Redescribing public services as diverse economies: a pragmatic critique of economistic reasoning

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"Who common welfare would despise
And only cares for personal prize,
I deem him foolish and inane.
What's public good is each man's gain"

Sebastian Brant (1494/2011, p.83)
The Ship of Fools (translated by E. H. Zeydel). Dover Publications.

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Declaration

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Warsaw, 16th of April 2026
Borys Cieślak

Abstract

Conventional economics and cognate disciplines, such as business and management studies, furnish capitalism with its distinct vocabulary. Yet, the abstractions they peddle to describe the world cannot contain it.

This dissertation uses public services in peripheral places as a lens with which to look past mainstream economic discourses. It shows that even in the late capitalist condition there are socio-economic activities implicit in public services which escape the economizing reason and are at odds with the imperatives of efficiency, control, or growth. To that end, three instances of civil servants' resistance to capitalist encroachment are analyzed: self-governance, care, and place-attachment.

The first chapter discusses the revival and recent struggles of local self-government in Poland. It traces its emergence as an emancipatory strategy against the oppression of the Soviet regime. This strategy was aimed to liberate the Polish society from the state and the market and culminated in 1990 when first democratic municipal elections since World War II were held.

Then the discussion moves 30 years forward and focuses on the resistance of the revived local governments to central government's debilitation of democratic institutions. This resistance is explicated by a study of the conflict over the municipal right to self-govern water and sewerage infrastructure. The state, under a technocratic and economistic guise, attempted to centralize these hitherto municipal services. The key axis of the disagreement was the state's failed attempt to subdue the political dimension of water provision with the notions of efficiency and control.

The second chapter turns to villages located in the Apennines which have been suffering from depopulation, amenity desertification, and earthquakes. There, postal offices are often the last pieces of social infrastructure and the only institutions subsidized by the state. By using the community economies approach and the method of reading for economic difference, this chapter draws attention to the emotional and caring work of the postmasters and explicates how they help abate isolation, improve wellbeing and provide a sense of citizenship to the rural communities. In doing so, it attends to the absences in the conventional regulatory economics discourse of postal offices and redescribes them as a universal, even if lingering, redistributive social infrastructure. It also discusses the unacknowledged costs of the emotional and caring labor of postal employees which evade the traditional economic purview and suggests possible policy interventions.

Finally, the third chapter interrogates the idea of schools as social infrastructures. On the basis of a review of literature pertaining to the school-community interface and a participatory action research project conducted with a high school in Poland it identifies a range of tendencies which undermine the potential of schools to serve as social infrastructures: placelessness, equating citizenship with global competitiveness of workers and education with a commodity for status attainment, exhaustion of teachers and students, spatial isolation, idealization and demonization of community. It also discusses how they can be resisted and overcome and provides a selection of ways to do so.

Epistemologically, the dissertation draws inspiration from the feminist critique of political economy, especially the method of reading for economic difference, and the pragmatic philosophy of Richard Rorty, particularly the concepts of vocabularies and redescription. It uses a wide range of methods: desk research, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, participant observation, participatory action research, photo voice, and surveys.

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I dedicate this dissertation to my late grandmother, Janina, who insisted that I never stop writing.

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Introduction

Critique of the faith in economic metaphors

> "(T)he only criteria we have for applying the word 'true' is justification, and justification is always relative to an audience. So it is also relative to that audience's delights – the purposes that such an audience wants served and the situation in which it finds itself" (Rorty, 1998, p. 4)

The key metaphor of economics is equilibrium, yet people rarely enjoy this blissful state. On the contrary, emergency appears to be the norm – destabilized climate, pandemics, wars, and economic volatility (Greenfield, 2024). Irrespective of the daily experiences proving it wrong, the conventional economic theory[1] continues unabated (Gibson-Graham, 2014). Is it not a proper scholarly conduct to revise a theory that does not work? But maybe we are dealing here not with science but with misplaced faith?

The difference between a scientific and religious belief lies in justification. While we can debate whether a secular proposition is good for us, when religion enters a conversation, justification is moved out of our reach and placed with a deity[2] (Rorty, 1999). Thus one is spared the daily labor of questioning and revising at least some of his convictions. This is what happened to economics whose metaphors became reified.

As a young student I thought that when economists spoke of the economy and its laws, they resorted to a discursive shorthand; that they did not mean it literally. For instance, I reasoned that a law stood for a temporary, contingent regularity. To claim that there are timeless forces guiding social behavior which can be discovered seemed preposterous. Soon I realized that the latter understanding is at play, that economists really think they talk about objective and true facts of life. As metaphors took the hold of their makers, economics ceased to be a critical intellectual endeavor. Take Varian's "Intermediate Microeconomics", a popular textbook. The editor of the Polish version indignant with the claim of behavioral economists that people do not always do what is

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[1] By economics and conventional or mainstream approach I mean the neoclassical strand which dominates the field. When referring to other schools of economic thought I name them (e.g., heterodox, Marxian, feminist, evolutionary, behavioral).

[2] Or, in more practical terms, with an authoritative religious body which debates beliefs and indicates the binding ones.

good for them, assured that "people prefer what they prefer over what they do not prefer" (sic!). This assertion is a foundation of the utility maximization theory and a tautology. As any tautology it is not falsifiable. Hence, it makes for a convenient axiom or a dogma. It is called the axiom of completeness which assumes that we can always rank our potential choices. Situations in which we cannot, Varian (2005, p. 35) writes, are "outside the domain of economic analysis".

From a Polanyian perspective "it is through the fetishization of fictions, humankind's tendency to worship its own creations and to forget its own role in animating them, that money", or other economic metaphors, "comes to operate as an independent, thinglike force, the god of a secular society" (Konings, 2015, p. 4). But attachment to such signs is not "just willfully irrational" (Konings, 2015, p. 5). Faith in economic metaphors does provide benefits, but mainly of an affective and redemptive kind and only to some people (for a detailed discussion of the affective and redemptive aspects of money and neoliberalism see, Konings, 2015).

The strong theory of economics – a powerful discourse which organizes "events into understandable and seemingly predictable trajectories" – is almost irresistible (Gibson-Graham, 2014, p. 148). It is difficult to deny the allure of equilibrium and other economic tropes: endless growth, perfect competition, or maximized utility. They placate us assuring that the *economy* left to its own devices will sort out the problems – supply will meet demand, prices will settle, resources will be allocated optimally. One needs only to behold its miraculous operations and consume fruits of its progress. In practice, most economists are occupied with obstacles which prevent the economy from working in this miraculous way (e.g., too much regulation, collusion, imperfect information). This is how the economy maintains its enchanting quality – it would have been an ideal system, but the reality does not let it. Even crises, such as that of 2008, cannot shatter the illusion. Ben Bernanke, then head of Federal Reserve, acknowledged that neoclassical models failed to forecast the events of 2008, yet he did not discard them (Keen, 2011). And later "the bailouts of the very institutions that were responsible for the problems" followed (Konings, 2012, p. 618).

But my critique is not that of an iconoclast. I do not want to abolish neoclassical economics. However, I take issue with economists equating the theory with its object (and trying to shape the object so it conforms to theory) instead of treating it as a tool deployed for certain purposes of certain people (Rorty, 1999). The economic concepts are

not just partial or wanting descriptions of socio-economic relations under capitalism. They, while posing as objective or natural, are guilty of stopping the conversation about the purpose of theorizing and thus subduing purposes incompatible with it and alternatives to the status quo. The language of economics is difficult to debate because, as I mentioned earlier, it has outsourced justification and is often presented as inherently moral. Who, in his sane mind and good conscience, would oppose growth, efficiency or equilibrium, which, we are told, are innate properties of the economy?

If theory, as in the mainstream economics and other positivist fields, is believed to be representing a phenomenon, it obfuscates the responsibility of the theorist for the purposes he supports by offering such and such descriptions. For him, a theory is just a better or worse representation of something external. Ethics have no way of entering the discussion.

This may seem innocuous, but in this dissertation, I show how the dogmatic aspect of economic vocabulary, that is shedding the responsibility for supporting certain purposes over others by reference to an external force, can be leveraged to override purposes incompatible with it. In the first chapter I explicate how the state's overruling of Polish municipalities' right to self-govern water and sewerage infrastructure was done on the grounds of alleged inefficiency. In the second chapter, I discuss how profit maximization of Poste Italiane is at odds with the social role of rural postal offices. In the third chapter, I explicate how education focused on labor market competitiveness constraints schools' role as a social infrastructure.

Socio-economic relations, in their complexity, cannot be contained by economic theory and they should not be truncated by it. My counterproposition is to develop contextual vocabularies to describe them. Thus, diversity of socio-economic relations can be acknowledged, and ethics can enter the discussion. By doing this I foreground not "the real" life struggling against an abstract, dis-embedding, mechanistic force, but a conflict of purposes. Which of them should be preferred: efficiency or self-governance (Chapter 1), profit or care (Chapter 2), individual social mobility or community's wellbeing (Chapter 3), needs to be a subject of a debate, not a decision outsourced to God, Nature, or the Economy. This epistemic position draws from pragmatism and feminist critique of political economy to which I now turn.

Redescribing the economy to make room for hope

Pragmatism and feminist critique of political economy

Pragmatic philosophy has informed this research in two ways. First, it helped me think about what I am claiming as a researcher. Disenchanted with the metaphor of theory as correspondence with an object, I opted for an instrumental approach, that is treating a theory as a tool (most developed in the third chapter). Second, pragmatism helped me clarify the normative and ethical aspects of theory, and, I hope, remain honest and critical about my allegiances and injunctions. I believe that both these contributions of pragmatism could be fruitfully combined with the feminist critique of political economy. Below I briefly discuss how.

A pragmatic inquiry denounces naïve realism and aims not for a single Truth but utility (Rorty, 1999). Instead of treating a theory as a mirror of reality, pragmatist handles it as a tool or a key to a lock (de Waal, 2022), and there "are as many different useful tools as there are purposes to be served" (Rorty, 1999, p. 54). Therefore no description of an object is more "real" than any other, nor any description captures the relation of an object with itself, that is its essence (Rorty, 1999). Yet, some descriptions are better than others in helping achieve some human purpose (Rorty, 1999).

There may be no intrinsic nature of reality, but causal pressures matter. They will be "described in different ways at different times and for different purposes, but they are pressures none the less" (Rorty, 1991, p. 33). Whether a world is made of atoms or it is just a convenient fiction is not crucial. What is consequential, is that this conceptualization helped accomplish something people, at some point in time, deemed important, which other descriptions could not do.

Rorty suggests that, with the above in mind, we should replace the task of justifying the status quo by referring to an unchanging structure "with the task of replacing an unsatisfactory present with a more satisfactory future, thus replacing certainty with hope" (1998, p. 32). In this, we shift towards meliorism and imagination, away from the reassurance of the past, especially the past posed as rooted in something eternal (Rorty, 1999). That one should replace knowledge by hope is to say "that one should stop worrying about whether what one believes is well grounded and start worrying about whether one has been imaginative enough to think up interesting alternatives to one's present beliefs" (Rorty, 1998, p. 34).

After Rorty, I refer to looking for alternatives to one's beliefs, or vocabularies as he calls them, as redescription. Redescription is not teleological in a sense that we move towards a predefined goal, be it moral or economic progress. Redescription is local, if not personal, for it is a weighing of our contingent inherited vocabularies against alternatives in an attempt to achieve some local or personal purpose. This, for Rorty, is a struggle for autonomy. Not autonomy from culture, world, or community, but autonomy from our inherited beliefs. This, I argue, could be usefully employed to aid the feminist critique of political economy which struggles to work against or beyond the hegemonic discourses of capitalism and economics (Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006, 2014) and wants to bring the diversity of socio-economic practices to the fore.

The pantheon of economic metaphors is the vocabulary of capitalocentrism, that is positioning of all economic identities with reference to capitalism as "fundamentally the same as (or modelled upon) capitalism, or as being deficient or substandard imitations; as being opposite to capitalism; as being the complement of capitalism; as existing in capitalism's space or orbit" (Gibson-Graham, 1996, p. 6, 2014). Capitalocentrism is a significant challenge for scholarship concerned with the complexity and diversity of socio-economic practices.

To disclose their heterogeneity and to open up possibilities for acting on them (Gibson-Graham, 2021) feminist researchers need to first lessen the force of the capitalism's and economics' grip on their thinking. They do so predominantly using deconstruction and reading-for-economic-difference (Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006, 2021).

Reading for difference is a method of drawing out "the counter narratives and the possibilities already existing within the present, which offer an alternative" to capitalist norms (Wynne-Jones, 2014, p. 149). The notion "alternative" presupposes a relation of difference to the hegemonic discourse and so is tainted by it. While it may be seen as a problem, I do not think that it is possible to escape it. We happened to inherit the capitalist and economic vocabulary because of living in specific times and places. But once we acknowledge their contingency and lack of roots in eternal structures, we can seek to get out from underneath them by trying new vocabularies, or put otherwise, we can attempt redescriptions (Frazier, 2006).

By changing the way we describe subjects, we may be able to do different things with them (to an extent to which reality will let us), and to achieve what the inherited

dominant vocabularies might have hitherto excluded. Redescription is thus a search for an always-contingent autonomy (or agency as J.K. Gibson-Graham would put it, (see, Gibson-Graham, 2021, p. 461)). It can be successful if one is able to find a more attractive language and with it a different way of life (Frazier, 2006). The new glossary to be useful and actionable, to be emancipatory in its consequences (Gillespie et al., 2024), unlike the economistic discourse, should speak not of the economy as an ultimate reality but of diverse economies as sites of ethical practices (Gibson-Graham, 2021).

Therefore, in my research I tried to conduct reading-for-economic difference as exercises in redescription. I did not perform a deconstruction of the dominant discourses or solely argued against them (so no iconoclasm). I acknowledged their contingency (Rorty, 1989), spelled out their consequences and focused on reframing the problematic situations I studied: resisting centralization, protesting closures of postal offices and struggling against economization of education. This was a strategy of "changing the subject, rather than granting the objector his choice of weapons and terrain by meeting his criticisms head-on" (Rorty, 1989, p. 44), and a new addition to the toolkit of feminist economic geographers wrestling with capitalocentrism. For example, one can argue that maintaining rural postal offices is unwise because they generates losses, that they should be substituted by automated lockers and devices. Those who advance such propositions speak to the shareholders of Poste Italiane. My reply is that the role of rural postal office is not to make money but to serve local communities, who are my audience (together with fellow scholars). The resolution of this tension is not to weigh profit against local wellbeing. This is an impossible equation. The resolution can, I believe, only be made by making these two purposes explicit and trying to enlarge the audience of whichever purpose one supports. As a researcher I can only describe what the economistic discourse overlooked and then make it part of some few conversations in which I try to convince some audiences.

This is more modest and less dramatic an approach to inquiry than discovering the Truth and proposing replicable theories. Some would accuse it of partisanship. But there is no non-partisan social theory, no God's perspective from which to write. The best we can to do is to make our allegiances known and keep a critical distance from them. This makes the ethical aspect of socio-economic research salient. If we only obey the dictates of the economic theory ethics is reduced to prudence. By foregrounding the

conflict of incompatible purposes and the involved audiences, we can start a debate about morality (Rorty, 1999).

The above discussion explains my epistemic position which underpinned all the chapters. In some, like the first, it is less explicit but remains important. In others, especially the second, it is more developed. In the next section I move from the philosophical concerns to research design and the structure of the dissertation.

Research design

Central argument

This dissertation is concerned with the variety of socio-economic practices present in public services and negative consequences of attempts at foreclosing them with economistic discourses. Its goal is to foreground the resistance of public servants to such processes and highlight the importance of their work to the communities they serve - importance to which economic theory is usually oblivious.

Following Gibson-Graham (1996) I attempt to undermine three instances of economic representation (of municipal water services, of postal services, of education) and generate three vocabularies of economic difference. Each chapter entails two motions: a critique of certain a relation between conventional economic reasoning and its object and an analysis of the recalcitrance of these objects to said economic reasoning. My key claim is that economistic renderings of public services, which inform policies and regulations, are unable to contain the multitude of purposes public services have. What is more, I show that imposition of unifying and reductive economistic concepts of public services comprises their potential to benefit the citizens.

But how does such imposition happen? This dissertation is inspired by feminist critique of political economy in which the performative aspect of economistic discourse plays an important role (Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006). However, it is Timothy Mitchell (Mitchell, 2005, 2008) who offers perhaps the most convincing excavation of such performativity and from his work I drew. Mitchell (2005, p.318) argues that while the discipline of economics seems abstract and "almost indifferent to the practical world of everyday economic calculation", economists participated in producing their object of analysis, that is the economy (or in my case, public services). The economy is a recent creation built out of projects of what Latour (1987, p.251) calls "metrology" – the

"gigantic enterprise to make of the outside a world inside which facts (…) can survive". Examples of such "metrological projects" analyzed by Mitchell (2005, 2008) are Thomas Edison's efforts to create a market for energy (mainly by a way of patenting, lobbying and cost accounting) and Peru's program of granting land titles to the dwellers of informal urban neighborhoods. That policy intended but failed to turn poor Peruvians into credit-worthy asset owners. However, an alleged side-effect of it - an increased propensity to work (which Mitchell (2005) debunks) – became one of the most celebrated examples of the unleashing of a capitalist spirit through property rights. Importantly for my argument, this economistic explanation stopped the conversation about what actually happened.

I believe that by attending to the economistic discourse, to its incarnation in a form of policies and tools, and to the resistance or avoidance thereof one can grasp the economic diversity that is subdued on the political and theoretical levels but actually surviving. For instance, in the case of postal services, their regulation by the state and by corporations is in a symbiotic relation with the work of economists. Most renowned postal and regulation economists liaise with managers of postal providers for data acquisition, jointly conduct research, and attend conferences where academics, policymakers and industry consultants participate. The conventional accounts and regulation of postal services is built on the economistic vocabulary: pricing, efficiency, networks, etc. However, they are partial representations of the lived reality of a postal office, blind to the purposes which economic theory precludes: care, sociality, variety, etc. Together with such new vocabularies, new possibilities shall arise, and what was delegated to the abstract economic realm can be politicized (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

Conceptual framework

Two categories are crucial for this dissertation: economistic reasoning and public services. In this section I clarify how they were used.

I am interested in how the economistic reasoning, which draws form neo-classical economics and its positivist epistemology, informs policies and regulations of public services. Mainstream economics poses as an objective discipline, or as based on natural propensities of people (as with Adam Smith's propensity to truck and barter), and claims to exclude normative value judgments, or in my parlance - to be void of intrinsic purposes. Below, I quote Hill (1983, p. 4) who exposed this issue already in the 1980s (and who also advocated for pragmatism in economics, but to little avail):

> First of all, when positive economists attempt to exclude normative value judgments from scientific economics, they are seeking to achieve an impossible objective, because positive economic theory is saturated with implicit normative value judgments which cannot be separated from the theory. The competitive model implies that competition is good, but monopoly is bad. Equilibrium analysis implies that a condition of equilibrium is better than disequilibrium. Most growth theories imply that economic growth and development are affirmative values, while economic stagnation is a disvalue. Macroeconomic analysis implies that full employment and price stability are good normative values, but that unemployment and price inflation are bad normative values. In a similar manner, microeconomic analysis implies that efficiency is desirable and good, but that waste is undesirable and bad.
>
> To deny the existence of these and other implicit normative values and value judgments is questionable intellectual integrity; to refuse to be accountable for implicit values and judgments is questionable moral responsibility. It is my firm belief that all economic analysis should be based on a valid theory of normative value. But it is also my conviction that every economist should state his theory explicitly and assume full moral responsibility for the values and judgments that he derives from it.

I concur with Hill (1983), especially considering that behind allegedly mechanistic economic phenomena are vulnerable lives – unemployment is not only a national statistic, it is suffering of people, a small enterprise going bankrupt is someone's life story. Meddling with economic policies is fraught with a risk of harm (DeMartino, 2019). And economists do meddle.

Mitchell (2005, 2008), drawing from Callon (1998), but also Gibson-Graham (1996), argue that economics is not a descriptive discipline but one that actively participates "in the per-formation of the worlds to which it belongs, by helping to set up socio-technical agencies/arrangements" (Mitchel, 2005, p. 317). These agencies/arrangements are infused with inherent purposes smuggled in by economistic reasoning which are not, but in a democratic society should be, subjected to a debate.

Therefore, the first group of objects of my analyses is agencies/arrangements or "metrological" projects (Latour, 1987; Mitchell, 2008) in which certain normative modes of calculation are used to render a public service: municipal water service defined as a

tariff, postal office as a profit/loss per node in a postal network, and education as a score in standardized test.

This critique is similar in motivation to that of foundational economy scholars who criticize national accounting regimes and propose to view economy as composed of various spheres which are not easily commensurable (Bentham et al., 2013). And it is from this scholarship which calls for demarcating the foundational economy as infrastructure and essential services of everyday life (Barbera & Jones, 2020; Bentham et al., 2013; Foundational Economy Collective, 2018) that I derive my understanding of public services.

The notion of foundational economy dates back to the 2013's manifesto resulting from the disillusionment of Manchester University scholars with the fetishization of high-tech and knowledge-based sectors in British industrial policies (Bentham et al., 2013). The manifesto has "broke with the idea of a singular economy" (Froud et al., 2020, p. 317) and claimed that there are various economies, or zones of activities, significantly differing from each other. It has elevated the hitherto neglected part of the economy – the goods and services consumed by all regardless of income (Bentham et al., 2013) and location (Morgan, 2021) and essential to the subsistence of the everyday life (Russell et al., 2022).

This foundational sphere is neither a closed nor a universal category but usually comprises utilities, telecommunication and transport networks, retail, housing but also healthcare, childcare, education, and social support (Russell et al., 2022). What unites these various infrastructures and services are their criticality for sustaining a civilized life, necessity of communal provision, and sizable contribution to employment (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018). They are also partially sheltered from international competition and economic cycles. Foundational economy is a heterogenous category but a helpful litmus test for foundationality is asking whether a "contemporary citizen pursuing a modest life" can "realistically choose not consume" a given good or service at all (Hall & Schafran, 2017, p. 5). If not, it is foundational.

Furthermore, "Foundational Economy approach is pluralistic and anti-perfectionist" (Barbera et al., 2018, p. 382), it does not slide into public-private binary and foresees a wide spectrum of ownership structures, including hybrid, communal, mutual, purely private, or purely public – what matters are the business models and social

obligations of foundational entities. It accords with the diversity of socio-economic practices celebrated by feminist scholars.

I treat the three studied public services: municipal water and sewerage services, postal services, and education as examples of foundational services. Because of their foundational character, especially the impossibility of not consuming them, they should not be relegated to the economistic reason with is intrinsic purposes. However, when they were taken over by economistic imperatives, for instance due to privatization or New Public Management policies, their ambiguity posed a challenge – they were simultaneously subjected to, often contradictory, imperatives of commercial performance and social obligation. This ambiguity attracted the attention of e.g., scholars concerned with privatization and remunicipalization of public services (Angel, 2021; Becker et al., 2015; Bel, 2020; Cumbers & Paul, 2022; McDonald, 2018; Pigeon et al., 2012; Strat, 2014) while Laila Smith (2004) aptly cast it as a conflict of private and public ethe. Public services are crucibles in which values of care, social obligation, or serving the community tangle with the notions of efficiency, competition, or control. I presumed that as such, they could be informative about the diversity of economic practices and their survival in late capitalism.

Research questions

The chapter-specific research questions can be grouped in three overarching ones:

1. How does economistic reasoning affect public services?
    a. In the first chapter I analyze the consequences of efficiency-driven centralization of water tariffs for Polish municipalities.
    b. In the second chapter I analyze how conventional postal regulations affect availability and scope of postal services in peripheral areas.
    c. In the third chapter I analyze factors, many among which are of economic provenance, which constrain the capacity of schools to serve as social infrastructure.

2. What does the economistic reasoning miss in it is rendering of public services?
    a. In the first chapter I ask what the economistic rendering of municipal water tariffs seeks to depoliticize, i.e., the infringement by the state of the constitutional right of Polish municipalities to self-govern.

b. In the second chapter I describe the emotional and caring role of rural postmasters eluded by economic analysis and regulations.
c. In the third chapter I show that schools would benefit from being place-based instead of focusing on competition in standardized educational achievement.

3. How do public servants resist subjugating their work to the economistic reasoning?
    a. In the this first chapter I describe how Polish local governments and their allies fought the state's centralization of tariffs via, among others, protests and judicial action.
    b. In the second chapter I describe how rural postmasters provide services to their patrons which exceed their official job descriptions.
    c. In the third chapter I describe how teachers try to provide place-based education along with the standardized one focused on labor market competitiveness.

Methods

Each chapter employed a tailored set of methods which are discussed in detail later. In this introductory section I highlight the overarching logic behind them.

What does espousing pragmatic epistemology mean for research methods? Pragmatic perspective on knowledge "roots ideas in their geo-historical context, (…) understands them in relation to their application" i.e., instrumentally, and "pays close attention to the collective communicative practice through which they are generated" (Wills & Lake, 2020, p. 24). Each chapter deals with two sorts of such ideas – economistic renderings of selected public services, and the perspectives of public servants and patrons. Each chapter is based on independent fieldwork and required two types of inquiries with appropriate methods. Their design can be characterized as exploratory and convergent multi-method.

To trace the economistic renderings of the services I conducted desk research and archival research, usually entailing analysis of applied and grey literature and legislation. To understand the perspective of public servants and patrons, I used qualitative methods

such as semi-structured interviews (69[3] in total), participant observation, workshops, participatory action research, photo-voice, and surveys. In each chapter these methods were held together by different approach: in the first chapter it was policy-instrument analysis (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007), in the second - reading-for-economic difference (Gibson-Graham, 2021), while in the third - participatory-action research.

Every inquiry was designed to be useful to the research participants, whose involvement was most substantial in the third chapter based on a participatory action research. This means that with every interview I asked the participants what they deemed important, what should be analysed according to them and what could help them. After the end of each study participants received summaries from me (some of which they published in media). Thus, research design evolved throughout the fieldwork.

What is more, to remain critical about my own positionality I reflected on my moral and political prejudgments related to each study. I did so by asking a fellow researcher to conduct with me semi-structured interviews aimed at grasping these prejudgements, before and after each fieldwork (save for the third chapter where it was me who interviewed key research participants about their prejudgments) (this strategy was inspired by Maxwell et al., 2020).

The cases were selected on the basis of their capacity to respond to specific gaps in the literature and because they offered problematic situations conducive to analysis. The first chapter brings the hitherto neglected geography of Eastern Europe to the debates of new municipalism, radical democracy and water remunicipalization. The conflict of local governments and the right-wing state proved an informative moment for this sort of analysis. The second chapter provides an analysis of postal services which have not been studied by economic geographers and foundational economy scholars. Importantly, Italy is a country which has one of the largest networks of postal offices in Europe. Yet, rural postal offices are always at a risk of closure, especially when new rounds of privatization of Poste Italiane are contemplated. Finally, for the third chapter I decided to work with a school which noticed its progressive disembedding from the local context and wondered what can be done about it – this was a unique opportunity for a participatory action research about schools' role as social infrastructure. What links these cases is their foundational character, resistance of public servants to certain regulations, and their

[3] 54 interviews were conducted by me personally; 15 interviews were conducted by students who used interview guides prepared by me (Chapter 3).

peripherality and semi-alterity, which, as I explain later, is conducive to the survival of socio-economic practices non-conforming to the economistic reasoning.

Structure of the dissertation & its contributions

This dissertation comprises three stand-alone chapters, each followed by a bibliography while all appendices are collated after the main body of the text.

Every chapter is a study of a tension between the economic imperatives and socio-economic practices which resist or evade them. However, writing an article-based dissertation is like sewing a quilt using moving pieces of fabric (especially when the articles have gone through journal review process). The above overarching gist informed them and can be traced in them, but each has shifted toward various directions: first moved toward new municipalism and self-governance, second and third toward social infrastructure.

While each chapter contributes to specific debates within which it was conceived, here I reflect on two threads that connect them: public service as source of hope and peripherality as a source of distance - both conducive to imagining alternatives to the conventional economic vocabulary of public services.

Public services as a source of hope

I am interested in how public services are involved in imagining the economic relations anew. This topic, while touched upon by foundational economy, is rarely of interest to critical economic geographers and feminist scholars concerned with diversity of economic practices. I reiterate that to me public services are crucibles in which values of care, social obligation, or serving the community tangle with notions of efficiency, competition, or control. I presumed that as such, they could be informative about the variety of economic practices and their survival in late capitalism.

In the first chapter I studied the conflict between Polish local governments and the right-wing state which attempted an unconstitutional centralization of water tariffs. The policy-instrument analysis revealed that the state bureaucracy and politicians referred to economistic arguments, primarily, of inefficiency, to implement centralization. The local governments resisted, protested, fought back in court and did not let the state depoliticize the real stake of the conflict – i.e., limiting the discretionary power of municipalities. That discursive battle was especially difficult because the allegation of

inefficiency is inherently moral and unifying in a sense that it applies to all municipalities (i.e., every municipality should be efficient, every process should be efficient). The counter-narrative was much more complex because local water services differ as they depend on local environment and infrastructures, and because they serve different purposes in each city. While the main goal is to supply water, some municipal companies support local sport teams, some engage in ecological education, others provide vocational training to students.

The contribution of this chapter is empirical and conceptual. First of all, it attends to Eastern Europe which is nearly absent in studies of water remunicipalization and new municipalism (which informed the self-governance strand of that work). Secondly, it showed, contrary to most new municipalist debates, that local government does not have to be a barrier, but can be a catalyst of radical local democracy.

As with the first chapter, the second was also inspired by a conflict between local governments and the state. This time it were Italian mayors protesting against closures of rural postal offices. When I started the literature review, I realized that postal services are absent in economic geography and have not been studied by foundational economy scholars. The only discipline they featured in as important topic were regulatory economics which conceptualized postal offices as revenues and costs of nodes in a postal network and a necessary unprofitable burden. But it did not explain why they were so important to peripheral communities.

