

## **Transforming workplaces in Polish Shipbuilding. A note on maritime sociology considering the Great Transformation of the sea industry**

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**ABSTRACT.** As a starting point, the article takes the generic proximity of maritime sociology and sociology of work into account. Latest upheavals, such as the restructuring of the Polish industry, have been mirrored in the development within sociology of work theoretically and methodologically and call the whole sub-discipline of maritime sociology into question. This article demonstrates various possibilities how to connect topics of maritime sociology with new approaches to social sciences, deriving from workplace studies, sociology of organization and neo-institutionalism. The transformation of Polish shipbuilding industry is taken as a case study for 1) the organizational changes as a consequence of ownership transformation, 2) the production-based legitimation strategies shipbuilders rely on, and 3) the decline of the production discourse as a significant of Polish economic transformation.

**Keywords:** shipyards, sea industry, maritime sociology

### **1. Shipyards in Maritime Sociology**

The history of maritime sociology is closely linked to sociology of work from the beginning and it could be argued that the development of industrial sociology in the twentieth century was a constitutional element for the rise of maritime sociology. So does Wioleta Bryniewicz for the Polish tradition, which has been established in Polish People's Republic, emphasizing the work environment as a major interest of the authors of maritime sociology (Bryniewicz, 2004: 34-35).

The broad definition that Poland's most important researcher Ludwik Janiszewski gives on maritime sociology consists of a socio-professional category of 'people of the sea' as somebody directly or indirectly employed at the sea industry, for example, sailors, fishermen, port pilots, shipyard workers or dockers (Janiszewski, 1976). One can see clearly the employment basis of this definition for the core class of Polish maritime sociology. According to him, the scope of maritime sociology are socio-economic activities at the sea first, secondly interactions of sea conditions and human collectives involved directly or indirectly regarding the exploitation of the sea and thirdly people influencing each other during the work process on the sea. Finally, the influence of the sea on the nature and direction of human activity.

His successor Robert B. Woźniak sticks to the employment-based, broad understanding<sup>1</sup> of 'people of the sea' that his professor in Szczecin suggested. He argues that the term 'people of the sea' covers the socio-professional categories related to the sea directly, is it as sailors and fishermen, or indirectly, such as shipbuilders or longshoremen. That is why Woźniak was the first to publish an extensive sociological study of shipyard workers in Poland analyzing attributes of the workforce, its work conditions, attitude and cultural models (Woźniak, 1969; Woźniak, 1976). I would like to argue that even in the broadest sense of the term 'people of the sea' this ideal type,

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<sup>1</sup> The broad definition includes people indirectly employed in the sea industry, f.i. shipbuilders.

applied as a research category implies a natural limitation for Polish maritime sociology. The limitation consists in the exclusive focus on cultural and existential features.

Polish maritime sociology is driven by the focus on the agency of workers and professional groups. In contrast, I would like to argue that maritime sociology cannot only investigate the fishermen (Polańska, 1965) or shipyard workers (Woźniak, 1969; Woźniak, 1976) as it did before, but it could focus on the shop-floor, enterprises, and business level. Especially as Polish maritime sociology is challenged by the political economic transformation to approach the maritime industry from a more material side of organizational changes.

There is a famous historical example in Polish maritime sociology, namely Janiszewski's research on the state-owned deep-sea fishing enterprise "Delfin" in Świnoujście (Janiszewski, 1997). In this case study, Janiszewski examines the business history of the enterprise, its organizational structure and labour relations. The interest in the organizational aspect of the shipyard is less common for the Polish maritime sociology. It just happened in the last years, forced by the restructuring and liquidation of Polish shipbuilding industry, that singular approaches are being presented (Kozłowska, 2004).

As German maritime sociology rose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its tradition traces back further than the Polish one. However, it withdrew its institutionalization after the Second World War. Just like in the Polish sub-discipline, German maritime sociology is connected to industrial sociology from the beginning. Ferdinand Tönnies' exploration of the big strike at the Hamburg port in 1896/97 is called the dawn of German maritime sociology (Tönnies, 1897). In the course of the political economic transformation and restructuring of the former GDR-industry and a historical interest in the functioning of the socialist economy and labour, a new interest for shipbuilders' milieu aroused in the new millennium (Alheit, Haack, 2004).

