The Limits of the German Minority Project in Post-Communist Poland: Scale, Space and Democratic Deliberation.

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of the German minority community in post-communist Poland, focusing specifically upon the Opole Silesia voivodship. I argue that the minority’s successful engagement within democratic fora at all spatial scales allowed the minority to voice its concerns and secure funds to develop its community infrastructure. However, the transformation of the region into a reservoir of cheap labour for Germany has had a negative effect on the minority project, undermining democratic deliberation within the minority, and promoting subjectivities at odds with the project fostered by the minority’s leadership.

Introduction

Since 1989 the German minority in Poland has achieved representation at all levels of government. It has attracted over 250m DM of German government investment to its region of Opole Silesia, and has used these funds to promote its culture, language and the infrastructure of the region. However, despite this success, the minority has experienced a marked and continued decline in support from its constituency. This decline, most readily seen at parliamentary elections, exposes the fundamental limits of politics of identity, and the immense difficulty in constructing more inclusive and relevant politics for the region’s population. In addition, the experience of the German minority demonstrates the tension between the representation of space and the actual social existences which that space produces.¹

This paper traces the development of the German minority in Opole Silesia and explores the limits of its political project. It is contended that the imposition of neoliberalism has freed German minority labour to seek employment in Germany, and this has created a significant disjuncture between those who promote an organic Heimat and those who have come to view Opole Silesia as a location of commodity consumption, status realisation (expressed through consumption) and

¹See Lefebvre, H (2000:53)
leisure. The declining support which the German minority party is receiving is a consequence of the new relationship which those who work in Germany have developed with ‘their’ region and the legalistic methods adopted by the party for seeking legitimacy. Furthermore the suppression of difference within the minority contributes to the organisation’s estrangement from its constituency.

**The demand for recognition**

The emergence of a *vocal* German minority in Opole Silesia during the late 1980s was predicated upon the weakening of the PZPR’s (i.e. Polish Communist Party) formal and informal apparatus of coercion. This was due to Solidarity’s continued challenge to the communist party’s legitimacy and because of the Federal Republic of Germany’s repeated demands that the rights of the German minority in Poland be respected. In addition, two further factors were important. Firstly, the increased interest of the Polish State in the welfare of Poles living in the Soviet Union (that is the families of those who had been exiled from Poland during Tsarist rule, or those who had been removed during and after World War II); and secondly, the disagreement within the German minority between those based in Gliwice (Upper Silesia), who believed that the task of the (unregistered) German minority organisations was to foster emigration to Germany and those based in Opole Silesia who argued that the task was to build vibrant German communities in Poland.

The leader of the Opole Silesia German minority Jan Król (who later changed his name to Johann Kroll) recognised that the development of Polish organisations within the USSR set a precedent for the creation of German organisations within Poland. In October 1988 Król and a small group of associates began to collect the signatures of those who declared themselves to be German, in order to prove beyond doubt that the minority existed. This was a reaction to a statement made by Primate Glemp, who argued that there was no reason to say mass in German in Opole Silesia since there was no German minority. The enthusiastic response to Król’s petition told a very different story; one which the West German government was prepared to listen to. The original petition was sent to the German ambassador in Warsaw, thereby substantiating the claims the German government had been making throughout the 1980s concerning the existence of a German minority in Poland.

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2 In 1984, at the European parliament, the West German CDU proposed a resolution to advise the Polish government to stop discriminating against the German language, in accordance with the norms of human rights and the commitments made through the Helsinki process.
However, it was not until the conclusion of the Round Table negotiations at Magdalenka in 1989 that space for the promulgation of the minority project was created. Solidarity’s victory in the subsequent elections and the formation of the ‘contract’ Sejm opened a ‘conjunctural’ window for German minority activists to extend their ‘space of engagement’ (Cox, 1998). The first success was the saying of mass in German on election day (4th June 1989) at the Silesians’ traditional site of pilgrimage, Góra Sw Anny / Annaberg (St Anne’s Mount) in Opole Silesia. This success was predicated upon the efforts of the sympathetic local bishop, Bishop Nossol. It was the first time since before World War II that the Catholic Church in Poland authorised mass to be said in German.

The next milestone for the minority was the extension of Król’s petition in order to legally register the German minority organisation with the State during 1989. On 24th July 1989, the regional court in Opole rejected the application for formal registration on the grounds that the German minority organisation had the aim of legalising the existence of the German minority in Poland, and was therefore not a social-cultural organ as suggested by the German minority leadership.

This rejection helped to cohere the minority by focusing attention upon the subtle and less subtle mechanisms of discrimination operating during the course of the of the Polish People’s Republic (PRL), and which some argued continued to function in this early period of post-communism. A declaration made by the German minority’s social-cultural organisation on the 7th April 1990 stated: ‘Throughout the period since World War II the autochthonous population has been treated as second class citizens. Our names have been changed. The graves of our kin have been desecrated’. The minority recognised the marginalisation which it had endured as a result of the State’s nation-building project implemented through the ‘diffusion of a single societal culture’ Kymlicka (2001:26). The privileged status of the Polish language and the curriculum of the education system (Talyor 1997:34) worked to undermine the autochthonous population and inhibited participation within the life of the wider community. In short, members of the minority understood that they had been subjected to a regime of hegemonic control, and they aimed to overcome this by emphasising their common experience through the language of identity.