During the ethnographic fieldwork I quickly noticed the vitality of rural postal offices and the strength of relations between postmasters and patrons, even if these patrons were only few. What the postal regulation missed is the emotional and caring work of the postmasters and their role in abating isolation, improving wellbeing and providing a sense of citizenship to the rural communities. Postal office is much more than a balance sheet; it is a lifeline.

Finally, in the third chapter, I show how teachers of a high school struggle against reducing education to "molding of students into education machines" focused on individual achievement and labor market competitiveness. While being pressured by parents, regulations and the market to comply and to maximize students' scores in standardized tests, the faculty tries to make education more place-sensitive and committed to the local community. They still believe that students can be instructed to become responsible citizens, not only competitive workers. The contribution of this chapter is

again of empirical and conceptual nature. On a basis of an intense and long fieldwork this detailed study of a high school in Poland qualifies the theory of school as social infrastructure proposed by Klinenberg (2018).

These three instances of the resistance of public servants to the encroachment of their work by the economic logic are attempts at getting out from underneath the imposed vocabulary and finding a new one, and with it a different form of life (Frazier, 2006). In the mainstream economic discourse the future is foreclosed in a homogenizing trajectory, but for them the future is open and constructed daily. Thus public servants replace certainty for hope (Lester, 2022; Rorty, 1998).

Peripherality as a source of distance

An important factor which aided these struggles is peripherality. For the Global North, Poland which I studied in the first and the third chapter, as the entire Eastern Europe, is a semiperiphery – "it is a place far enough for outlandish ideas to emerge without affecting the West and close enough to import them if proved interesting" (Cieślak, 2025, p. 22; Ost, 2018). To describe this ambiguous position I refer to it as the Global East – the former Soviet Union and parts of Central and Eastern Europe that experienced state socialism (Sovová et al., 2025) – which according to Cima & Sovová (2022) is an area eluded by the Global North and the Global South and marginalized in human geography. Müller (2020, p. 748) argues that Global East is "not quite rich, but neither poor; not just colony, but neither just colonizer". It falls "between the cracks" of the North and the South and occupies an interstitial position (Müller, 2020, p. 735). This position should not, however, be discarded as something to transition from but embraced as an informative, liminal epistemic space (Müller, 2020).

Thinking with the Global East can unsettle the rich and poor, powerful and powerless binarities of the hemispheric architecture of knowledge (Müller, 2020) and help notice the diversity of socio-economic practices present in the Global East which is too often "written out and reduced to a caricature of a monotonous 'grey place'" (Müller, 2020, p. 742).

The villages of the central Apennines, which I studied in the second chapter, share with the Global East the liminal condition of semi-alterity. Located in the so-called inner periphery of Italy, they are not far from Rome, yet territorial policies portray them as

remote places of decline and in need of reinventing themselves (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2014).

Capitalism, while affecting the distant and peripheral geographies, is closely linked to urbanization and cities (see, e.g., Rossi, 2017). So is the economistic language. My impression is that the peripheral position of both, Polish municipal companies and schools, and Italian rural postal offices, spared them from the total subjugation to economic reasoning.

Poland's systemic transition from socialism to capitalism is often depicted as progress towards the Western model. But depicting this as a simple sequence is misleading because:

> "They do not fully supersede each other, rather they form overlapping layers. Even though on the legal and economic levels, the break between socialism and post-socialism may seem sharp, socialism was a lived experience of prolonged influence. It did not simply dissipate after the fall of the Berlin wall. Its legacy still affects the cultural and political realms, it is 'a complex and heterogenous repository of feelings' Jelača & Lugarić, 2018, p. 6)" (Cieślak, 2025, p. 23).

The experience and legacy of socialism and opposition to it provided mayors, municipal company employees and teachers whom I interviewed with vocabulary that is not easily subdued by the economic discourse. This vocabulary, especially the idea of self-governance which should not be rescinded to the state or the market, remains a source of their motivation and hope.

The rural postal offices in turn, as unprofitable and remote, have been spared from the commercial pressures their urban counterparts endure. Postal offices in the Gran Sasso area do not have the ticketing system nor is time a postmaster spends with each patron monitored. This is a condition of possibility for the caring and emotional work of the postmasters, a work almost inexistent in the urban offices.

By being located in peripheries and remaining beyond the limelight, these non-economistic dispositions and socio-economic practices had a higher chance of survival. Their distance from capitalist epicenters enabled me to observe and study them.

Each chapter tells its own story, but their overarching message is that lived reality of public services comprises multiple purposes, values and related practices: employees of municipal water companies, postmasters and teachers need autonomy; they care for residents, patrons and students and are emotionally invested in their work. When

legislating these services and contemplating business models and modes of provision these purposes need to made part of a debate and not be overridden by notions such as efficiency. Efficiency has no intrinsic value despite the clout it commands among economists. It is only someone's purpose.

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Chapter 1 - Local self-government against the state: resistance of Polish municipalities to creeping centralization

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Abstract

Research on the relation between cities and democracy focuses on the city as an urban form and as a democratic imaginary generative of radical democratic practices. Established institutions of local and state government are often construed as barriers to such practices. There is a need to explore possible forms of territorial government bodies and modes of governance that could be supportive to them instead. This paper traces the revival of local self-government in Poland as an emancipatory strategy against the communist regime and analyzes its recent resistance to the democratic backsliding of the authoritarian central government. By way of historical ontology and policy instrument analysis it shows that appropriately designed institutions of local government can spur democratic practices, and, if given time, these in turn can engender a robust culture of self-governance. It proposes that local self-government envisioned by Polish anti-communist opposition prefigures institutions supportive to radical urban democracy.

Keywords: new municipalism, Eastern Europe, democratic backsliding, local government, municipal water

Introduction

The relation between city and democracy seems as revered as it is perplexing. It has been extensively written about, yet it poses ever newer questions. Beveridge and Koch (2023, p. 1) even call it "conceptually and empirically underdeveloped". The latest ventures probing that relation abound: from new municipalism (Thompson 2021; Russell, Milburn, and Heron 2022; Russell 2019; Arpini et al. 2022; Angel 2021; Janoschka and Mota 2021; Bertolin and Salone 2024), through the broader strand of works on urban democracy (Beveridge & Koch, 2023; Coşkun et al., 2024; Frick, 2023), to reflection on the cities' role in resisting authoritarian states (Buzogány & Spöri, 2024; Swyngedouw, 2024). Despite this extensive coverage, there still are, as Beveridge and Koch (2023) rightly suggest, underexplored aspects of urban democracy.

With a historical and empirical inquiry into the revival of local self-government in post-communist Poland and a recent struggle of Polish municipalities against authoritarianism, this work addresses two gaps in the extant literature on cities and democracy. The first gap is a dearth of critical and constructive assessments of the role local government can play in fostering urban democracy, resulting from the focus on the urban form and practices (see, e.g., Beveridge & Koch, 2023) and urban activism (see, e.g., Milan, 2022; Russell, 2019). For reasons discussed later, local government is often construed as a barrier to radical forms of urban democracy. There is a need to reflect on how this and other tiers of territorial government could be "hacked" or reimagined to instead become supportive to them (Beveridge & Koch, 2023; Russell, 2019).

The second gap pertains to the factors and mechanisms behind democratic resistance of cities to authoritarian states. To understand them, it is helpful to problematize the notion of scale, especially as a mechanism of capture (Isin, 2007). New municipalist and adjacent literature cover the cases of successful (Russell, 2019) or failed (Angel 2021; Bertolin and Salone 2024) attempts of bottom-up initiatives, usually opposing local, and sometimes state, governments or international capital (Paul & Cumbers, 2021). These studies have a distinctive geography – they come from the Global North: UK (see, e.g., Russell, Milburn, and Heron 2022), US (e.g. Cooperation Jackson), Spain (see, e.g., Fernández-Martínez, García-Espín, and Alarcón 2023; Russell 2019; Angel 2021) and South America (see, e.g., Arpini et al., 2022; Toro & Orozco, 2023), a geography of strongly centralized or regionalized systems of government underpinned by a vertical understanding of scales. Yet, in Eastern Europe there is a different dynamic and

scalar relations which speak to the cities and democracy literature and, according to Buzogány & Spöri (2024), beg further exploration – of liberal cities, with strong autonomy, resisting authoritarian central governments. Eastern Europe has been featured in new municipalist literature only once, by Chiara Milan (2022), who hinted at the resonance of the Yugoslav socialist self-management with modern new municipalist movements in Zagreb and Belgrade. This paper investigates further that trail of Eastern European self-government. Its main wager is that appropriately designed institutions of local government can spur local democratic practices, and, if given time, these in turn can engender a robust culture of self-governance. Furthermore, such culture, fueled by a memory of resistance to the totalitarian regime and protected by legal safeguards, can to a considerable degree impregnate local self-government against authoritarianism.

In what follows I firstly review the literature on cities and democracy. Then I discuss the extant works on the resistance of cities to democratic backsliding (O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2022; Buzogány and Spöri 2024; Blauberger et al. 2025). The subsequent section charts the research strategy. In the fourth step I trace the view of self-governing civil society particular to the Eastern European opposition to communism and explain how it was reflected in the design of the legislation which brought Polish local self-government back to life after a fifty-years long hiatus. In the fifth section I analyze, using a policy instrument approach (Kassim & Le Galès, 2010; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007), the resistance of Polish municipalities to a creeping centralization and their clash with the state over the right to set municipal water tariffs. Finally, I discuss how this Eastern European gaze could inform broader city-democracy and new municipalist debates and conclude.

Does seeing democracy like a city have to cause institutional myopia?

In this section I review the city and democracy literature. In doing so, I focus on how it construes local government and point to some constraining rigidities.

In their recent work Beveridge and Koch (2023) draw a line between a conventional conceptualization of democracy characteristic of political sciences which links democratic engagement with interest formation among various societal groups and seeing democracy like a city. The latter perspective, echoing Lefebvrian right to the city (Harvey, 2008), is characteristic of new municipalism and underscores "the materiality of the urban as an infrastructure of democratic engagement" (Beveridge and Koch 2023,

p. 14). From this perspective, urban is both a source and a stake of democratic struggles. It is less concerned with institutions "of power delegation" than with practices of sustaining and influencing the urban habitat (Beveridge and Koch 2023, p. 14). This city lens magnifies variegated place-specific problems and people trying to cope with them to which the state's purview is usually oblivious. Its core concern is the ability of urbanites to "influence the world (they) inhabit" (Beveridge and Koch 2023, p. 14). This is a practice-based idea of democracy as a collective experimental problem solving, "not exhausted by institutionalized procedure" of representative democracy (Frick 2023, p. 12). In this reading, the city's spatiality is a nontrivial factor for the agglomeration of heterogenous people augments the chances of having common goals and conflicts that need to be negotiated, put otherwise – politics of proximity (Roth et al. 2023).

With the increasing doubt in the state-centered democracy (Beveridge & Koch, 2023), initiatives falling within the above view of radical urban democracy are celebrated as hopeful harbingers of a possible socio-economic transformation (Beveridge and Koch 2023; Roth, Russell, and Thompson 2023; Russell 2019). This is the main tenet of the new municipalist literature. New municipalism understood as "democratic autonomy of municipalities (…) over political and economic life" (Thompson 2021, p. 317) encompasses initiatives, proliferating as a response to post-2008 neoliberal austerity (Arpini et al., 2022), such as incubation of cooperatives and social enterprises, local forums, progressive procurement, socializing finance (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017), and remunicipalization of public services (Blanco et al., 2019). Their core principle is the "redistribution of economic and political decision-making" to the citizens and favoring open, participatory, horizontal governance (Thompson 2021, p. 323). The early proponent of libertarian municipalism Murray Bookchin argued that it was through the local scale that the political, understood as "a participatory dimension of societal life and the activity of an entire community", can begin to be reconstituted through the "municipal association of people reinforced by its own economic power" (Bookchin 1992, p. 227, p. 245). What warrants the adjective new is "a newly-politicized and radical reformist orientation towards the state" in employing urban over nation-state logics (Thompson 2021, p. 318). What differentiates this current from earlier radical municipal movements, such as municipal socialism, are "more proactive, contentious, expansive programs for transformation of state/capitalist social relations" (Thompson 2021, p. 318).

City as a place, but especially as "a democratic imaginary" and "an object of struggle and democratic ambition", is generative of political organizations and demands (Beissinger 2022; Beveridge and Koch 2023, p. 8). As an inhabited space, body social, and as an idea, body politic, it is conducive to "experiments in collective self-rule" like the new municipalist initiatives mentioned above. On that account, the traditional institutions of politics are sidelined, yet not entirely moved out of the picture. This does not mean that existing government bodies should not be engaged but rather to "disaggregate them both conceptually and in practice, focusing on those aspects that can be harnessed, hacked and recombined into new institutional forms and processes" (Russell et al. 2023, p. 2136). Along that line, Beveridge and Koch (2023, p. 8) argue that once we start seeing democracy like a city, we will be forced to ask "how state-embedded forms of democratic action and institutions might foster or hamper urban ways of self-organization and self-government". Yet, in the extant literature there is a conspicuous lack of answers to this question. Importantly, the rare mentions of "hacking" and "imagining" are either brief moments of institutional capture or bottom-up creation, or are purely aspirational, and they speak of possible institutions to come.

The tension between unruly, emancipatory urban realm and established institutions of governance allegedly unable to accommodate it, as well as the futuristic outlook towards a possible transformation prefigured by the instances of radical urban democracy, can be traced in what Giovannini and Griggs (2024) call a dichotomy of the local. On the one hand, as Barnett (2020) stresses, local is appealing in its openness, in what it may be. It is usually a hopeful "local to come" that can save us if only we could find a way to unleash the good in it (Giovannini and Griggs 2024, p. 993). It is premised on the variegated emancipatory instances, the bottom-up constructs of the local characteristic of new municipalism. On the other hand, the local here and now seems to be a terribly "constrained or fixed institutional space of government" (Giovannini and Griggs 2024, p. 993). According to Giovannini and Griggs (2024, p. 993), the overarching narrative of the marginality of local government has unfortunately discouraged inquiries into "its capabilities to lead processes of local democratic transformation and resistance".

Despite the repeated calls for exploring such capabilities (Russell 2019; Roth, Russell, and Thompson 2023), the new municipalist and city and democracy research is characterized by a sort of local government phobia; it is "perceived as part of the problem" (Pill 2024, p. 1001; Barnett 2020) rather than an ally. That skepticism is warranted

because local government or state institutions do often compromise new municipalist projects (Angel, 2021; see, e.g., Bertolin & Salone, 2024). They can be temporarily captured, as in the case of Barcelona en Comú, and bended towards the demos (Russell, 2019), yet they seem to remain programmed for inhospitality towards radical democracy. What is more, institutions, as an entry point for researching democracy, is a conventional approach which Beveridge and Koch (2023), in their attempt to elevate the informal urban democratic practices, argue against. Importantly, they warn not to treat those established institutions as birthplaces of democratic practices. Instead, they should be treated as an "outcome of democratic struggles and the subject of constant contest" (Beveridge and Koch 2023, p. 15). I propose that this division of institutions and practices, useful as it may be, should be nuanced. In practice, located in a certain moment and space, formal institutions can be both an outcome of the past and a source of new democratic struggles (or indeed a constraint thereof).

Consequently, what I suggest is to attend to the cases where these allegedly opposing worlds of radical urban democracy and institutions of local governance are, however imperfectly, fused. There are two important aspects to this fusion. The first is how local governance is conceptualized. It may be created through state-level legislation, but it does not have to be an emanation of the state at a given point in time. Secondly, the very idea of the city as a democratic boon can be espoused by local government, not in a sense of cooptation but as a genuine value.

Importance of the critique of the scalar thought for "hacking" local government

To rethink the role of local government in urban democracy, as compared to state-centered democracy, it is necessary to problematize the scalar thought behind the relevant city-state relations. Purcell (2006) warned that there is nothing inherently democratic in the local scale and that it should not be privileged by political theory, but Frick (2023, p. 10) claims that this "allegation of the 'local trap'" should be problematized by a more complex understanding of the complementarity of scales which I attempt here. In doing so, I follow Isin (2007) and refer to scale in a double sense – as a virtual idea and as an actual juridico-political mechanism of capture. Ultimately, I want to contrast the hierarchical understanding of scales, underpinning most of new municipalist thinking, with a horizontal understanding of scales present in the Polish system of territorial governance. What is more, I suggest that in this horizontal view lays a promise of

a citizenship beyond the state that new municipalism seeks (Russell 2019; Roth, Russell, and Thompson 2023). The difference between the vertical and horizontal perspectives can be sensed in the discrepancy of Beveridge's and Koch's (2023, p. 15) claim that "the city might be the ground where the state aims to assert its sovereignty and power, and where urban democracy is always caught in the tension between this claim for sovereignty and the claim for self-rule" and an opinion of an employee of a Polish regional Marshal's Office, who, offended by an insinuation that there are levels of government in which the state is above the municipality, told me "State, region and city all happen in the same place and they do different things".

The problem of scale is fundamental for new municipalism. If its outlook is a broader socio-economic transformation, to which local or urban is a strategic entry point (Russell 2019; Roth, Russell, and Thompson 2023), the question arises whether proximity and unruliness of the local can serve to create a political scale unlike the existing ones. There seems to be a need, although not fully articulated, to modify "the local government into something (…) that operates at a different scale" (Russell 2019, p. 1001). However, it is often the hierarchical subordination of the city to the state that compromises new municipalist goals. The ambition of the local or urban to escape the clutches of the state, while still necessarily remaining in the existing nation state systems, seems near impossible.

Isin (2007) suggests, and I concur and will try to empirically show, that (urban) citizenship beyond the state is conceivable if we cease to locate the city "within the state". Vertical scalar thought is consequential because through legal and political means, it has created "a nested and tiered hierarchies with exclusive territorial domains that grounded the formation of legitimate authorities" (Isin 2007, p. 217). As such it can be critiqued but cannot be easily abandoned (Isin, 2007; Marston et al., 2005) as new municipalists learned and so did the Law & Justice (L&J) party trying to override municipal autonomy in Poland. In the latter case discussed below, national scale was weaponized as an apparatus of capture in an attempt to contain and control the city. This in turn was contested by local self-governments as undemocratic.

Scalar thought operates via symbols which stabilize and incorporate virtual entities of state and city: borders, controls, and regulations (Isin, 2007). They have material and affective effects, including instituting of a specific body politic to which one can ascribe legal, but not social, agency (e.g. state wages war) (Isin, 2007). Just as

Beveridge and Koch (2023), so does Isin (2007, p. 217) claim that "(t)he acts of bodies social overflow bodies politic", be it state or city. But while state is solely a virtual space, city is both virtual and actual (Isin, 2007). State has to assert itself via symbols and material practices enacted in a city. To understand how such virtual spaces are instituted, one needs to analyze the power relations which shape bodies politic and social – the "orientations, strategies and technologies as forms of being political" held together by a given scale, and dynamic solidaristic and agonistic relationships (Isin 2007, p. 222) within and between them.

Hierarchical understanding of scales places the state always above the city, as the sole entity endowed with the discretionary power to create other scales (Isin, 2007). Using the Polish case, I wish to demonstrate that a different order, even if imperfect and contested, is possible. That order is not easily maintained. It is, as Beveridge and Koch (2023, p. 15) would say, a "subject of constant contest". Its contours, forged during the Poland's transition from communism to democracy, partially inspired by the Yugoslav self-management (Radomski, 2017) mentioned by Milan (2022), are most evident once challenged. The cases of Eastern European cities resisting democratic backsliding of their respective states show that acutely. Polish local self-government and state government are independent bodies politic operating within the same national borders, while the ambition of the post-communist reformers was to blur the boundaries between the local self-government's body politic and body social (Radomski, 2017). A contrary vision of local government as an emanation of the state has been rejected during the transition of the 1980s-1990s but its proponents, founders of the L&J party, came to power in 2015.

Cities' resistance to democratic backsliding

Eastern Europe in 2010s experienced a right-wing turn in national elections (Ost, 2018). Victories of Fides in Hungary and L&J in Poland (in 2015 and 2019) have put the region's rapid transition towards liberal democracy on hold. The embrace of right-wing populism quickly ceased to be an exclusively Eastern European phenomenon as attest the UK's Brexit, Donald Trump's election and re-election in the US and electoral outcomes in Austria (Freedom Party's victory in 2024), the Netherlands (Party for Freedom victory in 2023), and Italy (Brothers of Italy victory in 2022).

To solidify their power, parties such as Fides and L&J implemented strategies to limit the possibility of them being overthrown, and to enable a quick seizure of resources,

broadly labeled democratic backsliding (O'Dwyer & Stenberg, 2022). They entailed "undermining the fairness of elections; discretionary use of legal instruments to undermine civil liberties; and restricting the opposition's access to public resources, the media and the judicial system" (O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2022, p. 210; Ost 2018). This weakening of political and civic institutions, tilting the playing field to favor the dominant party, is a form of regime change that may gradually lead to authoritarianism (O'Dwyer & Stenberg, 2022). Most of the analyses of the democratic backsliding focus on the cementing of power on the national level while the capacity of the likes of Fides and L&J to dominate the local level remains an open-question (O'Dwyer & Stenberg, 2022). Fides was able to amend the Hungarian constitution and thus assert its control over municipalities, whereas L&J never had a majority necessary to do it. It had to adopt different means as will be discussed in the empirical section. Yet, the local level, neither in Hungary, nor, especially, in Poland did yield quietly.

Cities can challenge authoritarian state regimes (Anthony & Crenshaw, 2014; Wallace, 2013). They can become a material space for staging anti-authoritarian protests (Beissinger, 2022) such as the Polish Women Strike opposing L&J's abortion legislation, but can also be, as I will try to show, and Buzogány and Spöri (2024) partially did, virtual spaces, bodies politic of strong resistance. Buzogány and Spöri (2024) focused on one form of such resistance, the initiatives of mayors of the Visegrad capitals (Warsaw, Prague, Budapest, Bratislava). They formed a Pact of Free cities, argued in the media against illiberal policies of their states, implemented policies contradicting the central government (e.g. financing in vitro fertilization programs, organizing sexual education in schools, supporting LGBTQ residents) and tried to circumvent the national level in obtaining EU funds. Buzogány and Spöri (2024, p. 18) acknowledge that theirs was just an initial inquiry "into understanding the mechanisms that enable cities to resist democratic backsliding effectively and become strongholds of democracy". There is a need to identify them further. As Buzogány and Spöri (2024), echoing Purcell (2006), warn – there is no automatic link between cities and democracy or resistance to authoritarianism, but it is worth exploring when and how this link proves strong, and this, I argue, is the Polish case. What is more, that link, that which enabled the contestation of authoritarianism is one of the possible forms of local government in which new municipalists could be interested.

Research strategy

To understand the contestation of the increasingly authoritarian state by Polish cities I conducted two analyses. The first traces the emergence of the idea that only through genuine local self-government the communist regime could have been overthrown and charts the regulations which translated this idea into a system of territorial governance established in 1990. In that year a body politic was formed, an institutional, scalar container which was yet to be enlivened by democratic practices. In the second step, using a policy instrument approach (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007), I examine one of many clashes of the matured local government with the state taking place in the 2020s – the centralization of municipal water tariffs.

Methods

Each analysis required a different method. Isin (2007, p. 219) suggests that in order not to be constrained by a scalar thought while studying sites of citizenship, one has to develop a contextual and historical picture of a city and a state as "radically different bodies politic". This ontological understanding of spaces and scales should be less concerned with their geometry or topology, and more with their historical formation (Isin, 2007; Swyngedouw, 2000). Here Ian Hacking's (2002) historical ontology that is "a study of historical formation of objects such as ideas, classes, groups, (…) bodies" and institutions by "social groups and their struggles" (Isin, 2007, p. 219-220) may be helpful. Therefore, in the first step I conducted a historical ontology of Polish local self-government through archival research. I reviewed relevant literature, legislation, accounts of the scholars and politicians involved in the design of the regulations reviving local self-government, and media coverage from 1989 onward. 1989 was the starting date for the media analysis as it was when the first uncensored daily newspaper, "Gazeta Wyborcza", was created to report on the ongoing systemic transition.

For the second analysis I resort to a policy instrument approach as developed by Pierre Lascoumes and Partick Le Galès (2007). The policy instrument I studied was the contested centralization of municipal water tariffs. According to Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007, p. 3), administration is interdependent with domination and "every (policy or administrative) instrument constitutes a condensed form of knowledge about social control and ways of exercising it". What is more, instruments are not neutral devices:

"they produce specific effects, independently of the objective pursued" (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007, p. 3).

This analytical strategy serves to reveal a theorization of the relationship between the governing and the governed underpinning a given instrument. Bodies politic and their respective scales are asserted through material practices and symbolic means (Isin, 2007). These symbols, as well as regulatory measures, have an axiological function of setting out values and interests protected by a relevant body politic which policy instrument analysis can identify (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007).

Finally, as will become acutely evident in the empirical section, for the ruling parties "the debate on instruments may be a useful smokescreen to hide less respectable objectives, to depoliticize fundamentally political issues" which involves repeated referring to alleged neutrality of policy instruments (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007, p. 17).

The policy instrument approach enabled me to map "the (shifting) balance of power between actors" (Kassim and Le Galès 2010, p. 5) – the de jure, and especially, the de facto impact of centralization on the municipal jurisdictional capacity (Noring et al., 2020). The analysis also unveiled what tariff centralization, posed as a technocratic tool, was used to depoliticize (that is, its real stake) – enforcing of a new civic order, a paternalistic state overriding the local self-government, thus profoundly affecting its relations with constituents (see Pill (2024) for the related notion of relational local government).

This analysis entailed desk research and in-depth interviews. I reviewed relevant legislation, parliamentary debates, appeals by municipal, trade and labor associations, rulings of administrative courts, tariff applications and reviews, appeals for prosecutor's oversight of the tariffs' review, controls of the Supreme Audit Office, corporate documentation of selected municipal companies, media commentary, and social media channels of the state regulator. The final corpus comprised 60 documents.

Simultaneously, I conducted 15 in-depth interviews (transcribed and coded thematically using Atlas.ti) with 17 participants (two interviews were dyadic; see Appendix 1 for a partially anonymized list of interviewees). Participants were sampled to represent all institutions involved in the conflict over the tariffs: directors, vice-directors and high-level managers of municipal and private water and sewerage (w&s) companies, vice-mayors, local government executives responsible for municipal companies, marshal

of the West Pomerania region, senator and the president of Association of Polish Cities, president of the Solidarity regional labor union, attorneys in law and tariffs' experts. The only institution which refused to participate was the state regulator (personal decision of its vice-director overseeing the tariffs' review). Regulator's perspective had to be inferred from its institutional speech (media, press conferences, administrative decisions, debates with other involved actors).

Interviews were conducted in June and July 2023, in-person (6), online or via a phone (8) and lasted from 30 minutes to two hours, one interview was in a written form. Five municipal w&s companies studied individually were sampled to represent all ownership types (fully municipal, fully private, mixed ownership) and have different spatial coverage (rural areas, small and large cities).

Revival of Polish local self-government

Andrew Arato (1981a, p. 5) writing in the 1980s about the Polish opposition to communism saw in it a struggle for a new form of social integration which would favor "the autonomy of society from both the state and the economy", an ambition most modern new municipalist movements would endorse. He asked back in 1981 whether this struggle would recreate the contradictions of civil society in the West, or would it generate something genuinely new, and with it a new meaning of emancipation (Arato, 1981a). For Arato, Solidarity, the labor union under whose banner most of the opposition assembled, was a new social movement "aimed at creating a self-governing society without the repressive presence of the state or market", a harbinger of a revitalized civil society, a vision attractive for the theorists and activists from the West's Left (Ost 2018, p. 34). The highlight of this democratic project was "the astonishing breadth of independent civic activism, in the factories, schools, institutes, and even in the countryside" (Ost 2018, p. 34).

In accounts of the Polish transition such as those of Arato (1981a; 1981b) and Ost (2018) Solidarity, a self-government of workers, is the focus. What they miss is that the revitalized civic society Solidarity envisioned had to assume a new scale, a new body politic liberated from the state. This required tremendous conceptual and legislative work to which we now turn.

Local self-government as a body politic radically different from the state

Poland is a unitary but decentralized state founded on the subsidiarity rule (Constitution of the Republic of Poland, Article 15 1997). At least in principle, Polish municipalities are independent from central and other governments in deciding how they want to meet the needs of the territorial communities they represent. There is no hierarchical subordination.

The terms "municipality" and "local government" need clarification. Polish equivalent of the term "local government", if translated literally, would read "municipal self-government" (henceforth used interchangeably). It reflects the constitutional prerogative that residents form self-governing territorial communities participating in the exercise of public governance in their own name and responsibility. Whenever I refer to a municipality, I mean the residents and the institutions of municipal self-government i.e. elected bodies – councils and mayors. The understanding in which these bodies are an inherent part of a territorial community is important as it was discursively attacked by the state.

Beveridge and Koch (2023, p. 16) argue that political legitimacy is not established through institutions of electoral politics, and that political subjects in urban democracies are not defined "by legal statuses or the idea of a culturally and spatially bounded community" but are emergent. I contend that drawing sharp lines between formal institutions and urban democracy, as described by Beveridge and Koch (2023), is not always helpful. What is more, the design of these institutions should be problematized. They can be intended to stimulate and accommodate urban democracy, as was the Polish case.

Local government bodies, although not without flaws, remain the most trusted public institutions in Poland, and the reform of 1990 which has revived them is posed as the biggest success of the democratic transition by some experts (Swianiewicz, 2014; Sześciło, 2020). How then did they become the Poland's democratic bedrock?

Since the abolition of local governments by the communist party in 1950 until 1990, cities were managed by a monolithic state bureaucracy (Misztal and Misztal 1984). During that period, a group of scholars aligned with the opposition worked on potential changes within this system (Antkowiak, 2011; Regulski, 2003). As their work progressed its purpose became more radical. Instead of incremental amendments, they started emphasizing that only through authentic municipal autonomy and self-government the

totalitarian communist regime could be uprooted (Regulski, 2003). For these reformers, the city was an entry point to transforming the entire state, hence it was an ideology of challenging existing power relations (Beveridge & Koch, 2023).