Especially in Poland, the literature on shipyards is no more monopolized by maritime sociology and *plant sociology*, but by political sciences investigating the role of Polish shipyards in the Solidarność-movement. These main narratives on shipyards during transformation written by foreigners and widely spread in Poland don't deal with organizational changes in the shipbuilding industry, but with the shipbuilders' unfair fate. (Keat, 2003; Ost, 2005) This domination of the political science approach leads to a disregard of the workplace and the production experiences and an overestimation of the influence of ideology. At least, one might note that from a from-below perspective. This perspective has to be outlined in the future. Without any doubt, it would be inspired by Michael Burawoy who summed up his findings from field work in Socialist factories in an interview recently: "[O]ne of the most interesting things I found was the ways in which the steelworkers' consciousness was shaped by the workplace in opposition to the ruling ideology" (Edmonds, 2016).

## 2. Transformations from below

In a collaborative, three years lasting project we try to consider the shipbuilding branch, its workplaces and their changes in two shipyards, in Pula (Croatia) and Gdynia (Poland) since the late 1970s. 'Transformations from Below' is carried out by the Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (Regensburg) and the Institute for East European History at the University of Vienna. Its aim is not to lapse into traps of the political science approach. Therefore, the project focuses on three levels of analysis:

1) the study of work at the plants; 2) organizational changes within the plants; 3) transformation of the environment (public discourse). We intend to study the many paradoxes and ambiguities of transformation from a historical-anthropological and social history perspective. The emphasis is put on the (self-) transformations (Dunn, 2004) of individuals, groups and social relations. By focussing on workers and their interaction with managers, we will highlight the importance of everyday practices on the shop-floor for the outcomes of transformations.

When applying such an approach, it is necessary to look closer at the special features of the branch. In contrast to the political science approach, this is also where we can establish a connection with maritime sociology. We can assume that shipyards as production units next to the sea and as producing vehicles for sea exploitation are affected by “marinization” (Janiszewski, 1994). This influences some of the main features of the shipbuilding industry and its labour relations. First, shipyards were major sources of export revenues in Socialism; secondly, because of the high number of employees, any restructuring of the enterprise has large scale societal effects on their localities; there is also a long chain of domestic suppliers who were depended on their orders. Thirdly, shipbuilding is a capital-intensive industry with a long cycle of turn-over and innovation, so that it requires long-term strategizing and a deep financial pocket. Fourthly, the shipbuilding and ship repairing industry are traditionally supported by the state and maintain an intimate relationship to the military industry; finally, it has a productive character and a highly concentrated workforce (Varela et al., 2017).

A further reason for the focus on shipbuilding industry is its social significance during state socialism: the shipyards placed a prime role in the allocation of social benefits, the organization of social life and the production of the community. Shipbuilding companies are a perfect object to study the relationship between socialist and post-socialist pressures to restructure and socially entrenched patterns of the organization of production. One consequence of supply side market-oriented reforms was to reduce the societal functions of the enterprises and to turn them into ‘mere’ employers. This meant that social milieus became less workplace-centered.

### **Workplace changes**

Two of the most important sociological studies in German and Polish maritime sociology of the transformation years are dedicated to shipyard workers. Whereas Peter Alheit pays particular attention to the workers’ milieu, Urszula Kozłowska’s main interest is the workers’ consciousness. Both, shipbuilding milieu and its workers’ attitude postulate ties with the shipyard sector and therefore, can be assumed to be secondary to the workplace as a socialization base and constructive factor which itself gets little attention<sup>2</sup>. Outside the shipbuilding industry, it was Burawoy who pointed out the constructive element of the workplace in the shaping of workers’ consciousness in Socialist countries. Based on his research on socialist production regimes and on other researchers underlining the socialization function (Brunnbauer, 2016: 41; Roth, 2004) and the “knowledge horizon” (Alheit, 1995) of (socialist) workplaces, the workplace and the material side of organization, respectively its change, , become objects of new research interest. The workplace in this perspective is a socially constructed terrain that manifests ideology and hierarchies with an added value of everyday experiences of the

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<sup>2</sup> Woźniak surely recognized this causality beginning his categorization of shipyard workers in dependence of the location of shipyard they work in (sea, river, inland) and their production status (productive/renovation) (Woźniak 1976, p.9).

labour and production process. Burawoy states in a Marxist way that the “production of objects is simultaneously the production of relations – relations of competition and interdependence”, which is true, but that should not tempt people not to take seriously the object as something materialized and experienceable to the worker. Inspired by Harold Garfinkel, workplace studies tried to do that in the last years (Barley, Kunda, 2001; Heath, Button, 2002; Lynch, 1985).

