

UNCOMMONLY WILD:

THE CONTEST FOR WARSAW'S WISLA RIVER

An NCEEER Working Paper by

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Executive Summary

This paper looks at how the Wisła River in central Warsaw became a site for articulating notions of the wild and the commons in postsocialist urban spaces. It asks what kind of commons might emerge in a semi-natural urban space fashioned out of informal networks and practices both at the level of the state and at the level of the everyday tactics used for ‘getting-by’ by the inhabitants of the space. By bringing the commons and the wild into focus within the urban space this paper argues that there are emergent conditions of activism and governance at work. The complex configurations in which the river flows means that it is a space where different, mutually contradictory modes of usage and governmental obligations come into contact. The contours of this story defy common divisions between private and public, between dissident environmentalists and a city/developer nexus, and between what ‘wild’ might mean as opposed to “usable green space.” Different logics about governance and use come into play depending on how the ‘wild’ river is acting.

Introduction

The commons and the wild are two confusing and understudied categories in postsocialist Europe. This is true particularly in the urban context where public sentiment pivots on two related notions: 1.) state owned land produced a tragedy of the commons during the socialist period, with polluted and pillaged natural spaces, a context in which no one felt enfranchised as common user, and 2.) A wild space in the city center is symptomatic of the postsocialist city's inability to properly modernize and invites technocratic solutions to overcome this "problem." This article examines synergies between public access and use of the 'wildlands' of Warsaw's Wisła River space in light of spectacular developments.¹ We look at how the Wisła River in central Warsaw became a site for articulating notions of the wild and the commons. Our goal is 1.) to explore the variety of dynamics at work in the river space in Warsaw and whether and why this might lead to this space being considered a commons 2) to present empirical examples of attempts to govern the dynamic publicly owned river space, and how this leads to an unstable notion of the commons and 3.) to develop an intellectual framework for understanding how the commons and the wild might be analyzed in postsocialist urban spaces.

When in Warsaw you hear that the Wisła River front is singular in Europe for the single reason that there is so much undeveloped open space along the river, both green and concrete. Until spring 2011 forest and a thicket of impenetrable shrub defined the Praga side of the river (right bank). When seen from the city centre, not just the river bank but Praga itself had symbolized the wild and dangerous social environment of an unmodernized and highly criminalized workers' neighbourhood on the other side of the river. Across from Praga, however, the river was also not a tight part of the city centre attractions. On the left bank, a cement

¹ Following Pole's name for the river this paper uses the Polish word Wisła for what is known in English as the Vistula.

bulwark and road separated buildings from the river, and on both sides of the river there were neglected ports, occupied semi-legally by house boat squatters and gardeners. The river space's proximity to strategic investments meant that it was never just a bounded space, which conflicting constituencies fought for. The river space was part of a strategic geography for how Warsaw would reinvent itself twenty years into its capitalist adventure, a period that saw rapid wealth accumulation and a stunning pace of infrastructural developments.

The biophysicality of the river in Warsaw played a significant role in how Warsaw could develop. Due to frequent floods and a shallow sandy bottom, the river's ecological attributes complicated its use as both a commons and stopped the space from being effectively privatized. The space was simultaneously undeveloped, polluted, wild, and a potential source of cultural and ecological wealth to revitalize the city, if only the river could be managed and improved while still being called "wild."

To most Warsaw residents the Wisła River had not been thought of as a natural gem symbolic of the city's identity. The NGO, *Ja Wisła* (I, the Wisła), summed up the challenges to bringing the river back to life in a 2009 outdoor exhibit about the river's history, "Today the shore of the Wisła is empty. Polluted for decades the river no longer attracts Varsovians. Navigation disappeared and water sports centers are hardly existent. The concrete encased waterside is not used as a boulevard or harbor. The beaches are covered with rubbish and debris and overgrown with bushes. The river is narrowed by ferroconcrete dams and it's become furrowed, therefore ports dry up in the summer." Hardly the image of a wild river nor a space desirable for use, *Ja Wisła* portrayed the river this way in an attempt to turn the fate of the river around, to invite Varsovians to its shores and to reanimate its waterways. They were one of many groups competing to manage the river space, a point we will explore later in this article.

In the last few years the city and developers roundly began referring to the river's natural attributes as a cultural resource in an attempt to make Warsaw a livable, world class city, particularly in its bid to be the 2016 European city of culture. One development billboard invited resident's to buy its luxury lofts using language that belied *Ja Wisła's* summation. "Everything is flowing. The new Powiśle Development grows along the banks of the Wisła, Poland's longest and most important river, the last natural European river."

And it is in the name of ecology, of the space's value as a nesting place for migrating birds, that another language could be found in legal terms to protest against city planning decisions and private investment plans that seem to contradict notions of public access and development. Designated as a NATURA 2000 site for its importance as a bird breeding habit the river would assume new importance through a 3.5 million "Euro Life +" grant, co-managed by the bird protection group STOP (Stołeczne Towarzystwo Ochrony Ptaków). The grant would radically alter the forested thicket along the Praga bank, formalizing trails, restoring breeding habitat for birds, constructing artificial floating islands and bulldozing vegetation to create beaches. Yet the lay observer often couldn't separate what was being done in the name of bird protection, the creation of public beaches, flood control or development. Moreover, technocratic experts also obfuscated answers to these questions.