The reconfiguring of the autochthons’ mental map from one which encouraged political passivity to one which demanded political engagement rested upon the conviction amongst the older cohorts that the break with communism gave them the chance to be recognised as German. The close contacts with the German government, through both the offices of the German ambassador in Warsaw, and

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3 Published in Polityka 18/8/1990.
the central government in Bonn, together with the dense network of contacts with the Union of Expellees (BdV, Bund der Vertriebenen) and the Association of Compatriots (Landmannschaften) - two German organisations continuously lobbying the Bonn government on behalf of those Germans expelled from Poland following World War II - eliminated the rigid public/private dichotomy which had paralysed the autochthonous population during the communist era.

The rejection by the Opole regional court stimulated the minority to greater efforts, so that by October 1989 over 250,000 signatures had been gathered. In addition, Chancellor Kohl visited Poland in 1989 and placed the issue of the German minority as a central point of his agenda. During his trip to Krzyzowa, a base for anti-Nazi resistance during World War II, with the Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki he was greeted by thousands of members from the still unregistered German minority organisations. (Registration of the Opole Silesia Germans’ organisation took place in February 1990). This demonstration by the minority was greeted with some surprise by the Polish population and later, with a degree of apprehension.

The 1990 by-election to the Senate in Opole Silesia coincided with the Federation of Expellees campaign to reopen the issue of the Polish-German border. The BdV desired to see a referendum of current and previous residents of the region. It proposed that these people would decide whether Silesia would remain in Poland, become part of Germany or become an autonomous European territory. However, of 2.5 million members of the BdV and some 250,000 members of the German minority groups in Poland, only 200,000 signatures were collected. The efforts of the BdV were soon overtaken by events as, later in the year (1990), Poland and Germany signed a treaty formally recognising the border. Nevertheless, the fairly rapid manifestation of a German minority in Opole Silesia elicited some negative response, frequently daubed on the walls of buildings within the region. These included ‘Nie chcemy Niemca: Slask - Polski ’ (We don’t want Germans: Silesia - Polish), ‘Szwaby do domu’ (Krauts go home), ‘Nie glosuj na Szkopa (Don’t vote for the Hun) and the curious construction ‘Fuck off od Polski’ (Fuck off from Poland).

The rise in anti-German feeling, together with the removal of State coercion, was a key factor in mobilising the autochthonous population. In the gminas (districts) in which the autochons were resident, turnout at the 1990 election frequently reached 80% (Berlinska 1999:216), and some members of the minority responded to the anti-German graffiti with anti-Polish slogans, such as ‘Polacy za Bug’ (Poles over the [river] Bug).
The Politics of identity

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the German minority leadership was able to secure widespread political support in the eastern gminas of Opole Silesia by demanding that their identity as German and Silesian be recognised. Henryk Kroll (the leader of the German minority, son of Jan Król and, from 1991, German minority MP), for example, declared: ‘Jestem Slazakiem i Niemcem’ (I am Silesian and German) and ‘Ich bin Schlesier’ The minority organisation’s constituents, the autochthonous population of the region, responded and participated in meetings and electoral campaigns to secure representation at the Senate in the 1990 by-election, at the local elections the same year and at the parliamentary elections in 1991.

The argument that was articulated in this period was one which demanded recognition. It rested upon an essentialised notion of identity, and was grounded in the specificity of national identity. For the older generations (55+), the political issue was clear - ‘We are Germans’, and the demand was to be able to live as Germans in Poland. The particular content of such an identity remained unproblematised in the face of Polish belligerence (expressed in graffiti and newspaper articles), other than a general inversion of the negative stereotypes that had affected the population. This allowed the broad spectrum of social positioning to be subsumed within a rather narrow political programme. The saliency of German / Silesian identity surpassed that of other particularities (gender and class for example).

Nevertheless, the articulation of the minority project was not the neutral unbiased affair which the leadership would like to suggest. On the contrary, the very foundation of the TSKN and the formulation of its objectives reflected the concerns of the men within the oldest cohorts who ‘sought approval for what their lives were and for themselves as German’. However, this project was able to garner the support of the vast majority of the autochthonous population (consider that Kroll in 1990 won 1/3 of the vote, and the autochthons constitute approximately 1/3 of the population) in the early 1990s, as it was the first time that

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4 Interview with Joachim Nieman, TSKN co-ordinating office, Opole 21/2/00
5 Interview with a commentator on the German minority 23/2/2000, Opole. The demands of the German minority were published in Gazeta Opolska 8/11/1990. Jerzy Wutte of the Sejm Commission on National and Ethnic Minorities refused to look at them since he believed that their real author was the BdV. He was not alone in this view, Dietmar Brehmar of the German minority accused the minority’s central council of nationalist tendencies and dependence on the BdV, and suggested that the demands made reflected the concerns of the BdV rather than the German minority in Poland.
an autochthon was specifically able to represent his community. Amongst the autochthonous population, the key advantage that Kroll had in the Senate elections of 1990, and which the 500 candidates who stood in the local elections later in the year shared, was that they were not Poles (Urban 1994:113).