The skepticism towards a top-down transition through state institutions was rooted in the conviction that for Polish people of the period the state was a foreign, imposed system (Radomski, 2017). Equating of liberation with self-governance was already advanced by some fractions of Polish Underground State (1939-1945) in forms of syndicalism and municipalism (Radomski, 2017).

The reformers were convinced that Polish citizens should not be subjugated by any predefined system of government but instead should be granted the possibility to craft it from the bottom up (Lipowicz, 2009). They believed that local government must be easy to understand for everyone and that it needed to become a catalyst of civic activity. This understanding of self-governance, along with its particular focus on individual dignity and subjectivity, was influenced by the pope John Paul II and the Catholic Church's social doctrine (Lipowicz, 2016).

In 1981 the first document demanding the restoration of local government was presented (Radomski, 2017; Regulski, 2003). According to one of its authors there was a shared belief that "local governments, where possible, should free themselves from all kinds of dependence on central authorities" (Regulski 2003, p. 24). This belief was shaped by the then constraints and social mindset "which construed local governments to be a form of social self-organization oriented against the state, rather than as a public authority acting within state structures" (Regulski 2003, p. 24). This vision required democratic local elections, transferring a major share of state property to municipalities, granting them autonomy in defining the exercise of their responsibilities, and protection by courts while the influence of other tiers of government had to be minimized (Regulski, 2003). Solidarity supported these ideas, especially the full protection of municipalities against the regional and central governments' interventions and their freedom to form associations (Radomski, 2017) but sidelined them as less important than other matters.

In 1980s Poland experienced economic difficulties and social unrest. The Soviet Union loosened its grip during perestroika and Solidarity gained momentum. Finally, the communist government succumbed and agreed to negotiate with the opposition how to reform the country. Note that until then, the communist government tempered any sense of local community. During the negotiations, the communist side was downplaying the

restoration of municipalities and tried to direct the attention to the issues of labor (Lipowicz, 2016; Regulski, 2003). This resistance made the opposition leaders realize that local governments could be an important part of the democratic transition. Finally, the act restoring local governments was passed in 1990 and the first democratic local elections were announced

The reform embodied the abovementioned ideas about the court-protected autonomy of municipalities (Antkowiak, 2011) and brought to live ca. 2,500 of them. They have been endowed with so-called "general responsibility", a vast jurisdictional capacity (Noring et al., 2020), meaning that the scope of municipal activity "extends to all public matters not reserved in laws for other entities" (Regulski 2003, p. 105) and comprises a wide range of duties and services. The "general responsibility" is a consequence of the subsidiarity principle. Municipality is supposed to deal with matters an individual is not capable of handling, the county acts as a subsidiary to a municipality, region to a county and state to all institutions. This hierarchy-in-reverse, which prioritizes the proximity of the government to the citizen, denies any dependence between the types of government for they are only expected to support each other. The scales should be complementary and horizontal.

Throughout the 1990s, despite frequent changes of the central government, mass unemployment, and inflation, local governments were solidifying their position. In 1997 the Constitution has been amended, and key provisions of the 1990 Self-government Act were incorporated in it. It gave municipalities the strongest legal footing possible, and, for some, they started to emerge as a fourth branch of government (legislative, executive, judicial and municipal) (Lipowicz, 2016). During the inter-war period, in the initial debates within the Solidarity and to a lesser degree in the 1990s, there was even an idea of creating a third chamber on top of the parliament and the senate, the Self-Government Chamber (Radomski, 2019). It never materialized, but the concept was used to point to the shortcomings of bicameralism and to limit the influence of political parties over municipal matters (Radomski, 2019). According to Irena Lipowicz (2016), Poland's former Ombudsman, the lack of such a chamber is a democratic deficit.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s local government has been referred to by politicians, new municipalist movements and academics primarily as an enabler of civic participation in the administration, a school of democracy (Swianiewicz, 2014), and a necessary barrier to the omnipotence of the state (Antkowiak, 2011; Regulski, 2003).

Local government was not only expected to be efficiently managing local issues but to activate the attitudes of civic involvement (Sowa, 2011), to transform citizens from observers into participants. Michał Kulesza, one of the authors of the 1990 reform, claimed that "it depends on the self-government today whether a civic society that would control the government structures and protect us from the alienation of the authorities will be developed" (Kulesza 2008, p. 350).

Eight out of ten Poles are willing to cooperate with local authorities in making decisions regarding their communities; however, at least in the 1990s, citizens' ability to shape local affairs was perceived as too small (Regulski, 2003). It seems to have changed, for the recent surveys indicate that citizens think themselves to be able to influence and hold local authorities accountable (Gendźwiłł & Wiszejko-Wierzbicka, 2022). Since 1990 the toolkit of participatory governance has evolved significantly in a twofold manner. There have been few crucial changes in the local government legislation, notably making the mayoral elections direct and obliging municipalities to stream sessions of councils which improved the accountability of local legislative and executive. On the other hand, municipalities have been experimenting with various forms of participation some of which also became centrally legislated, such as participatory budgeting. To influence their municipalities residents can, among others, organize referendums regarding any matter deemed important, use local legislative initiative, local initiative (local government supporting bottom-up community projects with funds and expertise), public consultations, and debates regarding the state of the municipality annual reports. Local governments are also obliged to launch formal procedures of collaboration with non-governmental organizations (Merényi, 2020). At the request of any local civic association, they are required to establish a consultative and advisory body of civic dialogue for specific issues such as housing, digital transformation, or education. Finally, all information stored by the municipalities must be freely accessible to the residents.

Local governments are positively evaluated by over 70% of citizens, vastly exceeding the assessments of central institutions (23% for the parliament, 31% for the senate, 29% for courts)(Gendźwiłł & Wiszejko-Wierzbicka, 2022). This positive evaluation is explained by the proximity of the local legislative and executive to the citizens, less polarizing issues they need to handle, and appreciation by residents that municipal councillors are not professional politicians (Gendźwiłł & Wiszejko-Wierzbicka, 2022). Mistakes of local governments are acknowledged but are rather

associated with the lack of competence than malevolence (Gendźwiłł & Wiszejko-Wierzbicka, 2022). Yet, local governments are not flawless nor free of cliques and party influence, especially in large cities.

Finally, despite the broad toolkit of participatory governance and the declarative willingness to influence decision-making, active participation of the residents in the public rule, especially in smaller municipalities, could be improved. Some forms of participation are broadly used: in the period of 2001-2023 there have been 830 municipal referendums 67% of which were council or mayor recalls, in 2023 ca. 32,000 projects were submitted to municipal participatory budgets, while in 2022 Poles participated in some 7,500 municipal consultations processes (Statistics Poland, 2024). Yet, other tools, such as local initiative and discussions of the state of the municipality reports are underutilized (Dąbrowska, 2024).

In radical democracy theory "the people striving for democracy and the institutions that ultimately give democracy a certain form, stand in enduring and unresolvable tension" (Beveridge & Koch, 2023, p. 14). Its articulation in real-world politics is given two forms: dissociative and associative (Beveridge & Koch, 2023). The former privileges agonistic conflict as a path to overthrowing an extant political order and proclaiming democracy (Beveridge & Koch, 2023; Marchart, 2007). The latter stresses the possibility of coming together in the public realm and developing "collectives through repeated practices, which in turn have democratic force" (Beveridge & Koch, 2023, p. 14). In the Polish case these two forms coincided. Firstly, the dissociative moment was dominant; it then gave way, although not entirely, to the associative. What is crucial here is that the reform of 1990 created the legal institution of local self-governance, a body politic, but it had to be brought to life by people dwelling in the newly empowered municipalities, people who had no experience in local democracy, politics or municipal management. They had to come together and decide about what common goals their communities would pursue. They were learning, also with the aid of Foundation in Support of Local Democracy, an NGO formed in 1989 to foster the development of civic society and self-governance (Regulska, 1996), and gaining further independence from the state. Polish municipalities are currently among the most autonomous in Europe (Swianiewicz 2020).

This is an important story for new municipalism as it shows the power of legal prefiguration, which may be one way of "hacking" local government. The reform of

reversing the state in Poland, of shifting to the local was possible due to the temporary turmoil and weakness of state institutions being created anew in the 1990s. What is more, this was sometimes pre-emptive legal activism. The Self-government Act was not compatible with the socialist constitution which was amended later.

Resistance of Polish local self-governments to centralization

Solidarity's idea of self-governing civil society is opposed by Polish political Right which sees it as "a dangerous reminder of a civic alternative to the 'nation' community" that they champion (Ost 2018, p. 40). During the transition period these objections were ineffectual, but in 2015 the Right lead by L&J secured a parliamentary majority and, disregarding constitutional safeguards (Sadurski, 2019), sought to weaken the autonomous institutions of civic society. One of the affected sectors were public services such as water and sewerage.

In 2022, during a debate in the senate, an attorney claimed that municipal water companies were "being murdered for purely political reasons" (Senate of Poland, 2022). "Local self-government is being mindlessly destroyed for political profits" (Participant 1) would add a senator and the president of the Association of Polish Cities. "Whoever is behind it does not understand the sense of building a democracy" (Participant 9) warned one of the vice-mayors. These statements attest to the entanglement of the question of democracy with local self-government and an almost unequivocal conviction that both, along with the municipal w&s sector, were threatened by the state.

There are ca. 3,070 municipal companies in Poland (Dolewka, 2017), among which w&s entities are the most numerous. Their founding was linked with the revival of local governments. The newly created municipalities inherited land, real estate, companies, and various assets formerly owned by the state. Most of w&s companies are of full or major municipal ownership. They are controlled by mayors who appoint the board of directors and can be audited by municipal councilors at any time (councilors have free access to companies' premises and documents). What is more, residents should have unrestricted access to all the corporate information (e.g. contracts, salaries, tenders, and board decisions). There appears to be a common conviction that municipal ownership is advantageous as compared to privatization; as one vice-mayor put it: "The only municipal services which are problematic are those partly privatized in the 1990s." (Participant 10). Mayors, city hall executives, and directors of municipal companies

appreciate that municipal ownership of w&s companies is essential for managing local development, coordination with other public services, and advancement of public agenda instead of profits (Participants 9, 10, 13). As mentioned earlier, local government bodies are highly trusted by the residents, but there have been few instances of misconduct related to municipal companies. Supreme Audit Office identified cases of insufficient oversight by mayors, economic inefficiencies, or overly commercial activities, while Watch Dog Poland claims that even if the access to corporate information cannot be restricted, the ease of it could be improved, especially in smaller cities (Watchdog Poland, 2022).

The municipal w&s sector was performing well until 2017 when the L&J government centralized the tariff setting. The entire sector was brought to a brink of collapse within a couple of years while this assault on municipal autonomy has caused an intense conflict between the state and local self-governments. It unfolded across political, judicial, and financial planes. It is analyzed by discerning practical and discursive strategies of the involved actors.

Until 2017, every year municipal w&s companies would propose new tariffs to be reviewed by mayors and councils. The process was a local matter. Mayors and councilors performed a double role – they represented interests of residents (affordable high-quality service) and interests of a municipal company (public service and profitability enabling investments). These partially conflicting imperatives had to be balanced. Part of municipal w&s companies' executives was critical of the need to bargain with the councilors whom some have seen as lacking competences to assess the tariffs (Participants 3, 7, 15). Tension between water's technical and political aspects came to the fore. The idea of depoliticizing and professionalizing the tariff setting process gained some currency as the industry survey conducted in 2016 showed: 40% of respondents would welcome a central technocratic regulator which would take over the responsibility for tariff approval (Participant 12). Around that time, EU required Poland to improve its oversight over water assets managed until then by dispersed regional institutions. This urge suited the centralizing ambitions of the then ruling L&J which had already been infringing municipal autonomy in other fields such as education and public finance (Sześciło, 2020).

The spatial distribution of L&J's influence was a crucial factor. No city with more than 100,000 dwellers had an L&J affiliated council or mayor. Even in small

municipalities it happened rarely. Winning mayoral election requires getting at least 50% of votes which in most cases means obtaining support across the political spectrum, discouraging strong party allegiances. What is more, party affiliation is usually seen as a flaw of local candidates (Participant 1). L&J had very little direct influence on municipalities due to their constitutional autonomy and its limited success in local elections.

In 2017 L&J government established a central water regulator Wody Polskie ([Polish Waters], PW). It was tasked with managing national water assets and approving municipal water tariffs (Prawo Wodne 2017). The related bills were sent to be processed by the L&J-dominated parliament so quickly that the affected stakeholders could not review them. The legal requirement of public consultation, also with the Joint Commission of Government and Local Government, a body responsible for developing a common position between the state and local governments, was ignored. Since then, municipal companies are obliged to submit tariffs once every three years to the regulator.

If the economic situation changes significantly, a municipal company can invoke an exceptional situation clause and apply for an updated tariff. In the latest tariffication period of 2021-2023, the average approved increase of tariffs was ca. 10%, an unofficial limit imposed by the Ministry of Infrastructure. Average price per a cubic meter of water for domestic use in 2021 Poland was 2.75 EUR (EU mean was 3.54 EUR) (EurEau, 2021). In 2022 the inflation rate reached 16.6% (Statistics Poland, 2023) while the costs of energy for municipal companies have increased three- and sometimes sixfold. Only in 2022, 549 companies applied for an updated tariff (Boroń, 2022). By the end of 2022, 28 applications were approved, 233 were rejected, and 246 were still being processed (Boroń, 2022). It became virtually impossible for companies to recuperate their soaring costs. As a result, the entire w&s sector is facing a financial collapse. In 2022, 70% of companies had generated losses and some have filed for bankruptcy (Senate of Poland, 2022).

Practical strategies of state control

How did the blocking of tariffs and related creeping dismantling of municipal autonomy look in practice? The main mechanism of subjugation was bureaucratic obstruction. The regulator was not reviewing tariff applications on time, prolonged the process by responding with numerous questions, often unrelated or unfounded

(Participant 7), and requested almost impossible calculations, e.g. assigning different categories of users to the sources of water while water is being mixed before reaching individual consumers. Municipal arguments about the increasing costs, e.g. of energy, which are easily attestable, were downplayed or ignored.

Similar attitude was displayed in responses to tariff applications, requiring companies to tweak their amortization calculations, or in personal communication during negotiations, in which state executives suggested to "fire some people" to reduce costs (Participant 14) or condition approving tariffs on the company convincing the municipality to subsidize it.

The above issues along with an outright declaration by the Minister of Infrastructure that "there will be no price increases" (Portal Komunalny, 2022) attest to the disregard for actual legislation obliging the regulator to review each case individually. This Kafkaesque situation was often described as absurd and likened to a scene from a 1980s Polish movie mocking the communist bureaucracy in which a cloakroom attendant who lost a men's coat says to him "We don't have your coat. And there is nothing you can do to us." (Participant 8). It is also abusive because directors of municipal companies bear personal financial responsibility for timely and correctly responding to PW.

Practical strategies of municipal resistance

Municipal companies try to survive the financial stress by short-term adjustments and to force the regulator to change its way of working. In terms of coping, they assume debts and reduce costs to a minimum by limiting investment, maintenance, training, and other expenses. Some engage in commercial services, and some are subsidized by municipalities (Participants 6, 9).

More telling about municipal autonomy and self-government are the strategies of resistance. They can be grouped into three categories: judicial, political, and legislative. First, many companies sued PW in the administrative courts, most of which ruled in their favor and validated their accusations of PW with purposefully prolonging of the tariff approval process. Another strategy was applying for prosecutor's oversight of an ongoing tariff review and asking the Supreme Audit Office (SAO) to analyze PW. Its audit, as of 2023, was underway. The fact that both the prosecutors and SAO agreed to step in means that they recognized the risk of infringement and social harm.

Municipal companies formed alliances with mayors, regional governments, opposition politicians, and labor unions to lobby for their cause. Importantly, for the first time since 1990, a political party comprised of local government supporters, "Self-government movement: Yes! For Poland", was formed and run in the 2023 parliamentary elections. These alliances staged street protests and requested the regulator to obey the law. Their struggle was aided with critical analyses by NGOs which played an important role in building Polish self-government such as the Foundation in Support of Local Democracy and Batory Foundation. Finally, municipalities drafted alternative regulations to be considered by parliament.

Discursive strategies of the state

State's discursive strategies aimed at destabilizing the understanding of municipality as a self-governing territorial community. The main claim is that the regulator is only protecting the citizens against unjustified increases in the price of water supposedly sought after by mayors and municipal councils. This strategy was used to implement the new regulations urgently (Senate of Poland, 2017) and is a common reason for rejecting tariffs, but the regulator does not explain what a justified price could be. Nowhere is this strategy blunter than in the social media posts of PW which claimed, "We are the guardians of low prices" and singled out cities where the tariffs were supposedly too high.

There is an evident inconsistency to the state's claim of citizen protection. Prices of other essential goods like energy were exempted from such intense scrutiny (in 2022, cost of energy for households grew by 37% although there were some protective mechanisms (Urząd Regulacji Energetyki, 2023); net profit of PGE, a state-controlled energy company, grew in 2022 by 19.3% to ca. 1 billion EUR (Money.pl, 2023)). The regulator is financed with fees it charges municipal companies and thus influences their costs directly. Appeals to lower or withhold them were rejected (Participant 6).

Putting "citizen protection" at the center of the debate drove the positive, paternalistic image of the state and made it difficult for the municipalities to oppose it. They needed to nuance it by explaining that there is more to the provision of water than its price: investment, maintenance, safety, and good employment terms, all require funds but are less suggestive and easy to convey.

The discourse of "protecting the citizens" implies a different vision of the democratic order than the one legitimized by the Constitution. This vision of a strong, controlling state (Participant 4) is premised on the assumption that the citizen is not able or does not want to act in her own interest, in her own name and her own responsibility. It rejects the capacity and liberty of municipal communities to self-govern that new municipalism celebrates, and Polish Constitution and the Self-government Act of 1990 protect. According to them, it is the municipal community that executes public duties, it is the community and not its bodies (e.g. council, mayor) that is the subject of rights and obligations. The state's paternalistic vision is even more evident in the second discursive strategy where self-government is posed to have an inherent conflict of interest.

This discourse appears in the audits preceding the centralization, giving it an aura of technocratic objectivity, and is leveraged in the justification of centralization (Wody Polskie, 2019; Żogała, 2023) but, importantly, it remains a speculation. It claims that mayors and councils on the one hand represent local communities, while on the other they control municipal water companies, hence they may have a conflict of interest. It is assumed that a municipal company has different goals than its owners (echoing principle-agent theory (see, e.g., Sørensen, 2007)). Even if some employees of municipal companies do not see their firms as an inherent part of the municipal community, the management does, and overall, among w&s companies the public ethos prevails over the pursuit of profits (Participants 7, 8). Prior to the centralization, there were very few issues raised by the citizens about municipal w&s companies.

In a case where the interests of companies and citizens would indeed be contradictory, mayors and councils would be pressured by both sides and would need to balance them. Their actions could be verified and, to an extent, controlled by the citizens. However imperfect at times, it would remain a local, democratic problem where a municipal community would be able to make decisions about the provision of water and bear the consequences thereof. By trying to discursively separate the community from its elected bodies and its companies, and by implying that mayors and councils act against the oblivious, incapable residents defenseless against the local bodies they elected, the state was trying to legitimize its intrusion into local matters.

Discursive strategies of municipalities

The key counter-strategy of municipalities was to claim that centralization of tariffs is anti-democratic. Firstly, they pointed out that it has deprived local communities of the capacity to impose upon their companies' objectives different than the pursuit of price reductions (Żogała, 2023). Secondly, they stress that what used to be a local democratic process with local consequences became a remote bureaucratic decision for which a state official bears no responsibility (Żogała, 2023). It is bemoaned that centralization compromises the validity of locally elected bodies, questions the sense of local self-government, and "destroys the potential to build democracy" (Żogała 2023; Participant 9). The "correct" meaning of local self-government is recalled as e.g. in a senate debate between municipal companies, mayors, senators, and legal experts confronting Polish Waters and the Ministry of Infrastructure when one mayor remarked that "The minister misunderstands the concept of local self-government because it is the residents who are the local self-government, not mayors and councilors." and that "It is the residents who will bear the consequences.". A more extreme version of this strategy is the warning that "municipal self-government is being dismantled by the state", frequently using visceral terms such as murdering, diversion (Senate of Poland, 2022), and backstabbing (Participant 9). The issue of scale is also brought up – it is claimed that since water companies operate only locally, they are amenable to citizen control and are contrasted with the national energy sector requiring central oversight (McDonald 2018; Żogała 2023).

Another strategy, linked to the history of municipal autonomy, is the argument of learning from the past and comparing the actions of the L&J government to the communist state. "History taught us, or maybe it didn't, that central management does not work.", one of the vice mayors claimed (Participant 10). Similarly, it was argued by the Association of Polish Cities' director that "the ministry is making decisions in the name of municipalities, just like in the worst times of deep communism" and uses "manipulations and lies" (Portal Komunalny, 2022). Discussions between the sides, if allowed, were at best difficult. Municipal companies and their supporters complained that focused, substantive debate with the regulator rarely happened. And when not ignored, they faced "arrogance and insolence" (Participant 1). Municipalities were repeatedly appealing for a dialogue to commence, suggesting that the state and municipalities are

not adversaries, but are both public servants. Nevertheless, a doubt that a dialogue would be possible prevailed (Portal Komunalny, 2022).

In 2023 the L&J was ousted by a new parliamentary majority of central liberal, Christian-democratic, and Left parties. As of 2024 the parliament has been working on the reform to return the tariff setting capacity to municipal councils.

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the emergence of Polish local self-government for insights about local democracy and its resistance against the state. According to Daivd Ost (2018), Eastern Europe has been "an exciting semiperiphery" for the West – it is a place far enough for outlandish ideas to emerge without affecting the West and close enough to import them if proved interesting. During the 1980s it was worker self-management and civil society, in the early 1990s these were novel neoliberal practices, and recently it is illiberalism and radical right (Ost, 2018). However, presenting those ideas in sequence can be misleading. They do not fully supersede each other, rather they form overlapping layers. Even though on the legal and economic levels, the break between socialism and post-socialism may seem sharp, socialism was a lived experience of prolonged influence. It did not simply dissipate after the fall of the Berlin wall. Its legacy still affects the cultural and political realms, it is "a complex and heterogenous repository of feelings" (Jelača and Lugarić 2018, p. 6). For the municipal class, it provides a living myth of toppling the communist state through emancipated local self-government which fueled the recent resistance to the state's democratic backsliding. This culture of local self-governance along with its institutional set up could be a next exciting semiperipheral idea to be imported by Western new municipalism and city democracy activists and scholars – an idea for "hacking" local government.

Such "hacking" would require political and legal struggles to amend local government structure in a way that it is conducive to new municipalist values. But this process can also be gradual. Polish system offers many institutional solutions which are worth experimenting with. Its founding principles are that of subsidiarity, court-protected autonomy, and general responsibility of local governments – they, for instance, enabled Warsaw to pursue policies contrary to the state when it came to in-vitro programs or sexual education. A corollary of general responsibility is that majority of public assets should be managed by municipalities. What is more, municipalities should be able to

freely associate and cooperate – this is especially important for public services provision in small towns and rural areas. One can argue that villages do not have the capacity to create e.g., a public transport network and that this service should then be a region's or a state's responsibility. But a federation of villages can do it or it ask a nearby city for help as often happens in inter-municipal projects in Poland.

Another important part of this "hacked" setup are robust tools of citizen control over municipal bodies and assets: easy to organize referendums, legislative initiative, direct access to municipal councils and meetings, local initiative (transparent and responsive tool for local governments to support citizen's initiatives), participatory budgeting rules of which are developed by the citizens, obligatory public consultations with feedback to citizens about how their suggestions were implemented and if not why, annual state of the municipality report and debate with the mayor on which her discharge depends, civic consultation bodies formed obligatorily at the request of citizens' associations, and full and easy access to all municipal information and data. Finally, local government bodies should be tasked with proactively motivating the citizens to participate and to attend to municipal matters.

New municipalism is often described as a "nascent social movement" seeking the redistribution of economic and political decision-making to the citizens (Arpini et al. 2022; Russell 2019; Thompson 2021, p. 317). I attempted to extend the "new municipalism" concept temporarily and structurally. I argue that the governance system of Polish local democracy established in the early 1990s contains municipalist premises which were lately discursively and practically attacked by the Right. The temporal extension means going back to the 1980-90s, while structural extension means appreciating how local autogestion was built in the constitutional order. I suggest that the adjective "new" can be productively applied to the revival of Polish municipalities, for its fundamental goal was to spur civic involvement, activity, and dignity (Regulski, 2003). This transformation of subjectivity was to be enabled through an institutional change (Roth et al. 2023, 2013) – the political and economic empowerment of territorial communities and granting their autonomy court and constitutional protection. It was radical in its orientation of construing local government as institutions against, not within, the state (Regulski, 2003).

The instrument analysis of water tariffs' centralization revealed that under the technocratic guise of price reductions and consumer protection laid a real stake – a vision

of relations between the state and citizen contrary to the one established by the 1990 Self-government Act and the 1997 Constitution. Thanks to the efforts of the involved municipal actors and their allies, it was not allowed to be depoliticized. Water, being an essential good, interrupting supply of which is beyond discussion, made for a vicious leverage exploited by the state to coerce municipalities. Despite longing for depoliticization of water expressed by some municipal companies and the state, the terms of its provision remain a political question. If tackled by a municipal community which would bear the consequences of its decisions, it could perform the role of a school of democracy. Hijacked by the state, it became a remote bureaucratic decision, ruminations of which do not affect its makers. Centralization proved more conducive to abuses than local quarrels of municipal companies with mayors, councilors, and residents.

While populists tend to create external figures to enact "us vs them" rhetoric, such as immigrants (Muller, 2021), in the Polish case the L&J party tried to pit municipal residents against the local bodies they elected, to demonize them, and justify its intervention in a paternalistic guise. It sought to discursively dismantle the idea of municipality as a self-governing territorial community, to impose seeing the democracy like a state, over seeing it like a city (Beveridge & Koch, 2023). Instead of attending to "the actual materiality of specific places and problems" and "the bodies entangled with these places" (Beveridge and Koch 2023, p. 14) as each local government did before the centralization, L&J advanced a single reductive perspective. Buzogány and Spöri (2024, p. 7) note that "a city advocating for democracy is inherently pluralistic and cannot present a unified voice", and it was observed in the clash over the water tariffs. The state used a unified voice, not only through the control of its various institutions, but, importantly, unified by a single, inherently centralizing, claim – that it is defending the citizens against unjust prices. Local opposition, composed of various actors, instead needed to argue that there was much more to water provision than price, that each city may have different water-related issues, and that what was also at stake was the right to self-govern.

Threats to municipal autonomy were both discursive and material, and ever more serious as the radicalization of the language used to describe them – the metaphors of murdering and destruction, along with practical consequences of depleted municipal budgets and limited jurisdictional capacity show. The emergent culture of local self-government, containing the memory of the communist system and the myth of municipal

restoration enabled the resistance to the L&J's assault on municipal autonomy and its depoliticization. The forming of alliances of municipal companies, mayors, councilors, senators, regional governments, and importantly, the Solidarity labor union, of political collaboration across space and scales to resist the intrusion of the state, along with the establishing of the first political party of municipalists, attest to the civic involvement authors of the 1990's reform hoped to spur (at least within the municipal class).

I concur with Beveridge and Koch (2023, p. 13) that "democracy cannot be limited to a form of government", that it "is a 'mode of being', a way to experience and shape the common world". However, we should not demonize the institutions of local government as mere emanations of remote state power incapable of fostering or purely contradictory to the new municipalist causes and urban democracy. This may be the case of systems such the English one where local government is "a 'creature' of the central-state" (Pill 2024, p. 999), but this should not limit our imagination. We should explore different, co-existing ways of making of the local, conceptually and practically (Giovannini & Griggs, 2024), problematize local governments in sense of their design, relations with the constituents and other tiers of government.

To stop seeing democracy like a state and see it like a city through and through, one needs to level the scales of respective bodies politic (Isin, 2007). From this follows an important avenue, so far seemingly foreclosed in the extant literature, that a new municipalist overhaul could be fostered through legislation and legal activism. In the Polish case, the autonomous municipalities imagined by the reformers and legislators were bestowed upon on a society in the midst of transition.

It was provided with initially empty yet capacious institutions to be enlivened. The consistently high levels of trust that citizens have in their local self-governments, along with the recognition of the municipal reform as one of Poland's transition greatest achievements, show that empowered municipalities, despite their flaws, have been working well. And for many self-governance has become a value worth protecting. This supports Beveridge's and Koch's (2023) claim that practices give meaning to the institutions of democracy, but it also shows that this relation can be reciprocal, that formal institutions can be generative of democratic practices.

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Chapter 2 - Lingering social infrastructure: A study of Apennine villages and their postal offices

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Abstract

Many villages located in the central Apennines in the Italian region of Abruzzo have been suffering from depopulation, decline of sheepherding economy, amenity desertification, and earthquakes, notably the one of 2009. Postal offices are often the last state institutions which remain in these places. By using the community economies approach and the method of reading for economic difference, this paper seeks to draw attention to the emotional and caring work of the postmasters and to explicate how they help abate isolation, improve wellbeing and provide a sense of citizenship to the rural communities they serve. In doing so, it attends to the absences in the conventional regulatory economics discourse of postal offices and redescribes them as a universal, even if lingering, redistributive social infrastructure. It also discusses the unacknowledged costs of the emotional and caring labor of postal employees which evade the traditional economic purview and suggests possible policy interventions. The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork (participant observation, interviews and desk research).

Keywords: postal office, mountain areas, villages, social infrastructure, care, economic difference

Introduction

In the Apennines there is a village where fifteen years ago an earthquake brought down most of the buildings, some of which were rebuilt. In one of them there is a postal office where an old man dozes off on a bench while the postmaster[4] attends to clients. Once she has finished, the man wakes up and tells her about his morning. There is also a retired woman who visits the office every time it is open and runs errands for the postmaster. Sometimes she gets coffee, sometimes she does a little shopping. There is a farmer who picks up the postmaster after work so that together they can collect fresh tomatoes from his field. In this postal office every morning there is an incoming call which the postmaster duly answers and talks with a woman whom she never met about weather, local news and her past.