Shifts in the desirability of the river timed with spectacular developments in the vicinity of the river banks. A former stadium for international petty trading was torn down and rebuilt for the 2012 European Football Championship games. The city sold development rights to its two underused and green-lined ports targeting them for massive office and living structures. A new Copernicus Science Center was built on the bank directly across from the Praga wildland, spending more than 100 million zloty (244 million Euros) to transform a cracked cement

bulwark into a formalized sculptured park. And the city is finally building a second metro line to link the east and west sides of Warsaw, with stops at the most significant developments along the river.

Thus it is in the last couple of years that the space along the river has emerged as one of a dizzying range of wildly contesting representations: from beaches for football fans and river bank luxury saunas to nesting places for migrating terns; from potential for developing Warsaw into an attractive destination or habitation point for an international jet-set to one for bottom up NGO activities or even a space where the power of nature (floods) threatens the security of human civilization. Such shifting discourse matched with strategic urban development draws attention to the river-space as a place where the question of ‘what is governance of the post-socialist?’ is posed with particular starkness. It is within this configuration that the notion of what the commons and the wild mean emerge as lively nodes in the restructuring of the fabric of the postsocialist city.

Approaching the question of the wild and the commons along the banks of the Wisła in Warsaw enables us to take up position at the intersection of interesting debates in the literature on what, with considerable reservation, one might refer to as postsocialist urban forms.² Firstly, by way of warning we would stress along with Harloe that despite points of commonality amongst socialist cities, there was also great diversity between the spatial and social compositions of particular cities (Harloe 1996). This diversity is even more apparent in the consequences of the incorporation of these spaces into the different international, indeed global connections, of contemporary capitalism and governance (between emergent varieties of capitalism, Drakohoupil and Myant 2010; between modes of development of different cities in

² For extended discussion on the problematic issue of naming the region of the post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, see Forrester, Gapova, Zabarowska 2004, and Milerius and Cope 2008.

Hungary, Kiss 2004). Thus, while we believe our case is exemplary beyond its particular spatial boundaries, we also suggest that the specificity of socio-spatial context is a key factor that the generic term postsocialist tends to underestimate.

Our work takes up a position within a body of literature analyzing changing urban forms in the region. In particular, theorists explore socio-spatial change as a consequence of socio-economic change that is bringing about greater socio-spatial segregation (with reference to Moscow, Vendina 1997) or the preeminence of the real estate market over municipal regulation structures (Warsaw, Keivani et al. 2001), but one in which the built environment can constitute strong lines of continuity with urban forms of the socialist past (built environment of Budapest, Dingsdale 1999; industrial location in provincial Hungarian cities, Kiss 2004). In particular, analysts emphasize the growing ambition of cities to be situated within a horizon of international competition (St. Petersburg, Golubchikov 2010), which combined with a lack of municipal investment (Moscow, O'Loughlin and Kolossov 2002) can cause a sense of a local lack of influence over spatial development (Moscow periphery, Golubchikov and Phelps 2011). This is often formulated in terms of a disappearance of public (common) space in favor of private (Tashkent, Kosmarski 2008), commercial (Warsaw, Jałowiecki 2007) or festival spaces ('spectacularly' common for a limited period aimed primarily at place promotion, such as in Berlin, Flierl 2002), or as part of the process of gentrification (Moscow, Badya and Golubchikov 2005). This is not a positive horizon for thinking about the urban commons!: while not wishing to question the validity of these general trends, our focus on the commons and the wild in an urban context attempts to complicate the optics through which urban change in this region is conceptualized.

The second areas of literature we are interested in engaging with are that of ecology and

of social activism as a way of expanding the horizons of how agency in urban change is possible and indeed is achieved. Thus, firstly, by posing the question of the commons and the wild in a postsocialist urban space we are interested in remarking the presence of such spaces as interesting features of this region's urban configurations. In so doing, we also want to raise the question of the role of ecology in problematizing the delayed development paradigm prevalent in these spaces (Tsenkova 1997) and to join debates about the environment in cities of the region (Moscow, Bityukova and Argenbright 2002). We also do so in order to draw attention to the activities of various users of space, not just urban planners and transnational corporations, but also NGOs, informal communities and everyday practices, and thus are also interested in taking up position in relation to the growing literature on NGOs in the region (on environmental and housing associations in late socialist and postsocialist Budapest and Moscow Pickvance 1996; on the development of environmental activism in Hungary, Krista Harper 2006; for a critique of NGOization in relation to gender activism Agnieszka Graff 2009) and bottom up social initiatives (housing associations in Moscow, Shomina, Kolossov, Shuktat 2002).