However, this comparative advantage was to be short lived. The politics of identity should be understood as a strategic moment in the struggle to secure substantive equality; it cannot form the continued basis of cohesion once this has been achieved. Following victory at the local elections, came responsibility of governing, and for making difficult decisions concerning resource allocation. Under this pressure, together with the easing of anti-German sentiment, the politics of identity began to lose its efficacy.

The political practice adopted by the German minority could easily have become less exclusionary, and a sustained attempt was made in this direction: to include the non-autochthonous population in the wider project of improving the economic and social infrastructure of the region. The most significant co-operation occurred in 1997, in order to sustain the Opole voivodship prior to the State’s administrative reform which cut the number of voivodships from 49 to 16. However, important factions within the German minority leadership were extremely reluctant to expand the party’s constituency (as they believed that this threatened the entire rationale of the organisation), and this severely restricted the policies adopted. Furthermore, the post-1989 period has re-ordered and re-positioned members of the autochthonous population within the wider social structure, and this has multiplied the needs and desires of the population in relation to the situation in 1989.

As Young reminds us (1997:385), ‘Individuals are not positioned as social group members because they have common identities or interests... that distinguish them entirely from others. Instead the social positioning of group differentiation gives to individuals some shared ‘perspectives’ or social life’. A major factor in the break-up of the ‘German’ minority is the creation of new social positioning in the post-1991 period. This re-ordering is closely connected with labour migration to Germany and with the fundamental rupture in the understanding of Germanness between those who are (temporarily) exiled by their need for employment, and those who remain outside this configuration of labour exploitation (largely, but not exclusively, pensioners).

**Migration: Unmaking Germans**

Richard Donitza, a senior TSKN (the German social-cultural association - the German minority’s organisation) figure based at Gogolin, estimates that up to 70,000 people from Opole Silesia are working in Germany at any one time, mainly
from the younger cohorts (18-34).\textsuperscript{6} As the journalist Teresa Kudyba has documented (in the Polish newspaper \textit{Gazeta Wyborcza} and on German television), thousands of young men from Opole Silesia have been engaged in the ‘rebuilding’ of Berlin as labourers, bricklayers and craftsmen.\textsuperscript{7}

This is a new form of migration. Prior to 1990, emigration was substantial, and temporary migration almost unheard of. With the reorientation of German foreign policy (see below), emigration has been greatly reduced, and temporary labour migration has increased significantly. Figure 1 below shows the changing nature of emigration from Poland to Germany.

\textsuperscript{6} Analysis conducted by the Silesian Institute in Opole gives a similar figure. See Heffner, K and Solga, B (1999:23)

\textsuperscript{7} Interview with Teresa Kudyba, \textit{Gazeta Wyborcza}, 3/3/00, Opole
The labour migrants' work is temporary and poorly paid in relation to the German social wage. Furthermore, the costs of the production and reproduction of this labour force is not paid for in Germany. Rather, these substantial costs are displaced to Opole Silesia. The lower costs of labour reproduction there form a significant factor in encouraging the employment of Silesians in Germany. From the perspective of Capital, the situation is ideal. As Harvey (1999:162) points out, ‘to the extent that workers can support themselves, the value of labour power is diminished and the rate of accumulation increased’. However, the Silesian workers’ ability to support themselves outside Germany is merely a displacement of commodity consumption to Poland. The return to Opole Silesia at the
weekends, or once a fortnight, allows those working in Germany to stock up on foodstuffs, fuel and any materials they may need for their work at significantly cheaper prices than in Germany. Thus, the benefits of employing a ‘self-sustaining proletariat’ is accompanied by the Silesians’ complete reliance upon wage-labour, thereby reducing their ability to withstand the varying demands of Capital.

Those working in Germany are economically positioned at a significant disadvantage to their German co-workers and have thus been exposed to Capital’s exploitation of differences in the labour market, and have experienced discrimination and marginalisation. In addition to low wages and exclusion from many social benefits (since 1993), Silesians endure negative stereotypes and, importantly, the denial that those from Opole Silesia are Germans. However, it should be clear that the rationale for the ‘Othering’ of the Silesians owes as much to the economic competition they represent for segments of the German workforce as much as any alleged difference.