At 850 meters above sea level, two hours' drive from Rome, within the Gran Sasso mountain range there is a village which has no shops nor schools or bus stops. One of the last remaining points of reference and pieces of social infrastructure, the last funnel of the state's presence, which remains frailly, is a postal office serving 120 residents. By following its and other postal offices' intermittent openings, for they work only three times a week, I seek to shed light on the emotional work of postmasters and on how they support the wellbeing of patrons, their sense of citizenship and survival. In doing so, this study explicates the under-researched role of postal presence in the "left-behind" places. On a theoretical level, it attempts to reconceptualize rural postal offices as a social infrastructure. At a practical level, it seeks policy ideas to support them in this role.

Italian rural postal offices are a witness to both an end of way of life (Tomaney et al., 2024) and the possibility of its survival. They are spaces where one can participate in an anachronistic communal life that is not possible elsewhere. On the other hand, this life is contemporary and can possibly prevail had it been nurtured the way postal offices nurture it. These glimmers of sociality, akin to the flickering glow of fireflies (Didi-Huberman, 2018; Pasolini, 2014; Rossi, 2022), are illuminating but are not normative. They do not impose a necessity of survival or unavoidability of perishing. They, I argue, offer a possibility of appreciating the work social infrastructure can do in remote rural

[4] [4] The Italian term is Direttore Ufficio Postale for men and Direttrice Ufficio Postale for women (in 2022 59% of Italian postmasters were women), yet this gendered distinction is not always observed as some women opt for the masculine version. United State Postal Service and Canada Post use the title of postmaster denoting a person in charge of post office irrespective of gender and that usage is followed in this paper.

places to improve wellbeing and abate isolation. But this work, nonetheless, may not withhold the disappearance of the communities and can be taxing for those who carry it out.

Social infrastructure is a topic of growing interest for researchers and policymakers (Hall, 2020). I suggest that a postal office is a universal basic social infrastructure (see, e.g. Coote & Percy, 2020). Despite the "decline of the state-monopolized, modern infrastructural ideals of non-excludability" (DeVerteuil et al., 2022, p. 5) exemplified by the folding of public services such as healthcare, schools or public transport in the rural areas (Higgs & Langford, 2013; Woods, 2005) accompanied by the withdrawal of bars, grocery shops and other amenities (Baroni, 2024), postal offices stubbornly persist and are often the most accessible of all public services (e.g. in Italy and in France (Cremer et al., 2008)). However, even if they abide by the so-called universal service obligation[5] (USO), their functioning in the rural areas is not unthreatened. The tension between the economic calculus of postal providers and the public service obligation is also a focus of this paper.

Finally, there is another aspect of postal services which seems to be overlooked in rural studies and cognate disciplines: the spatial redistribution – the subsidizing of the rural areas by the urban ones (Geddes, 2010). Postal regulation is underpinned by the principles of non-discrimination and equity (Fortunato et al., 2013), and it is a form of a redistribution policy through USO but also through the uniform tariffs thanks to which costly rural delivery carries the same price as considerably cheaper urban service (Borsenberger & Lefort, 2023). Hence, I suggest that the unprofitable rural postal offices are a social, universal, and redistributive infrastructure, which may be threatened by market liberalization and privatization. Their contribution to local wellbeing merits analysis and exploring for insights about organizing public services in remote rural areas, a research gap noted by Fortunato et al. (2013) and Cohen et al. (2008).

Yet, to view them that way an informed gaze (Gibson-Graham, 1996) is needed. Postal services are virtually absent in geography, urban and rural studies as well as social infrastructure literature (with a notable exception coming from the community development literature, see, Fortunato et al. (2013)). They feature however as a popular

[5] The obligation of the states to provide their citizens with affordable and easy access to postal services, including counter service. It is a widely adopted policy, imposed, among others, by the European Union (see, e.g., Mercier et al. (2020)).

subject of regulatory economics (see, e.g. Crew & Kleindorfer (2008a) and other positions in Advances in Regulatory Economics series). This literature describes postal offices with the language of pricing and costs, regulation and competition, networks and markets. It conceptualizes them as two-dimensional nodes of revenues and costs, a necessary (and unprofitable) burden. Such conceptualization is not wrong but enables certain actions and theories while obscuring others. It is a performative discourse and as such, it may be producing the "effects that it names" (Butler, 1993, p. 2), e.g. a postal office seen as a subject of performance monitoring that is obliged to maximize the monetary value of services and products which it sells, as will be shown in the empirical part. But if we look closely, signs of other social and economic practices are present even in this type of literature as in the following passage from Boldron et al. (2008, p. 57): postal offices "are located in urban areas for commercial purposes, and in rural areas for public service purposes." By following such clues, I attempt reading-for-economic-difference (Gibson-Graham, 2021) and excavating the possible. I do so by redescribing the postal office with the vocabulary sourced from the literature of social infrastructure, the studies of rural postal offices and my own fieldwork. The chosen entry point of this intervention into the overdetermined (Althusser, 2006; Gibson-Graham, 1996) life of a postal office, or what informs my gaze, is sociality of various registers (Latham & Layton, 2019), such as co-presence, friendship, and care and social reproduction (Hall, 2020) with its necessary labor. This choice is intentional because I am interested in their consequences (Gillespie et al., 2024), i.e. the sense of citizenship, place attachment and identity, and improved wellbeing.

In the next two sections I first review the extant accounts of rural postal offices and discuss relevant literature on social infrastructure (SI). The fourth section is a brief explanation of the research strategy. Then I introduce the fieldwork findings divided into three concepts: rural postal office as a focus of sociability, as a neighbor and counsellor, and as a commercial enterprise. The sixth section discusses the findings while the last concludes.

Rural postal offices

Inquiries into the relations of postal offices with the local communities are almost absent in urban and rural studies (but see, Higgs & Langford, 2013; White et al., 1997) and social infrastructure literature. Boldron et al. (2008, p. 47) go as far as to claim that

the "influence of postal presence on social welfare has never been studied." However, beyond the strictly academic purview there are interesting accounts. Perhaps the most telling study of the influence rural postal offices have on the wellbeing of small communities is a 1970s investigation conducted by a journalist Richard J. Margolis for the U.S. Postal Rate Commission. It was motivated by the concern of the Congress that the U.S. Postal Service, before deciding upon a closure of a postal office, should consider the effect it could have on the affected village (Margolis, 1980). Margolis not only traced the history of rural postal offices in the USA and their ever-present financial vulnerability, but also closely observed how they were used by the patrons.

Margolis (1980, p. 1) summarizes his findings by stating that "For many small-town citizens the post office remains an essential institution not only as a collector and distributor of the mails but also as a focal point of sociability and intimacy." He recounts political debates of the 1970s when congressmen likened the postmasters to counselors of the rural dwellers who help them in multiple ways, e.g. by filling out complicated forms, and who are a human side of the government. His fieldwork provides ample support for such claims. His respondents would call the post office a good place to meet one's friends and neighbors, a community center for all ages, the only public building used daily, and a reassuring space. The ritual of regular visits to the post office, socializing, being called by name was for villagers a comforting ceremony and an important part of their social agendas (Margolis, 1980). A rural postal office emerges as an institution that reduces isolation, helps sustain the community, and is a foundation of local economic activity.

Many of these rural communities viewed a postal office not as a privilege but as a basic service to which they were entitled (Margolis, 1980), while, at least in the American context, a postal service and civic pride became inextricable for being put on a map as a community often required having a postal office. Its closure would thus be a blow to a sense of local identity. Fortunato et al. (2013) also hint at the psychological impact of closures understood as a message sent by the state regarding the distributive justice and being "left-behind": living in the urban area provides entitlements, staying in the rural area does not (for the impact of closures of private amenities, see Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017).

Margolis (1980) also grasped what will be reiterated in my findings, i.e. the relation between aging, vulnerability and the postal services (see also, Higgs &

Langford, 2013). The postmasters he interviewed emphasized that it is especially the elderly who, having more time at their disposal and limited opportunities for social expression (Youmans, 1967), spend their time at a postal office and that they depend on the postmasters for company. It is one of few places that afford the elderly a "chance for daily social nourishment; the kind of life-sustaining support that only a community can provide" (Margolis, 1980, p. 27) and a place where they can get help.

These findings seem to be withstanding the test of time as few recent texts, also from different geographies, reiterate them. The Citizens Advice (2017) study of UK's rural postal offices reveals that residents use them not only for mail, parcels or banking but also for community information, obtaining help and advice such as informal assistance with services, reading official letters, compiling forms, and as a focal point for meeting with other people. UK's rural dwellers, as compared to their urban counterparts, are more likely to describe a postal office as "very" or "extremely" important (Barnett, 2017) while the relations developed between the postmasters and the communities they serve are for many of the postal employees the most rewarding part of their job (Rubin et al., 2006).

Sarah Smarsh (2020), a journalist writing in modern American context, claims that rural postal offices and mail carriers, whose existence is in jeopardy, provide a sense of community in the smallest of towns and calls them a "lifeline", "a complete necessity", "a hub of community life" and a "protective force." Also, in the French context postal offices are referred to as "hubs" important for social cohesion (Mercier et. al, 2020). The appraisal of the important role of rural postal offices notwithstanding, Margolis (1980) provides a caveat – a postal office can outlive its community. If there is a sense of community, no matter how small, the postal office can support it. But he came across places where, despite the functioning postal office, the community did fade. This is a cautioning note. Even if beneficial and crucial for many rural communities, a postal office may not be enough to secure their survival.

The above accounts seem telling. To critically examine them and to think of potential interventions we need to mesh them with analytical concepts. The literature of social infrastructure appears the most apt for this task.

Seeing a postal office through the lens of social infrastructure

As mentioned at the outset, social infrastructure is a topic of growing interest (Hall, 2020). It has been broadly researched and variously conceptualized and therefore needs to be navigated carefully (Latham & Layton, 2022). My intent here is to cover the strands of literature most pertinent to the objectives of this study.

Analytical caution is necessary when dealing with the sociality in the social infrastructure for its various registers are usually understated (Hall, 2020; Layton & Latham, 2022). Latham and Layton (2022) suggest several such registers, three of which are applicable to a postal office: co-presence, sociability and friendship, and care. I suggest that they are occurring, to various degrees, in a postal office along two axes: between the patrons and between the patrons and the postmasters. The encounters between the patrons are important, but what I want to focus on is the second axis as it is richer, more influential in terms of wellbeing, but is also determined by the politics of provision (Latham & Layton, 2019) and is spatially variegated for it emerges in the rural offices and dissipates in the urban ones. This axis, as will be explained in the empirical sections, is almost unidirectional. The postmaster becomes a confessor, a counselor, a witness to the end of a way of life and ends of lives, an attentive audience to the sense-making practice of reviewing one's life while nearing its termination (Rowles, 1983) but also an aid in various matters, and an assistant that smoothens the inevitable frictions a material but changing postal infrastructure can cause (e.g. by implementing new services and technologies not legible to patrons). It is mostly but not entirely unidirectional because patrons reciprocate through various acts of kindness and favors and by trying to help the postal office survive amidst the increasing commercial pressures. For some postmasters this relation is as rewarding as it is taxing which brings us to the question of how and by whom these types of sociality are enabled and at what cost. Put otherwise, what are its conditions of existence (Althusser, 2006)?

To describe them, the concepts of people as infrastructure (Simone, 2004) and social reproduction (Hall, 2020) are helpful. Furthermore, they are useful in linking sociality with the context of marginality and survival, in which the studied postal offices are situated. Simone's (2004) notion of people as infrastructure, which speaks to the relationality and processualism of infrastructure (Layton & Latham, 2022; Star, 1999), denotes the roles humans assume to compensate for shortcomings or a lack of physical infrastructures. The infrastructure understood in such manner is open-ended yet

displays a regularity which can anchor livelihoods, it has no explicit rules of conduct yet creates a coherent platform of social transactions and is shaped by the idiosyncrasies of people involved (Simone, 2004).

The concept of people-as-infrastructure has the potential to include labor in the social infrastructure (Hall, 2020) and thus illuminate how and by whom and at what cost and terms sociality is maintained. Often gendered and uneven this labor brings the infrastructure to life (Horton & Penny, 2023, p. 1717) or is the infrastructure itself (Hall, 2020). By attending to it, we can acknowledge how social infrastructure is implicated with social reproduction, what in most accounts of SI is unrecognized or undervalued (Hall, 2020). Social reproduction is deployed in this study as a "daily and inter-generational production of people as human beings, especially through care, socialization and education" which creates values "for use rather than for sale" (Pearson & Elson, 2015, p. 10). One of many advantages of blending social reproduction with infrastructure is that it helps make visible and make sense of how the spheres of "for use" and "for sale" overdetermine each other (Hall, 2020): how, for example, selling a state bond to a patron can be a commercial and a caring act.

Finally, Angelo & Hentschel (2015) and Yarker (2021) argue that by looking at the state of social infrastructure we can infer about the state of a place and broader patterns of social life and inequality. What then does the fact that postmasters assume the role of people-as-a-caring-infrastructure, even though they are a part of a formal, state owned, network which neither requires it nor provides any guidance, tell us? Social infrastructure, especially understood as people-as-infrastructure and in terms of social reproduction, is not only about gathering and civic life, but also, if not predominantly, about survival (Silver & McFarlane, 2019). As I will try to show, a rural postal office is involved in the survival of remote communities for it is where glimmers of a past way of life did survive but also, often it is the last remaining institution stepping in for social infrastructures which are already gone. In doing so, it becomes a lifeline and also a very modest hope of revival by being the first contact point for newcomers. The "lifeline" quality is attributed to the postal office in the remote mountain villages because, as Tomaney et al. (2024) show for UK and Barni for Italy (2024), "left-behind places" are characterized by SI deprivation while the infrastructural qualities of social reproduction become most conspicuous in the state of neglect (Hall, 2020). The villages I studied are amenity deserts

which often do not even have a grocery shop, while travels to get food and basic goods in the mountain landscape are a struggle for the elderly who do not drive.

But one can ask: why bother? Why study a mundane service in a marginal place? Why study the fading of a way of life? I choose not to fetishize neither survival nor scale (Gibson-Graham, 1996) and concur with Latham & Layton (2019, p. 9) that by studying SI one "can document what should be protected, curated, and encouraged in urban (rural) environments" to make them livable. And that it is especially needed in the context of austerity where SI, despite its value for local communities is "often overlooked and underfunded" (Latham & Layton, 2022, p. 663). Latham & Layton (2019) call for identifying and understanding instances where SI functions well and for analyzing how it is possible while Campbell et al. (2022) encourage looking for those who bring SI to life. From the perspective of these calls, postal offices as a lingering social infrastructure may be "exemplary cases of infrastructural provision for otherwise overlooked and underserviced communities" (Latham & Layton, 2019, p. 9).

Studying such cases in the postal sector is needed because the conventional economic scholarship is oblivious to them while being influential in terms of policymaking as it is often sponsored and coproduced by postal operators, state institutions, and consultants (see e.g., Crew & Kleindorfer (2008a, pp. vii–x)). There are numerous themes emerging from this literature: from universal service obligation, through profitability, market liberalization, privatization, to regulation. Key debates focus on the USO, first of all because it is "a cornerstone of regulatory policy in the postal sector" (Cremer et al., 2008, p. 23), secondly because it is determined by a range of other considerations such as efficiency, equity, liberalization, and privatization.

There are two important consequences of the economistic discourse of USO. Firstly, postal services are viewed from the top, as a network while single postal offices are present in this conceptualization only tacitly, as nodes whose variety is reduced to the balance of costs and profits; secondly, USO's funding mechanisms are depicted as hurdles to market liberalization and privatization which are supposed to bring in efficiency, innovation and ultimately a better service.

However, some economists acknowledge that if the postal sector was fully liberalized (i.e. rid of the state-funded USO), private operators may not have the incentive to provide services in the remote, rural areas. Boldron et al. (2008) argue that designing the networks of postal offices on the basis of USO and accessibility criteria causes their

"oversizing" as opposed to how they would have looked were they created with solely commercial objectives in mind. UK used to have ca. 8000 rural offices while its commercial counterfactual version would have run 1300, French postal operator has ca. 13000 rural offices while was it to maximize its profits, 3000 would suffice (Boldron et al., 2008).

This discourse has material consequences. The ongoing liberalization of the postal market in Europe and beyond (Cremer et al., 2008; Rowsell, 2016) imposes on the state postal operators a more commercial orientation (Crew & Kleindorfer, 2008b). Fortunato et al. (2013) warn that should postal operators prioritize commercial and efficiency goals, the ideal of equality would have to be abandoned. The effects of the increased pressures on postal providers are a reduction of the postal network, i.e. closing of postal offices (Higgs & Langford, 2013), limiting their working hours, removing mailboxes, outsourcing some services, relocating postal counters to commercial premises (e.g. in Belgium), digitalization and automatization by e.g. implementation of unmanned contact points (e.g. in New Zealand) and parcel lockers (Uni Global & Syndex, 2018). Italy is not free of such tendencies either, but Poste Italiane (PI, the Italian state-owned postal operator) still maintains a very dense network of postal offices which are present in 97% of Italian municipalities, some having as few as 40 residents (Poste Italiane, 2024), and thus constitutes an atypical case worth analyzing. In the next section I explain how my analysis of a postal office understood not as a node or a balance sheet, but as a social infrastructure, was designed and conducted.

Research strategy

How could social infrastructure as a social reproduction and as people-as-infrastructure be studied? First of all, we need to approach it on processual and relational terms (Bateson, 1978, as cited in Star 1999). Angelo & Hentschel (2015, p. 311) suggest looking at the "moments of interaction between people and sociotechnical systems" and I do exactly that but also include people-with-people interactions. By taking interactions as a basic object of my analysis, I could see how the infrastructure is practiced (Star, 1999) and how the human and material qualities shape the emergent reproductive social surplus. However, while focusing on the interactions we cannot lose sight of the politics of postal services and the role of the state, corporate governance and history play.

The workings of social infrastructure are often invisible and undervalued (DeVerteuil et al., 2022; Hall, 2020; Latham & Layton, 2019). Their invisibility stems partly from the infrastructure's in-betweenness, being in the background, and partly from the language used to talk about it. The goal of this study is to pierce this veil. To be successful, it needed to go against the grain (Gibson-Graham, 2021) in two ways. The first one is against the everyday transparency of postal services to patrons and postmasters. As Margolis (1980, pp. 32–33) observed: "These benefits (of a postal office) are largely taken for granted and therefore invisible to small-town people as they conduct their daily business. Only when the post office's survival is threatened, or when some outlander like myself comes along with a list of questions, do villagers consciously consider the value of their post office." Therefore, a strategy I employed, which is described below, was to "come along with a list of questions", to talk with the people involved and to observe the postal office's life carefully.

The second way is the one of language. The vocabulary of regulatory economics overlooks and hence undervalues the social dimension, leaving it institutionally unsupported (Hall, 2020). I attended to this absence (Gibson-Graham, 2021) in order to disclose the underlying heterogeneity of economic and social practices and to open up possibilities for acting on them, put otherwise, I attempted a reading-for-economic-difference (Gibson-Graham, 2021). Reading for difference is a method developed by Gibson-Graham (2006, 2021) as "part of their project for post-capitalist politics and alternative economies" (Wynne-Jones, 2014, pp. 149). It serves to "draw out the counter narratives and the possibilities already existing within the present, which offer an alternative to our neoliberal norms" (Wynne-Jones, 2014, pp. 149) – in this case to norms established by the regulatory economics' theorization of postal services and corporate rules of PI.

Methods and the scope of the case studies

This study, underpinned by an extended case approach (Burawoy, 1998), used multiple methods comprising desk research, unstructured interviews, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and participant observation. Although it is not an ethnographic study, it was informed by an ethnographic sensibility (Tomaney et al., 2024) and aimed for a thick description.

Desk research comprised relevant legislation and regulations, corporate documentation of Poste Italiane and media coverage related to rural postal offices and postal services. The final corpus contained 45 documents coded thematically in Atlas.ti.

I conducted 25 interviews (12 unstructured lasting up to 30 minutes, 13 semi-structured lasting from 35 minutes to 3 hours) with the patrons, the postmasters, other current and retired employees of PI, and experts (see Appendix A for the anonymized list of the interviewees).

30 hours of participant observation, over the course of 10 working days, was carried out at three rural postal offices in the period from May to September 2024. I also did short observations at one urban office. I have lived in the area of the study, i.e. the province of L'Aquila, for 3 years, used local postal offices and interacted with their postmasters.

The analysis is informed predominantly by an in-depth study of three villages and their postal offices but also utilizes insights from other places. Some of them are 15 minutes' drive away from larger agglomerations, some are as far as 50 minutes from them. These villages have from 100 to 500 dwellers, mostly elderly, and are all located in the mountainous landscape while their economy is based on sheepherding. They were all hit by an earthquake in 2009 damage of which varied but was considerable. The villages have been reconstructed to different degrees. The pre-earthquake variety and availability of SI was modest but considerably higher than currently. These villages have been depopulating and seeing the decline of the sheepherding culture and economy since the end of World War II. Only one of them has a relatively robust tourist-based economy. They are exemplar cases of "left-behind" places, categorized as "inner peripheries" by the Italian government.

They may seem extreme yet they are characteristic of Italian postal offices since their density is the highest in the rural, mountainous areas (Cohen et al., 2008) and 90% of PI offices are located in municipalities with less than 15000 dwellers. What is more, small Italian municipalities have been experiencing an accelerating services' desertification: in the last to 10 years 26000 bars, grocery shops, petrol stations, bank branches and other amenities were closed (Baroni, 2024) just like the villages studied.

This context is not only relevant for "left-behind places" research but also for social infrastructure, for as Simone (2004), Klinenberg (2018), Hall (2020) and Traill et al. (2024) argue: its role is most pronounced in the places of infrastructural deprivation

and times of distress. Postal offices are often the last remaining instances of SI in these villages; moreover, they were one of the first public services restarted after the earthquake and did not close during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The rural postal offices are very small spaces, usually run by one person from outside the village. To protect the anonymity of the research participants, in this account they are all fused into one, stylized postal office and a village.

A rural postal office as a lingering social infrastructure

There are 7904 municipalities in Italy, and postal offices are present in 97% of them (Poste Italiane, 2024). Despite the ubiquity of postal offices, maintaining their rural and unprofitable presence has not been uncontested. During the early 2010s there was a stint of closures and reductions of operating hours which led to resistance from Italian mayors. As a result, the Council of State ruled that the universal service obligation of PI cannot be compromised by commercial imperatives (Ruling 786/2014). Since then, there has been a change of PI's management which now pledges loyalty to small municipalities (see e.g., Falconio, 2018). A special department for maintaining relations between PI and small municipalities was established. PI is currently implementing a project called POLIS, goal of which is to add public administration services such as requesting a passport, a tax code or an electronic ID, to the postal offering and to modernize their premises. Among the offices I observed one has undergone a small POLIS revamp, one was in the process of a large revamp, and one was still awaiting it.

In this section I come back to Margolis's (1980) suggestion that a rural postal office can be seen as a "focus of sociability" and a "neighbor and counselor" and organize my fieldwork findings under these labels. I also add a third one, i.e. "a commercial enterprise", to show the imbrication of economic and social dimensions and to comment on the disappearance of sociality in the urban postal offices.

Postal office as a focus of sociability

The refurbished and branded postal office stands out in the desolate landscape of the village. Its service may be intermittent as it opens three times a week, but its rhythm is trusted and followed. At times it may be empty, at times it is brimming with life, especially during the first day of the month when the pensions are paid. Also, in the mid-month, as many bills become due, it is crowded. There is an average of 30-50 visits a day

and the highest number of people at once I noted was seven (on ca. 6 square meters). Most of the patrons are over 60 years old.

The atmosphere of the office is jovial. The patrons know each other, and the postmaster knows everyone's names, present or past occupations, family matters and usual needs. From the moment of entering the office and greeting everyone, the chatting starts. Unless the service currently being provided is demanding, everyone participates in the discussions: the postmaster, the patrons being served and those waiting. Topics encompass light matters such as food, weather, travelling, through family issues, health problems, taking care of the ill and dying family members, absent patrons, life stories, and politics, to passing of time and death. Aging and nearing of death are recurrent themes. The postal office is recognized as a space for seniors. On a day of pensions, a group of elderly ladies noticed three middle-aged men queuing. They teasingly asked the postmaster to kick the men out arguing that they were too young to be there and burst with laughter.

Sociality assumes forms of rituals and acts of kindness. The postmasters note that the elderly patrons put on elegant clothes and comb their hair when coming to the postal office – "They come with a bill to pay but mainly to chat – the bill is just one more reason to leave the house. The patrons put on nice clothes and comb their hair. Why? Because the postal office is a respected institution!" (Postmaster, I11). A similar need of nobility and recognition has been observed by Klinenberg (2018) in American libraries.

Patrons often bring small gifts for the postmaster. The gifts comprise, among others, rural produce such as fruit, cheese, eggs, liquors, handmade tablecloths, homemade pastries, grounded and freshly brewed coffee (see, Photos 1-2). The bringing of coffee is ritualized: on average the postmaster receives three a day, one brewed at home by a patron and brought on a platter by her every time the office is open. Bringing homemade cakes is ritualized too and happens regularly. Apart from gifts, handshakes, patting on the back and cheek-kissing upon entering and leaving the office, also of the postmaster, is common.

Patrons try to multiply their visits e.g. by paying each bill they have separately instead of doing everything at once. Similarly, they ask the postmaster to withdraw the money for them instead of using an ATM. This "intentional inconvenience" (Margolis, 1980, p. 25) seems a purposeful choice of sociality over loneliness. Klinenberg (2018) argues that social infrastructure becomes especially important in times of distress

and the observations from the COVID-19 pandemic give further examples of similar behavior. Postal offices were one of few public institutions in Italy that were open during the lockdowns. Not only were bills paid one by one, residents would come to the office almost every day to buy mobile credit of the lowest denomination available (5 EUR). The postal office is also a point of reference for meetings. Moreover, in rare cases it is used by children for WiFi access since the internet coverage elsewhere could be poor.

The patrons acknowledge the nourishing role of social encounters enabled by the postal office. As one patron put it: "Were it not for the postal office, I would not have met my old friend" (Patron, I3). They call it "central" to their community and claim that thanks to it, they feel less isolated. The rapport between the postmaster and patrons is close and characterized by trust. He is often likened to a family member or "a doctor". One patron (I3) said that whenever she is low-spirited, she comes to the postal office and just seeing the postmaster makes her feel better. Another person added that if she needs an opinion on something important, she comes to ask the postmaster. And it is to this caring and counseling capacity that we now turn.

Photos 1-2 Examples of gifts (homemade coffee and plums). Source: author

Postal office as a neighbor and counselor

In this section I provide examples of the postmasters' caring labor, closely linked with social reproduction. It assumes a form of acts of care which sustain life in a material and emotional sense. They attest to the postmasters' flexibility, depend on their personal dispositions, and often require bending of the corporate rules. To navigate their variety, I divided them into four categories: smoothing infrastructural frictions, counselling, witnessing, and responding to exceptional needs.

Smoothing infrastructural frictions

What I call "smoothing infrastructural frictions" are the moments in which the postmasters help the patrons with postal services. The postmasters not only explain patiently new problematic services, which is to be expected of a postal employee; they often read and clarify for the patrons the formal correspondence they receive. What is more, especially elderly patrons who have poor eyesight or are illiterate ask the postmasters to fill in complicated forms for them. Corporate regulations do not allow it, yet it is a norm in rural offices.

New technologies such as mobile postal applications, digital postal banking or ATMs pose difficulties, too. Since most of the elderly struggle with these devices, the postmasters invest considerable amounts of time and energy to teach them and to solve the frequently occurring problems. They also monitor their progress. Elderly patrons became used to this and come to the postmaster with almost any issue they have with their digital devices.

Counselling

The postmasters command considerable trust among the patrons, to a degree that if there is a temporary substitution, they withhold from most postal services and wait for her to return. This trust is also a reason why they ask her for opinions on various matters, not necessarily related to the postal services, such as what gift to get a graduating granddaughter, but also how to divide an inheritance. Even though the postmasters do not have corporate mobile phones, many patrons have their private numbers. In one village the number was shared with a patron, and it was then disseminated within the entire community. The postmaster likened her work to a call center and said that "The residents call (her) with all types of matters." (Postmaster, I9).

The counselling is most conspicuous, and also demanding for the postmasters, when related to financial issues. For patrons PI is predominantly a financial institution. The postmasters have a basic command of the saving products, but it is a financial consultant, who in the remote villages is not a permanent figure but can be summoned for a meeting, who advises and sells them. Yet, it often happens that after hearing the expert opinion of the consultant and receiving an offer, patrons would come to the postmaster and ask for her opinion, often put literally "Would you buy it?". If the postmaster says no, they will follow her advice.

Witnessing

Rowles (1983) writing about place attachment in old age stressed the importance of autobiographical insideness in sustaining personal identity. This insideness is maintained, among other means, by a process of life review (Butler, 1963) which "involves reminiscing on events of one's life in an attempt to 'make sense' of it as a whole" (Rowles, 1983, p. 308).

The rural postmasters are an audience of such life reviews. In the moments when the postal office is less busy, patrons use this as an opportunity to share place-related elements of their biographies. For instance, the patron who brings coffee for the postmaster seems to be carefully choosing her visiting hours, coming just before the closing time when the office is empty to collect the cup and get her services. She then recounts the hardships of working in agriculture, reflects how time accelerates at the old age, and how she is "in a descent".

Responding to exceptional needs

The postmasters in rural offices may not be as busy as their urban counterparts, but they provide help far beyond their job descriptions. Below I list examples of the exceptional needs to which they responded and comment on the most telling ones. The flexible and caring disposition led the postmasters to, among others: print and photocopy documents for the patrons, translate their correspondence in foreign languages and write replies for them, look after small possessions (e.g. keys to their homes) and pass them to other patrons, let them into the restricted areas of the postal office if they needed privacy which the intended service area does not provide, work in the field afterhours to help an elderly patron collect his crop, visit patrons' DIY museums of local agriculture, invent errands for a lonely resident who comes to the office every open day,

drive elderly patrons home when they forget documents needed for a postal service and offer to drive them to a different village so they can buy groceries.