Of special interest when considering the commons in the postsocialist context is the work done on informal networks, which argue that the central role that these played in communist society and their subsequent development in postsocialist societies is key to understanding the specific problems and potentials of the social fabric of postsocialist societies (informal work in Moscow and Ukraine, Williams and Round 2007 and 2008; ambiguity of informal networks Lebedeneva 2004 and 2009). Thus, we wonder what kind of commons might emerge in a wild urban space fashioned out of informal networks and practices both at the level of the state (and between state and transnational interests) and at the level of the everyday tactics used for 'getting-by' by the inhabitants of the space? In combining these different levels of analysis we

hope our essay can be an ethnography of the postsocialist space as a mode of engagement with complexity of the type called for by Hörschelman and Stenning (2008).

By insisting on the commons and the wild, we are seeking to bring to the fore specific elements of postsocialist urban configurations as a point of entry and specific twist to the growing literature on the urban commons as an important and complex area of social and academic interest. Three areas in this literature stand out. Firstly, the academic and social movements questioning the excesses of the commercialisation of socio-spatial relations and private enclosures by reclaiming after David Harvey the common right to the city, as witnessed in phenomena as diverse as the Occupy Movement and urban protests of the Arab Spring and in Russia (Harvey 2003; Brenner et al. 2011). A second renewal of interest in the issue of the commons is the emergence of the internet as a space where issues of private and group interest are still to be negotiated, as suggested for example by the widespread demonstrations in Poland in spring 2012 against the ACTA agreement that attempted to regulate the virtual sphere (Hess 2000). The third area is that of urban ecology considered not just as a way of defending the natural environment in cities, but as a way of reposing the question of cities as not just civilizational phenomena but as a complex environmental whole existing also in relation to wider spatial configurations (Foster 2006, Briassoulis 2002). By focusing on the wild areas around the banks of the Wisła, we suggest these spaces as an important example of emergent conditions of activism and governance in a postsocialist urban space. What potential and problems might additionally be created by thinking of this specific postsocialist urban space in terms of a commons?

Given Warsaw's tremendous economic growth over the last two decades, it is not surprising to watch the city allocate and project space for new developments in potentially

undeveloped space in the river city center. Nor is it surprising that an active civil society responded to the encroachment on open space. Yet there are contours to this narrative that defy common divisions between private and public, between dissident environmentalists and a city/developer nexus, between what “wild” might mean as opposed to “usable green space,” and between what the state is when other levels of global, regional, and urban come to be equally significant in influencing the management of this space. What this case can tell us is how new frames are being generated to project and produce the river as a desirable space for both development and use.

The Commons and the Wild as categories in Postsocialist Urban Space

The commons is a particularly confusing land category in the postsocialist context of privatization when everything formerly belonged to the state. It is even more confusing given that the reconfigurations of relations between state and private have taken place in a context of intense internationalization.³ Thus, the potential of attracting foreign investment, making the city visible on a global scale and rendering the space of the city attractive for international business are key elements in private development initiatives in the city. Creating attractive public spaces linked to private investments along the river synergistically increases the value for the city and developers alike, but this is only one element of the forces shaping a potential commons.

Equally in the case of Warsaw and other cities located inside the E.U., the potential for E.U. funding or grants is a major player: investing heavily in both the modernization of the territory of the country, the E.U. emerges rather paradoxically as a key element in the production

³ Key texts on the changes in urban governance brought about by the internationalization of economic relations are Neil Brenner. 2000. “Building ‘Euro-Regions’. Locational Politics and the Political Geography of Neoliberalism in Germany and David Harvey, “From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism”.

of Poland as a modernized nation state, (e.g. through infrastructural investments and regional restructuration programs). The EU directives and grants available to enable the preservation of natural spaces and engineer civil society projects (such as NATURA 2000 and Life +) have many consequences for how people use the river.

In the Warsaw river corridor even this variegated palette of scales of spatial governance is not adequate enough for an analysis of the commons in postsocialist urban space.⁴ Urban governance in Warsaw is itself a fragmented phenomenon, with the space of the city divided into districts not necessarily in harmonious relations with the overall city office (e.g. conflicts over budgets), and in the case of the river there are also bodies such as the City Offices of Watercourses and Canalization, the Regional Office for the Protection of the Environment, etc. While all part of the state (the state of law), these different bodies may be acting according to different rationales, be competing for different and limited allocations of the state budget and competing for different pockets of international (mostly E.U.) financing to enable the realization of their projects.

Just to give a sense of the complexity of this in relation to the Wisła, at a 2008 discussion of the river called “Let’s Return to the Wisła” organized by Poland’s leading newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza* in the Bambini di Praga Café in Praga which asked why nothing had been done to make the banks more accessible, the problem of who would pick up the litter if more people made use of the river was raised: if the river was in flood (as it regularly is once or twice a year) the watercourse office would assume responsibility. If the river stayed in its channel, district administrations would pick up trash.

While the fractured nature of city administration can often simply be an explanation for

⁴ For contemporary transformations of statehood, see Bob Jessop *Future of the Capitalist State*.

inertia, as in the example cited above, it also opens a space of contestation where different logics or priorities for using the space of the river come into conflict. There is no final word or single instance deciding on the priorities for the river; rather the river emerges as a conflicting set of visions or requirements for using spaces in ways that are both locally and internationally significant. Although some players in this game of shaping the future of the river are more equal than others, the field of play is nonetheless open.