Nevertheless, the German minority leadership remains largely supportive of the temporary labour migration to Germany. Edward Flak, mayor of Olesno, points out, ‘it is good that they go, earn money and return to Olesno and spend it here’. These people therefore do not claim welfare in Poland. Thus the German minority benefits from the economic advantages of reduced unemployment in Opole Silesia, remittances and delayed consumption by its mobile workforce. Richard Donitza sees this as the early stage of capital accumulation, as the money earned in Germany is invested in Opole Silesia, in housing, small businesses and farming equipment. The German minority MP, Henryk Kroll, is more sensitive to the problems migration engenders:

‘It is not good, but it is better if they have work in Germany, than if they would be unemployed in Poland. It is a way out that they can work there… It is not a good solution because they leave their family in Poland for a long time. Going there they are able to earn and save. Coming back to Poland they should set up small firms, craft workshops, so that

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8 As Marx (1992) points out, under capitalism ‘all are instruments of labour, more or less expensive to use, according to their age and sex’. It is recognised that other differences such as ethnicity and nationality are similarly exploited.
9 Interview with Edward Flak, Mayor of Olesno, Olesno 7/3/2000
their children would not have to go there to work. It is better for them to go to Germany for some time, than if they had to leave Poland for good’.11

But the German minority leadership remains oblivious to the high cost of this temporary labour migration has for their political project. Under the conditions operating during the PRL, resentment was stimulated by the banal discrimination that the Silesians endured and which was expressed after the break with communism as a strong German identity. In contrast, the present ‘liberal’ political conditions are failing to make Germans in Poland. Instead, migration out of Opole Silesia has exposed the labour migrants to a whole range of problems. The most important of these is the fact that the Silesians are paid less than their German colleagues, and are treated with less respect, because they are Silesians. The location of the production of Silesian resentment has been transferred to Germany. It is this fact which has made the younger cohorts of the ‘German minority’ indifferent to the political project being carried out in their name.

The most telling evidence of this process is provided by the results of the parliamentary elections in Opole Silesia. Since 1991, the number of votes for the German minority party has declined by 43% at parliamentary elections (for the lower house, the Sejm). Table 1 below shows the results of the elections from 1990-2001. In addition to a declining proportion of votes cast, the number of individuals voting has also decreased.

Table 1: The results of the German Social-Cultural Organisation in parliamentary elections from 1990 – 2001 in the Opole voivodship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>SEJM Turnout in the Opole voivodship</th>
<th>Turnout in German minority gminas*</th>
<th>Number of votes</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Number of Seats won</th>
<th>SENATE Number of votes</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Number of seats won</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>126276</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>74251</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>4**</td>
<td>82031</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>60770</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>69613 a</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>51027</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>68758 a</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>42340</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>46104 a</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*90 refers to the 2nd round of the election
These are gmina’s in which the German minority candidate received over 50% of votes in the 1990 election to the Senate
* These are gminas in which the German minority candidate received over 50% of votes in the 1990 election to the Senate
** Mandates from the national list
This is the number of votes gained by the German minority candidate who received the greatest number of votes.


The decline in the minority vote is frequently explained by pointing to the fact that the older cohorts (pensioners) who formed the solid support at elections have been slowly dying and that between 60,000-70,000 members of the minority are working in Germany at any one time, and therefore do not participate in elections (Berlinska 1999, Ragabalita 2000). Nevertheless, these two important facts are an insufficient explanation. Indeed, those working in Germany could return to vote if they wished and felt strongly about securing the minority party’s mandate.

The politics of identity, which cohered the autochthonous population into a powerful political force, had, by 1991, run its course. The movement from seriality to group proceeded rapidly under conditions of perceived injustice, and the lapse back into seriality occurred as soon as these injustices were largely overcome. The notion of seriality refers to a social collective passively unified by the material their actions are centred by, or the material effects of others’ action. Sartre
(1976) points to the queue at a bus stop, and the listeners of a radio station as example of a series. The relationship in both cases is passive. In short, ‘everyone is the same as the other insofar as he (sic) is Other than himself’ (Sartre 1976:260). In contrast the group is a collective in which individuals recognise themselves as unified through action with one another. Up until 1991 the German minority could be described as a group in the Sartrean sense.

The inability of the minority leadership to socialise the younger cohorts within the imagined space of the older generations has meant that these young people vote, if they vote at all, for mainstream Polish political parties.  

A disjuncture in the perception of Germany has emerged amongst the different age cohorts of the German minority in Poland. On the one hand are the older cohorts, and in particular pensioners, who identify emotionally with Germany and maintain that they are German (even though they may speak German awkwardly). These individuals draw strength from the bitter experience they believed that they endured during the PRL, when the very existence of a German minority was denied. On the other hand are the young people who work for periods in Germany, and have developed a pragmatic attitude to German identity as a result of sustained contact and participation in the German labour market. Those working in Germany have been made thoroughly aware that they are from elsewhere. As for the German minority project in Poland, ‘the young people are just not interested’.

**Cleavages in the Minority**

Within the German minority, age is a crucial factor in members’ strength of identity as German. The older the individual, the more likely he/she is to declare him/herself to be German. This distribution supports Henryk Kroll’s assertion that

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12 Berlinska, D. (1999: 232) credits the minority with securing the votes of just 10% of first time voters and 14.7% of those aged 18-24 in 1997. Significantly, the most popular party amongst these young people was Unia Pracy, the party with the most robust Leftist agenda. 31.5% of those over 50 voted for the minority party, and this cohort is its core support.

13 Members of the older generation also take work in Germany, but contextualise their experience there with reference to their understanding of their treatment during the PRL.

