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# The Kidnapping of Wrocław's Dwarves

## The Symbolic Politics of Neoliberalism in Urban East-Central Europe

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In this paper, I draw on the approach to the study of “actually existing liberalisms” with an example from contemporary urban east-central Europe. I focus on the city of Wrocław, a success story of Poland’s economic urban transformation, and consider the symbolic politics embodied in the city’s promotional strategy as a tool of ongoing neoliberal restructuring. I argue that an important feature of the city’s symbolic politics is the commodification and fetishization of dwarves, the historical symbols of an anti-totalitarian movement that used the image of a dwarf as a means for people’s deliberative and performative action that helped lay foundations for democracy. Today, the historical legacy of dwarves as a means of associational and performative action has been disguised in the city’s promotional strategy, which has turned dwarves into commodities that help sell the city on the global neoliberal market of intercity competition. I call this process of contemporary fetishization, the kidnapping of Wrocław’s dwarves. Kidnapping refers to the process whereby the symbol’s meaning and historical legacy is turned into a commodity, disempowering it by depriving it of its meaning for social action. At the conclusion of my paper, I offer a critical ethnographic and pedagogical perspective focused on symbolic politics as a venue for understanding and inspiring critical action in the context of these urban neoliberal developments.

**Keywords:** *wrocław; neoliberalism; dwarves; place marketing; memory*

### Introduction

This article draws on the approach to the study of the neoliberal condition promoted by Brenner and Theodore who argue for a path-dependent character of neoliberal projects and the strategic role of cities in the current remaking of political-economic space. They call for research on what they describe as “actually existing neoliberalisms”—an approach that stresses the “contextual embeddedness of neoliberal restructuring projects insofar as they have been produced within national, regional, and local contexts defined by the legacies of inherited institutional

frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices, and political struggles.”<sup>1</sup> Inspired by this place-specific and situated methodology, I would like to contribute to the discourse on actually existing neoliberalisms with an example from contemporary urban east-central Europe. I will focus on the city of Wrocław, today an iconic success story of Poland’s economic urban transformation, and consider the symbolic politics embodied in the city’s promotional strategy as a tool of neoliberal restructuring.

The phenomenon that provides empirical basis for my considerations concerns the striking preponderance of dwarves that have invaded Wrocław’s physical spaces and zones of representation. When today’s visitors arrive in Wrocław, they cannot avoid encountering (and sometimes tripping over) little bronze statuettes of dwarves that are placed in different spots of the city. When they visit the official tourist information offices and bookstores, their tourist experience is dominated by dwarves. They can buy maps and guidebooks proposing tourist paths that visit bronze dwarves placed throughout the city; they can also buy T-shirts and gadgets that carry the city slogan “Wrocław the Meeting Place” with the characteristic drawing of a dwarf, to take home with them as official souvenirs of their stay in Wrocław. Various internet sites, including those of independent travel agencies, refer to Wrocław as the “City of Dwarves.”<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I consider this twenty-first-century epidemic of dwarves in the Polish city of Wrocław as an embodiment of an important feature of the symbolic politics of the neoliberal urban development strategy in this east-central European city: the fetishization of historical symbols as a means of neoliberal place marketing.<sup>3</sup> I want to offer a critical ethnographic and pedagogical perspective focused on symbolic politics as a venue for understanding urban neoliberal developments in east-central Europe.

### **Fetishization as Kidnapping<sup>4</sup>**

In my use of the concept of fetishization I draw, of course, on the Marxist concept of commodity fetishism. Marx, in describing the capitalist system, tries to decipher what he calls the “mystical character of the commodity,” whereby things, products of human labor, are turned into commodities that seem to take on a life of their own.<sup>5</sup> An important feature of capitalist commodity is its fetish-like character—its propensity to disguise social relations between persons as qualities of inanimate things: “Fetishism denotes the attribution of life, autonomy, power, and even dominance to otherwise inanimate objects and presupposes the draining of these qualities from the human actors who bestow the attribution. Thus, in the case of commodity fetishism, social relationships are dismembered and appear to dissolve into relationships between mere things—the products of labor exchange on the market—so that the sociology of exploitation masquerades as a natural relationship between systemic artifacts.”<sup>6</sup> The Marxist idea of commodity fetishism—the process whereby social relations between people are displaced onto things—provides framework for my

understanding the contemporary Wrocław dwarf epidemic as a form of kidnapping, characteristic of the symbolic politics entwined in neoliberal urban development.

### **Prior to the Kidnapping—The Origins of Dwarves in Wrocław**

The history of Wrocław dwarves begins in the 1980s with the rise of the Orange Alternative, a popular and highly visible local protest movement against the communist totalitarian regime in Poland. The movement developed out of a student organization at the University of Wrocław called the New Culture Movement (Ruch Nowej Kultury) and was started and led by an imaginative activist and art historian Waldemar “Major” Fydrych. During the Martial Law period in Poland (1981–1983), when movement and freedom of expression were highly controlled and restricted, oppositionists developed creative responses to get their antigovernment messages out to the public at large and inspire action. Among other things, members created a series of stencils used to paint antiregime graffiti on buildings, lampposts, and other objects throughout Wrocław only to have these signs of protest covered over with paint by the militias. In response to these official moves, on the night of 30–31 August 1982, Fydrych and his friend headed to a power transformer station where graffiti had been painted over by militia forces, and proceeded to spray a white and orange colored figure of a dwarf over the layer of grey paint left. With this move, Fydrych and his collaborator sparked the Orange Alternative’s Revolution of Dwarves. Fydrych claimed that these actions, which were quickly noticed and replicated by others, were inspired by the principle of a triad of propositions: the protest sign as *thesis*, the paint smeared by the militia as *antithesis*, the painting of a dwarf as *synthesis*. As a result, in the 1980s Wrocław was filled with drawings of dwarves, which seemed to appear wherever the militia units had attempted to cover up antiregime graffiti.