In the case of the Wisła in Warsaw the question that the city, developers and activists are asking is how to best govern this space in light of its biophysicality and in light of its new attractiveness as a usable space. It is in this confluence of state and private, of international and local, of environmental and commercial, of the rhythms of nature and the need to defend civilization against flooding, of providing a space of recreation and making Warsaw a tourist destination that the question of the commons emerges in a specific postsocialist form.

By situating the space of the Wisła in terms of the commons, we want to know what would it mean for this space along the banks of the Wisła to become a commons in light of its recently undesirable status. In what sense is the space of the Wisła a common space and how can people come to feel enfranchised as common users?⁵

Wildness into Regulation

Standing in the center of the Świętokrzyski bridge, which will take you from the Powiśle neighborhood to Praga the river looks muddy and uninviting. From here you can see the imposing new stadium in Praga built for the EURO 2012 match, hundreds of terns and gulls wading on small islands, and the Praga “wild space,” or what used to be a wild thicket until the

⁵ Blomley 2008 explicitly poses the question of the urban commons in terms of spaces reclaimed as belonging to the common realm, and thus constituted through social activism.

spring of 2011 when the city chopped away the invasive American Maples, and even the native willows. Bulldozers widened what had been narrow, often barely existing, social trails and formed a two meter wide cycling and pedestrian path. They also shaved some areas completely of vegetation to make several sandy beach areas for sunbathers and volleyball matches.

Praga is a good place, but not the only one, to set an example of how the river looks from the lens of the commons. Prior to WWII the river was more oxbowed throughout its course and had a much wider floodplain than today. And Praga was much more open to sunlight and had beaches that were heavily used by residents.

WWII set a stage of development that explains much of the city's divided character. As German forces razed Warsaw to the ground during WWII in retaliation for the Warsaw Uprising, Stalin's Red Army camped along the Praga bank of the river. Uprising forces had hoped to capture the city before the Soviets arrived. Instead of any Soviet offensive against the Germans during the restraining and then massive repression of the Uprising, Soviets held tight, 'liberating' the city only after it had been destroyed in its entirety. In effect, the Praga side of the city, and river, was spared the full impact of WWII destruction. The PRL (People's Republic of Poland) designated Praga as a worker's neighborhood, providing modest investments, while it focused most of the rebuilding on the left side of the city.

Up through the 1970s, forests and beaches on the Praga side continued to be used heavily in the warm months and by ice fishermen in the winter months. The 1970s marked a new era of industrialization along the entire Wisła River. Pollutants from chemical factories, iron works and coal fired electrical plants fouled the river. Beltline road constructions in the 1980s and 1990s cut off river access. For years, the Wisła River was little more than a barrier between the right and left side of Warsaw.

In the two decades following the collapse of socialism, the river front became a refuge for an increasingly disenfranchised population. With few public spaces to inhabit where one did not have to purchase something, the cover of shrubs attracted homeless people. While crossing one of the bridges you could see multiple bonfires flickering throughout the night, belonging not just to homeless residents but to scores of partiers as well. Further downriver on the Praga bank, squatters established garden plots with hundreds of gardeners erecting small huts in a semi-legal arrangement with the city. The city tolerated the users but the users did not pay taxes or fees like other garden plot renters throughout the city.

On the other side of the river just outside the city center, intelligentsia, including biologists working for the Warsaw botanical garden located old rusty houseboats, which they docked in Port Czerniakowski borrowing electricity in informal agreements with a nearby pub. The NGO *Ja Wisła* took over an unused shore in Port Czerniakowski not far from the houseboats to run a series of cultural programs about the river.

Ja Wisła and other cultural organizations emerged alongside the city's changing relations to the river: the word alongside is perhaps key in this sentence as will be explored as *Ja Wisła* and the artist collective *Lowery* are discussed in greater detail beneath, since these organizations have developed in complex relations with the city. For in some senses they preceded the city's modes of engagement with the river, while in others they have alternately been fostered by, obstructed by, diverted by, motivated by, and discouraged by relations with the city, as perhaps best exemplified by the Przemiany, Transformation Festival.

In 2009, through this festival the city prioritized the river as one of the city's most valuable potential assets, provided financing for a number of NGOs to organize a range of cultural events and artistic installations along the banks of the river throughout the summer. In

2010, the city decided that these funds would be awarded to a single organization that would coordinate the activities of the festival, but on account of formal mistakes in completing the applications the pool of 2million zloty was awarded to nobody and the festival did not take place. In 2011, the festival took place under the jurisdiction of the newly completed Copernicus Science Centre on the left bank of the river, the pride and joy of the progressive *Platforma Obywatelska* now governing in both Warsaw and Poland, with the festival of Wisła related artistic events and scientific investigations entirely taking place over a single 24 hours, much to the celebration of the media but to the chagrin of other NGOs.

The confused history of this festival, first prioritizing the river and foregrounding the role of NGOs, then failing to exist at all on account of formalities, then put under the auspices of a new cultural institution says much about the city's desire to foreground the river, but an uncertainty as to how to best regulate or coordinate the changing configuration of forces that it implies.