Despite officially being confined to the postal office, the postmasters respond to the calls of the homebound dwellers. They bring them their mail and bills in person, together with the patrons they prepare replies and payments and the postmaster processes them on the next day in the office.

The knowledge of the patrons' finances is perceived by the postmasters not only as their duty, but also as a personal responsibility. For one postmaster knowing "how little they have" (Postmaster, I11) was emotionally burdensome. Once a pensioner came mid-month to inquire about the state of his savings. He had 5.5 EUR left, which he withdrew. The postmaster initiated a collection of money among postal employees to help the patron survive until the end of month[6].

The studied villages are amenity deserts and the elderly dwellers who do not drive and do not have family members in the area face considerable difficulties buying food and basic products. In one case, a pensioner was paying a young person 20 EUR to drive her to the nearest shop once a week. The postmaster having learnt that intervened, unsuccessfully, with the mayor to organize a municipal car to help procure food.

The above deeds do not fall under the job description of a postmaster, even if the patrons value or even expect some of them. Now we turn to how PI sees postmasters as employees and to the ambiguous relation of commercial objectives and the caring work.

Postal office as a commercial enterprise

The sociality described in the previous sections is almost absent in urban offices. The main reasons for this are the number of clients to be served and different key performance indicators (KPI) which the postmasters need to meet.

PI assesses the work of postmasters with a range of KPIs. The indicator that makes the biggest difference in terms of sociality is the tracking of time a postmaster spends serving patrons. In urban offices upon entering clients take a ticket assigned to a type of service. Postmasters constantly see how many clients are waiting and are instructed to serve them as fast as possible. Under such conditions it is very difficult to build rapport

[6] This was done by a village postmaster working on an alternate day in a middle-sized town postal office.

- “When you see 50 persons in a queue you cannot entertain a chat. You must shorten the time; you have to be very quick so you cannot establish this human relation which in small offices is instead substantial.” (Postmaster, I11). In urban offices the postmasters can do over a hundred transactions daily, while in some rural offices this number falls to as low as three. There is no ticketing system and patrons manage queuing themselves. There is no indicator for an average time of a service either and the postmasters do occasionally spend up to an hour with a single patron (Postmaster, I11).

But this does not mean that a rural postal office has no commercial targets. Each rural postmaster has a number of various transactions of certain value she needs to carry out, e.g. bills paid, energy or SIM contracts signed. Every day she receives an email with a summary comparing her performance to other small postal offices. As one postmaster claimed, from the PI perspective, his sole goal is to “charge money” (Postmaster, I2).

There is an interesting relation between the commercial and social dimensions. The trust the postmaster is endowed with, built over time thanks to her personal traits of being accessible and dependable, helps her meet the commercial obligations. For example, patrons do not usually compare the postal offering with competition, they trust that if the postmaster tells them that it is a good deal, they take it.

Furthermore, patrons are aware of the commercial pressure and understand that if the office is to remain, it needs to generate a turnover for PI. A patron reflected that keeping money in postal accounts may have saved the local office: “We are a village of considerable savers. I think PI withdrew from the idea of closing the office after they realized how much money we keep with them.” (Patron, I7). In a different village, elderly dwellers urge their family to do all the postal services in a local office and not in a nearby city or over the internet.

Another example of similar behavior is helping the postmaster meet her targets. Postmasters need to sign a certain number of new energy contracts each month. A patron considered signing one but wanted to discuss it further with his wife. Having learnt that it could help the postmaster meet her target due that day, he signed it right away.

Finally, many patrons prefer PI over banks because they perceive banks as interested only in profits, while PI is seen as a public institution. The postmasters treat them in a gentle and caring way, hard to come by in the formal setting of a bank.

Yet, despite such efforts, many rural offices are not profitable. Revenues from elsewhere, i.e. urban offices and state subsidies, cover the missing part. Thus, the USO

and its underlying funding mechanisms are an institutional condition of existence of the postmasters' caring work and the rural postal offices' sociality. They in turn not only benefit the residents in various ways, e.g. by reducing a sense of isolation, but may also contribute to the, however wanting, commercial performance of the postal office.

Discussion

If we turn away from the discourse of regulatory economics which renders rural postal offices as nodes of costs and revenues and inform our gaze (Gibson-Graham, 2021) with social infrastructure, what is it that we see and what can be done about it? The diversity of social and economic practices which underpin the life of a rural postal office comes to the fore (Gibson-Graham, 2007, 2021). It is not merely a place where one can send a letter or pay a bill; it is home to co-presence, sociability and friendship, and care (Layton & Latham, 2022) supporting social reproduction of the studied rural communities.

Social reproduction in third places is often dismissed because it is usually associated with home, while formal waged settings seem to be devoid of care (Hall, 2020). But patrons and postmasters breach this opposition daily and imbue the postal office with domesticity, familiarity and carefulness. Not only do they call the postmaster their son or daughter, but they also bring homemade coffee and food and confide with the postmasters about intimate matters. The postmasters, on the other hand, should the patrons seek privacy, invite them to the back offices, technically unavailable to non-employees, share their private phone numbers and help patrons in numerous ways.

Even formal and mundane banking services, pensions or letters are imbued with sociality and care. The act of paying a bill is used as an excuse for a joyful chat and a reunion but is also a caring practice for the postmasters feel near personal responsibility for the finances of the pensioners. Patrons in turn care for the postmasters' work and try to make the office meet its commercial targets. It may not be a purely altruistic relation but is mutually beneficial – "They support to be supported." (Postmaster, I19).

What also becomes visible is the strong relationship between rural postal office and aging and vulnerability. A postal office is most important, according to the interviewed postmasters, for the poor, those who depend on state sustenance and for the elderly. And it is these people who suffer most from the folding of public services and third places, and with them of "the protective factors and resilience mechanisms,

including buffers against stress, loneliness, inactivity, and alienation" (Finlay et al., 2019, p. 3; Higgs & Langford, 2013). The postmasters, by actively caring for the elderly and by being an audience of the life reviews (Butler, 1963), support the dwellers' "aging in place" (Lewis et al., 2022) and make it more bearable. Their and other patrons' company abate feelings of isolation and loneliness (see also, Higgs & Langford, 2013), even though, just like libraries, postal offices are not officially meant for that (van Melik & Merry, 2023). This social support can be "protective to health and wellbeing" (Finlay et al., 2019, p. 2).

But a rural postal office is also protective of a way of life that is fading. What may seem to an external eye as just a post-earthquake rubble is far more to the remaining residents. Through life reviews, which involve "projecting a sense of self into the space in which one resides", patrons "sustain a self concept" (Rowles, 1983, p. 307). In these reviews the built environment and its surroundings emerge as a site of numerous memories, as "incident places", which are relived and become a means of personal expression (Rowles, 1983).

Life reviews are not the only ritual reminiscent of the past. Every first open day of the month pensioners, dressed elegantly, crowd in the postal office to withdraw their pensions. They could withdraw only a part of it, or they could access them by a debit card, yet they opt for an "intentional inconvenience" (Margolis, 1980) and risk, for thefts happen, and take the entire amount in cash on the first day possible, just as it was 20 years ago. Then they return to pay the bills with that very money. In doing so, in accessing this public space on their terms, they perform what remains of their citizenship.

It is the marginality that calls for sociality to emerge in a rural postal office. Rural postal offices operate in the contexts of remoteness, peripheralization, aging and amenity desertification (Baroni, 2024). Like in austerity UK, where the retrenched state looks to community members to fill in the "care gap" (Hall, 2020, p. 83), here the postmasters overstretch their capacities as public servants (Hall, 2020) in terms of scope of their tasks, and sometimes need to go against the official job requirements to provide the caring work. As one postmaster put it "Postal office is everything that should have been in the village but is not." (Postmaster, I2), while a patron added that he wished it sold food as well.

The emergence of sociality is possible first of all due to the USO, which despite the folding of other public and private services, makes postal presence particularly difficult to remove; secondly, due to the differences in the design of the rural and urban

postal offices and the lack of the ticketing system and timing indicators; and thirdly, due to the idiosyncratic, personal traits of the postmasters (Simone, 2004). This last condition is a source of the fragility of the caring dimension of the rural postal offices. The postmasters' emotional work, which compensates for the local lacks seems hopeful, and radical to an extent (Traill et al., 2024), but, as any labor, it is emotionally (Held, 2005) and physically taxing (Baines et al., 2019). It depends on the willingness and personal capacity of each postmaster to engage in it. Although it seems prevalent, it cannot be taken for granted because there are offices where the employees opt for a more distanced attitude. The postmasters asked why they go an extra mile and tend to the patrons' exceptional needs, they respond "Because this is who I am." (Postmaster, I2). Many find this dimension the most gratifying aspect of their work, yet it can be a burden.

Traill et al. (2024, p. 194) suggest that "imaginaries of care" need to be "brought into closer conversation" with work of care and restate Held's (2005) call "not to dilute the meaning of care as a labor." The intimate relation the postmasters have with the patrons is underpinned by trust in a double sense: it is personal and institutional, and both are underpinned by the postmasters' emotional labor which is evaded by the economistic gaze.

The personal trust is developed due to responsible disposition of the postmasters. Traill et al. (2024, p. 201) in studying a DIY community park in a troubled area, noticed the ability of some people who run it to "harden up" which allowed them to engage in caring moments without having their lives consumed. A similar dynamic seems to be at play in the postal office. As mentioned earlier, the postmaster-patrons axis is almost unidirectional. It is because a postmaster is one, patrons are many, and the postmaster needs to maintain her professional "face" (Goffman, 1955). Patrons confide with them, but postmasters rarely share any details about their personal lives or work-related issues. What is more, postmasters keep the ample knowledge of patrons' intimate matters to themselves. As a retired mailman told me "Had I spilled the beans, I would have been finished." (Mailman, I10).

This capacity to function as a confessor and witness is also based on the externality of postmasters. They are a vital but an imported part of local communities, for they are foreigners. Usually they live elsewhere and commute, sometimes across considerable distances. Their foreignness means that they are not involved in local feuds.

Institutional trust emerges as the postal office becomes what Amin (2008) calls a patterned ground. It is a trust in its rhythm, a trust that it will open as promised, a trust in the repetitive routines of using it: withdrawing pensions, paying bills, meeting other patrons or managing the queue in an established manner. Behind this patterning there is the postmaster who commutes from afar, prepares and opens the office, stays there and then closes it.

Maintaining these two types of trust comes at a cost to the postmasters. The counselling and witnessing work carry an emotional tax. One of the postmasters wondered if being surrounded by the elderly people (he is in his 30s) and listening about their problems, family issues, poverty, illness, dying, and stories of lives already lived influences him negatively and curbs his joy of life (Postmaster, I2). He pondered if he was mentally tuning into the mindset of a life coming to an end and longed for contact with peers. The externality of postmasters has a flipside of solitude. Postmasters who singlehandedly run the remote offices are lonely at work. They rarely meet other employees of PI, and even if they do, these are couriers who quickly drop by to collect undelivered mail or security bringing in cash.

Conclusions

This study revealed the diversity of economic and social practices that make the postal office an important place for the remote rural communities. It uncovered a range of tasks which the postmasters carry out to compensate for what these places lack. The caring work made visible is radical and hopeful (Traill et al., 2024) to an extent but is also fragile for it depends on the personal, idiosyncratic traits of the postmasters (Simone, 2004) and on their capacity and willingness to bare the emotional, physical and material costs of it. The regulatory economics view is not misguided but tells a partial story in which the rural postal offices are passive two-dimensional figures of revenues and costs. By attending to their particularities and seeing them as a lingering social infrastructure that story was complemented (Gibson-Graham, 2021).

Rural postal offices, seen as a social infrastructure, have been resocialized (Gibson-Graham, 2006) and differentiated (Gibson-Graham, 2021). Sociality, even if unacknowledged, is always present in economic practices (Gibson-Graham, 2006). By making it visible, the underlying interdependences can become “matters for reflection, discussion, negotiation and action”, and they can be politicized (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

Now we have, even if cursory, additional coordinates to think about rural postal offices: the non-postal benefits they provide, the registers of sociality they support, the types of care work they do, the non-monetary costs they entail, and the contingencies of their social-infrastructural dimension. Gibson-Graham (2021) suggest that such differentiation is a first step towards new interventions. What interventions could that be?

Hall (2020) argues that to "invest in social reproduction as infrastructure" requires the "incorporation of reproductive and care work into economic analysis and economic policies" (Pearson & Elson, 2015, p. 9). Maybe a first intervention could then be to broaden the USO debates? Research on USO focuses on its design and financing, but not on the reason for maintaining it (Cremer et al., 2008). The sociality, and the caring work of the rural postal office can be one such reason. Surely, it will be difficult to incorporate for the affordances of social infrastructure escape "the calculus of conventional benefit–cost ratios" (Tomaney et al., 2024, p.27), while some regulatory economists want to base postal regulations solely on economic modelling and rid it of political debates (Cremer et al., 2008).

If included in postal regulations, how could sociality and care be protected and encouraged (Latham & Layton, 2019)? Traill et al. (2024, p. 205) urge to stay "with the ambivalence of, and limits to, everyday articulations of care", to be wary of the uneasy relation between hope and the lacks that call for care. If the postmasters provide that what is missing in the remote, rural municipalities, and bear unacknowledged costs of this labor, should they not be supported in it? Can postmasters' job descriptions be changed? Can the postal office and its regulations become more accommodating of it? Perhaps the postal office could be "retooled" (van Melik & Merry, 2023) as a social infrastructure? Maybe it can become a social and provision center for the remote communities akin to what Emmanuel Macron's government envisioned for rural cafes in France? The French "1000 Cafés" program subsidizes village cafés which are expected to provide, among others, postal services, internet access, tourist information and local products.

If such interventions were to be pursued, how should they be designed? Latham & Layton (2019) underline the importance of public provisioning for SI but does it necessarily have to be a top-down scheme? Tomaney et al. (2024), but also Klinenberg (2018, p. 194), advise against centrally legislating SI, and suggest that the state should rather be its enabler, and that terms of its provision should be arrived at through a democratic process including "an active participation of people and communities whose

lives will be affected." This may seem farfetched but the protests which accompanied closures of rural postal offices and the resistance of Italian mayors (Falconio, 2018), whose involvement in shaping the postal services in their municipalities is limited to a role of a spectator, attest to the need for public participation.

A lack of the participatory processes notwithstanding this study provides a lesson for the provision of social infrastructure in the "left-behind" places. In the Italian villages, the state performs the "enabler" function mentioned by Tomaney et al. (2024). It finances operations of rural postal offices and regulates their functioning, yet thanks to the limited oversight and manageable workload, the postmasters have the capacity to respond to various needs of the local communities. Their work is partially amenable, and this makes a difference. The state enables it but does not constrain it – it is de facto partially decentralized. This is possible due to Italy's particular governance of postal offices, and the corporate decision to keep them in-house as opposed to outsourcing or franchising them as e.g. in the UK.

The overstretching of postmasters as public servants, who provide care and opportunity for sociability, is suggestive of the need for social infrastructure and the importance of its "last" instances in the "left-behind" places. Tomaney et al. (2024) showed that shutting a central co-operative building in North England's mining village was a destabilizing "root shock" (Fullilove, 2016) and a symbol of the village's decline. A potential closure of postal offices in the Apennine villages I studied would have similar consequences, if not more dire for as one patron suggested: "If the postal office closes, the village will die." (Patron, I3).

Rural postal offices, like most other social infrastructures, are "a holdover from a more publicly funded time when infrastructure was more universal and accessible" (DeVerteuil et al., 2022, p. 4). They linger stubbornly but frailly in the remote and depopulating areas and redeem life in the margins (Simone, 2004). As they open on each Monday, Wednesday and Friday, like surviving fireflies, which were a Pasolini's (2014) metaphor for traditional ways of life fading away in the consumer society, they emit their "wonderous intermittent signals" (Didi-Huberman, 2018, p. 21). They are wonderous because they "throw light on unexplored possibilities for a minor politics of survival" (Rossi, 2022, p. 904).

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Chapter 3 - Limits and possibilities of schools as a social infrastructure

Abstract:

The growing literature of social infrastructure has recently enlisted schools as important spaces of public life which contribute to the wellbeing of local communities. Yet, this assertion needs qualifying because schools are often detached from places they inhabit - their faculty and students do not have meaningful relations with schools' neighborhoods while schools' premises are rarely accessible to residents. On the basis of a review of a broad literature pertaining to the school-community interface, dialogue with which is missing in the studies of social infrastructure, and a participatory action research conducted with a high school in Poland, this paper interrogates the idea of schools as social infrastructures. It identifies obstacles which undermine the potential of schools to serve their communities: placelessness of education, its standardization and marketization, exhaustion of teachers and students, spatial isolation, and idealization and stigmatization of community. It also discusses how these obstacles can be mitigated and exposes how a school can become a social infrastructure against the odds.

Keywords: social infrastructure, school, place attachment, place-sensitive education, pragmatism, participatory action research

> "What forces are stirring that awaken such speedy and favorable response to the notion that the school, as a place of instruction for children, is not performing its full function - that it needs also to operate as a center of life for all ages and classes?"
>
> John Dewey (1902, p. 73)

> "Opening the 'school walls' connects schools to their communities, favoring ever-changing forms of learning, civic engagement and social innovation."
>
> Organization's For Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) (2020, p. 49)
> one of four scenarios for future education

Introduction

Over one hundred have passed since John Dewey's article in the *Elementary School Teacher* called for integration of schools and their neighborhoods. This call is often repeated but remains mostly unanswered. That schools should create "stronger relationships with their communities has been promoted by governments, educators, (…) and community developers" for decades (Cleveland, 2023, p. 12; Cummings et al., 2011; Gruenewald, 2008). Recently literature concerned with social infrastructure joined in.

Social infrastructures (SI) are important because they enable people to gather and thus underpin communitarian life (Latham & Layton, 2022). They are places "outside the home where (we) nonetheless feel at home" (Blokland, 2017; Latham & Layton, 2022, p. 659): libraries and parks, cafes and bodegas, community centers, barber shops and, some authors suggest, schools. "(T)he role of school", Natarajan (2025, p. 117) writes, "as powerful social infrastructure is significant". Klinenberg (2018, p. 40) sees in schools "our modern agoras, gathering places where we make and remake ourselves and develop a sense of where we belong", and argues that they "shape and sustain entire communities". Boys and Jeffery (2023; see also, Heck et al., 2026) claim that by thinking about schools as social infrastructures new ways can be found in which they could serve their communities. All this, however, often remains but a frustrated ideal.

There is an implicit assumption on which the potential of social infrastructures rests – that they are open to all. Yet schools are not. They are strongly regulated and exclusive spaces (Barker et al., 2010; Foucault, 2020; Gruenewald, 2003), their isolation

rivaled only by private property (Grunenwald, 2008). “They resemble hospitals” rather than homes, a principal told me (P2) (see also, Collins & Coleman, 2008; Philo & Parr, 2000). Why, despite the unwavering conviction that “walls” of a school should be removed, they persist?

The works of Klinenberg (2018), and to a lesser degree, of Boys and Jeffrey (2021, 2023) and Natarajan (2025), do not engage with a broad literature of school-community relations which had developed during the last century (Cleveland, 2023). This literature is so vast and nuanced, encompassing full service and extended schools (e.g., Cummings et al., 2011), schools as community hubs (e.g., Cleveland et al., 2023), place-based education (e.g., Deringer, 2017; Gruenewald, 2003, 2008; Sanger, 1997; Semken & Freeman, 2008; Yemini et al., 2025), geography of education (e.g., Butler & Hamnett, 2007; Kraftl et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2017; Pini et al., 2017), and education and mobility (e.g., Waters, 2017) that adding the notion of social infrastructure in the above specific sense (as opposed to a more applied SI as institutions providing social services) may seem superfluous. I would like to reflect on this pragmatically (Rorty, 1989, 1999) - instead of asking, in an essentializing way, e.g., does the concept of social infrastructure tell us more about what schools are, I ask what purposes this new description may serve and how?

In the Global North but also in Poland, where public services, including schools, have been suffering from austerity and downsizing (Ofori, 2024; van Lanen & Hall, 2025) and marketization (Martindale, 2022; McFadden, 2023), especially in less populated areas (Corbett, 2020; De Cunto, 2024), seeing schools as social infrastructure can help principals and other schools’ stakeholders, policymakers, and scholars grasp their overall potential to contribute to local wellbeing (Boys & Jeffery, 2021, 2023), but also to broadly understood democratic social reproduction. Ralls (2019) claims that if schools’ value to a wider community is rethought, they can become more than heavily regulated and isolated institutions - they can become spaces which enable and integrate social interactions (Hart, 1997). Therefore, my wager is that thinking about a school as social infrastructure can open up a plethora of ways in which schools could relate to and support students and places where they dwell.

The more specific literature usually focuses on selected aspects of said relations e.g., schools-as-community hubs (Cleveland et al., 2023) or full-service schools (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002) emphasize social services’ co-location and putting the schools’

underutilized assets to work. Place-based education (Gruenewald, 2003, 2008) in turn concentrates on how curriculum and teaching methods could be informed by schools' immediate contexts. For schools which may be hard-pressed to demonstrate their value beyond student instruction, and which seek relations with places where they reside (De Cunto, 2024) for other reasons, SI can be a useful umbrella term gathering these and other dimensions of such engagement and thus aiding navigating them.

By surveying the literature of school-community relations, dialogue with which is missing in the SI scholarship, and a participatory action research conducted with a high school in Poland, I explore factors which prevent schools from integrating with their neighborhoods and ways of reducing their isolation. Thus, I qualify the notion of school as social infrastructure and argue that its potential to serve local communities is constrained by anxiety about the safety of students and distraction from standardized educational achievement. To overcome this setback, issues of labor and social reproduction (Hall, 2020), power relations (Horton and Penny, 2023), and, most importantly, place attachment (Tomaney et al., 2024) need to be addressed.

In the next section I explain how schools were hitherto theorized as social infrastructure. Then I revise this understanding building on the scholarship of school-community relations. In the fourth section I describe the research strategy and the case study. Afterwards, I analyze the factors which detach schools from places they inhabit and thus limit their social-infrastructural potential i.e., displacing education, standardization and marketization of schools, exhaustion of teachers and students, spatial isolation, and idealization and stigmatization of community. In the subsequent section I turn to strategies of integrating schools with their neighborhoods. In conclusion I reflect on the merits and limitations of the participatory pragmatic method employed in this study. For us[7] it was rewarding. By inquiring how the studied school could become a social infrastructure, we partially transformed it into one.

School as an isolated social infrastructure

Schools, Waters (2017, p. 4) writes, "… are ubiquitous, pervasive and unavoidable entities." Every city, every town and almost every village and neighborhood have a school

[7] The pronoun "we" denotes the researcher and the research participants when referring to matters decided or done together.

(Collins & Coleman, 2008). It is a rare institution with which nearly everyone had a "meaningful, sustained contact at one or more points in their lives" (Collins & Coleman, 2008, p. 281 emphasis removed; see also, De Cunto, 2024). Schools' influence on social relations is both long-term and immediate.

Schools introduce young people to social dynamics (Biesta, 2015; Klinenberg, 2018). The form and content of this introduction will determine students' lasting social skills, empathy, and attachments (Collins & Coleman, 2008; Dewey, 1915; Klinenberg, 2018; Sanger, 1997). In this sense, Klinenberg (2018, p. 41) claims that schools are crucial for "establishing democratic ideals and instilling civic skills" but this is not sustained by evidence, and often remains more an aspiration than a real achievement.

If education is detached from students' lives, as is increasingly the case, it will disconnect them from their places and communities, favoring individualism over civic-mindedness (Dewey, 1915; Sanger, 1997). This tendency notwithstanding, few authors, and with good reasons, think of schools as important social infrastructures (Boys & Jeffery, 2021, 2023; Klinenberg, 2018; Matthews et al., 2023; Natarajan, 2025).

The vital and often overlooked role of SI according to Klinenberg (2018) and Latham and Layton (2019, 2022) is to afford sociality and encounters and thus support public life. Therein, they suggest, lies the "immediate" influence of schools on social relations. Klinenberg and others explain that schools are central to the social geographies of everyday life – parents weave their schedules around the operating time of schools in which their children spend most of their waking hours (Collins & Coleman, 2008; De Cunto, 2024; Klinenberg, 2018; McFadden, 2023). The relations children develop with their peers and chance encounters among their parents during e.g., morning drop-offs is the daily sociality that a school affords (see also, Collins & Coleman, 2008; Witten et al., 2003). Other authors concur that schools can be "focal points for social interaction and adult friendships networks" (Cook & Hemming, 2011, p. 2). This account is limited, however. It focuses on students and parents; it stays within the school's walls and therefore provides a narrow view of public life.

Klinenberg approached school as a *unit* of study (Waters, 2017), similarly to policymakers who treat schools as generic, standardized institutions, and educational scholars who often see them as islands disconnected from other schools and their surroundings (Thomson & Hall, 2017). Even in geographical research analyzed are schools specific spaces: classrooms, playgrounds, libraries, or campuses (Cook &

Hemming, 2011; Waters, 2017). That is because schools are distinctive biopolitical institutions (Waters, 2017).

Schools are "a bounded portion of geographical space within which certain rules apply and particular activities occur" (Collins & Coleman, 2008, p. 282; Waters & Brooks, 2015). Barker et al., p. (2010, p. 378) invoke the Foucauldian panopticism to describe how school's rules and spatial design create systems of power. These systems serve to produce "docile and reformed subjects" by transmitting "particular values and norms and enabl(ing) the discipline, control and regulation of (students') bodies, behavior and identity" (Barker et al., 2010, p. 378; Philo & Parr, 2000). While in a school students are aware of being watched and "know where the control lies" (Catling, 2005, p. 327) even if they do not always comply. But treating a school, or its facilities, as a bounded *unit* of analysis can be misleading.

Attentive to the schools' insides, this perspective fails to notice their isolation and its consequences for the alleged nurturing of citizenship, sociality, and public life. The spatial and temporal isolation of children from the outer social world and environment is one of schools' defining features (Collins & Coleman, 2008), affecting negatively, as I show later, their capacity to serve as social infrastructures (see also, Natarajan, 2025). What is more, by delimiting a school with rigid boundaries, broader social and economic problems are re-territorialized as "school problems" while students become "partial beings understandable in terms of (…) school-inscribed attributes" – they become "abstract pupils" (Nespor, 1997; Thomson & Hall, 2017, p. 10). This approach obfuscates a long-term influence a school can have on its neighborhood and the interplay between students mobility, their education and place-attachments. Waters (2017, p. 1) applauds attempts at "decentering" this bias (such as, Cheng, 2015; Collins, 2012) and encourages more "spatially-contingent" conceptualizations to which I now turn.

School as a place-sensitive social infrastructure

To avoid the shortcomings of treating a school as a bounded *unit*, its relationality needs to be taken seriously and its links with the place in which it dwells should be foregrounded (De Cunto, 2024). Thinking relationally one can notice a school's uniqueness (but not singularity) and see how it influences and is influenced by its location and neighbors (Collins & Coleman, 2008; De Cunto, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2017; Waters, 2017). As school ethnographies such as Lipman's (1998) exemplify, schools are shaped

by the characteristics, hopes and problems of their neighborhoods while they can contribute to neighborhood's prosperity and identity (Butler & Robson, 2001; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Cook & Hemming, 2011; De Cunto, 2024).

Geographical research on the interface of education and community is rare, yet it is suggestive (Thiem, 2009). It demonstrates the importance of schools by studying the impact their closures have on neighborhoods. For instance, the analyses of schools' closures in Philadelphia by Good (2017), in Chicago by McFadden (2023), in Invercargill (New Zealand) by Witten et al. (2003) or of dismantling of the New Orleans public education system (Huff, 2015) show "how the remaking of public education remakes the city" (Nguyen et al., 2017, p. 5).

Within the scholarship of schools as SI Boys and Jeffery (2023; see also, Cleveland, 2023; McShane & Wilson, 2017) also advocate broadening the lens and including neighborhoods. They argue that schools, often being the most significant local assets, are underutilized. Their facilities - gyms, classrooms or playgrounds - could be made available to residents. Moreover, schools can offer life-long learning opportunities and allow neighbors to participate in schools' life (Boys & Jeffery, 2023). Boys and Jeffery (2023) claim that the need to open schools has been exacerbated by austerity policies which curtailed other social assets. Likewise, Le Nepveu (2023, p. 186) claims that "We no longer build the town halls, the churches and the community health centers that we once did, so schools must play enhanced roles as hubs for community." Boys and Jeffery (2023) see potential in (over?) stretching (Hall, 2020) schools to cover that gap. Similarly, educational research, such as Anyon's (2014) or Warren's (2005), indicates that schools can be vital for communities by providing them with material and organizational resources (Thiem, 2009).

However, this relation may not always be positive and is increasingly challenged (Collins & Coleman, 2008). Schools can be involved in constructing exclusive urban geographies by e.g., being a conduit of gentrification (Hankins, 2005, 2007; Thiem, 2009). Schools may, but do not necessarily do, underwrite civic and democratic values and the communities' broadly understood wellbeing (Nguyen et al., 2017; Thiem, 2009).

Our project therefore sought to understand if and how a school can develop a lasting civic sensibility among its students and support the wellbeing of its community here and now, i.e., if it can become a social infrastructure. We concluded that to do so a school needs to be conscious of its place and attached to it, yet, as I explain later, schools

are increasingly detached (Gruenewald, 2003; Sanger, 1997; Semken & Freeman, 2008; Yemini et al., 2025).

By place attachment I mean bonds between the school – its students and faculty, and its surroundings and neighbors (Adams et al., 2017). Attachment should not be essentialized as a positive and uniform disposition toward a certain place because people can ascribe different meanings to it (Adams et al., 2017) and these meanings change in time. That is why thinking about a school with place attachment sensitized us to what it is that a school could be related to and problematized the notion of place and community - it upset "the idea that the neighborhood is simply the container, or stable unmoving context, for the school" (Thomson & Hall, 2017, p. 17).