14 Interview with a commentator on the German minority (Male, about 35 years old), Opole, 23/3/00. The commentator’s father is involved in the German Social-Cultural Organisation (TSKN) in the region.
it is ‘the elderly people for whom Germanness, Germanity is very important’.\(^{15}\) Figure 2 below illustrates this point clearly.

**Figure 2: The German Minority’s Classified Identity According to Age Cohort\(^{16}\)**

![Bar chart illustrating the classified identity of the German Minority based on age cohort.](chart.png)

**SOURCE:** Author’s survey 1999/2000(50 respondents)

The older cohorts, the core of the German minority electorate, identify with their community in opposition to the wider Polish society. The politics of identity continue to be played out despite the fact that the minority has achieved substantive equality with the majority. This has led to fractures within the minority, so much so that during the 1997 electoral campaign not a single candidate from the younger cohorts presented himself / herself. Thus, one major factor contributing to the declining vote for the German minority party is its inability to make itself relevant to the younger generations. Since the acknowledged disappointment of the 1997 elections, the situation has worsened for the party (not to be conflated with the lived experience of its ‘potential’

\(^{15}\) Interview with Henryk Kroll, German minority MP, Gogolin. 20/4/2000.

\(^{16}\) This data is derived from a questionnaire undertaken in Opole Silesia between 1999 and 2000. ‘Simply’ refers to those who describe themselves simply as German, ‘Variegating’ refers to those who hyphenate their self-identity – Polish-German, Silesian-German, and ‘Unacknowledging’ refers to those who do not describe themselves as German at all, but are involved in the activities of the German minority.
constituency). The attempt by some within the German minority leadership (Henryk Kroll, for example) to expand the constituency of the party has met with resistance, to the degree that a small percentage of the older cohorts have voted for the Pensioners Party rather than the German minority.

However, the continual decline at parliamentary elections contrasts with sustained proportional support at the local and regional levels. The closure of windows of engagement at the international and the national scales has meant that the local and regional levels become increasingly important. The new minority rights regime, together with the network of contacts at higher scales formed during the past ten years, have created avenues of communication which can be utilised when and if necessary.  

In Opole Silesia, the German minority currently holds 13 seats in the Sejmik (regional parliament), just one less than the SLD, and plays an important role in selecting personal for the key positions of Marshal (leader of the Sejmik) and his/her cabinet (see table 2). The German minority also governs some 26 gminas in Opole Silesia, and is a significant influence upon local and regional politics. This effective engagement allows the minority party to put into practice its project through the apparatus of local government and through the offices of the German Social-Cultural Organisation. (Frequently councillors and mayors occupy similar positions within the TSKN hierarchy). This complementarity enables the minority to pursue its objectives efficiently.

Table 2 Results of the German minority in local elections 1990-1998 in Opole Silesia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
<th>Seats won</th>
<th>% of Seats</th>
<th>Seats in Sejmik</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22 out of 76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>33 out of 82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998*</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>13 out of 35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* A reform of government took place in 1998. To the Opole voivodship was added the powiat (county) of Olesno which has a high proportion of people identifying themselves as German. In addition, the powiat level of government was reintroduced and the election to the Sejmik was direct rather than indirect, as in 1990 and 1994

17 A new minority rights regime has taken shape in Europe since 1989 and is backed by all the major European institutions. See Jackson-Preece, J. (1998).
The turnout at all elections throughout Poland during the post-communist period has been very low and reflects a widespread belief in the inability to effect change through the ballot box, rather than democratic immaturity as some commentators have suggested. Indeed, the imposition of Balcerowicz’s economic package was more influenced by the demands of Poland’s creditors than the electorate. The rapid decline in turnout at elections in the eastern gminas of Opole Silesia is indicative that the German minority party has been unable to sufficiently engage its constituency, and the non-participation should be understood as a refusal to sanction the minority project, or that of any of the other political parties for that matter, rather than apathy. For sure, the minority has secured significant funds from the German government, and basic infrastructure in the region is above country average (Szmeja 2000:110), but this has not translated into fidelity to the minority.

This low level of engagement of the minority subsequent to 1991 in elections is due, in part, to the autocratic style of leadership practised by the German minority elite (Berlinska 1999:242), and also due to the increasing distance between parts of the minority’s constituency and the leadership. This is clearly seen by analysing the different degrees to which the various age cohorts feel that their voice is heard within the minority. In 1999, no one from the 15-24 cohort felt represented within the German minority structures, while 86% of those between 55 and 64 did so.\textsuperscript{18} The general pattern shows increasing feeling of being represented with increases in age. However, 50% of those over 65 felt that their views were not represented, reflecting the tension within the minority between the evident need to extend the constituency (in order to secure electoral mandates) and loyalty to what the older cohorts believe is the minority’s rationale – identity politics.