The hundred year flood of 2010 has both simplified and complicated the situation. It made it possible for the city to destroy the illegal community gardens, clear several kilometers of scrubby brush, flush out the homeless and bulldoze the wide swath of dirt trail along the Praga side of the river. Simultaneously, the city turned down *Lowery's* formal attempts to organize cultural activities in the Praga 'wildlands' and served notice to *Ja Wisła* that they had to leave their space in Port Czerniakowski to make way for the redevelopment of that area, before also approving a plan for a major development around the disused Port Praski site.

However, it has also brought into sharper focus the difficulties of putting the river to any specific use. Too much vegetation on the Praga bank is argued to raise the water level during floods and therefore in the winter of 2012 was removed on a scale that seems to contradict the

need to preserve nature for migrating birds inscribed in the Life + grant and reduces the attractiveness of the cycle path that the city was praised for having instigated in the summer of 2011 for local users.

Meanwhile, the heightened sensitivity to flooding and changing water levels also pose awkward questions for potential developments along the riverbanks. All of this taking place under the shadow of the new national stadium and the predicted (but also uncertain) flood of human migration that will occur in tandem with the five matches to be played in Warsaw in June as part of the Euro 2012 football championships. Some of the paradoxes of this are bought out by the contrast between the fact that, while a couple of years ago those drinking beer in the bushes were liable to be flushed out and given a fine by the local gendarmerie, now an advertisement for Carlsberg and Coca-Cola, sponsors of the Euro, stretches the whole length of the main railway bridge right across the river, across the same space marked by the city and at the European level as in invaluable space of nature.

In short, the last decade, but particularly the years 2010-2012 marked a major transformation in who would use the space and how the space would be governed and formalized.

Developing Subjectivities in the Management of Space

There was a round consensus on the part of all those who used the river space that the city had not been a good manager. Anglers complained that the city taxed their fishing licenses and heavily policed their social drinking without any benefits to make the space more attractive for them, such as cleaning up trash or improving fish stock. *Ja Wisła* charged that the city had no clue what it was doing when it hacked down shrub and proposed industrial floating barges as

the solution to disappearing bird habitat and that the city was “feudal” in its attempt to evict them. Lowery criticized the city for handing out huge grants to support festivals that turned the space into a Caribbean themed beach party instead of letting them set up tables for chess and offering free yoga classes on the newly cleared beach. The city’s move to empty the space of ‘undesirables’ and fill it with ‘legal’ users marked a point when the city wanted to formalize rules and create institutional arrangements for the space to be governed.

Although, as mentioned earlier, the dominant mode both in the literature and in point of fact is the passage from the pseudo-public space of socialism to the disappearance of public space through the private acquisitions of capitalism, it is too easy and false to simply categorize the city, developers and activists as stakeholders with competing interests. NGO’s criticisms of the city in particular demonstrate how the playing field is shaped by actors who project the value of private and public in their strategic plans to protect their activities along the river.

On the surface a few battles for the undeveloped river front looked clear cut. The question for *Ja Wisła* and *Lowery* was whether users who began to restore and reinhabit the river space should have rights to that space but also control over the possibilities of creative use of the space. But as we will demonstrate these NGOs and the city refracted what entrepreneurialism, management, the commons and the wild meant, both in terms of the subjectivities expressed by individual actors and by the possibilities for use presented by the city and NGOs.

Ja Wisła was formed in 2005 by Przemek Pasek, a young enthusiast of Warsaw’s history with the support of a vast social network of artist friends and amateur naturalists. With no particular training in biology or ecology, Przemek began learning everything he could about the city’s natural history. He founded his organization with the following charter: 1.) To protect the natural bank of the Wisła and unique values of the river. 2.) To retain the cultural heritage of the

river and cultivate traditions. 3.) Shape an authentic relationship between the river and people.

Pasek set up the base for his organization by heroically pulling the barge “Herbatnik” from under the muddy port waters, which he converted into a stage for concerts, then his group began squatting along the river banks. They floated a small wooden office on a raft made of barrels and cleared a space to build and refurbish old wooden river boats and eventually erected a small wooden platform about thirty square meters to serve as a dance floor in a nearby grassy area.

Ja Wisła was highly successful in bringing a loyal group of a few hundred people to the river frequently for concerts and films, projected against the walls of the city’s bridges. Additionally in all types of weather and seasons Ja Wisła offered walks, work opportunities and boat rides, sometimes lasting many days along the river in small rowboats where participants camped in Spartan conditions in the chill of early spring. Walks would often take three or four hours through icy and muddy conditions along the narrowest social trails and ended in bushwhacking frustration for the uninitiated when the trails petered out. Even a free mother’s day boat ride, for mothers, began at 4 am. Ja Wisła prided itself on opening access to the river, but also on cultivating a type of wilderness user in the city who was hearty, an independent thinker, and someone who could entrepreneurially get things done without waiting for official sponsorship.