This approach is contrary to the discourses of globalization and place branding in which places are reduced to locations to be "charted and exploited" (Greenwood, 2013, p. 94) and attachment is treated as an economic or promotional asset. Here, places were seen as environment, culture, and politics "experienced and understood on local terms" (Greenwood, 2013, p. 94), as "the contact zone of contested place stories"(Somerville, 2007, p. 153).

To be an important social infrastructure a school needs to foster consciousness of such varied attachments and accommodate them. It also needs to participate in place stories and create stories of its own instead of isolating itself. In the next section I explain how we used this relational perspective to study the Social High School nr 5 as a potential social infrastructure.

Research strategy

Pragmatic participatory action research

This study is underpinned by pragmatic epistemology and treats theories not as phenomena they describe but as tools for action (Gillespie et al., 2024; Rorty, 1999). For pragmatists verity of a theory lies in its consequences or, to use William James's words (1907, p. 97), its "cash-value in experiential terms". To see how useful the theory of school as a SI can be, I accompanied a high school in its efforts to build relations with its neighborhood.

Wondering what the theory of SI could enable us to do we sought knowledge that *might work* (Gillespie et al., 2024). We focused on problems, possible "local fixes" and "incremental improvements" (Gillespie et al., 2024, p. 13). We did not strive for certain,

clear-cut assertions but "aim(ed) to repair a ship while at sea" (Gillespie et al., 2024, p. 13). The principal (P2) used a similar metaphor and compared the school to a ship balancing between the waves of educational success, measured with results of the school-leaving exams, and involvement in local initiatives. Moving toward one direction negatively affects the other. More time spent by students on community projects means less time studying. Prioritizing exams leaves little room for civic engagement.

Our goal was to understand how the school can navigate these waves safely and become place-attached and open to the residents without damaging its capability for teaching. Maybe it could redefine what education means for it? For this purpose, we devised a participatory action research project (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Kindon et al., 2007) which I outline below after introducing the case study.

Social High School nr 5

Social High School nr 5 (SHS5) is located in Milanówek, a town of ca. 15'000 residents in the vicinity of Warsaw, Poland's capital. Milanówek was established in the early XXth century by proponents of the Howardian garden-city movement. Initially it served as a summer resort for rich Varsovians, and its architecture is dominated by large, single-family villas. During the communist period central government built an industrial zone and multi-family housing units for its workers to diffuse the bourgeois culture of the town. After the transition to capitalism in the 1990s, Milanówek became a popular location for white-collar class from Warsaw. Despite its garden-like atmosphere Milanówek is deeply divided. It may be only one hundred years old, but the three periods sketched above laid foundations for animosities between different groups of its residents - "What Milanówek needs is to come to terms with itself." remarked a teacher and local activist (P5). Milanówek has one of the highest rates of income inequality in Poland while local politics are contentious.

Social High School nr 5 is positioned at the intersection of the three distinctive parts of the town: the post-industrial zone with high-rise blocks, the old residential area, and newly built houses. It was established in 1989 by Społeczne Towarzystwo Oświatowe (Social Association for Education, SAE), a non-profit. It can be conceived as a part of Polish underground schooling tradition (Janasik, 2012) dating back to Poland's partitions, through the Underground State of the World War II and anti-communist opposition. In the 1970-80s democratic movements in Poland started resisting the state's monopoly over

education and sought to gain a right to create alternative schooling (Janasik, 2012). A group of pro-democratic educators engaged in a legal skirmish with the communist Ministry of Education to legalize their association. In late 1988 SAE came into existence as the first non-state institution in post-war Poland with power to set up schools. Already in December 1988 few teachers from Milanówek formed a committee to create a social school. In March 1989 they presented their idea to residents who proved supportive of it (Janasik, 2012).

With voluntary efforts of residents and teachers the school was established two months later. Initially it did not own any premises. Teaching took place in private houses provided rent-free. Teachers participated in renovating classrooms unremunerated and agreed to lower their salaries to finance necessary initial investments (P13).

The goal of the school, to quote its first principal (also a town councillor), was to provide a challenging education that would turn students into an elite dedicated to civic causes and social service – a view still shared by some of the present SHS5 board members (P25). SHS5's roots are community-based and democratic if tainted by a degree of elitism. They are a source of SHS5's concern with neoliberal influences which, as I show later, have detached education from civic-mindedness and the school from the town of Milanówek.

Social schools, of which there are now one hundred in Poland, are a sort of charter school differing in several respects from their public counterparts. Social schools are usually smaller with classes of 5-15 students (SHS5 used to have ca. 80 students, and only recently doubled that number), and they allow students to choose subjects of interest almost freely as opposed to pre-planned specialized programs. Like all schools in Poland, they are subsidized by the state but there is also a monthly fee covered by parents (ca. 450 EUR), lower than in private schools. Even though throughout most of its history SHS5 did not promote competition and achievement in standardized testing, in recent years it was propelled in national rankings and became one of the best high schools in Poland. This, as I will explain, proved to be as much of a blessing as it is a burden.

I chose SHS5 for a case study purposefully. Most research about school-community relations is concerned with schools in poor and distressed communities (Valli et al., 2016) where they face considerable difficulties and are perceived as "failing" their neighborhoods (Butler & Hamnett, 2007; Collins & Coleman, 2008). Also, schools closed or slated for closure attract attention (McFadden, 2023;

Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019). This in turn is a study of a highly performing school in an unequal but wealthy suburb.

That this is an Eastern European suburb matters too. Majority of educational (Kraftl et al., 2022; Thomson & Hall, 2017) and SI studies (Boys & Jeffery, 2023; Hall, 2020; Horton & Penny, 2023; Klinenberg, 2018; Latham & Layton, 2022; Layton & Latham, 2022; Natarajan, 2025; Tomaney et al., 2024) come from Anglo-Saxon countries. Kratfl et al. (2022) urges us to decolonize this perspective and invites studies from the Global South. Yet, Global East(s), the liminal area not fitting Global North nor Global South (Cima & Sovová, 2022), remains sidelined. It is "not quite rich, but neither poor; not just colony, but neither just colonizer" (Müller, 2020, p. 748). Its interstitial position needs not to be discarded as something to transition from, it can be embraced as informative ambiguity (Müller, 2020). By attending to it I want to enrich the scholarship of school-community relations and SI with observations from an uncommon geography.

Methods

The participatory action research had three phases: understanding the needs and assets of the school, understanding the needs and assets of the neighborhood, and devising ideas for initiatives informed by the previous phases. We planned this sequence to make schools' actions and, to an extent, instruction place-based and to align educational and community outreach goals with local needs. The project started in October 2024, while the fieldwork was conducted from January to July 2025 and used a wide range of methods. All were designed in cooperation with research participants. They entailed: 24 in-depth interviews with faculty, municipal councilors and local government employees, 15 interviews with neighbors conducted by students, photo-voices prepared by 47 students, town-wide survey with over 500 respondents, survey with students, workshops with residents and with students, and classes during which students discussed their place attachments (for a detailed list of methods, see Appendix 1; for a list of interviewees see, Appendix 2).

Not all the methods were initially planned. As the project progressed, we understood better what we needed to know and added new tools accordingly. Their choice was driven by research questions (Gillespie et al., 2024; Morgan, 2014) while their integration took place in the moment of interpretation, both during the fieldwork

(e.g., when interview information was cross-checked with public statistics) and later analysis.

This study was underwritten by the pedagogical potential of places (Gruenewald, 2008) and designed to involve students. We asked them to investigate "places, identify (…) issues, analyze them, and then plan (…) some sort of action" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 640). Similarly to the Freirean tradition of critical praxis (Freire, 2021), our role was mainly to facilitate "the process of reflection and action" carried out by the students (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 640). We privileged the younger grades (high school has four grades, in the first students are 15 years old) because we wanted them to see the results of their work, implementation of which can take some time. We hoped that this would improve their research skills[8], support their sense of efficacy and civic-mindedness (Ardoin et al., 2014; Berg et al., 2009).

Students' participation also served as a conduit for forging school-community relations with the inquiry itself. Community-based action research can help students reconnect with their environments (Ardoin et al., 2014; Gruenewald, 2008; Hart, 1997), make them question the social construction of places and recognize their own capacity as place-makers (Gruenewald, 2008). As the principal put it "Even if the only result of the project was that the students investigated this area, got to know the neighbors and talked with them, that they now recognize and greet each other, I would deem it successful." (P2). But we wanted to involve the residents more.

Kerr et al. (2016, p. 279), having conducted a broad literature review, noticed that agendas for community-oriented initiatives are often developed solely by professionals. Likewise, Rivera-Yevenes (2023, p. 282) observed that the community's perspective is "overlooked in academic research about schools as community hubs". We managed to solicit few in-depth perspectives of the neighbors with semi-structured interviews and residents' opinions on a wide range of topics with the town survey. Where we failed to engage them were workshops attended only by two persons despite having some, but apparently not enough, publicity.

[8] Some students and teachers were trained by the researcher in qualitative and quantitative methods. Others actively participated in creating the research tools under the guidance of the principals and the researcher (e.g., writing survey questions, testing, and refining the surveys). They were also involved in the interpretation of the town survey's results and in planning initiatives that the school could implement.

This fieldwork and its analysis were an exercise in perspectival realism (Gillespie et al., 2024). It was an abductive process of forming both a perspective (theory of a school as a social infrastructure) and reality (of a school). How that reciprocal forming changed the school will be discussed in the penultimate section. But first, I turn to how it problematized the theory.

What detaches schools from places they inhabit?

A social infrastructure that is isolated from its surroundings and people who live nearby is an oxymoron. Schools, however, are increasingly disconnected (Gruenewald, 2008; Hart, 1997). In this section I discuss factors which detach schools from their places and thus constrain their capacity to serve as social infrastructures broadly understood i.e., to build and maintain relations with local communities, to afford encounters and socialization, to provide instruction which imparts democratic ideals and civic skills (Klinenberg, 2018) and to support social reproduction (Hall, 2020). Their selection could not be exhaustive; I chose only those most consequential: displacing education, standardization and marketization of schools, exhaustion of teachers and students, spatial isolation, idealization and stigmatization of community.

Displacing education

School is an institution of cultural pedagogy through which states impart ideals of identity and conduct (Apple, 2013; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Green, 1990; Spring, 2014; Thiem, 2009). They do so through regulations, spatial arrangements (Barker et al., 2010), and most importantly for my argument, through geographical imaginaries - "territorial affinities, spatial fields of reference, and other frameworks" that "explain who 'we' are collectively and individually, who 'others' are and how the world works" (Thiem, 2009, p.161, quoting Morgan (2003)). These imaginaries, as I explain below, are often incompatible with place attachment. Instead of sociality and civic-mindedness Klinenberg (2018) hoped for, they promote isolation and individualism (Sanger, 1997).

Children's Geographies (2011) special issue on education explicates that governments focus on raising students' aspirations (Brown, 2011) and assume "that social mobility is hampered by emotional connections to place" (Hinton, 2011; Kraftl et al., 2022, p. 18), echoing new economic geography which promoted the idea of productivity-based spatial sorting of people (Venables, 2011). As a result, students are supposed to

"learn to leave" (Corbett, 2020), for in this rendering "local cultural attachments are inevitably constraining, while a universal outlook is inherently liberating" (Tomaney, 2013, p. 662). The infusion of education policy with mainstream economics is caused by education increasingly being treated by policymakers as a crucial element of economic development and national competitiveness (Kraftl et al., 2022; Mitchell, 2017; Pini et al., 2017; Thiem, 2009; Vingaard Johansen et al., 2017). In Poland, the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s encouraged by the World Bank (Sliwerski, 2015) emphasized that education should be viewed as investment in human capital and a trigger for social mobility. This tendency was reinforced in the 2000s and 2010s when Poland sought to align its education system and its governance with that of the European Union (Klatt, 2024). The Ministry of Education's strategic priorities of that period were "aligning education with the needs of the labor market" and "creating effective system for quality assurance" (Klatt, 2024, p. 568). But individual social mobility became a dominant purpose of education also due to parental pressure.

This pressure is fomented by careerism (Semken & Freeman, 2008) and importance of educational achievement in narratives of neoliberal knowledge economy and contemporary middle-class reproduction (Thiem, 2009). They equate a good citizen with a globally competitive worker (Mitchell, 2017; Thiem, 2009), while education is expected to cultivate "economist forms of 'global' thought and conduct" (Apple, 2013; Gruenewald, 2008; Spring, 2014; Thiem, 2009, p. 161; Yemini et al., 2025). The underlying disdain for parochialism (Tomaney, 2013), be it in state policies or individual aspirations, is anathema to the idea of school as an institution geared toward the local community. What is more, it can make a school work to the community's detriment.

"(N)o one", writes Geertz (1996, p. 259), "lives in the world in general" because the world is places (Snyder, 1990). They are a foundational context of our experience (Malpas, 2018; Sanger, 1997; Tomaney, 2013) and in that sense they are pedagogical (Gruenewald, 2008). Our identities (Kyle & Chick, 2007; Malpas, 2018; Tomaney, 2013) and possibilities are shaped by the attributes of places where we dwell (Gruenewald, 2008). And we influence them too. What places can teach us "depends on what kinds of attention we give to them" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 621) and education can either illuminate or obscure this interdependence. What happens when it so often does the latter?

According to Dewey (1897, p. 79), "education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience". If it values other things than what students' lives contain, it will disconnect them from their environment (Sanger, 1997, p. 5) and hinder the learning they could have received from it. Students educated in a place-blind manner will not only think instruction they receive unrelatable, they will also be trained to turn away from their places and communities; they will be, to use David Harvey's (1996, p. 314) words, "abstracted from the material world of experience in particular places".

Furthermore, as Tomaney (2013), quoting Berry (2007, p. 39), warns: "Without a complex knowledge of one's place, and without the faithfulness to one's place on which such knowledge depends, it is inevitable that the place will be used carelessly, and eventually destroyed…" (see also, Sanger, 1997; Semken & Freeman, 2008). Likewise, in his essay "How My Schooling Taught Me Contempt for the Earth" Bigelow (1996) argues that the education system enclosed him for 12 years inside a building and made him inconsiderate and oblivious to his surroundings.

Such inhibited perception is notable in SHS5 students' reflections about the school's neighborhood. When asked what and who constitutes it, they indicated spatial dominants such as a supermarket, an adjacent park and a kindergarten, most claiming that they do not know who lives in the area and which places are important for these people. The area's lavish greenery was noted by just a few students and one of them demonstrated heightened place-sensitivity writing "…when I think about the school's neighborhood it seems calm, with clean air, a wide variety of birds, including one beautiful starling, but also squirrels and cats…" (S3, Open questions). She went on to describe the neighborhood's environmental and social composition and speculate about socio-economic factors affecting them. Hers was however the only such place-sensitive an answer.

Individual social mobility as education's sole purpose is irreconcilable with the civic-mindedness and sociality Klinenberg (2018) endowed schools with. It is a significant constraint of what schools can achieve as SI[9]. It can even be harmful to the places where they dwell – students are schooled in indifference to their surroundings and instructed to abandon them. Education which is bound to a narrow goal of admission

[9] That is not to say that it is impossible for schools to adopt other purposes. Primary schools for instance seem to be less affected by the cosmopolitan ideal, and there are schools, also secondary, which try to resist it.

to a university and embarking on a career excludes educational purposes and activities which do not serve it. Students cannot be distracted.

In SHS5 the longing to allow students to wander, to explore, to make mistakes and find what interests and motivates them, to engage in social initiatives, trampled by the necessity of molding them into "education machines" (P5), was shared by many teachers – "I am not sure if we are preparing them for life (…), we are certainly preparing them for university." (P4). Attempts to change this, such as local action research projects carried out by the students, are difficult to organize. They are possible, e.g., a study of the disappearance of newspaper kiosks or mapping of illegal waste dumps, but they come at cost. "We can clearly see", the principal (P2) noted, "when children are involved in community projects. It is immediately visible in the lower results of tests, exams, and assignments". Cultivating place-sensitivity and attachments seems incompatible with standardized curriculum to which I now turn.

Standardizing education

Earlier I argued that by paying attention to school's linkages with places we can notice its uniqueness (but not singularity) (Thomson & Hall, 2017). It is because places, and schools, are heterogenous (Collins & Coleman, 2008). As with other public services (see e.g., Cieślak, 2025b, 2025a) and social infrastructures (Tomaney et al., 2024), their variety is often subdued by the usually unifying outlook of the state.

Education is central governments' important tool for identity politics and economic development (Apple, 2013). Hence, even in the strongly decentralized Polish system it keeps it in a firm hold and imposes standardized forms of accountability on schools, which in turn constrain what schools can do for local communities (Sliwerski, 2022). The standards regulate curriculum, teachers' and students' conduct, but also skills and outcomes that schools should promote (Gruenewald, 2003). The obligation of schools to publish standardized tests' scores rests on the "assumption that student, teacher, and school achievement can be measured by classroom routines alone and that the only kind of achievement that really matters is individualistic, quantifiable, and statistically comparable" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 620). This assumption, underpinned by a conceptualization of school as a bounded *unit*, is misleading because it, being oblivious to a variety of local factors, reterritorializes them as features of a school (Nespor, 1997). It obfuscates the wealth of suburbs such as Milanówek and extra support its students

receive in a form of private tutoring (P4), or challenges students face in less fortunate neighborhoods. What is more, standardized testing and curriculum decontextualize learning (Deringer, 2017).

The uniformity of school standards, conventional educational policy suggests, advances social justice (Gruenewald, 2003). It is supposed to support marginalized people and help them integrate with society (Gruenewald, 2003) but Linda McNeil (2002) worried that the language of standardized accountability obstructed democratic debates about the purpose of education. There is little room for asking to whom and for what schools should be accountable. Currently, the standardized economistic purview dominates and dislodges discussions about schooling "far from communities" that schools are supposed to serve (Deringer, 2017; Gruenewald, 2003; McNeil, 2002, p. 246). Their accountability lies with state-imposed guidelines and the market, not with connections between people, education, and places (Gruenewald, 2003).

Standardization in the Polish case affects many aspects of education, but its most evident in curriculum and external testing. It was especially acute in the period of 2015-2023. The reform of 2016 has limited the agency of teachers and required close adherence to the state-imposed curriculum - "The Polish government knows what students are to learn in Polish schools", writes Mendel (2022, p. 34) and adds that "teachers are merely there as technicians of a homogeneous knowledge". This reform was broadly criticized and was seen as a backward step:

> The effectiveness of teaching is based on rote learning (the entries about memorizing texts are repeated several times); student activity, referring to student interests, respecting and shaping internal motivation for learning and reading, and developing skills in relation to the child's own experience, are neither assumed nor valued. Only external motivation, or coercion, is important (Biedrzycki, 2016; Mendel, 2022).

The language of standards and accountability "lacks a vocabulary for place" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 642), and sociality replete with difference. There is little possibility of teachers to devise educational activities drawing from the local context and attending to local knowledge. It is very difficult to involve student's lived experience of their places in education. Whether a student lives in Warsaw, small town by the sea or a village in the Tatra mountains, Polish school offers her a single image of the world and unified knowledge, or a "commodity of education" as Leszek Balcerowicz (Balcerowicz,

1999), the minister of finance who designed and implemented neoliberal reforms of the early 1990s, put it. And he was on point. Standardization would not have been so powerful a constraint, were it not for the marketization of education.

Marketizing education

Marketization of education, enabled by standardization, parental-choice and school-zoning removal, pressures schools to compete with each other. What is more, it broke the spatial contract between schools and households and thus gave birth to a commuting and detached student.

School-zoning facilitates strong connections between schools and communities, but they have been challenged by neoliberal reforms and displaced by the market (Collins & Coleman, 2008; Kerr et al., 2016). Such reforms, favoring competition and self-interest, supposedly empower parents to choose a preferred school (Witten et al., 2003). This in turn, the neoliberal theory implies, shall impart pressure on education providers to perform better, and consequently improve overall educational outcomes (Bukowski & Kobus, 2018; Butler & Hamnett, 2007; Collins & Coleman, 2008). Allowing parental choice has effectively broken "the spatial contract linking schools and their immediate neighborhoods" (Collins & Coleman, 2008, p. 292) and freed parents from the "tyranny of place" (Witten et al., 2003, p. 220) – that is the requirement that their children attend the nearest public school (Collins & Coleman, 2008).

Now when choosing schools the empowered middle class scrutinizes their performance (Collins & Coleman, 2008). School rankings based on high stakes standardized exams are a sour and ambiguous issue for SHS5. A respondent in the town-wide survey wrote "From what I know this (SHS5) is the best high school in the region, excluding Warsaw. I will for sure consider it in the future for my children if it manages to maintain a high level and position in the 'Perspektywy' (EN: Perspectives) ranking". As a teacher remarked: "Even though the principal says he is primarily concerned with students' development, it is not the full story. He cares a lot about the rankings. Three years ago we were the third best high school in Poland." (P4). She added that parents are constantly monitoring how each school fairs in the country-wide comparisons and noticed their growing importance.

> "This is difficult for us", she admitted, "because achievement in tests strengthens our position, but we are having more and more 'corporate-kids' and 'corporate-

> parents' who forget that it would be good if the students could explore their passions instead of being forced to study so much. (…) I would like the school to give students more freedom to grow instead of the sole focus on the curriculum and results." (P4).

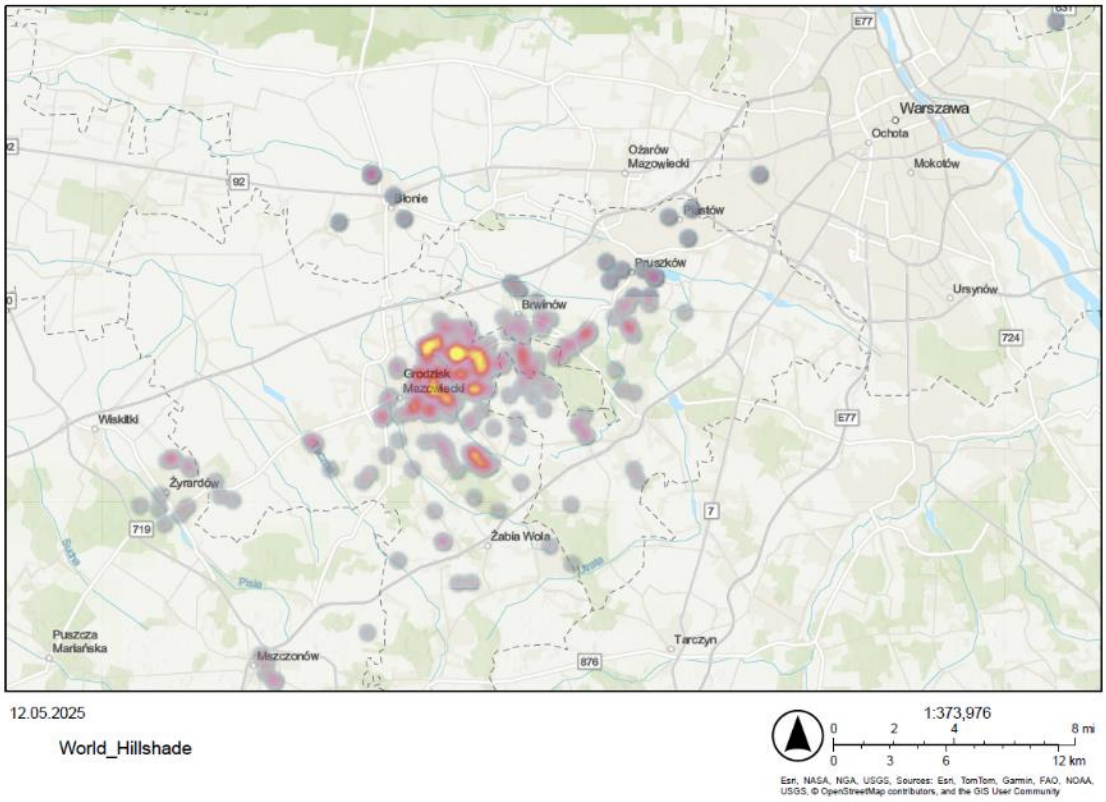
By the strong position, the teacher meant a high probability of the school's survival. SHS5, as other high schools in Poland, is not subjected to zoning. It means that it can enroll students from anywhere within a commutable distance. It also means that if it becomes unattractive for whatever reason, the enrollment can fall and make its financial situation perilous. The pressure neoliberal reforms hoped for is real for SHS5 and consequential. We noticed that as the school improved its esteem through rankings it became more elitist and its catchment area grew (see, Map 1). This has two effects.

First, the higher the school's rank, the more sought after it becomes and the more competitive selection of students is. With the bigger pool of candidates coming from further away and more competitive admission, fewer children from Milanówek enroll. We observed a steadily diminishing share of students from Milanówek. Currently only 20% of students are its residents (35 of 174), while this number fell to 9% in the latest enrollment (for how parental choice underpins residential inequality and social segregation between schools see, Allen, 2013). Therefore, as in charter, magnet and faith schools (Thomson & Hall, 2017), many of the students do not have any meaningful relations with the school's area and the town.

Asked about what Milanówek and the neighborhood need, most provided answers in the like of "I really don't know. I think that they may lack something, but, when in Milanówek, I only walk from the train station to school and back, and I cannot say much." (S1, Open questions). Others, who are driven to school by car, may be even more detached. "Some students have a sort of limited perception of reality.", argued a teacher (P24), "They are driven by parents in the morning and later driven back to wherever it is that they live. They are not exposed to the external world almost at all." This phenomenon of a commuting pupil is common in the Global North (André-Bechely, 2007; Butler & Robson, 2001; Collins & Coleman, 2008). It not only requires effort and time but also limits the agency of children (Collins & Coleman, 2008) and severs them from the places in which they learn. It reinforces the ideal of the global and mobile individual. In such a spatial arrangement school resembles a temporary depository rather than an important

local social infrastructure. But marketization and the dominant purpose of education to foster individual social mobility have more negative consequences.

They limit the social infrastructural potential of schools by exerting pressure on students and teachers. The more attention is placed on exams, the less time children and faculty have for non-curricular initiatives and forms of learning. There is a tradeoff between students' participation in community-oriented activities such as theater, action research or civic projects and their performance in tests. Parents notice this and react immediately. If their children obtain even slightly lower grades than usual, they resort to



Map 1 SHS5's catchment area

private tutoring (P4). Sometimes they even go further and forbid their children from following activities which do not align with the optimal route to maximizing scores in a predefined selection of school-leaving exams required by a desired university (P4).

> "There are more and more parents", a teacher noted, "who direct their children. Some students openly tell me, I have three such students, 'Oh prof, we are undercover humanists, we would like to specialize in humanities, but parents made us pursue STEM'. This a 'Dead poets society' situation." (P4).

Organizing non-curricular activities requires difficult planning and negotiations between the teachers (P1, P2, P4, P5, P21). If the students are to rehearse a play in the evening, they cannot have a math test next morning (P4). But often it is not possible to accommodate such exigencies, and many students opt out from initiatives because of the anxiety of underperforming in exams. However, it is not that they would not be interested in them. The internal survey indicated that e.g., 74% of responding students would like to volunteer in a local dog shelter and 40% would like to participate in community-oriented activities such as tutoring younger children in a municipal community center, urban gardening, organizing public film screenings, organizing public art or sport events, and action research.

The bind of the market logic is manifold. It underpins the purpose of education and exerts pressures on both students and schools to conform. Students are to become global, mobile and competitive workers while the schools factories thereof. The cost of disobedience is losing out to the competition. But to obey is to have the students' and schools' place-based relations severed. Eric Klineberg's children learned this firsthand when they relocated from New York to Santa Clara County where the sociologist became a visiting scholar (Klinenberg, 2018). In this setting, there is little latitude for schools to be important local SI, especially considering that participation in the educational competition also requires near ceaseless effort. Even if teachers and students had the time to do something with their communities, they often do not have the energy.

Exhaustion of teachers and students

Keavy McFadden (2023), drawing on Simone's (2004) concept of people as infrastructure, showed how schools' materiality and labor are imbricated in social reproduction (see also, Hall, 2020). As Chicago's education system she studied "has been dismantled, destabilized, and privatized, workers have been enrolled as infrastructure itself to augment and maintain networks of care, cleanliness, and education in schools" (McFadden, 2023, p. 10). They were expected to provide instruction and the necessary emotional and physical work (McFadden, 2023). They were, to use the Hall's (2020) term, over-stretched.

In the case of SHS5 such over-stretching of teachers did happen early in the school's history and has now been substituted by over-stretching of a different, but also economic, kind. They both limit faculty's capacity to engage in building relations with

Milanówek's residents. The older teachers who agreed to lower their salaries to finance the necessary initial renovations and who contributed their physical labor to them, now refuse to sacrifice their free time and energy (P13). A teacher (P13) who participated in the setting up of the school argued that

> "Times of idealists are over. Sometimes I joke that these doors were bought with my salary. It is hard to imagine but back in the day we earned less than those in public schools. I worked for low pay and on precarious contracts for years. It took a toll on my pension. But it was my conscious decision, my contribution to the idea of this school. But now it is over. Younger teachers will do nothing they are not remunerated for."

and admitted that she has finally learned to value her free time.

Teachers in Poland are paid poorly, even if in some of Warsaw's prestigious institutions they can earn as much as 50 EUR per hour (P13). To afford middle-class living standards many work multiple jobs and do overtime. High qualifications and responsibilities, along with uncompetitive salary, make teaching an unattractive profession and Warsaw's public schooling system alone is short 3000 education professionals (Gruszczyńska, 2024). "The assumption of the Polish schooling system is that a teacher cannot survive working only full time.", a teacher (P15) claimed and added "One cannot sustain himself unless there is an additional source of income or a supportive partner.". He estimated that, on average, teachers need to work 60 hours per week. This is a ceiling above which there is no time for anything else and extra hours become ineffective (P15). Such workload makes engaging in civic initiatives almost impossible for teachers, yet there still are, as one teacher put it (P15), those "naturally proactive" who somehow find time - in our participatory project many meetings took place in late evenings and during weekends.

