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# The hegemony of values: Revisiting Stanisław Pietraszko's concept of culture with Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony

**Abstract:** In my reinterpretation of Stanisław Pietraszko's writings, I seek to identify their elements that exhibit some affinity with the concept of cultural hegemony, which germinated from entirely different ideological soil and has been developed under different historical circumstances. The idea of hegemony is usually traced back to Antonio Gramsci's texts, though also to the work of other scholars inspired by Karl Marx's thought, including the British philosophers who founded cultural studies. I argue that in distancing himself from all Marxism-underpinned theories, therein those that evolved toward semiology, Pietraszko was prompted not only by his philosophical views on the ontology of culture and possibilities of studying it but also by the social and political conjuncture in which he developed his conception of culture (specifically, the socialist or communist regimes in Eastern Europe). I ponder how the two divergent models of understanding culture (i.e. culture defined in terms of ways of life and the idea of cultural hegemony) can be brought together. In my argument, I consider various media and communication forms in public space, such as murals, graffiti, posters, billboards, monuments and the like. It is in them that I see manifestations of values.

**Keywords:** culture, cultural hegemony, values, symbols, cultural communication, Marxism, Gramsci, cultural studies, Birmingham School, public space

For the 50th anniversary of the foundation  
of cultural studies in Poland

## Culture in theory

This paper sprang from my epistemic unease. Yet the argument made here goes beyond personal needs. The scholarly discomfort I felt was caused by the realization that something was missing in the theoretical paradigm that had been

formative of me as a researcher. This paradigm defines what culture is and binds it to the order of values, at the same time leaving out the issues of power relations, communication and media. While emphatic, the term “missing” does not accurately convey my goals because it is not in the least my intention to find fault with Stanisław Pietraszko’s theory of culture. Rather, I seek, first, to explain why this theory made no room for the study of these issues and, then, to redefine them slightly and show how they can be instrumental to cultural-studies (*kulturoznawczy*) research. In doing this, I will rely on examples from culturally-inflected studies of urban space, my own major field of practice.

As a scholar, I was fostered by the theory of culture developed by Stanisław Pietraszko (1928–2010), the founder of an experimental degree course and a research discipline that grew out of it. The discipline was named *kulturoznawstwo* (literally: the knowledge/study of culture) and has developed under this moniker in Poland since 1972. The appellation is as a rule translated into English as “cultural studies.” Several Slavic languages opt for -logy-suffixed compounds, as exemplified by Russian *kul'turologiya* (*культурология*), that is “culturology,” is also a frequently used term. In cultural thought, Pietraszko espoused a trend he himself labelled as “autonomist.” Wrocław-based researcher Dorota Wolska retraced its genealogy to “the tradition of German thought (as well as the ancient Greek objective notion of culture as an ethos), [...] represented in American anthropology, for example, by Alfred Kroeber and, in some ways, by Leslie White.”<sup>1</sup> As related by Wolska, the trend came to be “accused of reifying culture, of hypostasizing it, with these charges mainly levelled by cultural-studies scholars who viewed the idea of a relative autonomy of culture with some hostility and, rather inconsistently, emphasized its political entanglements and [...] framed ‘culture’ as inherently, if too one-sidedly, oppressive.”<sup>2</sup> Hence, Polish *kulturoznawstwo*, at least the way that Pietraszko conceived of it, is not a straightforward equivalent of “cultural studies,”<sup>3</sup> which is an important point for this paper.

Pietraszko’s axiocentrically oriented conception has always appealed to me as a theory. However, I would time and again stumble over major problems whenever I tried to use it in researching media-related and urban-space developments. It took me a long time to figure out how to combine Pietraszko’s theoretical framework and urban studies. I tried to bring them together in a variety of ways, but the questions concerning the relationship of values and messages kept cropping up, and naggingly too. Pietraszko approached communication as “utilitarian” and

<sup>1</sup> D. Wolska, “Kulturoznawstwo jako wiedza humanistyczna. Od kulturoznawstwa negatywnego do niewyraźnego,” [in:] *Antologia tekstów polskiego kulturoznawstwa*, eds. P.J. Fereński, A. Gomoła, K. Moraczewski, Gdańsk 2017, p. 426.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 426.

<sup>3</sup> Translator’s note: with this caveat in mind, *kulturoznawstwo* is anyway rendered as “cultural studies” in this translation, given that when cultural studies as practised in Anglo-American academia is meant, the author himself makes this clear by adding “British” or “Western” to the term.

proper to the order of civilization. His seminal “Messages and values” (“Przekazy i wartości”) broke up with the language- and communication-based paradigm, which underpinned a considerable part of the 20th-century theory of culture. Meanwhile, in teaching courses in media and communication and above all in implementing my research projects with partners from other universities, including foreign ones,<sup>4</sup> I came to view the city as a medium. Urban spaces are saturated with various forms of messages. One can hardly do cultural urban research without taking messages into account. I believe that these messages are for the most part underlain by values. Urban space is a site of axiomatic disputes and conflicts, where political and ideological values are voiced and otherwise expressed. Certainly, those are not reducible merely to class struggle.

The theoretical essentials of Pietraszko's theory were influenced by the historical conjuncture in which he devised it. To start with, Pietraszko was dedicated to pursuing the epistemic ideal of knowledge free from biases and ideologies—objective knowledge—even if it could not be fully attained. His guiding values of humanism and liberalism<sup>5</sup> were not reflected in the political realities of Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe of his day. Even though situated in a building known as “the tower,” cultural studies was not an entirely abstracted and isolated study programme; it was neither “out of touch” with reality nor a project of political escapism. To gain a tolerable autonomy as a researcher, Pietraszko had to adopt an unengaged position; nevertheless, he shielded his colleagues and students against the tentacled hegemon “disguised as the people.”

From the very beginning of his cultural-studies project, Pietraszko rejected the Marxist concepts of culture<sup>6</sup> and embraced less determinist explicative models, in which the human world was mainly known through values. In the early 1980s, with Pietraszko as its head, the Wrocław-based hub of culture research gradually abandoned the pansemiotic paradigm of the humanities to entirely focus on exploring the axiomatic sphere. Pietraszko deliberately relinquished not only all the paraphernalia of scientific Marxism but also the approaches in which signs and messages—or communication—were considered the fundamental components of culture-producing processes. In her account, Wolska wrote:

What I believe was notable, and inventive for that time, was that culture was not thought of in either determinist or functionalist terms (I mean philosophical functionalism of, for example, Marxist provenance), at least not at Wrocław. Another challenge to the venture of defining culture by negation was posed by the very vigorous and still very promising semiological model. If

<sup>4</sup> Chiefly universities in Ukraine and Russia, where semiotic inquiry is still a meaningful presence.

<sup>5</sup> “Values” is not used here in the strict sense of the term, but rather denotes the Enlightenment-rooted belief that there are inalienable human rights, an indeterminist faith in the freedom and equality of all citizens, and trust in reason, science and education as capable of emancipating humanity (individuals and societies).

<sup>6</sup> Unlike Jerzy Kmita, the founder of cultural studies in Poznań, who grounded his theory of culture on the (considerably modified) epistemological and methodological assumptions of Marxism.

that perspective tempted by offering a possibility of discussing heterogeneous matter in a tolerably coherent and rigorous language and if the texts by, for example, the Tartu school were assiduously and hopefully read by culture scholars, semiology proved disappointing in its helplessness vis-à-vis axiological issues, which were always considered central to the study of culture here and which were extremely difficult to capture in the semio-structural paradigm.<sup>7</sup>

Wolska's observations call for some elaboration and elucidation.