Sartre (1978) has forcefully argued against participation in (bourgeois) elections, playing upon the fundamental distinction between legal power (embodied in discrete laws) and legitimate power (embodied in praxis). He suggests that elections actually cause harm to the possibility of alternative social relations since they promote ‘serial thinking’. Serial thinking is the thinking ‘of the other which [one] is and also that of all the Others’ (Sartre 1978:202). In other words, serial thinking is the consequence of the plurality of solitudes created by the abstraction of the individual from his / her totality. He states that those born in and socialised by a group (consider the autochthonous population in Opole Silesia) ‘are atomized when large social forces - work conditions under the capitalist regime, private property, institutions, and so forth - bring pressure to bear upon the groups they

\textsuperscript{18} Source: Authors survey completed in Opole Silesia, 1999/2000
belong to, breaking them up and reducing them to the units which supposedly compose them’ (Sartre 1978: 202).

These social forces are acting particularly strongly upon the proletariat (conceived broadly, in both realms of production and reproduction) amongst the German minority, opening up substantial cleavages and exposing the class and gender biases within the minority project. The leadership’s call for engagement at elections is rightly ignored because this is the limit of democratic accountability. The real decisions concerning everyday life are structural, about which democratic deliberation does not take place. The new regime of migration is only free in the same sense that the proletariat is free to sell his / her labour, and it is the awareness of this unfreedom which inhibits the voluntary acceptance of the seriality which the electoral process promotes. The actual programmes implemented by consecutive Polish governments Solidarity, SLD (post-communist), AWS (post-solidarity) have not altered the neo-liberal rationale underpinning the process of ‘transition’ (or rather the creation of a new topography of exploitation). This is well recognised by the Polish electorate, including the German minority who would agree with Sartre (1978: 209) that, ‘To vote or not to vote is all the same’.

Throughout Polish political space, the formation of the group proceeds outside the established political framework and is rigourously opposed by capital, government and the media, including the liberal press (Gazeta Wyborcza is the prime example – its editor in chief is the once celebrated Leftist Adam Michnik). Resistance to progressive impoverishment is manifested in repeated street protests and demonstrations in Warsaw. Farmers, nurses, and industrial workers have all eschewed the ballot box, and indirect democracy, in favour of direct participation. Members of the German minority simply ignore the electoral process and have chosen to evade responsibility and the implied conflict through labour migration. While this action does not challenge the contemporary regime of accumulation within Polish space, it does threaten the entire German minority political project.

**Scale and engagement**

Swyngedow (1997:173) reminds us that ‘scaled places....become the embodiment of social relations of empowerment and disempowerment and the arena through which they operate’. The German minority has pursued a dual strategy of empowerment: firstly, it has successfully participated in democratic fora at all spatial levels in Poland (local, region and national), and secondly, it has ‘jumped’ scale and has mobilised the German government and German NGOs to intercede on its behalf. The ability to access nodes of power outside of Poland in order to
improve its position within Poland has been crucial in the development of the minority throughout the course of the 1990s.

However, the minority’s ability to effectively engage with the German government has been predicated upon its ability to present itself as an instrument of policy implementation. Consequently, as soon as this task has been accomplished, the willingness of the German government to engage with the minority has been reduced.

Since the German organisation in Opole Silesia was dedicated to inhibiting emigration to Germany and to persuading Silesians to remain in their *Heimat*, it became a natural ally for the German government following reunification of Germany in 1990, and the subsequent radical change in immigration policy in regards to the German minorities. In the new geopolitical framework, the incentive to encourage ‘Germans’ living in communist states was removed, and was further undermined by the large projected cost of reunification. For, where ‘Germans’ were encouraged to migrate to West Germany in order to help overcome labour shortages (and thereby reduce the number of ‘guestworkers’ required), the ‘freeing’ of East German labour, together with sluggish economic growth, largely destroyed the tightness of the labour market.

The decline in emigration has been achieved by increasing the incentive to stay in Poland, and by reducing the attractiveness of emigrating. Firstly, the German Social-Cultural Organisation (TSKN) has played a boosterist role in the region. It has secured a significant amount of funding from the German government, and during the early 1990s from German NGOs such as the Federation of Expellees. These funds have helped improve the region’s infrastructure, and in particular the German minority areas in the east of the voivodship. Secondly, legislation in Germany has been passed to inhibit emigration. These measures include a quota on the number of resettlers, the Ethnic Settler Reintegration Act, in force since 1st July 1990, which has drastically reduced the benefits available to resettlers, and the War Consequences Consolidation Act which changed the German nationality policy. It states that those born after 1st January 1993 outside Germany will not be recognised as German - thereby superseding Article 116 of the German Basic Law which gave German nationality to all those, and their descendants, resident within the German Reich in 1937. Article 116 was

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19 On 18th January 1989, German foreign Minister Genscher argued that the securing of minority rights for German minorities would reduce emigration to West Germany. See Kosiarski, J. 1991:57.
important in justifying the West German government’s (mistaken) belief during the 1970s and 1980s that there were over 1 million Germans in Poland.  

On 17th June 1991, Germany and Poland signed the Treaty on Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Co-operation, which includes several articles relating to the treatment of the German minority in Poland and the Polish minority in Germany (Articles 2, 20, 21, 22). Article 2 asserts that Germans in Poland and Poles in Germany are ‘a natural bridge between the Polish and German peoples’ and this metaphor is frequently used by activists of the TSKN. The German minority, has been able to appeal to the German government to intercede on its behalf. In the early 1990s it was fairly successful in effecting action, owing to the German government’s very real concern about migration. This is no longer the case.