This overload of work happens in a context of what some participants called a permanent exhaustion caused by recent school reforms, COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (P1). Teachers had to frequently adjust to the impacts of these overlapping crises. Not only the standardized textbooks changed often, and the high school had to add one more grade as a result of the latest reform, the school had to switch to a sanitary regime and on-line teaching, while supporting refugees from Ukraine in their new environment (e.g., teachers and students taught Ukrainian families Polish). One of the main worries of teachers regarding opening the school to the residents was whether it

has the manpower to oversee this. The faculty, however, is not the only group subjected to demanding work regimes.

Asked whether students have time to pursue community projects or their passions, a teacher answered

> "Yes, if their passion is studying in school, 10 hours of advanced mathematics a week, working on festive days and Saturdays, as sometimes happens… They have 36–42[10] classes each week. There are some students who can handle this and have a passion or hobby, but it usually happens at the expense of grades." (P15).

There is an agreement among the faculty that students are tired, but whether it is caused by excessive demands of the school and parents or over-stimulation with digital devices is not clear. In either case, both staff and children not only have little time but also energy to engage with local communities. It does not mean that it is not possible, as some teachers and students already do so, but more profound and regular engagement with Milanówek's residents would require careful organizational changes. What may however prove a sturdier hurdle to opening of the school's "walls" are certain legal provisions and their spatial emanations.

Spatial isolation

Gruenewald (2003) suggests that schooling could be among the most common human experiences of spatial isolation. The enforced separation of children from culture and nature is its prominent characteristic against which Dewey and Freire warned (Gruenewald, 2003). The rationale behind it is to temporarily shield children from and prepare them for adulthood (Collins & Coleman, 2008). In this, schools resemble other institutions for which isolation from the public life is an organizing principle – prisons, hospitals or asylums (Collins & Coleman, 2008; Cook & Hemming, 2011; Philo & Parr, 2000; for an extended discussion of the school's biopolitical aspect see, Barker et al., 2010).

The most conspicuous means of isolation is a fence which is legally required in Poland. Even Klinenberg (2018, p. 76), however only in passing, remarked that some schools "put gates and security guards on the perimeter to ensure that only

[10] One class takes 45 minutes. The students have on average 30 full hours of instruction per week (not including tutoring, breaks or homework).

a selected group comes in". Photos 1-2 below from a photovoice exercise in which students and teachers were asked to document places which they dislike show the SHS5's circumference. The second photo made by a student came with the following comment: "The fence is unnecessary. It would have been better if it was removed".

Fences isolate the school, are a visual distraction and connote a sense of threat, exclusion, and elitism (P14) (Huang, 2012). If complemented with camera surveillance, they create a militarized feel (Jahangiri, 2023).

Photo 1-2 SHS5's fences. Source: photovoice exercises.

Rooney (2015) argues that school fences and spiked gates can strengthen community patterns of fear, insecurity and over-protection and limit potential school-community ties. Such regulated entry and visual and institutional borders are absent in the most celebrated types of social infrastructure – parks (Layton & Latham, 2022) and libraries (Klinenberg, 2018; van Melik & Merry, 2023) – characterized by unencumbered access. Although schools could hone social capital by stimulating trust, reciprocity, and cooperation, due to the concern for safety and liability they are designed to be separated which makes "learning" social capital "almost physically impossible" (Fisher, 2000, p. 168).

The concern with safety translates into fencing but also mobility policies. The former are sometimes contested (Boys & Jeffery, 2023) as in the case of a school in Copenhagen's Sydhavnen district. Demonstrating a higher-risk tolerance, it designated parts of its premises as public or semi-public. Another example is Seoul's experiment with the removal of fences which has gone awry (Kim & Han, 2023). In the 2000s Seoul's schools demolished their fences (Bae (2011) in Kim & Han, 2023) and replaced them with plants to create public spaces. They became popular and hosted sporting and community activities (Kim & Han, 2023). But this policy has been reversed after several sexual assaults happened and attracted media attention feeding common anxiety about

children's safety (Kim & Han, 2023). Similarly, children's independent mobility is decreasing for the fear of "stranger-danger" (Crawford et al., 2017; Donnellan et al., 2020; Ergler & Smith, 2023; Foster et al., 2014) or is not allowed at all e.g., for students in the SHS5's first grade.

But who indicates the stranger whose access should be prohibited and the dangers he or she poses? Who has the power to define the sociality a school should foster? From the critical political economy perspective infrastructures produce socio-spatial inequalities (Horton & Penny, 2023). Cognizant of this, when considering school's role as social infrastructure the power disparities undergirding the decisions about "how and for whom (it) is designed, financed, and governed, and who decides these matters" (Horton & Penny, 2023, p. 1715) should not be ignored. Put otherwise, it merits asking who chooses the community which the school should serve, whom it excludes and why?

Idealizing and stigmatizing the community

So far, I was using the notions of community, neighborhood, and place lightly, but I claimed that analyzing a school in a place-sensitive manner can help problematize what it is that it could be related to. Now I shall turn to this question. It is important because if it remains implicit, we risk celebrating narrow kinds of sociality and education and perpetuating inequality in access to public services and spaces.

The key I use to make sense of the relations between the school and its various outsides is the concept of encounter. It is prominent in the SI literature for which enabling encounters and thus providing opportunities for social capital to form is the main role of SI. Additionally, encounter is at stake in the opposition between the place-sensitive and place-blind education. To think about schools' relations is in fact to ask what sorts of encounters and among whom the school can engender?

To answer that question I avail myself of Wilson's (2017) interrogation of encounters in human geography. They are of interest for geographers because of their transformational capacity (Wilson & Darling, 2016), which begs caveating for it is not necessarily good or always realized (Halvorsen, 2015). Encounters are experiences of wonder and fear, of fulfilment and risk (Wilson, 2017). Source thereof is difference. What distinguishes meetings within the homogenous group of SHS5 students, often referred to by teachers as a "bubble" (P4), from encounters with the residents is noteworthiness of difference (Wilson, 2017).

In Wilson's (2017) theorization a surprise caused by differences that can "undo our faith in our ongoingness, our sense of consistency as subjects (however inconsistently conceived)" (Berlant and Edelman (2014, p.8) in Wilson, 2017)[11]. In so undoing, encounters are central to making and unmaking of borders and therein lies their political and pedagogical potential (Wilson, 2017). The surprises and ruptures in a sense of sovereignty may produce "momentary destabilizations where borders are shifted, exposed, crossed, made, unmade and undermined" (Wilson, 2017, p. 456). They can, but do not have to, transform the subjects involved. If the former happens – encounters are pedagogical. If the latter happens – they can reinforce previously held beliefs (Valentine, 2008).

Surprise cannot be contained or pre-planned which makes encounters unpredictable (Wilson, 2017). As perilous endeavors they may cause unease and fear (Hou, 2016; Listerborn, 2015; Wilson, 2017). This in turn can lead to restricting them (Schuermans, 2016) as we have seen in schools which became isolated institutions in both a material and a cultural sense.

Encounter unites two main threads of the previous subsections – the exposure of students to differences which places and communities can provide, and schools' shunning them due to anxiety about safety and distraction from standardized educational achievement. If the school is to become a SI it needs work against this anxiety. The question is how?

To comprehend what sort of boundary (un)making encounters can help achieve, one needs to attend to the "societal attitudes, discourses and categorizations which shape and constrain them" (Wilson, 2017, p. 456) and especially to whom they pose as desirable parties of encounters. In the literature and policies concerned with school-community relations there are two opposing voices regarding the latter party. Miles et al. (2023) note that the term "community" is never used unfavorably but it is rarely defined. Head (2007) likewise argues that community is a symbolic "spray on solution" which assumes "that all members of an area or group have one voice, or one set of needs" (Miles et al., 2023, p. 104). On the contrary, Kerr et al. (2016) claims that communities are indeed often treated as homogenous but deficient. These normalizing categorizations provide "impoverished notions of the dynamics of geographical communities (…), and of the

[11] This bears resemblance to the Deweyan approach to knowledge creation and education in which an interruption of a habit of thought and action calls for reflection.

actual and potential interactions between schools and the communities" (Kerr et al., 2016, p. 267).

A similar problem is observed for the concept of neighborhood by Thomson & Hall (2017). It is flawed, they claim, also because, as was discussed above, schools enroll students from various locations beyond their immediate vicinity – there is no easy equation between a school and its neighborhood. Yet, even if the catchment area does not neatly correspond with the schools' location, there may still be relations between it and its surroundings (Thomson & Hall, 2017). Finally, Bertling (2018) and Kerr et al. (2016) raise alike concerns over the meaning of "place" and warn that without understanding of its complexity implementing place-sensitive education can be compromised. We therefore needed to let go of the idea of a unified community, neighborhood, or place.

As Miles et al. (2023) and Thomson & Hall (2017) advise, there are usually multiple communities, individuals or neighborhoods involved. And good questions to ask, Thomson & Hall, p. (2017, p. 77) claim, is "How many neighborhoods are inside this school?" and what are (or could be) their relations with it? SHS5 is located at an intersection of the three distinctive parts of the town: the post-industrial, the old, and the new residential. It is positioned to cater to the divided and often conflicted groups of residents. When considering how the school could relate with them, what it could offer to foster socialization, we faced several issues, both on the side of the school and the residents.

Within the school there were opposing images of community that the school could open itself to. On the one hand it was seen as offering a meaningful difference, on the other hand, as dangerously deficient. Most teachers, but also students, appreciated that engaging with members of various communities, be they seniors, residents of the pre-fabricated blocks, students of other schools, city councilors, or families in need, either by inviting them to the school or reaching out to them in the town, could be a transformative and enriching experience. It was seen as a way of bursting the aforementioned "bubble" in which the students live. Teachers claim that students are sheltered from the outer world and live within their like-minded group of peers where their values and privilege are rarely questioned, where they are treated only gently (P2, P4, P13, P14). But students were interested in engaging with the residents of Milanówek, also non-human ones.

Apart from the survey in which they expressed willingness to engage in community-oriented initiatives, some of them, having seen through a school's window

a group of elderly residents participating in outdoor dancing classes, wanted to join them and wondered how this could be made possible. Furthermore, for some students the interviews that they conducted with the residents were enchanting (Wilson, 2017). The principal noticed that now the interviewees and students recognize and greet each other in the streets (P2). Another enchanting encounter happened during a geography outdoor class when a resident passing by asked if she could join it and astonished the students by having posed the most questions (P24). These positive experiences notwithstanding, the idea of opening the school was marred by anxiety of threats this could pose.

One social primary school in Milanówek experimented with making its sports pitch available to the public and had to deal with vandalism and rubbish including emptied bottles of alcohol and needles. Faculty of SHS5 feared that a similar thing could happen if the school invited residents to its premises in an unsupervised way. Some asked who would bear the responsibility if something happened to a student or if a student had an unpleasant encounter with an intoxicated person. The opinion of the principal (P2) is exemplar of such anxieties:

> "I think that we as a society are not yet mature enough to use this potentially opened space kindly, that we would look after it. I don't think that this would be so. It is obviously only my belief. Maybe I underestimate the residents of Milanówek and Polish society, but I am full of doubts.".

Yet, despite these doubts, he would like to avoid installing monitoring systems and considers experimenting with a gradual opening of the school's space to the residents. He, as some teachers, believes that if students encounter difference, even if displeasing, this would be pedagogical.

Such encounters are happening already when students venture into the nearby supermarket and meet homeless people who stay in front of it. They also happen indirectly when students visit the adjacent park, partially vandalized and littered (see Photos 3-5). These but also other traces indicate how the school's material boundaries are porous. The administrative employees (P20) told me that young people from this area regularly jump over the school fence during weekends to use its outdoor furniture. They leave waste behind but never destroy anything while the cleaning staff does not mind taking care of it. Through these indirect encounters a tacit agreement on a certain border

has been made between the trespassing adolescents and the school's employees – the space can be used but not damaged.

In our study we had another indirect and, to an extent, disenchanting encounter with the residents. We conducted a town-wide survey to understand the needs of Milanówek's residents. On this basis we wanted to devise attractive initiatives, both material such as opening of the schools public space or making its premises available for residents' led projects and experiential, such as sport, art or educational events. Our hunch, only partially confirmed, was that Milanówek lacks social infrastructure and that the school can act on that gap.

We learned that some residents are unwilling to engage in the social life of the town. As a municipal councilor observed, the class composition of Milanówek does not favor active communitarian life (P16). For wealthy residents, Milanówek is where they sleep while Warsaw is their place of work and entertainment. He noted they may support community initiatives financially but will not show up in person (P16).

The last question which remains is who decides whom the school should invite and what sort of encounters it should seek. As in many cases of school-community projects, the search for sociality and place-attachments has been driven by few faculty members and on their further effort the whole project rests (Chandler & Backhouse, 2023). Therefore it is them and the involved students who influence the image of sociality and place relations that the school pursues. Still, they are held in check by other teachers, standards and regulations, and, to a degree, parents (P2, P21). Despite the anxiety, and save for legally required exclusions, the school remains willing to arrange encounters with various residents of Milanówek, including animals in the nearby natural reserve (P6). But they will necessarily be curated and supervised. The unencumbered sociality, as in parks (Layton & Latham, 2022) and libraries (van Melik & Merry, 2023), is out of question.

In this section I have discussed factors that constrain schools as social infrastructures and argued that such status should not be ascribed to them lightly. Schools' increasing detachment resulting from the subjugation of education by the individualistic ideal of social mobility, standardization and marketization, exhaustion of teachers and students, spatial isolation, and the problematic question of who are the communities that the school could support, are all significant obstacles. Before concluding, I briefly discuss how despite these setbacks we imagine SHS5 to become a social infrastructure.

Photos 3-5 Adjacent park, litter, vandalism, and the school in the background. Source: field study by students.

Cultivating place attachment and becoming social infrastructure

Extant literature and our participatory action research offer a range of ways in which schools can build relations with their surrounds: places, neighborhoods, and communities. They are all promising means to encourage meaningful encounters and to make education more place-sensitive and civic. Their variety shows how broad school's role as social infrastructure can be.

In our case, they are attempts at dissolving the school's physical and institutional borders by arranging what Amin (2002) called micro-publics – spaces and initiatives which foster integration, cultural exchange, but also destabilization and transformation of the ways of being and relating (Sandercock, 2003). They are drawn across a spectrum of inward and outward movements, of inviting the town of Milanówek to the school and of extending the school into the urban space. Majority of them have been proposed by students, some by teachers and residents. They are listed in the Table 1 and discussed below. What is necessary while orchestrating them, be it through animation or design (Fincher, 2003), is attention to varied meanings of a place and publicness, but also to inequality and exclusion.

Latham and Layton (2019), following feminist pragmatist philosopher Elizabeth Anderson, emphasize that publicness of SI, similarly to a place, can mean various things for different people and can be practiced in multiple ways. Hence, SI should not be conceived as hinging on a single idea of publicness but as accommodating its diversity. This is especially important when there is power disparity and prejudice among people involved. Even if participation in the micro-publics is beneficial for the minority groups such as seniors or less-fortunate residents, it can be stressful for them (Valentine, 2008). Encounters must then be arranged carefully and on the terms of the less powerful.

Moreover, to alleviate prejudice an unadulterated encounter may not be enough. Prejudice is rooted in community-based narratives which are difficult to destabilize (Valentine, 2008). To do so, students, faculty and residents may need help. To accommodate difference, they have to be prepared for and assisted in processing it. Put otherwise, diversity has to be incorporated in the broader pedagogy of the school. Place-sensitive education and the social-infrastructural role of the school need each other.

With the above caveats in mind, during workshops we devised ideas for micro-publics drawn across a spectrum of inward and outward movements. Students who in the initial phases of our project seemed detached needed only a nudge to direct their attention

toward their surroundings. They responded eagerly, engaged in the workshops, and showed enthusiasm for the prospects of making some of their ideas happen.

The students and residents were first briefed about the outcome of our previous analyses, especially the needs and assets of the nearby and more remote neighborhoods. Then they were given a set of personas representing various archetypes of residents (e.g., seniors, youth, working parents, university students). They were asked to modify the personas based on their knowledge and to come up with ideas for school-community relations building initiatives that would be attractive for the school and the residents (it was moderated with a series of exercises[12]). As a next step we will assess the feasibility of these initiatives and select a few to be implemented in an experimental manner (possibly initially using low-cost or low-effort prototypes). The whole process is based on a service design methodology (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2012).

What we ended up with is a mix of potential initiatives blending various approaches to the school-community interface such as more-than-school or community school (e.g., the psychological counselling), place-conscious education (e.g., outdoor classes, action research), extended school (e.g., internships in municipal institutions), social infrastructure in a civic-liberal vein (e.g., making school's space and premises available to the residents, soft-entry solutions, community-facing events), and also independent mobility (e.g., bus routes modification).

Apart from these ideas and student's enthusiasm for place-conscious activities, there are two interesting observations regarding the workshops. First, the participants, especially the faculty and residents, when discussing social infrastructure of the town and what the school could offer emphasized that we need to think holistically and relationally, i.e. that SHS5 should cooperate with other institutions, including other schools, and jointly create a network of social infrastructures. In this way, the participants reasoned, we could avoid overlaps, help each other, and provide the residents with varied infrastructures and services. This resembles the logic behind Miles et al. (2023) concept of school and community infrastructure networks.

[12] Detailed workshop scenarios can be made available upon request.

Initiative	Description & comments
Inward	
Making the school's public space temporarily available to the residents	A temporary soft-entry solution.
Making the school's premises and classrooms temporarily available to the residents	After school-hours.
Opening the school's library to the residents	
Outdoor sport area	Creating a small outdoor sport area accessible by the residents.
Craft workshop at the school's border	Accessible from the outside of the school and from the school area (teacher's and resident's idea). Residents proposed that students could use the workshop to hone their technical skills by creating locally needed objects (e.g., related to the renovation of old villas and small architecture). Teachers concurred and argued that learning manual and craft skills would be beneficial for students.
School café	Setting up a make-shift café run by students and open to residents.
Temporarily opening the fence which separates the school from the adjacent park	E.g., so the students could join the seniors in their outdoor dancing classes.
Removing or temporarily opening other fences	Possible only for certain school areas.
Inviting residents to, hitherto internal, events and trainings such as lectures about entrepreneurship	E.g., classes about CV drafting or creating a start-up.
Inviting residents to join students' sport clubs and to train together	
Arts and sport events on the school's premises	Student-led, e.g., using the fence as an art exhibition space.
Outdoor cinema	Organized by students, open to the residents.
Flea markets, food markets, and fairs	Organized by students, open to the residents.
Creating a community garden and an inviting green space	Curated and looked-after by the students, open to the residents.

Fostering civic involvement of residents	Inviting the city council (also the senior and youth councils) to organize some of their sessions in the school. Civic engagement classes by teachers and students open to the residents, e.g., workshops about preparing participatory budget applications, municipal legislative initiatives, and public information access requests.
Classes for seniors about using smartphones, internet and digital devices conducted by students	Organized by students, open to elderly residents.
Continued education and adult education	The school could provide various classes for adults in the evenings (resident's idea).
Place-conscious education	Cooperation between firms and associations in Milanówek and the school in designing certain classes in way that they would use local information and issues, e.g., the entrepreneurship assignments of students could be based on business challenges of Milanówek's firms (resident's idea).
Psychological support for youth	Since SHS5 employs a group of psychologists and youth in Milanówek suffers from increasing rates of anxiety and depression, residents suggested that the school could open its psychological counselling to non-SHS5 students (in cooperation with the municipality) (resident's idea).
	Outward
Action research	Student-led research projects about the social and natural phenomena and issues of Milanówek which would involve the residents (e.g., in the like of previous projects such as a study of the disappearance of kiosks or mapping of illegal waste dumps). Currently considered project is mapping of vandalized electoral posters and trying to understand how political sentiments vary among Milanówek's districts.
Outdoor classes	Physical geography and chemistry classes in a nearby natural reserve. Some of the classes could be open to the residents.

Partnerships with residents, local government and municipal council	The faculty, but also the students and the residents, emphasized that if the school is to provide either its space or some sort of service to the residents, it should be done in cooperation with them and with the municipality in order to avoid overlaps and to obtain institutional and financial support. The first step towards this, a signing of a letter of intent by the mayor and the principal, took place during our project.
Internships in the municipal institutions	Students proposed that they can spend some time interning in various municipal institutions, including those providing cultural and social services. It should be organized on flexible terms that would allow students to adjust their internships to a varying study workload.
Volunteering	Two main ideas for students' volunteering are helping out in a local dog shelter and tutoring younger children in need in a municipal social services center.
Community theater	Continuation of the existing initiative in cooperation with the municipal cultural center. Student theater with plays open to all, organized either in the school or in the municipal cultural center.
Art, sports, cultural, events	E.g., art exhibitions, dog parades. Student-led, open to residents.
Urban gardening	Re-activation of a community garden in the park adjacent to the school. The garden could be cultivated by the students as part of their biology and chemistry education and could be supported with municipality with necessary equipment (using the public-common partnership, specifically the local initiative[13]).
Urbex	Student-led and open to residents explorations of Milanówek's urban space and mapping of abandoned villas.
Thematic street festivals near the school	Student-led, open to residents (e.g., Easter, Halloween).

[13] Local initiative is a regulated form of cooperation between residents and local governments in Poland. Local governments have to respond to initiatives proposed by residents. Such

Integrating walking tours and fundraisers	Student-led, open to residents. The goal of these walks is integrating residents and showing them different parts of the town.
Association for social infrastructure and events	Students proposed to form an association that would support the development of Milanówek's social infrastructure and, importantly, ensure that residents are well informed about it.
Cooperation with the Milanówek's cultural center	Cross communication and promotion, jointly organized events.
Informational screens informing the residents about social and community initiatives	Students and residents noticed that publicity about social infrastructure and events is lacking in Milanówek. They proposed an infrastructural solution of a website and information screens in various parts of the town.
Modifying municipal buses routes so the students and other residents can use them more often	This infrastructural idea resulted from the student's frustration that bus routes are not aligned with school hours. If they were, students could use public transport more frequently and meet residents doing so.

Table 1 Community-facing initiatives

Second, students communicated a need to pierce their "bubble" and to make their education more place-conscious and applied. One of the initiatives they were very eager about were the internships in municipal institutions. They saw in them not only social value but also a chance to learn "real-world" applied skills and earn some money and thus gain a bit of independence. Doing such internships would also help them compete in the future job market. They appear to be a place-conscious, socially useful initiative which could co-exist with the market-oriented overarching purpose of education. In this ambiguity they resonate with the claim of McFadden (2023) that schools, as infrastructures of social reproduction, are crucial for capital accumulation, but they are also important sites for resisting that process.

The workshops provided us with ideas on how to move forward. They seem promising, but whether they could work, we can learn only by trying them out. Some of

initiatives should be designed to serve their neighborhoods (e.g., installing small architecture, organizing events). Local government supports them with tools, materials and expertise up to a certain threshold of estimated value. Residents cannot receive funds, only support and materials, and need to commit their time to the initiatives.

them may be compromised by rigid barriers such as the legal requirement for a fence. Others would require careful planning and negotiations, e.g., as with organizing the very workshops which was only possible in the end of the school year when the students had a rare moment of brief respite. What we therefore have are hopeful but uncertain propositions. Uncertainty is not their flaw, however. As Rorty (1999, p. 33) argues, to seek certainty is to "attempt to escape from the world", and we wanted to stay as close to it as possible.

Conclusions

Thinking about a school in a relational way helped us understand what it could and could do for a place where it dwells (De Cunto, 2024) and if it could become an important social infrastructure. Similarly to what van Melik and Merry (2023) noticed for libraries, we learned that creating a social infrastructure of encounters in schools is difficult. There are many factors which prevent them from engendering the sociality authors such as Klinenberg (2018) or Latham and Layton (2022) value in public spaces: the increasing detachment of schools underpinned by individualistic, cosmopolitan and economistic purpose of education, standardization and marketization, exhaustion of teachers and students, spatial isolation and anxiety about differences encounters which community can foreground. Having these issues, schools are utterly different from most social infrastructures. Unlike community centers, parks, or libraries, schools are highly regulated institutions, access to which will remain restricted.

These tendencies apply to schools in the Global North, from which most of the literature on the detachment of schools originates, but also to Poland. Yet, there are important nuances rooted in the legacy of Poland's transition from socialism to capitalism. Polish schools on the one hand have been subjected to extreme neoliberal and economistic treatment, yet the yearning for self-governance and democratization of schools, however weakened, can still be traced.

Democratization and self-governance of schools have been present as an important value in Polish pedagogical thought since at least the late XVIII century, but they repeatedly clashed with and were truncated by the state (Sliwerski, 2015). During the transition from socialism to capitalism, the democratic opposition proclaimed that schools should be governed by teachers, students and parents, while the Ministry of Education's role would only to support them (Sliwerski, 2015). This radical and hopeful

ideal was short-lived and in 1990s and 2000s “the utopia of democratic education and education as a common good” has been destroyed (Sliwerski, 2022, p.25). In that period there were over 70 reforms or modifications of the Polish educational system, many of which gradually shifted the control over education to the state (first already in the 1993) (Sliwerski, 2022). Despite Constitution of Poland implying that legislation shall decentralize public power, Ministry of Education has consolidated its control over education, (Sliwerski, 2015). It now maintains a vast network of auditory and control units which oversee schools (Sliwerski, 2015).

This process of centralization happened in parallel to Poland’s embrace of neoliberal capitalism. World Bank has imposed on Poland a strategy of reforms in the neoliberal spirit, which also affected education or, as Sliwierski (2015, p.34) puts it, which “started the process of devastation of valuable elements of Polish education system”. The economic reforms have reduced or entirely removed financing for holiday programs for students, children and youth associations, libraries, and subsidies for research in pedagogy (Sliwerski, 2015). Leszek Balcerowicz (1999), the finance minister responsible for the remodeling of Polish economy into a capitalist one, treated education as investment in human capital and source of future revenues. He argued that education shall be viewed as a relation between time and money invested in studying and future salaries (Balcerowicz, 1999); he also called education a “commodity”. Poles in the new system were to educate themselves to be mobile and productive (Sliwerski, 2015). This tendency continued well in into 2010s and 2020s and has been reinforced as Poland accessed the European Union (EU).

Klatt (2024) analyzed Polish Ministry of Education’s strategic plans in the period of 2011-2020 and shows how they framed quality of education in economistic and neoliberal terms. For instance, the top two priorities of the 2011 plan were implementation of “legislative solutions for aligning education with the needs of the labor market” and “creating effective system for quality assurance in education” (Klatt, 2024). This plan concentrated on increasing the “effectiveness” and “accountability” (Klatt, 2024, p. 568). Klatt (2024) shows that this emphasis on “employability skills” and links to the “labor market” was persistent in all the plans and legitimized by reference to EU and knowledge economy.

Sliwierski (2015, p. 37) claims that Polish education system may seem effective when viewed through national statistics, but from a close perspective it is clear “that it

has been dehumanized for the sake of efficiency". This efficiency comes at a cost. Not only teachers are underpaid and overworked, Poland has very high rate of parental burnout (Roskam et al., 2021), while 40% of Polish students claim to be exhausted (Bachalski, 2025). This happens while Poland performs well in standardized testing and international rankings, well ahead of e.g., United States in science and mathematics (The Economist, 2013). But the early 1990s longing for civic and democratic schools, however tattered, still remains and fosters the SHS5's resistance.

SHS5 may have been subjugated by an alienating market logic, but this subjugation is not absolute. Schools as infrastructures of social reproduction are crucial for capital accumulation, but they are also important sites of resistance to that process (McFadden, 2023). In the SHS5's history, which resembles the trajectory of Poland, the tension between civic and market values, between solidarity and individualism is particularly profound. The educators who created social schools were allied with the causes of anti-communist opposition heralded by Solidarity. They strived for democratic self-governance and civic education. When Poland transitioned to capitalism in the early 1990s, their role and that of the social schools changed – they ceased to be opposition schools and became a kernel of the newly formed system of public education.

Social schools were not numerous, but they provided institutions of democratic education which were later broadly adopted – e.g., school councils comprising teachers, students and parents. Poland was the only country in the post-communist bloc which has reshaped its education along democratic self-governance (Janasik, 2012). However, as Poland's embrace of capitalism became stronger, the civic education slowly gave way to standardization and education aimed at job market competitiveness.

The legacy of Solidarity and civic roots of SHS5 prevent it from entirely succumbing to the market and parental pressures (e.g., in 2010 it organized an open event concerned with this legacy and the modern meaning of solidarity, see Photo 6 below). That is why it was able to start thinking about itself as a social infrastructure - its longing for "opening the school's walls" is palpable. Students, initially oblivious to their surroundings, reacted to prospects of doing so enthusiastically. Faculty, although not without doubts and anxiety, sees in it an opportunity to stray from the individualistic path and make education more relatable, useful, and place-sensitive. Some residents, municipal councilors, and representatives of local government likewise saw a promise in this.

Photo 6 Poster of the "Picnic of Solidairty: how to be solidary today?" organized by SHS5. Source: Janasik (2015).

What this study achieved, apart from eliciting the constraints of schools' sociality and ideas for overcoming them, was to direct the participants' attention to the place where they dwell or study and the school's role in it. We started to draft a new geographical imaginary which inspired them to reconsider their, especially students', territorial affinities (Morgan, 2003; Thiem, 2009). What is more, we managed to arrange a few meaningful encounters. Students started noticing the space around and got to know their neighbors, ceasing to appear to them as anonymous commuters. Municipal councilors got in touch with us regarding the continuation of the project while the local government showed us new ways in which it could support our ideas. By inquiring about whether the school could become a social infrastructure we started, however slowly, turning it into one and forming place-attachments. We collapsed means and ends (Rorty, 1989).

Hopeful as it is, this study has limitations. We worked with only one school, and schools are heterogenous. In SHS5 we saw many things observed in other countries and types of schools, but it has particularities. It is important to keep in mind that what I called schools in this paper encompasses diverse institutions: primary, upper-primary and high, public and private, faith and charter schools in various jurisdictions. For some of them, what we did in Milanówek may not be possible, for some, it can be redundant for they are already serving their communities well (as e.g., few Australian primary schools discussed in Cleveland et al. (2023)).