With background in literary studies,<sup>8</sup> Pietraszko in one of his few texts that directly referenced Marxism pointed out that the literary-studies evolution initiated in Poland in the 1970s had led from orthodox Marxist standpoints to a semio-communicative concept of culture.<sup>9</sup> At its onset, the scientific study of culture was closely connected with semiology. The notion of culture as a sign system was quickly getting traction across the humanities. Like in the USSR, semiology was perceived in Poland as the first humanistic discipline possessed of a methodology precise enough to equal the solid sciences. It could be an alternative to or complement the top-down, imposed Marxist explicative mode. In Pietraszko's view, some scholars believed that semiology could even help reform and salvage the Marxist paradigm. Humanists were attracted by the instrumentality that semiology supplied. Culture came to be conceived of as a tool of communication from the functionalist perspective. It was exactly this notion that Pietraszko's criticism targeted. The "technological" approach to the order of culture precluded distinguishing it from the order of civilization, and that was an axial distinction in his own model. The founders of sign-system theories, just like the originators of information and communication theories, had no interest in culture as a separate sphere. As observed by Pietraszko: "Adopting a very flexible criterion of sign-ness, by which even the natural system could be seen as sign-based, semiology was unable to define the identity of culture or its distinctiveness from other spheres of the human *universum*. Thus, whatever stood for the signature features and internal rules of the cultural sphere could not but fade from its view."<sup>10</sup>

According to Pietraszko, the gravest fault of the semiological perspective was that combining the focus on values with the focus on signs necessitated taking a subjectivist stance on the mode of the existence of values, and that axiological subjectivism was mainly embraced by the proponents of psychologism. The mental status of values was unacceptable to Pietraszko, who, as stressed above,

<sup>7</sup> D. Wolska, "Kulturoznawstwo jako wiedza humanistyczna," p. 427.

<sup>8</sup> His study *Doktryna literacka polskiego klasycyzmu* [The Literary Doctrine of Polish Classicism] (Wrocław 1966) became a basic source on classicism in philological education. Pietraszko moved from the history of literary ideas to a discussion with historians and Polish-studies scholars on the synthesis of the history of Polish culture and then to more general issues of culture.

<sup>9</sup> Pietraszko notes that this change was initiated and powered by Stefan Żółkiewski, an eminent Polish historian, literary critic and political activist. See S. Pietraszko, "Kultura literacka," [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Kultura. Studia teoretyczne i metodologiczne*, Wrocław 2012, p. 148.

<sup>10</sup> S. Pietraszko, "Kultura jako sfera aksjosemiotyczna," [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Kultura*, p. 38.

thought of culture in terms of autonomy as a “relational-structural entity” and located culture in Karl Popper’s “third world.” Signs and values could not be accommodated on the same plane of being. The latter could not be reduced to consciousness processes or to what the Marxists called “social consciousness.” Pietraszko levelled charges of subjectivism not only against psychologists but also against Antonina Kłoskowska, a sociologist of international repute, who promoted the concept of “symbolic culture” as a “culture of both signs and values.”<sup>11</sup> If the non-cultural status of signs seemed indisputable (at least in semiology) to Pietraszko, the status of symbols as a particular species of signs was less clear. It was probably in trying to tackle these challenges that Pietraszko developed the concept of culture as an axiosemiotic sphere, an idea that he ultimately abandoned. In Pietraszko’s view, culture could not serve any function or have any aims as it was not “an intentional entity.” Its existence was objective and independent. His version of cultural studies was supposed to explore “culture as culture,” that is, as part of the human world irreducible to the organic level, the psyche, mentality or to social (therein economic) interrelations.

Thus-conceived culture can be (and indeed is) reflected in ideas and beliefs, but it is neither an ensemble of them nor a component of collective consciousness. Culture is enmeshed in connections and interdependencies with various actors, including social groups, yet transformations of these actors and resultant transformations in consciousness do not automatically entail changes in the relatively independent order of culture. Pietraszko conceded that culture was realized in human communities, but insisted that it had its own internal rules. He argued that the developmental dynamic of culture was separate from and relatively independent of the “general patterns of social development.”<sup>12</sup> As can be seen, Pietraszko’s cultural-studies approach envisioned complex interconnections between culture and consciousness, collective and individual alike.

Pietraszko devised his concept of culture in opposition, first, to the dominant model of philosophical and sociological practice, whose agenda was founded on historical (and dialectical) materialism and on semiological thought, which was linked to it in a variety of ways—at least in Eastern Europe—and second, to a range of information and communication theories, where the order of culture was framed in technical and functionalist terms.<sup>13</sup> Still, central to his project was

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<sup>11</sup> Kłoskowska’s theory corresponded to the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, whom she met in the late 1950s, when she did research in France. Over the following decades, the two remained in touch as scholars.

<sup>12</sup> See S. Pietraszko, “Kultura literacka,” p. 155.

<sup>13</sup> To obtain a fuller picture of the (“negative”) context of Pietraszko’s concept, we should add non-Marxist, general sociology (S. Ossowski, P. Rybicki and J. Szczepański) and socio-cultural anthropology (e.g. B. Malinowski and R. Benedict). Pietraszko also dismissed the notions of culture propounded at the time in Polish studies, a discipline that appropriated the themes of culture in education.

the belief that culture, as a relatively autonomous being, should be an object of inquiry of a separate scientific discipline. At the same time, Pietraszko repudiated not only “orthodox” Marxism with its economic materialism, but also all other forms of reductionism. In constructing a unique research perspective on cultural phenomena, he claimed that culture was “a human way of life founded on the relation of this life to values.”<sup>14</sup> He considered values to be a special kind of objectivized and objectalized qualities. Importantly, those qualities were not “products” of culture. Rather, culture was where they were “mediated.”<sup>15</sup> Pietraszko did not regard culture as the state, or a projection, of the consciousness of its members (or scholars studying it), but as existing objectively and being “a relatively autonomous sphere of the human *universum*. [...] [A] special structure of this *universum*, which is realized in behaviour and products and also manifests itself in its mental correlates—in ideas and thoughts. Its ontic status is neither physical or material nor mental, but relational and structural.”<sup>16</sup> Pietraszko sought to fuse in his model some ideas articulated by German neo-Kantian and phenomenological philosophers or, more broadly, champions of the anti-positivist breakthrough (Dilthey, Rickert, Windelband and Cassirer), with concepts derived from American cultural anthropology (in particular from Kroeber and White).

Pietraszko’s concept held that the human world (the human *universum*) encompassed the orders of culture, civilization and society and was based on *internal* and *external* interrelations (for example, with the relative autonomy of culture being curbed by society and civilization as its heteronomies). In terms of the interwovenness of culture and values, “somebody’s” relation to “something” (of “something” to “something” as well, though) appeared particularly relevant. The human being was conceived of as “an evaluating animal” (*animal aestimans*). Nonetheless, the existence of values was not bound to individual or collective volitional acts. Values were deemed independent and autotelic. At the same time, they were autonomous of any uses or advantages (which did not mean that the relation to values could not be ideologically, or otherwise, instrumentalized). The values that “regulate” a considerable portion of the human universe—the modality of being “for somebody”—exist objectively, but always for somebody, yet unlike the processes of civilization they do not fulfil any utilitarian function. They are separate from functional qualities. The order of society is yet another thing, as it in fact comes down to forms of organizing human collectives (that is, groups, communities, etc.), relationships between these collectives and between their members, various regulations, obligations, etc. Pietraszko studied not only literature and linguistics but also sociology. In his view, the research appara-

<sup>14</sup> S. Pietraszko, “Przedmowa,” [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Kultura*, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Notably, Pietraszko, whose explorations took semiotic and axiosemitic concepts of cultural systems as their starting point and proceeded to inquire into strictly axiotic dimension of culture, continued to use the terminology characteristic of language and communication studies.

<sup>16</sup> S. Pietraszko, “Przedmowa,” p. 13.

tus and epistemic goals of sociology—even the “sociology of culture” (like Kłoskowska’s)—diverged from those requisite for understanding the order of culture. He explained: “Culture is undoubtedly a social phenomenon, yet I believe that, like some other phenomena and spheres of social life, it exceeds the competencies and research aims of sociology. To establish a separate science of culture seems both an inevitable internal necessity of the contemporary humanities and an urgent demand from social practice.”<sup>17</sup>

In 1972, that is, just past the midpoint of the Polish People’s Republic, cultural studies as a newly founded discipline obviously had to cater to social needs. In widely read weekly *Polityka*, Pietraszko acknowledged the expectations fuelled by the establishment of the new study course but explained that its goal was not to design the process of cultural participation in a presupposed form and with a strictly defined content, but to enable citizens to take part in culture more consciously and independently. He stated that when constructing

a system of forms and actions to shape a society’s culture, one must assess how deeply this system can penetrate the cultural life of the collective and of human individuals without overpowering and emptying it out of authenticity, how the necessary organization and steering can be reconciled with the need for freedom and spontaneity, and how educational tasks can be combined with respect for the autotelic elements of culture.<sup>18</sup>

Pietraszko himself admitted that his theory of culture approached culture in a rather abstract way.<sup>19</sup> He called for a non-phenomenalist view, one targeting the deeper structures of the cultural universe, where agentive factors could be discerned in concrete human behaviour and thoughts. “View” and “discern” are used metaphorically and somewhat perversely here, since both values and culture evade any direct observation. In studying them, we infer rather than see. Culture can only be “perceived” in its expressions or correlates, that is, when values are actualized in human actions, products or perhaps ideas.