In the interviews that we conducted with workers from the Gdynia Shipyard, we experienced alienation towards the ongoing privatization discourse pushed on by the management. Their production-driven logics cannot grasp that a big enterprise is not profitable in spite of a constant production of big vessels and a full order book. Their workplace experience of production is used as a legitimation strategy; this is what points out an interview with Adam, an engineer from Gdansk, who at the end of 1989 got a job at the Shipyard Gdynia JSC. Even though Adam worked in the period of so-called transformation, commercialization, restructuring, privatization, then kind of re-nationalization and finally returning to trouble and liquidation, one gets to know very few aspects of all these processes in this interview. He talks a lot about building ships, but mostly from the perspective of engineering and the perspective of the design office. “As you talk to more people, probably one of the feelings that appear is regret that this [the shipyard, p.w.] no longer exists. It really was something that attracted people. On the one hand a lot of people certainly were aware that the yard was not very profitable and that it did not achieve enough income; that effectiveness was low and various such matters. However, it always seemed to me that there was some respect for this company among people. This might be because it kept going on that long and there were some concrete results; these ships! Actually, you could see them when you came to a ship’s christening. Sometimes you could come aboard, it made an impression”<sup>3</sup>.

### **Organizational change**

The transformations of labour relations and of enterprises, especially the restructuring in the 1990s, provided a new hype in sociology of organization in Poland. Researchers investigated the transformations of selected branches, the postponement of power structures of old agents and the appearance of new ones such as the Industrial Development Agency JSC in 1991 (Czarzasty, 2010; Deppe, Tatur, 1996; Federowicz, Kozek, Morawski, 1995; Trappmann, 2013). As so far, there was no approach to apply this know-how in the shipbuilding industry with the exception of a political science study by Kamola-Cieślik (Kamola-Cieślik, 2013). In the following, I give a short outline of organizational changes in the Gdynia Shipyard during the first years after 1989.

In 1991, on the basis of the Law on the Privatization of State-Owned Enterprises<sup>4</sup>, the state-owned Stocznia im. Komuny Paryskiej<sup>5</sup> became a joint stock company totally owned by National Treasury and changed its name into Stocznia Gdynia S.A.<sup>6</sup> Ownership changes were accompanied by significant transformations in the branch such as the disappearing of the Zjednoczenie Przemysłu Okrętowego<sup>7</sup> and the decoupling of the

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<sup>3</sup> The interview was conducted by Piotr Filipkowski, translation by Peter Wegenschimmel.

<sup>4</sup> Ustawa z dnia 13 lipca 1990 r. o prywatyzacji przedsiębiorstw państwowych, Dz.U. 1990 nr 51 poz. 298.

<sup>5</sup> Engl.: *Paris Commune Shipyard*.

<sup>6</sup> Engl.: *Shipyard Gdynia JSC*.

<sup>7</sup> Engl.: *Union of Polish Shipyards*.

Centrum Techniki Okrętowej<sup>8</sup>, till then responsible for new ship projects, and Centromor, the sole ship exporting agency of all Polish shipyards. The functions they fulfilled were now internalized and included in the statute, so that the “manufacturing” as the only statutory object of the shipyard was replenished by “designing” and “commercial activities including foreign trade”<sup>9</sup>. In fact, the commercialization of the shipyard was accompanied by a formal change in ownership only; state’s agency was carried out by the Ministry of Ownership Transformation, installed in 1990, from then on. It held a total of shares and started just in 1995 to sell them.

