991). From another point of view, a "substitutive institution" is one built in opposition to the state, or simply in substitution for the state (Burton 2004).

We can call this type a “professional type.” Like the above-mentioned teacher, we can find here several managers of community centres for the elderly and housing-estate administration workers. Here the active focus is on the development of professional activity via new subjects which result from a current situation – perhaps a current necessity – or from an ethical motivation, for example, work for the benefit of poor children (in the case of a teacher), or a work in the administration of a housing estate.

The second type – important in the case of the peak generation – can be called the “community type.” The issues are as follows:

(1) on one hand, the activity which benefits society is not considered to necessarily involve putting aside personal interests. So the activity may include drawing a salary. The activity is regarded as a professional activity producing goods that are consumed collectively;

(2) on the other hand, often the same kind of work which a respondent equates with social activity is also as a way of living. In other words, there are a number of strategies involving taking part in works that are undertaken by others, and which include elements of collective action. The choice of strategies always, or almost always, includes constructing an external context which is defined as “social welfare” or “work for the benefit of the others.” To repeat, as far as the subtext is concerned, this type of activity includes a collective interest and an individual interest overlapping in some way. Here we may speak about a liberal collective context that appears as a separate sphere from professional work, and as an element of life strategy chosen by the person. A fifty-six-year-old female respondent (W34/K56) describes activity as follows: “[Social activity] simply means taking part in everything you can manage, for the benefits of society and your close and distant relatives. It means helping people solve problems which they can’t solve themselves. It means helping the state and individuals. It also means acting to improve things. Sometimes, your help should be unpaid, but sometimes it should be paid, because then the help can be done properly.” She added, “As far as I am concerned, there are hardly any personal benefits [to such activity], material or otherwise ... there are no material benefits. What’s more, you have to devote your own time. So, it all depends on your ambitions ... That’s why I keep at it.” The respondent said that she was a milk bar owner – so, not someone professionally connected with administration or local authorities.

### *Entry Generation*

With this generation, we are again considering social activity in the context of affiliation – the perception of activism as operating within the scope of a legal entity. One of the younger respondents, a law student, states, “I think that [social activity] means acting in an organized group, for example, neighbourly communities, political parties, associations, or foundations.” Comparing with the substitute participation of institutions we have seen earlier, a difference is that here we are concerning with rank-and-file initiatives. In other words, the difference includes the appearance and development of the third sector in Poland. The above respondent’s experiences concerned free services provided within the framework of acquiring professional competence. The formal status is of great importance here. Provision of such services is treated as a component of professional biography, which develops naturally from voluntary work to employment, and which it is especially important in the case of lawyers. We will refer to this as the “voluntary type” of action.

Broadly interpreted, what we are dealing with here is a change of status in social activity, starting from the ethos of activity for the good of our country, through activities performed outside working hours and for the benefit of the community to which we belong, and ending with social activity as a particular stage of professional work.

This process of change can be seen as an element of a linear pattern of modernization, which starting from a communal form, and develops via individual activities, and ends with professional practice that is based on the structures of third sector associations. Yet it is hard to imagine these stages as stages of development of an activist’s biography. Instead, we can speak here of a break, rather than a continuity, in the cases of both the exit generation and the peak generation.

It should be emphasized that respondents’ answers also include more traditional ways of understanding social activity. These ways refer directly to the substitutive type of action: a twenty-four-year-old respondent (M30/24) replies “To be socially active? It means, well ... when somebody takes part in activities for the benefit of society, and they undertake work that isn’t directly connected with their everyday professional responsibilities, study, research, or family duties. And in their spare time outside working hours, they act for others’ benefit, for the

benefit of society.” We can also observe the inconsistency of opinions and the lack of order in understanding social activity. A twenty-two-year-old female (K31/23) respondent adds, “To be socially active means working for the benefit of others, including people we know – for example helping a neighbour – and strangers, like taking part in charity work and other social actions.” Participation in elections is also included.

Finally, we can add that the types of social action that refer to all three generations are those that concern activities resulting from religion and from widely relevant politics. Here the motivations are of a more universal character. However, this kind of activity was of little interest to us, due to its character.

### **Summary**

In general, the phrase “postcommunist microactivism” refers to

(1) the diagnosis of a crisis of social engagement which we have described for the moment as “social non-movement” (Nowak 2005). This crisis concerns the generational structures we have analysed. The research we have conducted leads to the next point;

(2) the collapse of forms of communal activism (in the traditional sense), which results from the period of Solidarity, and previous to that, from the conservative ethics of the intelligentsia of central Europe. A good illustration of this tendency is the quasi-experiment we used in our quantitative research (Nowosielski 2007);

(3) Communal activism is replaced by different forms of activity which we describe as “community type” activity. The status of these types is illustrated by the process of privatization. Activism is an individual choice and individual strategy. We should add that this understanding of activism involves both performing social activity alongside normal professional work, and combining ethical elements, such as helping weaker people, with the pursuit of interests which the subject may regard as being both to his own advantage and also for the benefit of others;

(4) The young generation add to this tendency a formula of voluntary work, which is both (a) treated as a way of helping others, and (b)

an element of the professional portfolio or a part of an individual's curriculum vitae;

(5) A general tendency typical of the postcommunist model of microactivism is (a) an eclectic selection of form and content of contributions, indicating a constant initial stage in the development of the standard of social participation, and (b) an overlap of different forms deriving from separate cultural sources. As far as the youngest generation is concerned, the problem is evidenced by semantic chaos. We can observe here, at the same time, those terms which are typical of a "substitutive" understanding of activity in a monocentric state, and political citizenship – such as participation in an election, or in the work of a political party – and the elements of the model which Thomas Marshall connects with the development of social citizenship in western Europe.

Significantly, the "roles" of microactivism are constantly evolving, and at this moment it seems impossible to find one dominant model. Perhaps this is exactly what we mean by "postcommunism."

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