As already stated, Pietraszko excluded signs and communicative acts implicated in them from the scope of these products and practices. However, if culture is purely the order of values, should culture scholars “cede” the study of all kinds of messages to researchers from other disciplines, such as sociologist of culture and social communication scholars? Or would it perhaps be a more fruitful effort to find links or bridges between Pietraszko’s theory and other concepts, including those of Marxist origin? Crucially, such ideas, for example, the notions of cultural hegemony, are founded not only on Marxist thought but also on critical investigations of media transmissions (various communication forms). I believe

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<sup>17</sup> Qtd. in: J. Jagoszewska, “Niedokończony projekt kulturoznawstwa,” [in:] *O kulturze i jej poznawaniu. Prace ofiarowane Profesorowi Stanisławowi Pietraszkowi*, eds. S. Bednarek, K. Łukasiewicz, Wrocław 2009, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Qtd. in: *ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> See S. Pietraszko, “Natura prawidłowości w sferze kultury,” [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Kultura*, p. 285.

that such connectivity attempts breed opportunities for a greater operationalization of Pietraszko's theory, especially in the cultural research of urban space. Fifty years after its foundation, Pietraszko's theory needs to be reviewed and rethought. The time-lapse as such is not a sufficient reason for such a review. However, the fact that since 1972 Eastern Europe, as well as the rest of the world, has radically transformed in terms of politics, economy, culture, society, technology and communication certainly warrants a reappraisal of prior frameworks. Some culture scholars posit that culture has entered a post-autonomous stage and is morphing into "culture without symbols."<sup>20</sup> Besides, multiple "patterns" and "mechanisms" described by thinkers of Marxist ilk, such as those reflected in the concept of cultural hegemony, have lost nothing of their relevance; on the contrary, they have been gaining more and more currency recently. Can "culture according to Pietraszko" be brought together with aspects of "hegemony theories"?<sup>21</sup>

## Cultural hegemony

Given the size limits of this paper, I obviously cannot offer a complete survey of research positions and philosophical frameworks that have marshalled the concept of hegemony. Some of the "archaeological" research in this respect traces it back as far as to ancient Greece, while other studies take as their zero-point Lenin and his ideas of building class alliances as a political tactic.<sup>22</sup> Certainly, in the context of cultural theory, *the* point of reference is provided by Antonio Gramsci's prison writings, though, as shall be seen, the primary notions propounded by the Birmingham School, the "cradle" of today's Anglo-American cultural studies, are highly relevant as well.<sup>23</sup> Gramsci's *Notebooks* contain understandably less-than-systematically explicated, though profoundly inspiring, insights into what hegemony is... from the viewpoint of communist theory. The Gramscian analysis makes up an important part of the intellectual and political movement which Pietraszko's theory with its

<sup>20</sup> In the post-autonomous stage, culture is "commodified, penetrated by technologies and expert discourses, gravitating toward a possible variant of 'culture without symbols.'" T. Majewski, "Kulturoznawstwo wobec kryzysu/ów. O dyscyplinowaniu dyscypliny," [in:] *Kulturoznawstwo polskie. Przeszłość, przestrzeń, perspektywy*, eds. P.J. Fereński, A. Gomółka, M. Wójcicka, M. Zdrodowska, Gdańsk 2018, p. 297.

<sup>21</sup> My intent resonates with Majewski's remark about the perniciousness of "polite silence," which has replaced a possible debate between the students of Pietraszko and Kmita (that is, between the Wrocław-based school and the Marxist-inspired Poznań-based school) on the attitude of Polish cultural studies to the Marxist theory of culture. T. Majewski, "Kulturoznawstwo wobec kryzysu/ów," p. 296.

<sup>22</sup> For the record, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau begin their historical account of hegemony from the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg.

<sup>23</sup> For the directions in which research developed in British and American cultural studies, see *Cultural Studies*, eds. L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, P. Treicher, New York 1992 and *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. S. During, London 1993.



(historically and axiotically informed) worldview has opposed since its very inception. Does that mean that, promising as they seem, for example, for the study of the city as a medium, which is discussed at the end of the paper, attempts to link Pietraszko's thought of culture as a "values-mediating" sphere to inquiries into hegemonic practices are doomed to failure? Can Gramsci's and the like thinkers' unorthodox, "reversed" epistemic perspective, which leans toward culturocentrism yet remains intrinsically Marxist,<sup>24</sup> perhaps *offer* something (with Italian *offerta* meaning both "offering" and "sacrifice") to the conception that I believe is permeated with the spirit of liberal humanism?<sup>25</sup> What does that mean? Before answering these questions, let me again cite Wolska, who (re)interpreted Pietraszko's concept, observing that:

culture [...] appears less as a separate, marked-off sphere of life and more as a modality of human existence. As such, it is epistemically abstracted upon a somewhat different principle. Rather than focusing in research on the one-sidedly oppressive, regulatory or normative dimension of culture, this perspective promotes highlighting the open, dynamic and "creative" nature of culture, which constitutes a way and quality of life, of experiencing what happens to us. From the perspective of axiologically-invested cultural research, participants in culture are not simple expressions of culture, and living by the values, including in chaos and conflict, is not an enactment of any algorithms; hence, it demands specific analyses. From this viewpoint, the communal criterion is axiological rather than social. The opposition of "community" and "free individual" is basically stripped of its heuristic aspect.<sup>26</sup>

Liberal humanism is rather associated with the Enlightenment and connotes the increasing political and economic significance of the bourgeoisie. What I mean, however, is primarily the fondness for ideas which frame human beings in terms of freedom, creative action, the construction of meanings and senses and a rational view of the world. The cognizing subject is clearly distinct from the object of knowledge. Individuals are autonomous, though always culturally and socially anchored in their communities.<sup>27</sup>

Wolska, like Pietraszko's other students, was rather sceptical about attempts at bridging his concepts and the ideas promulgated by philosophers and scholars

<sup>24</sup> Pietraszko knew Gramsci's writings and cited his notions of culture in lectures for the students of cultural studies at Wrocław. The first Polish edition of *Listy z więzienia* (*Letters from Prison*) was published in Warsaw as early as in 1950; two volumes of *Pisma wybrane* (*Selected Writings*) followed in 1961. Before 1989, papers on Gramsci's thought were penned, among other scholars, by Sław Krzemień-Ojak, Zbigniew Kuderowicz, Sławomir Magała, and Barbara Tuchańska, and in the following decades, interest in Gramsci only intensified in Poland.

<sup>25</sup> This does not mean that Pietraszko as a believer in the theoretical precision of science cannot be labelled as a "scientist" at the same time.

<sup>26</sup> D. Wolska, "Kulturoznawstwo jako wiedza humanistyczna," p. 428.