In comparison with the neighbouring shipyard in Gdansk, the Shipyard Gdynia SA. provided a labour-far commercialization. In fact, by approving the beginning of commercialization, the workers’ council accepted its own annulation. During the ownership transformation at Shipyard Gdynia SA all the bodies of workers’ co-determination were eliminated. The entitlement of partnering the board that had been fulfilled by the workers’ council before, was taken over by the supervisory board. This meant an unequal compensation of the privileges that the workers’ council had had before. According to the new statute, only a third of its members is elected by the employees, whereas two third are elected by the general meeting of shareholders. Due to the fact that the majority of votes decides, the workers’ representatives do not have a realistic chance of co-determination anymore and no right of veto either. So Michał Federowicz’s claim that “commercialization was renationalization by another name” (Federowicz, Levinas, 1995: 302) conducted in order to free the enterprises from the strong labour position can be confirmed. During the restructuring of the enterprise and the creation of a joint-stock company, the self-governing bodies of workers were abolished and replaced by new actors, such as the supervisory board and the general assembly. The result of this change is the exclusion of employees from co-determination and a preference for shareholders, which turned out to be factual at the shipyard bankruptcies when employee shares were omitted. Take for an example the bankruptcy of Gdansk shipyard in 1996 and its business continuation by the trustee and the subsequent redemption by the Stocznia Gdynia SA. One can call the devaluation of 40 percent of the company’s shares, which had been held by employees expropriation.

As the shipyard was still in the hands of state treasury in the first years, subsidies were not off immediately. One could even argue that organizational resilience in a new capitalist era was guaranteed only by a continuity of state interventionism. Summing up, the organizational changes in the first period after 1989 indicate that all ‘3xS’ Solidarność-demands ‘self-governing, self-financing, independent’ were not realized at the early stage of transformation.

### 3. Discursive Change

Another approach that has not been applied yet in the transformation studies of shipbuilding industry is the organizational neo-institutionalism regardless of the fact that transformative business history is a perfect example to demonstrate that simply material resources are not sufficient for organizational persistence. Organizational neo-institutionalism refers to the enterprise’s environment that has to approve an organizational change (Lynne, Zucker, 1977). In this perspective, privatization or the

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<sup>8</sup> Engl. Ship Design Center.

<sup>9</sup> Statute of the Shipyard Gdynia JSC, 1995.

transformation into a joint-stock company does not require any performance ratio, but is due to the adaptation to a new hegemony which in 1989 private firms took over from state enterprises. So, a major change can be analyzed as a – simple or not so simple – legitimization strategy and even a permanently failing company can survive if this is part of a discursive contract between the company and its environment (Meyer, Zucker, 1989). Thus, the decline of Polish shipbuilding can be described as a loss of recognition which shipbuilding industry and its workers had appreciated during socialism. In other words, the shipyard workers lost a discursive struggle they had set off themselves during the 1980s.

One of the most important findings of Kozłowska concerns the weakening of workplace ties within the shipyard-industry (Kozłowska, 2008) which implies a weakening of the workplace's influence on the employees. The end of workplace determination is part of the decline of the production narrative in the Polish economic discourse after 1989. Its center is the world of work, based on the workplace: production as an experience, hearing the production noise, celebrating the launching of ships and noticing changes in the production regime. Its competitor narrative can be called entrepreneurial. This yard is not meant to be a production site in the first place, but to make profit. Emblematic here is the new speech of neoliberal management that does not accept long-service and experienced staff.