**Spatialisation and its discontents**

Lefebvre (2000: 142) notes that, ‘Space is at once result and cause, product and producer, it is also a stake, the locus of projects and action deployed as part of specific strategies, and hence also the object of wagers on the future which are articulated, if never completely’.

Following the 1997 elections, the TSKN leadership was forced to rethink its strategy. The outcome of this deliberation was to invest the annual cash subsidy (in the four years 1997-2001 this came to a total of about 80m DM – but this includes payments directed to the Silesian Development Fund) in the creation and running of further meeting and cultural houses throughout the German minority areas in eastern Opole Silesia. The leadership wagered that these facilities would satisfy a community need and help to cohere the German minority as a community. It was believed that the consolidation of Opole Silesia as the *Heimat* of the minority could be achieved through these institutions. This has not happened, as those aged between 15-34 virtually ignore the existence of these facilities.

The lack of democratic deliberation *within* the minority prevented all relevant parties from being consulted. Most notably, the young, women and the lower classes were largely excluded. Men fill the higher positions of the German minority organisation. This is to a similar degree to which men dominate the entire political process from the local level to parliament within the wider Polish polity. The proposed solution to the German minority party’s crisis reflected the priorities

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20 On 14th December 1983 Alois Mertes, Minister for State at the German Foreign Office, told the Bundestag that there were 1.1m Germans in Poland.
of the older (male) generations and the established cadres of ‘professional’ Germans, rather than the needs of the minority’s alleged constituency.

McNeil (2001:347) argues, ‘Any political project which aims to ‘engage’ with extra-local territorial scales must have a strong discursive dimension, both in the sense of practices of talking and meeting and networking, and in the sense of disseminating this public domain’. The German minority has attempted to do this by exploiting the resonance that the concept of Heimat has within Germany. Heimat therefore plays a dual function. On the one hand, it defines and appropriates space within Poland, and on the other, it aids communication with sponsors in Germany (including the German government and the BdV).

The attempt to orchestrate how members of the autochthonous population of Opole Silesia relate to the place in which they live has been a project underway since 1989. In the first instance the minority struggled against the wider Polish society in order to create monuments to commemorate those (German) soldiers who died during World War II. By 1993 the Opole Voivod (central government’s representative in the region) established a group to negotiate the form of the monuments. The major compromise agreed with the German minority was the replacing of the Iron cross with a Christian cross, the use of Polish place names and the change of words from ‘to the heroes’ to ‘to the victims’ (Lodzinski. 1998:202, Berlinska, 1999:276-296). For the German minority, monuments form a concrete manifestation of the extent of their ‘Heimat’. They also serve to create a particular past and make a particular history. Silesians who died in World War II as members of the German army are finally rehabilitated as sons, fathers and as individuals.

Secondly, the minority has fought to display place names in German as well as Polish. With the development of the new minority rights regime, the Polish State has an obligation to fulfil such a wish if demand has manifested itself, and today a number of villages in eastern Opole Silesia do display German and Polish place names.

In addition, the Catholic Church has played a role in mediating how space is understood and experienced. Its publication, ‘Heimatbrief’, cartographically delineates the extent of the Heimat on its cover. This image reaffirms the religiosity of the German minority by conflating its space with that of the Church, and it suggests the content of German minority identity.

The sense of Heimat is a powerful emotional bond extending to an immediate, and to a wider, environment. It moves beyond the purely spatial, and incorporates an imagined community of those living within the Heimat. Furthermore, it is understood as historical, and so people are rooted in their space. Thus, in imagining this space, it is made a fundamental part of the German minority in
Poland. This point was demonstrated in the campaign to preserve Opole Silesia as a voivodship during the 1997 reforms. As Auge (1995:51) points out, ‘Collectivities (or those who direct them)…need to symbolize the components of shared identity…The handling of space is one of the means to this end’.

However, despite the enviable position that the minority party secured for itself following the 1991 elections, it has failed to handle its space to ensure continued success. Indeed, it is very doubtful whether it could have. The main issue concerns the manner in which Opole Silesia has been incorporated into the circuit of capital. On the one hand, the exceptionality of the region enabled it to secure funding from Germany, but this was secured on the condition that the manner in which Silesian labour was exploited be reorganised.

The costs of the reproduction of labour-power were to be borne in Opole Silesia in exchange for financial support to improve basic infrastructure and train the necessary cadres to carry out the process of reorganisation. This essentially meant propagating the ideology of *Heimat*, but at the same time encouraging temporary labour migration with the justification that remittances and delayed consumption could play a progressive economic function.