<sup>27</sup> Of course, what I have in mind is a more modern version of this position than its 17th-century species—one that perceives historical, linguistic, social and economic conditions, acknowledges the importance of the relations of power and subjugation and is acquainted with postcolonial and gender studies.

of Marxist extraction. Pietraszko's theory of culture and the vision of the human being it comprised were connected to this "deliberate," axiologically motivated decision and rather at odds with regulatory, normative and highly oppressive visions of culture.<sup>28</sup>

Below, I outline the central ideas of cultural hegemony attributed to Gramsci and like-minded scholars. Thomas R. Bates emphasizes in his paper "Gramsci and the theory of hegemony" that Gramsci's argument in *The Prison Notebooks* is fragmentary, scattered and occasionally casual and warns that, given this, piecing together any coherent theory of hegemony from Gramsci's notes is an iffy enterprise. He claims that the only tolerably certain message that can be gleaned from Gramsci's prison writings is that "man is not ruled by force alone, but also by ideas."<sup>29</sup> The industrially backward homeland of Saint Francis, Vico and Croce was not really a convenient place for thinking in typically Marxist terms of *homo economicus*.<sup>30</sup> Gramsci discarded rigid economic determinism. This helped him, for example, consider "management" and "leadership" in a broader sense—not only regarding the legitimization and dissemination of the worldview of the ruling class, but also with respect to strivings for political hegemony that preceded the seizure of power. His focus was on the rivalry of various actors, in which all classes or groups had their own intellectual "leaders" or "headmen," who exerted themselves to produce a new collective identity. In civil society, the role of those intellectual leaders and institutions that contributed to the formation of collective consciousness as a rule consisted in validating the interests of the dominant group. Nevertheless, this vision involved a kind of "marketplace of ideas," where "salesmen" of competing cultures were at work, as Bates puts it.<sup>31</sup> Of course, the "free" will in the choice of "commodities" may always be limited by the disciplinary power of the state apparatus. All in all, relations of production are no longer the only locus of social rivalry they were in Marx, as this rivalry also unfolds in ideas and their underlying value systems. "Cultural organization" means the establishment of moral institutions that make leadership possible. When discussing "the Gramscian watershed" in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe point out that it is largely to Gramsci that we owe the

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<sup>28</sup> This does not mean that in Pietraszko's conception individuals are not subject to the power of culture. They are, and quite one-directionally to boot (it is impossible to establish human influence on structurality as a dimension of the ontology of culture; the human/culture relation can be metaphorically likened to the relation of a person and their shadow: a human being is not the "maker" of the shadow but is indispensable for this shadow to be there and partly impacts its shape). Culture can be accused of being "non-human," though only because it is autonomous. See S. Pietraszko, "Autonomia kultury," [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Kultura*, p. 95.

<sup>29</sup> T.R. Bates, "Gramsci and the theory of hegemony," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36, 1975, no. 2, p. 351.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 353.

notion that in order to achieve and maintain power, broader social groups must share a certain set of ideas and values<sup>32</sup> (in Laclau and Mouffe's view, hegemonic relations ultimately determine all social identities).

Gramsci himself insisted that "an historical act can only be performed by 'collective man,' and this presupposes the attainment of a certain 'cultural-social' unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim on the basis on an equal and common conception of the world."<sup>33</sup> This entails a struggle for people's "hearts and minds," in which moral principles are directly invoked, along with myths and legends, whereby every political actor presents their image of the world and their goals as universal and ubiquitous. Leszek Koczanowicz explains that, according to Gramsci, political fight is ongoing in all communities and subsumes all the spheres and phenomena of social life. This fight is a means of emancipation of the members of subordinated groups. In Koczanowicz's view,

their struggle for recognition proceeds along cultural lines, but in this perspective culture is not innocent: it represents a way in which the dominant classes impose their view on the whole society. However, a permanent clash between different "cultures"—that of the dominant class and that of the subordinated one—makes community into a field of fight, which in turn enables incessant societal construction and reconstruction.<sup>34</sup>

For example, liberal and conservative values continually clash in Polish society today.

Concluding his comprehensive study of Gramsci titled *Hegemonia i władza* [Hegemony and Power], Polish researcher Michał Wróblewski states that hegemony is "a situation in which some social groups extend their moral and intellectual authority over other social groups and impose on them some elements of culture as official interpretations of reality or, finally, construct a meta-worldview that integrates various visions of what community should look like, generated in the course of social practice."<sup>35</sup> Wróblewski regards hegemony as the legitimization of power. To gain and maintain power, the dominant group must have the values it upholds accepted by the majority of society. Of course, hegemony is not given once and for all, and it can be lost; as such, it should be considered a continual or processual practice. It entails perpetual "trench warfare," in which cultural resources are amassed and hoarded.

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<sup>32</sup> E. Laclau and Ch. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London 2015.

<sup>33</sup> A. Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. and transl. Q. Hoare, G. Nowell-Smith, New York 1971, p. 349.

<sup>34</sup> L. Koczanowicz, *Politics of Dialogue: Non-Consensual Democracy and Critical Community*, Edinburgh 2015, p. 103.

<sup>35</sup> M. Wróblewski, *Hegemonia i władza. Filozofia polityczna Antoniego Gramsciego i jej współczesne kontynuacje*, Toruń 2016, pp. 388–389.

Wróblewski discusses elements of Gramsci's conception and their kinship with ideas of other thinkers and theoretical-methodological movements, and in doing so, he devotes one chapter of his study to hegemony as explored in British cultural studies.<sup>36</sup> Though important, the research on media carried out by Stuart Hall and other scholars of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies<sup>37</sup> is less essential to my argument than the foundational ideas of the Birmingham School, developed by Raymond Williams, Edward Palmer Thompson and Richard Hoggart (a co-founder and head of the CCCS). Williams produced a detailed account of how the notion of culture became entrenched in British philosophical thought and in the study of art (in particular, literature).<sup>38</sup> He noted a series of shifts in which the classical concept of culture, redolent of the Ciceronian "cultivation of the soul," morphed into the Romantic "eminence" and "excellence" only to expand further and encompass the totality of ways of life.<sup>39</sup> Williams himself re-interpreted this holistic vision of culture as an expression of social conditions of living. The prior changes in the understanding of culture that he described tied in with industrialization, the democratization of power and transformations in the field of art. These processes triggered a range of responses, prominently including conservatism and elitism, embodied in the works of Matthew Arnold.<sup>40</sup> The development of the industrial society seemed to increasingly threaten values that had been fixed over centuries. To defend these jeopardized values was supposed to be a responsibility of culture produced by the intellectual elites. In this model, culture was a traditionalist answer to the degradation of humanism and to the debasement of the idea of humanity brought about by the progress of civilization. Arnold thought of the latter as bound up with anarchy and civilization's trademark utilitarianism and alienation.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, discourse revolving around the notion of the masses was gathering momentum. It was introduced as an ideological manoeuvre by the elites scared by the prospect of an increasing political power of the working classes. Wróblewski elucidates:

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<sup>36</sup> My reasoning consistently relies on Wróblewski's comprehensive study, which belongs among the most recent studies that bring together an array of historical positions on cultural hegemony from Polish and international publications.

<sup>37</sup> Obviously, the inquiry carried out in cultural studies is not reducible to research on media and communication, with analyses of education, sports and other fields forming an important part of the discipline as well.

<sup>38</sup> Pietraszko certainly knew Alina Brodzka-Wald's *O kryteriach realizmu w badaniach literackich* [On the Criteria of Realism in Literary Research], Warszawa 1966), in which she offered a thorough account of Williams' ideas.

<sup>39</sup> M. Wróblewski, *Hegemonia i władza*, p. 264.

<sup>40</sup> As a matter of fact, Arnold's views were far more complex, which will be discussed below.

<sup>41</sup> The opposition of culture and anarchy in Arnold's famous essay is not really evident; see footnote 47.

Williams notes that, in the 19th century, the mass becomes synonymous with the mob, credulity and opportunism and as such is proclaimed to be a threat to culture as a distinguished spiritual activity of the elite, which elevates humanity to a higher level of development. A split into high culture and popular culture arises at the intersection of these two discourses, focused on the elite and the mass, respectively. High culture is a repository of precious ideas and shields high standards against vulgarity and barbarism.<sup>42</sup>

This implies that the idea of popular culture is a product of the dominant group and serves to justify and maintain its subordination of others. Like in Hoggart, popular culture is not really a genuine culture of the working class, but its surrogate substitute—a way of life almost entirely oriented to mass consumption.

Williams claims that by attributing to the masses the lack of aspirations or expectations vis-à-vis the world, combined with the basest possible taste, members of the privileged strata reduce them to passive consumers of inferior products. Admittedly, as part of the so-called long revolution, the democratization of art and public life spawned multiple forms of artistic expression, which gradually stopped being the exclusive domain of the elites, like other spheres of subjective articulation, and were recognized as common elements of communication, with group-, class- or stratum-specific values, meanings and senses defining the way of life. Nonetheless, the tendencies to extend the areas of cultural exclusion are still strong, and effort is still undertaken to foster the “aristocracy of the soul” as pitted against “low culture.” Williams of course called for abolishing these differences and distinctions.