At first the city encouraged Ja Wisła allocating city funds to support their cultural activities. By 2010 as the city shaped alternate plans for the space they grew increasingly embattled and frustrated with the group asking them to pay rent and back rent on their space in the Port, fining them for illegally erecting their stage platform and serving eviction notice in 2011. In many ways the media and other interview sources made it seem that the battle was

between two individual men, Przemek Pasek and the city official in charge of developing uses for the river, Marek Piwowarski, a point we will return to briefly.

The city, under the leadership of Piwowarski, has impressive looking plans to develop the Port Czerniakowski site. They already decided in an architectural competition that the land adjacent would be filled with high rise offices and the actual Port space would be deepened and modernized to dock yachts (even as there were currently no yachts on the river and the river's shallow bottom makes it difficult for keeled sailboats). Ja Wisła does not oppose these plans, but argues that a place for them and a Wisła museum could be made available within these development plans. The city seems to be rejecting these offers, offering the foundation a different site just outside the port, not nearly so attractive for the foundation, and withdrawing support so the foundation has to charge for its various activities.

Thus, while their future is uncertain, Ja Wisła, and particularly Przemek Pasek, have succeeded in becoming the face of cultural revival for the river. National newspapers sympathetically portray Pasek in his battles with the city. Moreover, Przemek and Ja Wisła are seen as representing a complex view of the river and its place in Warsaw life, which puts them on higher ethical ground than a city council suspected of merging private economic interests with its pronounced concern for the good of the city. Thus, although the city has the power, it seems often that Ja Wisła and Przemek lead the discursive game – it is surely as a repercussion of the success of Ja Wisła, which translates, “I the Wisła,” that one of the city's websites dealing with the Vistula was initially called Nasza Wisła, “Our Wisła.”

Also the city manager, Marek Piwowarski, responsible for the development of the river banks, is described in terms of praise not normally used for a city official in Warsaw, of his passion for the river, his unconventional determination, similar to those used with regard to

Przemek. A recent newspaper article quoted a river captain as saying Piwowarski is “an enthusiast who loves the river, unusual for an official. He wears a warm jacket and boots (as opposed to a suit and dress shoes), and walks in the wild bush.”

Other observers of Piwowarski, including these authors, had interactions with him where he appeared as a wearied city official, distracted in meetings by countless other bids for his time and steeped in technocratic language about the city’s plans for the river. He hired an administrator for the Life + grant who had been working there more than a year and had never even been to the river. (Piwowarski’s office was located more than 10 km from the river). There is a real conflict of interest between Przemek Pasek, the *Ja Wisła* founder and Marek Piwowarski, and a real difference in the ways they can operate as either a low to no-budget NGO and as a city manager. Yet the mimicry Piwowarski displays as well as the media seem to employ in presenting the public face of these two individuals is interesting for it links the question of the commons to two figures who make it seem like the battle for the space is a battle for their identities and personal roles in shaping the future of the river.

Thus, as the city moves to try to develop the river sites, both the city in terms of how it positions itself in relation to the complex configuration of natural elements, and *Ja Wisła* in terms of how they position themselves in relation to development and the regulatory pronouncements of the city, find themselves in a complex and changing configuration. When perceived as site of natural, historical, ecological and economic demands, *Ja Wisła*, rather than the city seem to be at an advantage. *Ja Wisła* are best able to express this complexity and have a group of loyal supporters, although the difficult situation they are in inevitably causes frustrations. Despite the city’s greater power, the game between them and *Ja Wisła* is as yet ongoing.

Przemek and his supporters are deeply committed to the language of the private and

privatization. A nearby houseboat owner said, “commonly owned was state owned land in Warsaw and this was a problem in communist times.” The reason there are so many strong nature conservators in Poland today, he added, is that individuals treat wild natural space as their personal property and believe they can do something to manage it. “It is Przemek Pasek, the count, or estate owner, and that’s why he’s able to do something in this space,” referring both to Przemek’s persona and what is viewed as a pre-communist system of civilizational hierarchy that make him successful.

Przemek expresses an optimism in democratic structures and criticizes the city for its peculiar “feudal” character as the force which stymies his and Ja Wisła’s innovation. “Thanks to the fall of Communism in Poland almost ten factories have closed. Communists didn’t invest in environmental protection. All their poisons were dumped directly into the river. When communism fell it was like a house of cards. The biggest factories collapsed so that in the last twenty years we’re brought back to civilization and democracy, especially within in the EU now. There are a lot of pro-ecological investments. The government has gotten credits so that all new developments are pro-ecological, like the sewage treatment plant(s) that are finally going into Warsaw. In five years the Wisła will be so clean you can bathe in it. You can even drink it. But you won’t have any place to dock your small boat ‘cause we’re just going to have parking lots and office buildings, thanks to the city. These are irreversible investments”

The second NGO analyzed provides an alternative but also telling example of how the relations between an NGO and the city shape the language of the commons. Like Ja Wisła, Lowery also thought that occupying and regularly using the space should justify city monies and official sponsorship of their river front management. Lowery was more of a social club of artists than an activist group, with less overt interest in the river’s ecology. One member described

Lowery as ‘an agency of idea development.’ They operated within short distance of the Poniatowski bridge, a space where they frequently partied on the beach after hours with DJ’s, alcohol and food on a donation basis, and a self-described conjuring of a Berlin arts scene. They ran a do it yourself bike shop/artist gallery within walking distance of the beach and applied for city grants to offer more formalized activities open to the public in this river space, such as festivals, yoga classes and chess games. The ‘owner’ of Lowery, Dominique, preferred not to be known as an owner and identified the group as a collective, even as he personally paid the rent. He also lamented that the city mismanaged the river space. Unlike Przemek of Ja Wisła, Dominique is noted for his hands off approach rather than battling city officials. He has long hair, and cherishes the thought of escaping in his VW van somewhere if life gets too stressful in Warsaw.