The hierarchy of these narratives puts shipyards in a negative light of permanently failing organizations (Meyer, Zucker, 1989). The beginning of the decline of the production narrative can be seen in the liquidation of the Gdansk Shipyard in 1988 when the concept of profitability became an absolute value. Industry Minister Mieczysław Wilczek tried to point out the economic base of his decision to avoid a political connotation. Economic transformation, which since 1980 was negotiated with shipyard workers' vision of a socialized economy, at the moment repelled their impact. One can say, the production narrative was devoured by the 'revolution'. Shipyard workers did not insist on it. Condemning the decision as a political, rather than a productive one (Śmiech, 2005: 190), they missed to oppose the exchange of narratives. At this point, the political discourse seems to be only a maneuver that trapped in the production narrative and spat it out as a distorted entrepreneurial narrative. The liquidation of Gdansk Shipyard resulted in a significant decrease of the workforce by about 2,000 people, including 1,000 skilled workers directly involved in the production. Even if the process of liquidation was detained by Industry Minister Tadeusz Syryjczyk's decision on the shipyard's transformation into a joint stock company in 1990, it was this original announcement of the liquidation that initiated a trajectory of bankruptcy and liquidation in the shipbuilding industry. The shipbuilders' agency, whose field of activity was the production narrative till then, was affected for the first time. Neoliberal rhetoric successfully managed to succeed in what the Workers' Party has been failing to accomplish during the Seventies and Eighties. It is important to emphasize, that the political transformation of 1989 did not bring back the sovereignty of narratives to the yard. If so - that is what we can see in the following example - it returned as farce.

My example concerns a strike in Stocznia Gdańsk SA<sup>10</sup> operating in the Third Polish Republic; at that time it was annexed to the Gdynia Shipyard. The dispute preceding the strike concerned the wage system in the company. According to the trade union Solidarność, the management fixed unrealistic production norms for the workers so that

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<sup>10</sup> Engl. Shipyard Gdansk JSC.

it could reduce labour costs (Tittenbrunn 2007: 280). When the board decided further redundancies, the company based *Solidarność* decided to declare a collective labour dispute. They called the dispute's issue the "forced excessive labour intensity due to the Collaborative Work Organization System"<sup>11</sup> (Polityka, 2001). The information on the collective dispute was accompanied by an announcement of strikes on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> of August, the anniversary of the start and the end of the protests 21 years ago. 14<sup>th</sup> of August - the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the famous 18 days long strike of 1980 which ended with the signing of the Gdansk Agreement - a two-hour warning strike took place in the Gdansk shipyard. The choice of the date gave the strike a symbolic framing and suggests a comparison with 1980. Despite the legal status of the unions "management intimidates people claiming that the protest is illegal. Just like old times, the radio broadcasting system threatens shipbuilders, they have to expect consequences for participation in the protest." (Głos Wybrzeża, 2001) President Janusz "Szlanta brought the matter to a head. From early morning, the entire board was in mobilization"(Dziennik Bałtycki, 2001). "President Szlanta stood under one boat and the President Twarowski under the second, the people were afraid to come down" (Polityka, 2001).

The turnout was very moderate, maybe 400 out of 3,800 employees. And even admitting that there has been illegal intimidation, the low turnout and the simple fact that it was possible to scare employees suggest a decrease in the union's associational power. "There is no longer that atmosphere" (Dziennik Bałtycki, 2001) mentioned Aloysius Szablewski, the first president of the company based *Solidarność*. "21 years ago, there was enthusiasm. People joining the protest were hoping that it can make a difference" (Głos Wybrzeża, 2001). One newspaper even quoted Marx on the revolution returning as a farce. To sum up: The environment - and even workers themselves - did not take shipyard strikes in the now private company seriously enough.

In 2001, referring to the cradle of *Solidarność*, the union failed to transform the entrepreneurial discourse into a production discourse. Just as in 1988 union representatives in 2001 argued that the decision had no economic foundation: "It's about the distraction of public opinion from legal issues related to the acquisition of Gdansk Shipyard" (Głos Wybrzeża, 2001). They did not make use of the chance to rebuild the production narrative to the entrepreneurial narrative but went into the political discourse.

Szlanta commented the protest: "If the trade union is really sure of their demands they should arrange protests farthest from the symbolic level" (Polityka, 2001). In his opinion, the protest really was about the importance of maintaining the union power using the Collaborative Work Organization System as a pretext. Referring to the historical frame, the union wanted to mobilize narrative resources to reconstruct or reconstitute associational power. "The battle launched 21 years ago, has never ended" (Dziennik Bałtycki, 2001). In that sense, this struggle, though not at the level of production, but symbolically, was very serious and path setting. It mirrors a change in discourse to the disadvantage of shipyard workers who did not only lose the entitlement to co-determination but also the power of interpreting their own history.

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<sup>11</sup> The following translations of newspaper quotations have been prepared by the author.

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