Essentially, Williams' *Marxism and Literature*,<sup>43</sup> his most well-known work, which directly draws on Gramsci, defines hegemony as a set of practices and expectations complete with their corresponding system of meanings, symbols and values.<sup>44</sup> Subordinated to the ruling classes, culture organizes the entirety of experiences, feelings and emotions. As such, it is an ideological instrument that works in the service of a certain group and is “internalized” rather than “accepted.” In this way, coercion or repressiveness come to be somewhat redefined. At the same time, Williams insists that the imposed views, attitudes, norms and their underlying values can be contested and, furthermore, that the elites can lose cultural hegemony under inauspicious conditions. By invoking history, tradition, faith, philosophy, literature and fine arts, the ruling class can only safeguard its interests to a certain degree, and power can eventually be taken over by competing forces. For this reason, hegemonic practices involve constant extensions of the field and inclusion of alternative, or even “oppositional,” cultural developments which may put the order in place at risk. Dominant culture, which Williams also dubs central, must unceasingly trumpet the old (legacy) and absorb the new. Despite these stratagems, the defeat of hegemons and the demise of

<sup>42</sup> M. Wróblewski, *Hegemonia i władza*, p. 265.

<sup>43</sup> R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford–New York 1977.

<sup>44</sup> M. Wróblewski, *Hegemonia i władza*, p. 269.

the prevailing relations are never out of the question. Thompson, the third of the insular “culturalists,” contended in his critique of Williams, where he pictured hegemonic processes as more dynamic, that culture was not so much “a whole way of life” as rather “a whole way of conflict,”<sup>45</sup> highlighting the fundamental role of dispute, antagonism and struggle two decades before Laclau and Mouffe.

The names of Williams, Hoggart, Thompson and Hall are nowhere to be found in Pietraszko’s publications. Why did he not refer, be it at least polemically, to the tradition and achievements of British cultural studies? One easily explainable reason is that he was not interested, for example, in feminist media research carried out at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. First of all, he was far more a theorist than an empiricist (and more committed to general theory than to specific issues), and secondly he associated communicative or informational media messages with civilization, only conditionally accommodating some of their aspects in the order of culture. Yet why did he pay no attention to Williams’ writings on transformations in how the notion of culture was understood and how it had come to encompass the totality of the ways of life? What about Williams’ supremely interesting critique of Arnold’s texts? Should it not have aroused Pietraszko’s interest in the context of the culture/civilization division? After all, this segmentation of the human world was based, at least in the UK, on the assessment of hazards posed to traditional values by the development of the industrial society. The working masses were obviously only its part. Arnold, a liberal conservative and a believer in culture as an antidote to the power-gaining philistine middle class, whose members—“enemies of sweetness and light”—only pursued material wealth, saw values as a tool of political moralism. Perhaps it was this “political” and “instrumental” component that discouraged Pietraszko from theoretical reflection on Arnold’s work and even more so from exploring later (re)interpretations of his thought?<sup>46</sup> Was his cultural studies perhaps supposed to be not only “the theo-

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>46</sup> Interpreting Arnold’s notion of culture, its autonomy and agency remains a disputable issue. Without a doubt, he grants subjectivity to culture. In *Culture and Anarchy*, culture is rendered in profuse personifications (not only metaphorical ones): “Culture tends always thus to deal with the men of a system”; “[C]ulture hates hatred; culture has but one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light. Yes, it has one yet greater!—the passion for making them prevail. It is not satisfied till we *all* come to a perfect man; it knows that the sweetness and light of the few must be imperfect until the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light” (M. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. J. Garnett, New York 2006, pp. 51, 52; italics original). Further passages of Arnold’s argument are of particular interest in the context of Kautsky’s, Plekhanov’s and Lenin’s discussions, which have proven foundational of the notion of hegemony (see E. Laclau, Ch. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Chapter 1: “Hegemony: The genealogy of a concept”). Specifically, Arnold insists: “Only it must be real thought and real beauty; real sweetness and real light. Plenty of people will try to give the masses, as they call them, an intellectual food prepared and adapted in the way they think proper for the actual condition of the masses. The ordinary popular literature is an example of this way of working on the masses. Plenty of people will try to indoc-

retical physics” but also “the Switzerland of the humanities”<sup>47</sup> Although, as Williams convincingly argued, the notion of civilization is not innocent, it should be borne in mind that when Pietraszko used it, he referred to another conceptual tradition. This does not mean that he was altogether not interested in the development and problems of the industrial society. Importantly, however, his writings on the subject were much later than Arnold's and came into being under entirely different socio-political and economic circumstances than those surrounding Williams', Hoggart's, Thompson's and Hall's observations and generalizations. The issue of working-class culture in Pietraszko's writings will be addressed in the third part of this paper when discussing the city.

In the light of the theories developed by Gramsci and the founders of British cultural studies, one question appears particularly relevant to the theory of culture, namely, whether hegemonic strategies and practices should be construed as solely related to the domination and safeguarding of the interests of the elites or as bound up with the aspirations and actions of the groups that seek to seize the initiative in order to effect socio-political changes. Do we ponder a way of existence intertwined with a value-based relation to the world around us, that is, culture as creative, open and dynamic, or do we ponder a tool that constantly regulates our behaviour, that is, something in fact exclusively oppressive? Do we only view conflict through the lens of economically conditioned power relations, or do we recognize its axiological dimension as a struggle to mould the world and thus allow a certain unpredictability? Drawing on a variety of research experiences, including my studies on the strategies of urban space development, I propose expanding the concept of cultural hegemony to include—and even cognitively focus on—hegemonic aspirations. I believe that this approach makes more room for the concept of the human being as an *animal aestimans* and, as a result, we can obtain a more nuanced image of the world. It still encompasses the privileged strata that manipulate citizens' consciousness with a view to maintaining the status quo, but the visions of individual and collective life must be broadly shared by members of various groups within the community (otherwise, the former's hegemonic advan-

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trinate the masses with the set of ideas and judgments constituting the creed of their own profession or party. Our religious and political organisations give an example of this way of working on the masses. I condemn neither way; but culture works differently. It does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes; it does not try to win them for this or that sect of its own, with ready-made judgments and watchwords. It seeks to do away with classes; to make all live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, and use ideas, as it uses them itself, freely,—to be nourished and not bound by them. This is the social idea; and the men of culture are the true apostles of equality” (M. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, pp. 48–49).

<sup>47</sup> For a while, a popular adage at Wrocław's cultural studies department was that cultural studies should become “the theoretical physics of the humanities” (this may have been an expression of “crypto-scientism”). See T. Burzyński, “Kulturoznawstwo — ‘fizyka teoretyczna’ humanistyki,” *Polska* 1977, no. 7, pp. 62–63.

tage and dominant position can be lost).<sup>48</sup> As an effect, the image includes both activists, community workers, educators, amateurs, artists, curators, journalists, oppositional politicians and academics, as well as sports fans, militants, members of radical groupings, members of subcultures, etc., who fight for the government<sup>49</sup> of the people's hearts and minds in the streets and on the walls in order to wrench the control of their co-citizens' ideas and beliefs from the ruling class. These are at least partly grassroots and alternative movements that compete with dominant narratives in the axiotic and semiotic spheres and offer—"sell"—different visions of the world. Should we see cultural hegemony in the practices of power alone and thus limit ourselves to deconstructing ("debunking") the pursuits of the local, national, international and global political-economic elites, we would learn little about culture. If we extend the field to include hegemonic aspirations, we gain an opportunity to analyse a far broader scope of developments and, at the same time, to heed Pietraszko's call for regarding culture as a relatively autonomous sphere of the human world—one that is realized in behaviour and products, therein in ideas and thoughts. "Aspiration" for leadership in culture is also less semantically loaded than "hegemony." This helps abolish methodologically reductive economic determinism, in which the totality of causal factors behind human actions is narrowed down to relationships of production.<sup>50</sup>

## Culture, the city and the medium

Regarding urban studies practised within the cultural-studies model,<sup>51</sup> Pietraszko's writings primarily address these issues in the context of research on the worker culture of industrial cities. His texts include no references whatsoever to the conceptions propounded by the British thinkers. In the 1970s and 80s, scholars at the Pietraszko-headed department of cultural studies carried out research on the development of worker culture in Polish industrial hubs. The so-called Lubin studies were preceded by analyses of the cultural needs of blue-collar workers at DOLMEL (M5), a large Wrocław-based producer of electric motors and gen sets.