The second limitation is a narrow scalar focus of this inquiry. While we paid attention to the school's relations, they were mainly of a horizontal kind. Other than few brief mentions, I did not discuss the state-level legislation pertaining to schools. We took it as an external constraint, but acting on their level could be important for enabling schools as social infrastructures (Thomson & Hall, 2017; Tomaney et al., 2024). This remains a possible avenue for further research.

Finally, we did solicit residents' participation via interviews and the survey, but their contribution to the ideation process was minor. Thus, their voice remains under-represented. We hope to correct that as the project progresses to testing of selected initiatives and obtaining the residents' feedback.

In this, we will move toward place-making and attempt to do what Dewey (1902, p. 73) called "The pressing thing, the significant thing" that is "to make the school a social center". That, Dewey (1902) argued, is a matter of practice, not of theory. But I would forgo this dichotomy. For us, like for Rorty (1999, p. XXV), a "theory which is not wordplay is always already practice".

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Conclusion

By studying public services and talking with mayors and mailmen, politicians and postmasters, students and specialists, residents of Apennine villages and residents of Polish suburbs, I have acquired a new vocabulary. As I observed and slowly learned to speak about their diverse socio-economic practices, previously obfuscated by the mainstream economic language, my scope of possibilities has widened. With it, my commitment as a researcher to try to replace "an unsatisfactory present with a more satisfactory future" and thus replace certainty with hope (Rorty, 1998, p. 32) grew stronger. To conclude, I reflect on how this new vocabulary came about, come back to the overarching research questions, and suggest avenues for further research.

The goal of this dissertation was to bring to the fore the variety of socio-economic practices present in public services along with the consequences of attempts at foreclosing them with economistic discourse. To do so I attended to the instances of resistance of public servants to such attempts. My studies drew inspiration from the pragmatic philosophy of knowledge (Lester, 2022; Rorty, 1989, 1999) and feminist critique of political economy (Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006, 2021), especially the method of reading for economic difference. The former helped clarify what my analysis can achieve. As a pragmatist, I am not concerned with essentialist definitions or correspondence between a theory and reality. I am concerned with problems of everyday life and the utility of theories in alleviating them. Thus, a theory was and remains for me a tool, the verity of which lies in its utility – the "cash-value in experiential terms" (James, 1907, p. 97). The method of reading for economic difference, in turn, helped me to circumvent mainstream economic reasoning and see what matters for people providing and using public services – to pay attention to their lived and material experience of peripherality and neglect in public services provision. Thus I joined the growing strands of scholarship with similar concern such as foundational economy (Bentham et al., 2013; Foundational Economy Collective, 2018; Froud et al., 2018) and social infrastructure studies (Hall, 2020; Horton & Penny, 2023; Latham & Layton, 2019; Tomaney et al., 2024).

In the introduction I posed three overarching questions: How does economistic reasoning affect public services? What does the economistic reasoning miss in its rendering of public services? How do public servants resist subjugating their work to the economistic reasoning? I shall now briefly return to them.

Economistic vocabulary with which the regulations of public services are infused comes with intrinsic purposes such as profitability or efficiency. They, while posed as objective and free of value judgments, mold public services into teleological calculations, or as Latour called it "metrological" projects (Latour, 1987). With the authority and alleged impartiality of the science of economics, these projects constrain public services to what the regulators want to see in them. This has ofttimes detrimental consequences and diminishes, however not fully, the potential of public servants to benefit the citizens. Sometimes, it even causes harm.

In the first chapter we have seen that the autocratic government of Law & Justice reduced the debate about municipal water and sewerage services to the question of low tariffs. The capability of local communities and their representative bodies to choose the tariffs was snatched away. With it, the ability of municipal companies to pursue other purposes than cost reduction was lost. This led, among others, to lay-offs, stagnated salaries of municipal employees and interruptions in provision of new water infrastructure. Risk of similar harm looms over Italian rural postal offices. Their opening hours have already been reduced to three days a week while Poste Italiane contemplates further automatization and digitalization of its services. This makes sense under certain respects but if the human element of the postal office was lost, majority of what the postal offices mean for rural communities would be gone too.

Economistic reasoning shapes public services into an image it can fathom. This procrustean process is often detrimental the employees and patrons because it is oblivious, if not at moments antithetical, to values which are not compatible with the values inherent in the economic theory. Economic theory, in its hubris, aspires to explain all economic activity. But as foundational economy and feminist scholars argue and I show, what we think of as economic practices is infinitely diverse and changes in time. Just because we can attach a price tag to many things, it does not mean they are commensurable (as imply Gross Domestic Product calculations). And to many things no price tag can be attached (despite what methods such as hedonistic pricing attempt to do) – these things, according to Varian (2005) are beyond the scope of economic analysis. But they are an important component of public services provision: self-governance, autonomy, care, emotions, relations, friendship, solitude, or place attachments. They should be included in the debates about their regulation. These values should not be derided as non-economic, for they a part and parcel of how we provide for ourselves.

From this follows the question of who can partake in these debates, because, in the end, it is a matter of incompatible purposes of various people and communities. Currently, regulation and management of public services is often relegated to experts and elected representatives who sometimes liaise with labor unions and trade associations. But it does not have to be that way. For instance in the Polish territorial governance system residents of a municipality are de facto owners of municipal companies, have full access to their operations and information and can participate in municipal councils. They also have legislative initiative and many tools to influence mayors. In this system, even if underused and imperfect, I saw a promise of democratically managed public services and true subsidiarity. But in the two other cases the need for self-governance or democratic control over public services was palpable as well - Italian mayors demanded more say in the decisions about postal offices while the teachers of the SHS5 created their own democratically managed school.

Attention to the role of public servants and their unassuming resistance to the economistic reasoning is my, however modest, contribution to the foundational economy and feminist scholarship. Foundational economy literature examines public services, including the consequences of their degradation by privatization and outsourcing. However, it usually works on aggregate or institutional scales and rarely entails qualitative and ethnographic studies of foundational services. In my opinion, this type of analysis would enrich and strengthen the claims of foundational economy. Feminist scholarship and other disciplines concerned with alternatives to capitalism, such as prefiguration studies, concentrate on households, bottom-up initiatives such as cooperatives, the third sector, and ecology. In this dissertation I showed that public servants deserve to be considered as important actors within the broad category of non-capitalist or diverse economic practices. Their daily work, often against or in spite of the economistic regulations, is unassuming and escapes public attention but it is important. Municipal water companies provide quality services to the residents, engage in the life of their communities through educational activities and heritage projects, support local sport associations and share their know-how with mayors, councilors and other municipal companies. Rural postmasters attend to the various and changing needs of their patrons vastly exceeding their job descriptions. Teachers, even if overworked and hard-pressed for maximizing results in standardized testing, seek ways of providing students with place-based and diverse education.

Barbera et al. (2018, p. 390) writing about foundational economy, the commons and employee-owned companies claim that:

> School managers, health service personnel, local transport experts are actors who have a «fine-grained» knowledge of the territories and their problems and represent a source of diverse applied business models for the provision of foundational assets.

I concur and argue that the same applies to public servants, and both foundational economy and feminist scholarship would benefit from attending to their "fine-grained" knowledge, especially in peripheral areas or other sub-altern geographies where the grip of economistic regulation could be lighter than in the Global North and urban areas or where, as in the case of Poland, legacy of different than capitalist economic orders is still consequential.

Avenues for further research

While I focused on state funded public services and public servants during my research, I noticed other sorts of infrastructures which I have not paid attention to previously, and to which I would like to turn in the future – bottom up, citizen-led infrastructures and systems of provision.

When I was in Northern Sweden, I visited a community-led center located in a deep forest which served nearby villages. It started as a store. In response to the changing needs of its patrons it kept adding new services and products. Now, it is not only a shop but also a café, a small restaurant, a postal office, and a community hall. Its employees help organize other needed infrastructures, e.g., energy infrastructure, as well. The residents contribute to it as customers and with voluntary work. This unlikely, flexible infrastructure resembles Adam Greenfield's utopian idea of a Lifehouse – "a multi-purpose infrastructural neighborhood center, powered with renewable energy, equipped to be as self-sufficient as possible, managed in non-hierarchical, direct democratic way" (Cieślak, 2026, p. 1).

In Sosnowiec, a Polish town located in the post-industrial and mining region of Silesia, there is a single theater. While some feared that it may not have enough audience to sustain itself, it is brimming with life because it prioritized serving and engaging with the local community. It not only organizes plays which draw on local traditions and comment on current problems but operates in the urban space by organizing various

participatory events like performative walks with the residents, classes in schools, workshops and lectures. In its flexibility and diversity, it broadens its role as a social infrastructure and sustains the residents of this troubled area.

These, and other, examples of a caring, flexible and entrepreneurial disposition of peripheral and otherwise neglected communities that cope with infrastructure and service deprivation is what I would like to study next. In the future research I want to understand how such initiatives are possible, what they do, and if the state, instead of legislating or co-opting, could encourage and support them.

These initiatives resemble what AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) has called ‘people as infrastructure’. Simone used this term to explain how people organize themselves to compensate for the shortcomings or lack of physical infrastructures. The infrastructure so understood is open-ended but displays a regularity which can anchor livelihoods, it has no explicit rules of conduct but is coherent (Simone, 2004). I believe, however, that there is more to say about them. I just do not have the vocabulary yet.

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Appendices

To Chapter 1

Appendix 1: List of research participants

Institution	Role	Number of participants
Municipal water and sewerage company	Directors, vice-directors, managers	8
Local government	Vice-mayors	2
Local government	Directors	1
Regional government	Marshalls	1
Labor union	Presidents	1
Other	Lawyers (tariffication experts)	2
Other	Lawyers (local government experts)	1
Senate of Poland and Polish Association of Cities	Senator and the president of the Association of Polish Cities (Zygmunt Frankiewicz)	1

Appendix 2: Interview guide

Interview guide

Date of the interview:

Participant:

Location:

Introduction

Welcoming the respondent

Hello (participant's name). Thank you for finding the time to take part in this interview.

Introduction of the interviewer

My name is (…). I am (…).

Purpose of the interview

As a part of my (…) research, I need to conduct in-depth interviews regarding the reasons, consequences and potential solutions to the crisis resulting from the freezing of municipal water tariffs by Wody Polskie.

The goal of our interview today is to learn your (expert opinion) about these matters.

Duration of the interview, types of questions and plan of the interview

The interview is planned for 30-40 minutes but please don't feel restricted by it. If you want to talk longer, we can go on. Also, if you want to stop at any time, please feel free to tell me and we will stop.

The interview consists of open-ended questions only. As I want to make my research useful for the people involved at the end of the interview, I will ask about whether there are any particular matters I

could look into that would be of interest for you and (participant's organizations).

There are no good or bad answers, and no one will judge them anyhow. We are looking today into your unique opinions about the freezing of tariffs and its impact on (participant's institutions).

If any of the questions feels uneasy or you don't want to answer it for any reason just let me know. It will not be a problem. This interview is supposed to be an informative and pleasant time for both of us.

Privacy and ethics

The outcome of this interview will be used for the purposes of an academic paper only.

It will be confidential and anonymized. You will not be referred to in any way enabling the reader to identify you. If e.g. parts of the interview will be cited in my research you will be referred to as "woman, 30s".

The outcome will be stored in a safe environment and accessed only by myself and my university's IT staff. After the completion of the research, it will be permanently deleted.

If you want, before submitting my analysis of the interview you can review and authorize it.

Consent for recording

Before we proceed further, I need to ask if I can record the interview. The recording will aid the analysis but is by no means obligatory.

(consent for recording)

Informed consent

The last thing before we move on to the interview is your consent to take part in it. Knowing now the purpose, confidentiality, and other matters we discussed, do you still consent to participate?

Please note that you can withdraw this consent at any time, and we will stop and erase the recording.

(recorded informed consent)

Do you consent to use the outcome of this interview for scientific research and education?

(recorded informed consent)

Do you have any questions before we start?

Interview questions

A. Warm-up questions – before the conflict

1. Since when have you been in your current role as a (role)?
Let's move back to the pre-inflation, pre-conflict times for a moment.

2. How would you assess the contribution of municipal water companies (or a selected company) to the wellbeing of (city's) dwellers before the inflation and conflict over tariffs? Why?

   Probes:
   i. Equitable quality of service?
   ii. Physical availability for diverse social groups?
   iii. Financial health?
      a. Profitability
      b. Indebtedness
      c. Infrastructure reinvestment
      d. Are municipal companies considering other municipal institutions?
   iv. Employment terms?
      a. Wages
      b. Unionization
      c. Do employees participate in the decision making?
      d. Types of contracts
      e. Agency employment
      f. Training (citizen capability building)
   v. Environmental performance? Environmental measures and footprint?

3. How would you assess the autonomy of municipal water companies (or a selected company) before the inflation and conflict over tariffs? Why?

   Probes:
   i. State-level regulation
   ii. Regional-level regulation
   iii. County-level regulation
   iv. Municipal-level regulation
   v. EU regulation
   vi. Influence of various shareholders

4. How would you assess the democratic accountability of municipal water companies (or a selected company) before the inflation and conflict over tariffs? Why?

   Probes:
   i. Public or private ethos?
   ii. How can the citizens influence municipal water companies (participatory mechanisms)?
   iii. How can the citizens access information about the municipal water companies (transparency)?

B. Key questions – conflict over municipal water tariffs

Now I would like to move to the current moment and the key questions about the reasons, consequences, and potential solutions of the conflict over the water tariffs.

B.1. Reasons

1. What, according to you, were the reasons for establishing a central regulator and effectively freezing the municipal water tariffs?
2. Where is the situation going currently? Why?
3. Is this direction desirable? Why? For whom?
4. Who is gaining and losing from the status quo / direction of change? How (by which mechanisms of power)?

B.2 Consequences

1. What, according to you, are the consequences of freezing the municipal water tariffs for (selected municipal company)?

   Probes:
   i. In terms of its contribution to the city?
      a. Equitable quality of service?
      b. Physical availability for diverse social groups?
      c. Financial health?
         i. Profitability
         ii. Indebtedness
         iii. Infrastructure reinvestment
         iv. Are municipal companies considering other municipal institutions?
      d. Employment terms?
         i. Wages
         ii. Unionization
         iii. Types of contracts
         iv. Agency employment
         v. Training (citizen capability building)

e. Environmental performance? Environmental measures and footprint?

ii. Its autonomy?
   a. Did become dependent on other entities? External financing?

iii. Its democratic accountability?

B.3. Solutions

1. (Should this conflict be resolved?)
2. How according to you this crisis can be resolved?
3. What can the city of (city) and the (selected municipal company) do to resolve it?
4. How may we prevent this conflict from re-emerging in the future? What would be the consequences (and for whom) of implementing this solution?

Probes:

i. Short-term mitigation strategies?
   a. Cost optimalization?
   b. Curtailing of non-core activities?

ii. Long-term mitigation strategies?
   a. Diversifying sources of revenues?
   b. Diversifying sources of energy?

iii. Freeing of the tariffs? How to fight for it?
   a. What are the conditions of the debate? Can a consensus be reached? How?

C. Research design & snowballing

These were all the core questions. We are about to finish the interview but before we do so I would like to ask two more questions about framing this research further.

1. Is there anything I should focus on in my research that could be useful for you or your organization?

2. Is there anyone with whom according to you I should talk about the water tariffs and municipal water companies?

Conclusion

These were all the questions. Thank you very much for sticking until the very end and sharing with me your opinions and providing useful knowledge.

1. Is there anything you would like to add?

2. Do you have any questions before we finish?

I will transcribe the interview in the upcoming days and will send you the transcription so you could see if I grasped everything correctly, if anything should be removed, added, or maybe further clarified.

As agreed, I will share with you the outcome of my analysis.

Will it be ok for you to contact you at a later stage if I need to clarify anything?

Thank you! Have a good day.

To Chapter 2

Appendix 1: Anonymized list of interviewees

Table 1 Anonymized list of interviewees

Participant	**Role**	**Date of interview**	**Mode of interview**
1	Financial consultant, employee of Poste Italiane	27.05.2024	On-line
2	Postmaster, employee of Poste Italiane	03.06.2024	In person
3	Patron	04.06.2024	In person
4	Patron	03.07.2024	In person
5	Mailman, retired employee of Poste Italiane	08.07.2024	In person
6	Postmaster, employee of Poste Italiane	09.07.2024	In person
7	Patron	10.07.2024	In person
8	Expert and representant of small municipalities	11.07.2024	On-line
9	Postmaster, employee of Poste Italiane	12.07.2024	In person
10	Mailman, retired employee of Poste Italiane	15.07.2024	In person
11	Postmaster, employee of Poste Italiane	18.07.2024	In person
12	(Role anonymized), employee of Poste Italiane	23.07.2024	On-line
13	Postmaster, employee of Poste Italiane	29.07.2024	In person

Appendix 2: Interview guide

Interview guide
(employees | 23.05.2024)

Date of the interview:

Participant:

Contact data: phone - / email -

Age: young / middle-aged / senior

Gender: male / female / non-binary

Role:

Location (incl. description of the environment):

Introduction

Welcoming the respondent

Hello (participant's name)! Thank you for finding the time to take part in this interview.

Introduction of the interviewer

My name is (anonymized). I am a (anonymized) at (anonymized).

Purpose of the interview

As a part of my (anonymized), I need to conduct in-depth interviews regarding the role of postal services in small, mountain municipalities.

The goal of our interview today is to learn your (expert) opinion about these matters.

Duration of the interview, types of questions and plan of the interview

The interview is planned for 30-60 minutes but please don't feel restricted by it. If you want to talk longer, we can go on. Also, if you want to stop at any time, please feel free to tell me and we will stop.

The interview consists of open-ended questions only. As I want to make my research useful for the people involved at end of the interview, I will ask about whether there are any particular matters I could look into that would be of interest for you and (participant's organizations).

There are no good or bad answers, and no one will judge them anyhow. We are looking today into your unique opinions about the role of postal services in small municipalities.

If any of the questions feels uneasy or you don't want to answer it for any reason just let me know. It will not be a problem. This interview is supposed to be an informative and pleasant time for both of us.

Privacy and ethics

The outcome of this interview will be used for the purposes of (anonymized) and an academic paper only.

It will be confidential and anonymized. You will not be referred to in any way enabling the reader to identify you. If e.g. parts of the interview will be cited in my research you will be referred to as e.g. "woman, 30s".

The outcome will be stored in a safe environment and accessed only by myself and my university's IT staff. After the completion of the research, it will be permanently deleted.

If you want, before submitting my analysis of the interview you can review and authorize it.

Consent for recording

Before we proceed further, I need to ask if I can record the interview. The recording will aid the analysis but is by no means obligatory.

(consent for recording)

Informed consent

Last thing before we move on to the interview is your consent to take part in it. Knowing now the purpose, confidentiality, and other matters we discussed, do you still consent to participate?

Please note that you can withdraw this consent at any time, and we will stop and erase the recording.

(recorded informed consent)

Do you consent to use the outcome of this interview for the scientific research and education?

(recorded informed consent)

Do you have any questions before we start?

Interview questions

A. Warm-up questions

1. Since when have you been in your current role as a (role)?

2. Do you live in (municipality)? If so, for how long? If not, where from and how long do you commute?

3. Is it the only location where you work? If not, what are the others?

4. How often do you work here (the opening hours)?

5. Are there any other people working here with you?

6. What tasks does your job entail?

7. Which are the most popular or important postal services for the local community (e.g. mail, parcels, financial services, banking, insurance, pensions, bills, gas & energy, telecommunications, administrative services)?

8. Which of your tasks are visible to the patrons and which are of a back-office type (e.g. opening and closing of the office)?

9. Do you carry out some tasks which are beyond your job description
(e.g. helping the patrons feel in official forms, counseling, socializing and emotional support, looking after things, passing on information)?

10. (for mailmen) Can you provide other services than just delivery?

11. What do you like most about your job? Why?

12. How did your job change in recent years? How do you think it may change in the near future?

13. Do you like the postal office building? Is it significant in any respect? Does it stand out? Is it conveniently located? Is it available to the people with disabilities?

14. Is work in Poste Italiane sought after? Why?

15. Local community:

a. Do you feel as a member of local community? Is it important for you?

b. How is this municipality doing? How has it changed over recent years?

i. What are the most important (social) places or institutions in this municipality (e.g. school, park, library)?

ii. Have there been and investments or renovations recently?

iii. Have any local businesses expanded or have new been opened recently?

c. Did you ever want to work elsewhere? Why?

d. How would you describe the role of postal services / office in this community (municipality)? Are they important? Why?

16. Usage of the postal office:

a. How many patrons a day do you serve (daily/weekly/monthly)?

b. Are there any specific groups of patrons? Why?

c. Are there any businesses in the village for which post office and postal services are crucial?

d. Are there particular times of the day, week, year when the post office is busier? Why?

e. Do you think dwellers are satisfied with the services of your local postal office? What is good about them? What is lacking? What would you (or they) change (e.g. the opening hours)?

17. History of the given postal office (making / remaking / unmaking)?

a. Do you know anything about the history of this particular postal office? When was it opened? How it changed over time? Has its history been written down anywhere?

    a. Has the usage of the postal office or its role changed over time? Why?

b. Where there any conflicts regarding the postal office or postal services in your municipality?

c. Was its closure ever considered and protested? If so, where there any initiatives to save the post office (e.g. alternating opening hours with post offices in other cities, locating other public services in its vicinity)?

d. Do you know about the recent and current changes in the operations of this particular postal office?

e. Does your postal office differ from the other offices? Is there anything special about it?

B. Key questions

Now I would like to focus on the social role of the postal office in this municipality.

B.1 Postal services as a social infrastructure

2. Postal office as a space of encounter

a. Do you recognize you patrons? Do you know their names, occupations, particular needs? Do you maybe know what is going on in their lives (e.g. related to family, health, work)?

b. Would you call any of them your 'friends' or 'acquaintances'?

c. Are there any social practices or rituals which take place regularly (e.g. someone bringing coffee, someone coming every day for a chat)?

d. Do patrons stay longer at the post office to chat after their service has been completed? If so, what topics do you discuss?

e. Are there people coming here in couples or groups?

f. Do people meet or gather in front of the post office?

g. Are there any corporate rules regulating your conduct when serving the patrons?

h. Do you think anyone is welcome in the postal office?

i. Is the post office particularly important for some groups of dwellers? Which one (e.g. age, gender, profession)? Why?

j. Are there any social or public events taking place at the postal office?

k. How would you describe the atmosphere at the postal office?

l. (mailmen): Do you know remember the names of people whom you visit? Do you chat with them? Do you help them in non-post related matters?

m. (mailmen): Do you visit any homebound dwellers?

n. Do you think you, in your work, and postal services in general reduce the isolation of people living in this municipality?

3. Postal office as a <u>communications center</u>

a. Would you say that you are well informed about what is going on in the community? How?

b. Do people ask you about recent news or gossip ('oral mail' - MacConnell (2015))?

c. Do people ask you to pass on information to someone else ('oral mail' - MacConnell (2015))?

d. Are there bulletin boards with local announcements in the post office, and if so, are they used?

e. Is post office used as a space for dissemination of invitations, or flyers of local events or associations?

4. Postal office as a <u>neighbor and counselor</u>

a. Do patrons ever ask you for help, both related to postal matters and nonrelated (e.g. in filling in forms, understanding official letters, reading)?

b. Do patrons ever ask you for advice and counseling?

c. Do patrons talk to you (or call you) just to chat (and feel less lonely)?

d. To which patrons (type of patrons) do you need to attend more or in particular ways?

e. Did you ever receive some exceptional request from a client? What was it? Did you agree to help?

f. Do you perform some tasks for other (local) institutions e.g. local government, schools, associations? Which? How? Why?

g. Do you find trying to help or meet the extra requests taxing physically or emotionally?

h. Would you notice that someone regular client stopped coming to the office and would inquire about what happened to him/her?

B.2 Privatization of Poste Italiane and its projects in small municipalities

Finally, I would like to ask for your opinion about the current projects of Poste Italiane and their potential influence on you and the dwellers of this municipality.

1. **POLIS project**
   a. Have you heard of the Poste Italiane project POLIS? Do you know what it entails? (If no then explain: Spazi per l'Italia, Sportello Unico; use the press presentation).

   b. Do you think the integration of administrative services will be useful for the local community?

   c. Do you think the added work-space will (is) be useful?

   d. Do you think the added public-space will (is) be useful?

   e. Do you think the citizens will use the digital totems?

   f. Do you like how the postal office will be (is) refurbished? Why?

2. **Privatization**
    a. Have you heard that Italian government is privatizing parts of Poste Italiane? What impact this may have on your work, on the functioning of the postal office, and on the villagers?

    b. What would it mean for you and for the local community should the postal office be closed (e.g. longer commutes, need to ask someone to help them, loss of social space, loss of touch with the community, symbolic loss)?

C. Other

1. How did postal services work in the times of distress (pandemic, earthquake)? Do you think they were more important or helpful for the local communities then?

2. Is your work different in this municipality as compared with working in a bigger city? How? Why? (e.g. distance to cover by mailmen, efficiency pressures, targets and indicators, scope of tasks, time pressure, or lack thereof, socializing).

D. Research design & snowballing

These were all the core questions. We are about to finish the interview but before we do so I would like to ask two more questions about framing this research further.

4. Is there anything I should focus on in my research that could be useful for you or your organization?

5. Is there anyone with whom I should talk about the postal services in rural municipalities and the topics we discussed today?

Conclusion

These were all the questions. Thank you very much for sticking until the very end and sharing with me your opinions and providing useful knowledge.

3. Is there anything you would like to add?

4. Do you have any questions before we finish?

I will transcribe the interview in the upcoming days and will send you the transcription so you could see if I grasped everything correctly, if anything should be removed, added, or maybe further clarified.

(As agreed, I will share with you the outcome of my analysis.)

Will it be ok for you to contact you at a later stage if I would need to clarify anything?

Thank you! Have a good day.

References

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To Chapter 3

Appendix 1: Research methods

Method	Purpose	Research participants	Carried out by	Comment
Desk research	To understand the needs and assets of the town, school's history, school's assets, and plans of the local government regarding schools and social infrastructure.	N/A	Researcher	Among many documents analyzed, the most informative was a recent quantitative and qualitative analysis of the needs of Milanówek's residents regarding social services and public spaces commissioned by the local government.
Catchment map	To understand where the SHS5 students are commuting from.	N/A	Principal	
Photo voice	To grasp the students' perception of and needs regarding the school's spaces and the neighborhood.	Students	Students	47 students and 2 teachers prepared photo voices.
Neighborhood semi-structured interviews	To understand the needs of the school's neighbors and their perception of the school.	Residents in the area of the school	Students with principal's supervision	15 semi-structured in-person interviews. It was important that it was the students who interviewed the neighbors. In this way they both got to know each other and started recognizing each other's presence.

Town-wide on-line survey	To understand the needs of the residents and their perception of the school.	Residents of Milanówek (ca. 500 respondents)	Students, vice-principal, researcher	Some surveys were conducted in person by students who visited elderly residents in the municipal social services center for seniors. Despite this effort, the sample is not representative because the quota of the eldest group of residents we surveyed was too small.
Student survey	To understand students' willingness to engage in civic and social projects involving the community.	Students (38 respondents)	Researcher and principal	
Classes with students	To understand students' place-attachments.	Students	Principal	Principal conducted a series of classes during which, using an open-ended questions guide, he discussed with students their attachments to the town of Milanówek.
In-depth semi-structured interviews	To understand the needs, hopes and fears of the faculty and staff regarding school-community relations. To understand the perspective of the local government on school-community relations and on the needs of the town.	Teachers, school staff, local SAE board member, town councilors, local government employees, local activists).	Researcher	24 in-person or on-line interviews lasting from 30 minutes to 2 hours, one was in a written form.
Visioning workshops	To generate ideas for school-community relations building initiatives informed by the previous analyses.	Two three-hour-long workshops: one with residents, one with students.	Researcher	Two residents and 15 students took part in the workshops.

Appendix 2: Semi-anonymized list of interviewees

Research participant	Role	Institution	Date of the interview	Mode of the interview	Duration of the interview
P1	Vice-principal, teacher	SHS5	31.03.2025	Online	30 minutes
P2	Principal, teacher	SHS5	01.04.2025	Online	50 minutes
P3	Teacher	SHS5	01.06.2025	Written	N/A
P4	Teacher	SHS5	18.04.2025	Online	65 minutes
P5	Teacher	SHS5	14.04.2025	Online	40 minutes
P6	Teacher	SHS5	18.04.2025	Online	50 minutes
P7	Teacher	SHS5	29.04.2025	Phone	35 minutes
P8	Teacher	SHS5	30.04.2025	Online	35 minutes
P9	Director	Milanówek Town Hall	28.05.2025	In person	60 minutes
P10	Town councillor	Milanówek Town Council	25.04.2025	Phone	35 minutes
P11	Town councillor	Milanówek Town Council	29.04.2025	Online	70 minutes
P12	Local activist, Manager in cultural sector	Milanówek Town Hall	10.06.2025	Online	42 minutes
P13	Teacher	SHS5	22.04.2025	Online	55 minutes
P14	Teacher	SHS5	29.04.2025	Online	30 minutes
P15	Teacher	SHS5	08.06.2025 and 09.06.2025	Online	120 minutes
P16	Town councillor	Milanówek Town Council	28.05.2025	In person	120 minutes
P17	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
P18	Town councillor	Milanówek Town Council	29.05.2025	In person	40 minutes
P19	Teacher	Other high school	15.06.2025	In person	30 minutes
P20	Secretary	SHS5	29.05.2025	In person	20 minutes
P21	Vice-principal, teacher	SHS5	06.06.2025	Online	70 minutes
P22	Teacher	SHS5	02.07.2025	Online	50 minutes
P23	Teacher	SHS5	12.06.2025	Online	50 minutes
P24	Teacher	SHS5	10.06.2025	Online	40 minutes
P25	Treasurer	SAE board	21.07.2025	Online	40 minutes