The re-defining of the identity – space relationship by the minority leadership is disconnected from how that space is actually lived. Opole Silesia has become, for the labour migrants, a place of consumption, of displays of wealth and prosperity (contrasting with the surrounding Poles), and leisure rather than the organic space imagined by the leadership. The creation of wealth differentials is understood by the older generations as demonstrating Germans’ intrinsic superiority *vis a vis* Poles, but for the younger generations it represents a reprieve from their low status in Germany. The re-imagining of Opole Silesia as a place of leisure by those working in Germany is fundamental to their lack of interest in the minority project and their lack of participation in the newly created social-cultural houses. For them, Opole Silesia represents a ‘break from everyday’, and ‘they mistrust anything which might appear to be educational and are more concerned with those aspects of leisure which might offer *distraction*, *entertainment* and *repose*, and which *might compensate* for the difficulties of everyday life’ (Lefebvre 1991, 33). In Opole Silesia seriality is celebrated.

**Conclusion**

The specific conjunctural window that enabled the German minority to successfully articulate a politics of identity, and thereby achieve representation at all spatial scales, has, during the course of the 1990s, slowly been closing. In the first instance, the success of the German government’s new immigration policy
has removed the objective incentive to provide support for the minority in Poland. It is, therefore, no accident that funding and support from Germany has slowly, but continuously, been declining. As one German minority activist put it in 2000, ‘I think that the German government is particularly sinning, because it does not demand from Poland those rights for us which we have guaranteed’.

These rights include the promotion of German language and other manifestations of German culture. Despite the Polish State’s best efforts (Poland recognises that Germany is a key sponsor for its admission into the European Union), there are insufficient German language teachers. Even the German minority organisation has great difficulty in recruiting teachers, largely due to the substantial wage differences between Poland and Germany. Furthermore, adolescents prefer to learn English rather than German (Berlinska, 1998:4), since English has become the lingua franca of business and, in the Polish context, of upward social mobility.

This represents a very real limit of the minority project. For, although the leadership would like to make Germans in Silesia through the promotion of language and culture, the region’s position within European capitalism has created desires and incentives at variance with the minority’s enterprise.

The minority has lost its presence in the Senate but continues to be represented in the Sejm. This is despite the favourable electoral law of 1993 (in which the minority deputies were involved in framing, allowing them to achieve below 5% of the national vote and still secure a parliamentary presence). However, it is now obvious that the loss of this presence does not constitute a democratic deficit by itself. Indeed, there are a number of avenues for minority representatives to

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21 Interview with Dr Gonschior, TSKN Raciborz, 11/2/2000.
22 For example the German President Johannes Rau declared in Gdansk in June 2001; ‘Poland’s road to the EU is a step that is urgently needed; it should be made possible, as soon as possible. All sides should do everything possible to make this step a success’ (PAP news agency, Warsaw, 24/6/2001).
engage with the apparatus of government. These include parliamentary representation, the Sejm’s Commission for National and Ethnic Minorities (founded in 1989), regional ombudsmen, and the possibility to engage with other scales, such as the Council of Europe’s unit for minorities, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, and, of course, the European Union. This is not to say that a democratic deficit does not exist. It does; both within the minority and without.

On a very basic level, over 50% of the electorate refuse to participate in elections, that is, as Sartre (1978) has argued, refuse to sanction their own alienation. In the case of the German minority, this refusal challenges the sustainability of the German minority’s political project. The period since 1991 has seen members of the minority reduced to seriality, and the particular problems that they face glossed over by their ‘representatives’. Exploitation in the German labour market is paralleled by the intensification of exploitation in the realm of reproduction in Opole Silesia. The ‘absence’ of some 60-70,000 people allows the German minority elite to continue to pursue an autocratic style of leadership, and to present the lower unemployment rates as evidence of their success. Internal marginalisation continues with the failure to give adequate respect to the perspectives of women and the younger cohorts, and in this way the minority organisation fails to respond to the problems its constituents face.

Consequently, those subjected to marginalisation in Opole Silesia, and in the labour markets of Germany, have re-evaluated their relationship with the minority organs and its political project. The retreat from participation is both a cause and a consequence of the unfolding of the minority’s project in the context of Polish neo-liberalism.

The Polish geographer Gorzelak (2001) maintains that Schumpeterian ‘destruction’ is a necessary prerequisite of economic growth in Poland. In this view, the creation of a reserve army, together with the implied weakening of the working class’s position within ‘democratic’ fora, is a positive development. Labour migration eases the social tension within Opole Silesia, but at the same time fosters a climate of fear (Hardt & Negri 2000:323). This is a far cry from the objectives of the German minority leaders, but they must take some responsibility for it, due to their promotion of legal power, autocracy and migration. As Sartre (1976) has shown, the appearance of the series is frequently accompanied by counter-finalities, that is, the summation of individuals’ intentional actions to produce a result that no-one intended. (a good example would be the desire for increased mobility through using the car, the counter-finality would be grid-lock).
In order to break with this cycle of exclusion and marginalisation, the minority must reconnect with its constituency and develop common ground with similarly situated Poles (rather than merely promote the ‘Polish’ spouses of the German minority leadership). This is unlikely as long as labour migration is tacitly supported and the agenda of ‘national’ identity politics is promoted at the expense of the commonality developing in the face of Capital. This is not to deny the reality of situated knowledges, but merely to highlight the fact that emancipatory action is possible and, in this case, necessitates alliance with other actors in the social field.

References