<sup>48</sup> Where the internalization of models ends, force begins, and democracy is gradually replaced by authoritarianism or totalitarianism. The internalization of attitudes, viewpoints, norms and their underlying values by a considerable part of society is a prerequisite for the preservation of the status quo. Beyond this line, power persists mainly by means of oppression and violence.

<sup>49</sup> Which I understand in the Foucauldian sense, as in *governmentality*.

<sup>50</sup> Emphatically, I mean abolishing methodological reductionism rather than disregarding the relations of production and ownership themselves as meaningful factors in people's modes of behavior.

<sup>51</sup> Ten years ago, Poznań-based culture scholar Ewa Rewers (and her colleagues) promoted the term *kulturowe studia miejskie* (cultural urban studies) in Poland; see *Kulturowe studia miejskie. Wprowadzenie*, ed. E. Rewers, Warszawa 2014).



As stated by Pietraszko's close collaborator in an interview published in *Kierunek eksperymentalny* [Experimental Course],<sup>52</sup> these explorations marked a kind of concession that Pietraszko made to the "social demands" of Poland's political system at the time. As a matter of fact, Pietraszko believed that the theoretical construct he was developing could indeed be useful in empirical research. Yet, even though a study of workers' culture was developed and published, Pietraszko did not consider it a responsibility of culture scholars to answer the questions about the cultural offer for the working class asked by members of the Polish United Workers' Party. What the Party members had in mind was dressing the citizens in suits after a hard day's work and dispatching them to an exhibition, a performance or a concert at a community hall, one usually remote from where they lived. Assessments regarding these matters definitely "had too little in common with cultural studies" in Pietraszko's view. Some of his colleagues collaborated with sociologist Andrzej Siciński and relied on his concept of life styles<sup>53</sup> to carry on empirical research, in particular in what was known as the Copper Mining Region,<sup>54</sup> with Lubin as one of its major urban centres. Importantly, the scholars looked beyond the cultural needs of the working class as such and studied forms of daily behaviour and everyday practices.

If Pietraszko himself was interested in city-related issues, those certainly pertained much more to cultural theory than to examinations of everyday life in the industrial society. He was fundamentally committed to questions of objects and subjects that determined the trajectories of knowledge and of competencies of respective disciplines in this regard. One of his notable insights was that:

if the very concept of culture in the city as the culture of the city's residents basically does not limit the study of it to its particular social context, or specifically to the behaviour of a particular group of inhabitants, in fact researchers' attention in the case of an industrial city primarily focuses on the workers' milieu. What tends to be referred to as the culture of this milieu is a very popular, even favourite, thematic concern in comprehensive studies of the industrial city and, to boot, usually the only representation of the entire possible extent of culture.<sup>55</sup>

Pietraszko emphasized that this approach resulted from non-scientific—that is, ideological and political—reasons. It might be epistemically warranted from the perspective of sociology, with culture considered to be "owned" by social actors, that is, groups, classes and strata, but even with this caveat, problems proliferated, especially when trying to specify what was actually at stake: worker (i.e. working-class) culture or the culture of workers. The problem with the former was, as Pietraszko claimed, that cultural practices of the working-class members had long converged with the behaviour of other city dwellers. Having become blurred, their

<sup>52</sup> P.J. Fereński, *Kierunek eksperymentalny*, Wrocław 2012.

<sup>53</sup> See A. Siciński, *Styl życia. Przemiany we współczesnej Polsce*, Warszawa 1978.

<sup>54</sup> Precisely speaking, in the Legnica-Głogów Copper Mining District.

<sup>55</sup> S. Pietraszko, "Problematyka kulturoznawcza w badaniach miasta przemysłowego," [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Kultura*, p. 226.

once-distinctive or identity-specific traits could now be analysed from the historical viewpoint alone. In case of the latter, defining whose customs or life styles were at stake was not a problem as that was determined by the criterion of production or, in other words, the nature of the activities performed (physical labour at an industrial plant). However, this criterion was rooted in the order of civilization (division of labour), rather than in the culture-specific order of values. Besides, as aptly observed by Pietraszko, researchers devoted far more attention to leisure pastimes of the proletarians than to their production activity.

For these and other reasons, including political ones, urban cultural life (at least under the Polish People's Republic) tended to be reduced to popularly and administratively conceived cultural participation.<sup>56</sup> This came down to easily registered physical attendance at events at community halls, cinemas, theatres, concert halls and museums. Interestingly, in Pietraszko's view, as a result of this superficial notion of cultural participation, which nearly by default excluded watching TV and video films (an activity that in fact represents a very important form of more comprehensively understood cultural participation), workers' non-professional literary and artistic pursuits were separately considered in such research.<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile, "their creative work seems to be a mode of cultural participation, [...] one particularly intense and leading to values through constituting new forms of their actualization."<sup>58</sup> We may add that this form of cultural participation is more bottom-up and spontaneous, which ties in with Wolska's critique of Western cultural studies framing culture as too one-sidedly oppressive. Pietraszko stressed thereby that the bureaucratic approach to cultural participation and the related academic investigations of institutional—initiated and organized top-down—forms of collective cultural life did not in the least expand the knowledge of the real culture of the working masses. What they offered was merely insight into the aims, means and methods of the administrative apparatus and actors that worked for it. As a whole, such pursuits served no other goal than priming workers for inclusion in the official "model of the country's general culture."<sup>59</sup>

However, Pietraszko's ideas about studying the city from a cultural-studies perspective (that is, with respect to the general issues and responsibilities of cultural theory) went beyond the themes of workers' cultural life in industrial hubs. In 1989, the year when socialism collapsed in Poland, he wrote:

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<sup>56</sup> I believe that Pietraszko's insights can provide a starting point for exploring today's model of the operations of cultural institutions, at least public ones (funded by state and local—municipal, communal, provincial—government agencies). Apparently, Pietraszko's view of the functions of cultural institutions was ahead of his time, whereby I mean, for example, his aversion to top-down practices of "inculcating culture" in people undertaken by culture-and-education facilities.

<sup>57</sup> S. Pietraszko, "Problematyka kulturoznawcza w badaniach miasta przemysłowego," p. 228.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

In the life of the urban population, a sizeable portion of so-called leisure time is taken up by educational, sporting and touristic activities, gardening and other hobbies. For each of these activity types, we should concede that they are utilitarian from time to time; education can be a means of finding a job or acquiring qualifications with a view to ensuring or improving livelihoods; sports can serve to preserve or restore physical fitness, like tourism (not to mention the practical aims of foreign trips undertaken by Poles); gardening is done for physical recreation and for abetting one's cuisine and one's wallet; even a hobby can become a source of financial gain, as borne out by stamp collecting. This is not always and not everywhere the case; the prevalence of such functions of these activities can undoubtedly result from the so-called order of values, formed and present in a given culture. The point is that, in terms of research on the contemporary city, even popular knowledge of today's Polish society leaves no illusion: the kinds of activity listed above are treated as autotelic and performed for the sake of values far less frequently than for the sake of possible uses and profits.<sup>60</sup>

Today, that is thirty-three years after Pietraszko wrote those words and five decades after the first culture studies degree course was launched at Wrocław, sports and gardening are regarded by most researchers as linked to culture. To grasp these behaviours and the related ideas fully, one needs to explore them in terms of the values inscribed in them. It is only in this way that we can comprehend why people work up a sweat at the gym, cycle, play squash and/or jog with electronic wearables around their wrists, feeding data and scores directly to their user accounts on social media. Without taking an axiological approach, we are bound to fail to understand not only why thirty- and forty-year-olds are ready to do and sacrifice a lot to get urban allotments, but also why they so doggedly fight for urban greenery and why twenty-year-olds hold performances in public spaces and glue themselves to artworks in protest against global deforestation and emission of greenhouse gases. I believe that these are signs or elements of aspirations for cultural hegemony in the sense outlined above. In order to acquire an in-depth understanding of urban messages, in the form of both gestures, behaviour and actions (e.g. performances, protests, strikes, etc.) as well as material objects (i.e. stickers, inscriptions, murals, graffiti, posters, billboards, banners, placards, monuments, sculptures, installations, neon lights, expositions in the windows of art galleries and temples of commerce), we must discern in these objects actualizations of the order of values, whose dissemination is connected to cultural domination. Yet, it is not all about power as such, but about changing the way and quality of life so as to promote transformations, for example, in attitudes to the social and natural environments (issues of violence, migration, exclusions, air pollution, climate crisis, etc.).