“The city doesn’t have the capital to organize,” he tells me. “We know all the people and have social trust and the city doesn’t. The city organizes an event and it’s stiff and formal. There are some problems with getting things done in this city because capitalism wasn’t here earlier. The city is just after revenue now....they don’t have a vision...and they wanted to be the Capital of Culture in 2016?”..... “Warsaw doesn’t have character” he laments. “Tourists come to Poland and spend 1 day in Warsaw and 3 days in Krakow. We need a commons to help the city with its identity. The city closes off opportunities for cultural development. It looks to other cities and sees things that it wants. So what does it (the city) do?” He tells me how the city invites artists to use empty buildings and spaces for free until the space becomes attractive enough for investors and then it kicks the artists out. He sees his group in this situation. What is important for Lowery is not that they are artists, but that they have initiative and that they know the people and place on this side of the river (Praga-Saska Kempa neighborhood)

It is troubling to Dominique that the city built the trail along the Praga side of the river (which runs through Lowery's favorite beach space) and that the city doesn't have the resources to keep it up, including picking up trash, which frequently spills out of small buckets the city installed when it put in the trail. For these reasons the city would be doing Warsaw a favor if they handed over control of these river spaces to groups like his and *Ja Wisła*. If the city is left to control the space, he added "they will just give licenses to beer huts and you have a bunch of drunk people down by the river."

Dominique's and Przemek's criticisms raise many interesting questions about the problems facing the city and its management of culture along the river banks. Crucially, and quite commonly for Poland, they see a decentralization of organizational activity as a more effective method for rendering the city a lively and attractive place. The city is critiqued for its lack of entrepreneurialism, its opaque relationship to sources of funding and bad governance (Harvey 1989). Yet, it is certainly not an easy question to imagine how the promotion of bottom-up activities of cultural activism can be weaved together with the management of the river space in a context of scant access to resources. While finding themselves in a frustrating relationship with funding possibilities, for a period in the spring of 2011 Lowery's activities nonetheless extended the range and topography of cultural activities along the river, thus adding to the discussion of what should the river be and for whom?

The City and the enigmas of ecology

While previously the Praga (right) bank of the Wisła was just wild, its becoming ecological valuable has profoundly altered the scales at which it is imagined and organized. The

Life + grant obtained from the E.U. and managed by the Warsaw city council, the Capital Society for the Protection of Birds and the Bird Asylum of the Warsaw Zoo (<http://nasza-Wisla.com.pl/?mode=news&nid=243>) provides financial support for the management of the river banks to promote the nesting places of terns and gulls. Thus, the bank of the river is not just to be considered in terms of the people of the city, but in its attractiveness to migrating birds considered valuable at a European level and thus locking the city into an international framework of ecological directives. A similar situation is the case for the cleanliness of the water as European grants have helped the construction of a sewage treatment plant to assist the city in attempting to hit the targets of capital city river water cleanliness instigated by the E.U. for 2016.⁶ Here a focus on the micro-level of the chemical composition of the river water plugs into a macro-level of Europe wide programs in a rather extreme, but increasingly common scalar relationship that makes one wonder about the spatial levels in between, such as the body, the interpersonal, the neighborhood, the city or the nation state.⁷

It is hard to imagine, watching tractors and bulldozers driving around turning the thick bushes and trees that populated the east bank into sandy moonscapes, that this is ecological management. It is, however, possible as the ecological project envisaged the creation of special spaces for sand-nesting birds and a more active style of management to return to a natural Wisła bank environment, in other words uprooting invasive species such as the American maple. However, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish what might be ecological management from the creation of beaches for Warsaw inhabitants and Euro 2012 football fans, the cutting of trees to provide a view to the Old Town by an Ibiza styled beach bar La Playa or the removal of trees in

⁶ Anna Tsing's article "The Global Situation" provides an interesting account of how ecological campaigns and contacts have altered frameworks for conceiving of spaces.

⁷ For different perspectives on scale as a spatial concept, see Brenner 2001, Marston 2001, Moore, 2008.

the name of flood prevention. In addition, the planned investment around the Port Praga area, the second city Port, was found to be not environmentally detrimental by the Regional Direction of the Protection of the Environment despite the fact that even the application admitted that not all the ecologically active space would be preserved: a precondition for developments inside Natura 2000 zones . Thus, the implementation of ecological schemes does seem to be open for manipulation by the city as a pretext for authoritarian styles of spatial management.