Urban space shows and makes us realize that cultural hegemony is not reducible to mastery, domination, control or the preservation of the status quo. Cultural hegemony also entails struggling for power in order to effect political, economic and social changes. On the one hand, there are agents of propaganda, in the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

broadest sense of the term, who permanently endeavour to manipulate the consciousness and will of the members of the public or, to use a somewhat different lexicon, to win “the people’s hearts and minds”; on the other, there are “guerillas” (a resistance movement, so to speak) who use streets and walls, memory sites and art galleries, cafes and clubs (and the Internet, too) to fight for the government of the souls of their co-citizens, that is, for redrawing the communal beliefs and representations. In this regard, the city—its cityscape, urban planning, architecture, street art, bottom-up expressions on the walls—is a medium. In discussing media, we tend to focus on their functions of transmission, dissemination, multiplication and representation. Urban space is undoubtedly a site where varied content is distributed; it is a locus of memory and knowledge.

To restate, for a range of reasons, Pietraszko did not count signs or communicative acts related to them as part of culture. Of course, any struggle for cultural hegemony would barely be possible without them. Pietraszko associated the notion of message and messages as such with functionality. Since messages performed a strictly defined—informational—function, they belonged to the order of civilization. What about signs and sign-based representations encountered in urban space? We know that, being related to the order of values, they may transfigure into symbols (for which people are sometimes prepared to die). Does that only happen under exceptional circumstances? Does it take some highly specific conditions to be met? Or is that perhaps a frequent “predicament” of messages? What about the multiple forms of visual interventions in public spaces—on the walls—that serve to transmit socially, politically and economically relevant content? Surely, they are not simply informational; they often actualize values as well. Do they have anything in common with culture? To settle this, we must, it seems, accurately define the criteria of value-actualization. As stated earlier, if something actualizes values, it is a subject of cultural studies and can be captured, interpreted and understood exclusively by this discipline (at least as Pietraszko designed it). The fact that a given actualization of values is at the same time a message or a social interaction is not an obstacle to cultural-studies research. The point is rather for cultural-studies explorations of messages to set apart what refers to values from the other functions they fulfil.

The slightly simplifying transition from the “notion” to “essence” or “phenomenon” aside, and despite the multiple reservations about the material dimension of communication raised by Pietraszko in “Messages and values,” one of his key texts as it is, Pietraszko seems to equate messages primarily with newspaper write-ups, audio and video recordings and other forms of registering and distributing content. In this way, the transfer of information is accommodated within the sphere of the human world that Pietraszko, following anthropologist Alfred Kroeber,<sup>61</sup> labels

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. A.L. Kroeber, “Reality culture and value culture,” [in:] A.L. Kroeber, *The Nature of Culture*, Chicago–London 1952, pp. 152–168.

as the order of civilization.<sup>62</sup> Admittedly, Pietraszko marshals examples in which classifying a communicatively marked phenomenon as civilization is disputable to say the least (e.g. the postcard), but he entirely fails to consider transmission<sup>63</sup> in terms of, for example, “donation” (etymologically derived from *donum*, a gift), “intergenerational transmission” (of tradition or experience) or “worldview” (including the testament, that is “testimony” or “legacy”). This results from his focus on the theory of language and information and from his commitment to drawing the possibly clearest “demarcation lines” protecting culture, both as part of the human world and as an object of knowledge within a separate discipline.

Emphatically, Pietraszko's ponderings on optimality and redundancy in “Messages and values”<sup>64</sup> above all refer to newspapers, announcements, legal acts, user manuals, information boards and the like. If his claim about the possible optimization of messages is relatively warranted regarding the radio, it sounds rather problematic for combinations of words and images, such as in TV news programmes. Here, functionality is founded on the “enhancement” of the message, which is associated with ideological persuasiveness, rather than with “proximity” of information. The messages in urban space that are my main research object certainly differ from broadcasts, shows and commercials in mass media, both audio-visual and digital alike. The heterogenous and formally varied aesthetic, ethical and ideological interventions compel us to think differently not only of the medium itself but also of “senders,” “receivers” and the common asymmetry of their relations. Anyway, even if one insisted on depicting stickers, inscriptions, murals, graffiti, posters, billboards, banners, placards, monuments, sculptures, installations, neon lights, expositions in the windows of art galleries and temples of commerce in terms of functionality (uses), attributing any communicative “optimization” to them would make little sense. At the same time, one would be hard pressed to deny that they “announce” something, “represent” something, “show” something or simply “mean.”

Disciplines that deal with the aesthetic aspect of subjective expressions, such as semiology and the history of art, can help establish the efficiency of street messages, including how some of them are superior to others in technical skill or craftsmanship. Yet, is that a pivotal issue from the standpoint of cultural-studies research? What seems to matter more than the examination of “effectiveness” is inquiry into the strategies and forms of striving for cultural hegemony. To culture scholars, such inquiry means exploration of the values that inform the struggle for

<sup>62</sup> At the same time Pietraszko deems television-watching a very important form of “comprehensively understood” cultural participation.

<sup>63</sup> Translator's note: In Polish, *przekaz* (as in the title of Pietraszko's paper “Przekazy i wartości” [Messages and values]) means both “message” and “transmission/transfer.”

<sup>64</sup> For an analysis of Pietraszko's language, see P. Kuligowski, “Via negativa. Ku rozdefiniowaniu kultury,” [in:] P. Kuligowski, *Przyszłość jest katastrofą. Szkice o filozofii kultury*, Wrocław 2011, pp. 53–120.

the people's "hearts and minds," a battle by no means fought by members of the privileged strata alone.

In his considerations on the functional optimization of messages, Pietraszko seems to have believed, like Karl Popper, John Condry and, to a degree, Pierre Bourdieu, in "the truth of the media," in their informational and educational mission. Today, this is a rather rare position. For quite a while, "manipulation" has been *the* notion and term for depicting medial reality. Recently, it has been joined by "post-truth." This is the major focus of research at research centres worldwide, where academics mainly rely on the tradition of British cultural studies. In the capitalist system, broadcasts and commercials primarily aim to intervene into the audiences' consciousness in order to subject their will to the interests of the political and economic elites. These goals are achieved by generating needs and desires, as a result of which active actors are potentially converted into passive consumers. There is not much room in this framework for the optimistic visions conjured by Pietraszko's writings, in which freedom and autonomy are touted as the "supreme qualities of human existence."<sup>65</sup> However, if we expand our research field and focus not only on the hegemonic practices of the privileged classes (which seek to perpetuate the status quo) but also on activists, community workers, members of subcultures, artists, scholars, sports fans and radical militants, who use the streets and walls to vie for the control of their co-citizens' ideas and beliefs, we stand a good chance of salvaging some of Pietraszko's "optimism." This would also be more aligned with Wolska's picture of culture as intrinsically open, dynamic and creative. With "salesmen of ideas" competing for the people's hearts and minds semiotically and axiotically, we can look at hegemonic aspirations otherwise and, at the same time, retain the notion of culture as a relatively autonomous sphere of the human universe and individual expression (without pitting "community" and "a free individual" against each other). A space of mediation arises through which autotelic values can come about in human thoughts, behaviour and products. On the whole, there are no axiotically neutral signs in this space; there are only those that correspond to configurations of worldviews, convictions and beliefs, with the city being a battlefield of meanings, that is, signs and values bound up with them. All creative acts that take place in it, like painting, music and stage plays, must be analysed for what they say and instantiate, that is, messages and values realized in them. Individual, concrete signs and messages are never isolated, but always dynamically connected to other signifying objects. Coupled with the instability of meaning, these connections make possible interceptions of and battles for constituting new senses, which are particularly visible in various graphic forms on the walls or facades of buildings. For example, in Poland, they mainly revolve around various interpretations of history, attitudes to co-citizens (in particular those of "Jewish descent"), relations with