On the other hand, however, the planned Port Praski investment creates controversy for a number of reasons, from its too tight relationship with the city council, its lack of concern for the social environment of Praga to its disregard for heritage buildings. In this situation of suspicions of a lack of transparency between private enterprise and the state, ecology provides the simplest and clearest international legal framework in which to protest against the annexing of common goods to the benefit of private investors. It does this by providing the potential to question decisions at different scales – when protestors questioned the Regional Direction of the Protection of the Environment they received the reply that this state body they could not understand why the Mazowszcze Regional Authority (another state body) had made the port a protected area. Thus, ecology brings to light a conflict within the state and provides footholds at different levels for making protest: activists are now turning to the level of the regional authority to question the legitimacy of the investment. Thus, not just ideologically but also legally and financially, the fate of migrating birds opens a potential to make concrete critiques of private enterprise and the state in ways that calling for social justice does not.

Conclusion

The mix of natural, political, human and social obligations placed on the Wisła river

space make it an important example of how the commons can be conceived in the postsocialist city. In this configuration the question of what is a contemporary city space, who is it for, what modes of governance should be involved in running it emerge most starkly. The city council and private enterprises might well want to capitalize on it, but what then of ecology where the E.U. has institutional clout and NGOs the moral high ground? And how does ecology and private investment position itself in relation to flood protection, suddenly so much more important after 2010 (despite the fact that this was a 100 year flood and the city was not flooded).

Asked what he thought of the latest cuts of trees, a bird protector said that if they were not cut and the city was flooded the ecologists would never be forgiven and that it was better that trees were cut in the city than elsewhere along the Wisła banks. Despite this, however, and the fact that he had friends involved in Life + and thus supposedly overseeing the implementation of changes on the river bank, he would not himself approve the cuts. The same “Stop the Cuts” plea is made on big graffiti on one of the concrete piers that sticks out into the river. Meanwhile, the city spokesman for the planning of the river banks tendered his resignation in October because he was unable to get it accepted for a bike track that goes along the riverside to in fact be continuously riverside (he is still in his post, so perhaps he succeeded?) and *Ja Wisła* continues to hold its winter walks despite the threats of eviction. Television programs and complaints were lodged to the city against the Port Praga investment, and the results remain to be seen. Meanwhile, the city attempts to press ahead with its drive to revitalize the river bank, while Euro 2012 with the directives of UEFA and the presence of multinational sponsors looms over the river.

What we want to argue then is that for Warsaw, the terms in which the redevelopment of the city are usually stated, whether it can be made to look like Hamburg, London, Toronto, Paris,

Helsinki, etc. (Ryzewska 2011), are less significant than the formulation of the different voices from which the perspective of what role for the river, what place for the river in the life of the city, who can be a user of the river space can be argued. It is the river itself, with its rising and falling, its population of migrating gulls and human users, its problematic sandy bottom and equally valuable deposits of sand excavated for building materials along the bank, its magnificent views which look as great from a penthouse window as they do from sitting free on a beach that poses these questions, as it does that of how the free enjoyment of many relates to the private gain of a few. These, however, are not just natural questions, they are questions in which international directives, state law, different bodies of the city council, private investors, NGOs, ecological enthusiasts, partiers, anglers, wanderers, rubbish dumpers, people looking for a place to drink, Varsovians, visiting tourists and football fans, as well as the imaging of how rivers look in other cities, are all playing a role in creating the complex configuration in which the river banks function.

It is our feeling that the term the commons would be a good front for uniting the different issues at stake along the river-front in Warsaw, but for the various reasons we have described above, especially a resistance to the perverted outcomes of the commons as achieved under communism, the fragmented nature of NGOs and informal groups, and the complexity of issues at stake along the Wisła, it does not seem an easy one to gather around. It is perhaps endemic that the big demonstrations against ACTA in Warsaw in late 2011 were to protect rights of access to the intimate, virtual public sphere of the internet, rather than the right of group usage of any physically existing space. However, what we have tried to indicate is that the situation of the river banks in Warsaw is one in profound fluctuation and that the concept of the commons could still have an active political life in reconfiguring the horizons in which the conflicts of these

spaces play themselves out.

The city likes to impose its vision of the future of urban spaces through highly detailed ‘master plans’ and the impressive (utopian or nightmarish depending on your perspective) architectural visualizations of developers. There are many indications that the city is able to find ways to evade awkward obstacles and enable investments from influential parties. However, the complex configurations in which the river flows means that it is a space where different, mutually contradictory modes of usage and governmental obligations come into contact. It is thus a space where the commons emerges as process or question. The questions of what uses for the river banks, for which users and what sort of city space lead to another set of questions key in making an urban commons in postsocialist space (Blomley 2008). What arguments count, who is a worthy ally, what mechanisms might be meaningful and what is a charade, what usages can we get away with, when does a usage become a useful political tool or statement, where might institutional support be available...? Thus, the river banks in Warsaw form a space where much is at stake - this is an ongoing situation the outcome of which is as yet far from clear. The Wisła does not flow quietly.

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