<sup>65</sup> S. Pietraszko, "Status wartości," [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Kultura*, p. 114.

neighbours (Germans, Ukrainians, Russians), migrants and refugees (especially those from the Middle East and Africa), the rights of women (abortion law) and sexual minorities, class differences, economic issues, social sensitivity, etc.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, the struggle for cultural hegemony also goes on in architecture, which is plainly demonstrated by Sharon Rotbard in *White City, Black City*. In Rotbard's view, cities themselves and narratives of them are constructed by winners for winners. They are also erected first and foremost around victory. He argues that:

Both the physical and cultural space of a city is always subject for challenge and struggle. It is likely that those who control the physical space often control the cultural space, and they are never those who have lost the battle over history. Those who have the power to shape the physical space to suit their needs can easily shape it to suit their values and narrative—not only to obtain for their values and narratives a hegemonic stature, but also in accordance with them, to reshape the city.<sup>67</sup>

The physical building of the city inevitably involves producing its cultural texture. According to Rotbard,

control over the cultural construct of the city may be proven even more effective and profound than any other political governance or programme. Unlike other forms of authority, cultural hegemony is not only ubiquitous but hidden: it is defined by the unthinkable, suggested by the obvious, cloaked behind the *common sense* of the rulers and their subjects, and relayed through stories, legends and fables; the cultural construct of a city composes what we tend to designate and identify as “normality.”<sup>68</sup>

In his book, Rotbard addresses Tel Aviv and Jaffa. Yet when Amos Oz, one of the most eminent Jewish writers, depicted Jerusalem in his *In the Land of Israel* published two decades earlier, he predominantly dwelled on the ubiquitous words “the Messiah” and “Hitler” written in splashes of red paint on the walls all around.<sup>69</sup>

As stated above, Pietraszko mainly discussed the status of the medium as part of the order of civilization with respect to the press, radio and television. Today, mediality is certainly conceived of in broader terms, and extending it to incorporate urban space does not seem to raise any eyebrows. This approach is also attractive to researchers of collective memory and its material and visual correlates. Notably, the city as a medium appears far more democratic than television, radio and even the Internet. On the Internet, knowledge stemming from so-called big data is chiefly harnessed as a means of mastery in order to subject citizens to the

<sup>66</sup> As I was writing this paper, the walls of Polish cities were becoming overwritten with phrases such as “LGBT to the dustbin,” “Abortion is genocide,” “Stop the Banderization of Poland,” and “Poland is no Ukropolin.” The coinage of “Ukropolin” brings together anti-Ukrainian and anti-Semitic sentiments. At the same time, the streets of cities in, say, South America looked entirely differently in that period.

<sup>67</sup> S. Rotbard, *White City, Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa*, transl. O. Gat, London 2015, p. 3.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4 (italics original).

<sup>69</sup> A. Oz, *In the Land of Israel*, transl. M. Goldberg-Bartura, London 1983, pp. 7–8.

control of the state and commodify all spheres of individual and collective life.<sup>70</sup> As opposed to this, the battle over the government of the souls that is fought on the walls of metropolises can be joined by any, even the most marginalized, social groups. Of course, we fully realize that “whistleblowers,” “guerillas” and “revolutionaries” who articulate “universal” principles geared to constituting, ultimately, a new “collective man” have no monopoly on the “marketplace of ideas” or “cultural marketing” in the streets of cities (my use of the neoliberal parlance is meant subversively here). Urban space is used at least as effectively by well-managed organizations that strive to further their interests and maintain hegemony, including those that assemble financially privileged employees—global corporations. For those, the walls of building are above all advertising surfaces that “promote” certain ways of being.

What about art and artists in the context of the city and the “excess” of messages? In “Messages and values,” Pietraszko basically seems to equate various forms of artistic expression with redundant elements. Yet this nexus can be worked out differently as well. Within an object itself, besides message, excess can be a factor that engenders an entirely different thing that is, for example, a work of art. Aesthetic values become by definition primary then. I will not enter into a dispute over the status of the work of art here, because this is not the central issue in research on the manifestations of values in the visual layer of the city. However, pointed out by Pietraszko, the duality of objects that contain messages and at the same time actualize values is highly inspiring, not only aesthetically but also ethically. Pietraszko was more committed to discussing the former than the latter. However, instead of enshrining the Kantian disinterested contemplation (typical of the elites that have leisure enough for that, rather than of the part of society that toil in menial jobs to scrape together a livelihood), it would perhaps be more worthwhile to follow multiple critics and philosophers of art and explore relations between signs, values and ideological productions<sup>71</sup> to find out how they reflect and refract reality that resides beyond them. This approach overcomes the dichotomies of high and popular culture, classic art (theatre, philharmonics) and everyday communication (graffiti, posters, memes), with their specific meanings or senses, founded, as they are, on the “elites/masses” distinction. Forms of everyday communication are like flowing torrents into which individuals step. Obviously, signs and sign-ness can only be relevant to cultural studies inasmuch that values remain their reference system, just like the axiomatic order is the reference for culture. It is not about providing information about values but about the actualization of values, about objects that are not signs of values, but “carriers” or objective

<sup>70</sup> Cf. P.J. Fereński, “Fale,” *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa* 2002, nos. 1–2, pp. 62–71.

<sup>71</sup> I mean, for example, Jacques Rancière, who argued in one of his most famous works that the aesthetic sphere was inseparable from political space (the political). See J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. and transl. G. Rockhill, London 2004.



concretizations of values.<sup>72</sup> Beginning from the study of objects in terms of their axiotic properties, we can then reinterpret them in the context of aspirations for cultural hegemony.

## Conclusion

My argument above shows that the notion of hegemony is a relevant part of the theoretical toolbox of cultural studies and that it helps research and discuss urban space as a medium, that is, depict it in terms of not only communicative but also cultural practices. The city is understood here as a complex, multi-layered object whose structural and visual dimensions reflect and reproduce certain orders of values, along with life styles, models of behaviour, attitudes, beliefs and actions. In this framework, research investigates ways or strategies of urban organization founded on sign-based, textual and visual strategies, which also encompass architectural and spatial development. I believe that the factors that determine, define and hierarchize space include not only the current power and property relations but also the relations of gender, race, class, ethnicities and religions and issues of security, health, power resource management, environmental pollution and climate change. I consider the historical perspective to be equally important. Urban language or poetics comprises multiple references to the past, material correlates of collective memory, identity narratives, ideological disputes, wars of/over symbols (values), and ensembles of representations concerning the future of communities (including, for example, forms of democracy). My studies are supposed to contribute to the development of knowledge on how cultural production and social communication means are interrelated with the modes of being, action, thought and self-identification of city dwellers. Case studies focused on the (fundamental, or rather representative in some measure) forms of visual, textual and audial experience and processing of space can help capture correlations between the changing communication models and aesthetic, ethical and social values shared by citizens. Visual and/or acoustic symbols actualize an array of values. These axiotic “realizations,” “concretizations” and “manifestations” are capable of triggering violent and intense responses in people and of generating or consolidating durable dispositions (worldviews, conduct patterns, affective models). Some of my research has looked into contemporary strategies for working through the memory of 20th-century dictatorships and totalitarianisms in public spaces (cities in Albania, Argentina, Chile, Germany, Romania, Russia and Ukraine). Messages on the walls, at memory sites and art galleries

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<sup>72</sup> The point is not what culture scholars are allowed to study but what is and what is not part of culture. Cultural-studies research cannot be surgically circumscribed to culture itself; instead isolating culture, it should explore culture in its external relations to what it is not.

actualize values embedded in the context of social conflicts, systemic violence, wars, persecutions, prisons and concentration camps. Undoubtedly, signs function here as symbols (is it a form of semiological guerilla warfare on the territory of axiology?). I believe that without relinquishing the spirit of Pietraszko's indeterministic liberal humanism and the related view of culture as a way of living by the values (or, following Wolska's thought, as a modality of human existence), we can indeed factor into power relations and struggles for hegemony and, at the same time, discover the axiotic dimension of communication, particularly in research on the city regarded as a medium.

*Translated by Patrycja Poniatowska*

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