In addition to making drawings of dwarves, the Orange Alternative strongly relied on performance as key to their oppositional activities. Sympathizers of the movement wore orange dwarflike hats and they organized happenings that included a widely publicized mass protest march on 1 June 1988—on the occasion of International Children’s Day. On that day between thirteen and twenty thousand citizens dressed as dwarves marched through the streets of Wrocław, confounding the militia and security forces who simply observed the protesters as they moved through the city. But the core of Fydrych’s activities centered around smaller happenings that usually started on Wrocław’s Świdnicka Street, the historic shopping street that leads into the town’s main Market Square. Here, together with other artists, Fydrych chose communist holidays to poke fun at the regime. So, for example on the anniversary of the October Revolution, Orange Alternative protesters distributed rolls of toilet paper to passersby; on International Women’s Day female pedestrians received sanitary napkins. In these actions, Fydrych could underscore the

grave situation people faced during the economy of shortages that defined life in the former Communist bloc.

Similarly, Fydrych mocked the communist regime's use of violence by organizing "Big Autumn Maneuvers" of dwarves on Świdnicka Street on the occasion of the National Military Day on 12 October 1987. On another occasion, together with other activists dressed as dwarves, he ridiculed pompous communist rituals by singing Stalinist hymns to chimpanzees in the Wrocław Zoo. Fydrych and his supporters were frequently arrested after their happenings and questioned. After the march on the International Women's Day in 1988, for example, Fydrych was taken into custody for carrying a bed mattress with the sign, "Say NO to Pershings, YES to sanitary napkins!" ("Pershingom - nie, podpaskom tak!") and for being unwilling to disclose to his interrogators the source of the sanitary napkins that he was passing to women in the streets during the march.<sup>7</sup>

Fydrych called himself the "Major" and the "Commander of the Festung Breslau"—underscoring the sense that under communism Wrocław was a city under siege, and boldly associating the moves of the communist authorities with the actions of the Nazi regime at the end of World War II when the local Gauleiter declared the then-German Breslau to be a fortress to be defended at all costs, a move that led to the mass destruction of the city.

The Orange Alternative, one of the most visible and imaginative protest movements against the communist totalitarian regimes in east-central Europe, was a remarkable example of the power of popular laughter against oppressive power. The Orange Alternative, the theatre of the absurd, empowered people by inviting them to join in public demonstrations whose content was not explicitly directed at pursuing political, economic, or social claims. Instead, through comic performances in the public realm, it weakened the regime's authority by provoking it to react with violence and force against quotidian comical actions. Today, on its official webpage, Orange Alternative defines itself as

an underground anarchic movement, which was started in 1981 in Wrocław, a city located in south-west Poland, by Waldemar Fydrych, known as *Major (Commander of the Festung Breslau)*. Bearing some traits of Provos [*sic*], and strongly influenced by dadaism and surrealism, it organized happenings, painted absurd graffiti dwarves on city walls, which became its symbol and was one of most picturesque element of Polish opposition against communism. . . . Particularly active in the period 1986-1989, while more familiar protests have been gathering pace across Eastern Europe, Orange Alternative was the purest expression of Socialist Surrealism. Unlike those pursuing nationalistic or economic freedom, Orange Alternative made no explicit demands at all; rather, it has adopted an altogether more radical strategy—that of directly challenging on the streets the State' monopoly on Truth.<sup>8</sup>

In its public and performative character, the movement inscribes itself particularly well within Matynia's concept of performative democracy, a project in which

“local people talking to each other in public illuminate the reality around them and help to find ways of changing it.”<sup>9</sup> Among the examples of performative democracy in communist Poland that Matynia calls forth were the Youth Theatre movements of the early 1970s. These movements, argues Matynia, created spaces of deliberations where “private voices appeared in public and became social ones.”<sup>10</sup> She points to the key role of free public association and deliberations that the theatre movement provided, forming foundations for people to enact democracy through utterance and performance and ascribes them with an important role in instigating democratization processes that culminated in the round table negotiations and the first free elections in Poland. Matynia, similarly to Jeffrey Goldfarb, detects the key role that such spaces of free deliberation, in the context and against the omnipresent eye and ear of totalitarian power, played in creating foundations of democratic culture that eventually brought down communist totality.<sup>11</sup>

Sympathizers of the Orange Alternative ridiculed power that treated them with seriousness. As dwarves (drawn on walls or impersonated), they entered city space and enabled regular people to join in protest. The dwarves of the Orange Alternative that helped bring down totality were people associating, talking, and performing in public space. The dwarf was a venue for symbolic action that was social and associational in nature, a performative and symbolic means for creating free space for deliberative democratic action.

## Wrocław—The Neoliberal City

The post-1989 Polish law on local self-government decentralized national administration and allowed for the direct election of city mayors and locally elected representative bodies. This move laid the groundwork for Polish cities to become important players in the neoliberalized landscape of Central Europe. Cities have become drivers of local and regional economies, and the concentration of financial and social capital in the hands of city mayors is spectacular. Today's Wrocław (a city of 640,000) occupies a privileged position among Polish cities whose march to economic success was launched with their administrative independence after 1989.<sup>12</sup>

Wrocław's promotional strategy, under the banner of *Wrocław—the Meeting Place*, has been widely credited as key to the city's wealth and prominence. The strategy sets the stage for the portrayal of the city as an open and friendly place, facilitating an economic policy focused on attracting foreign investments and large international events as the drivers of the local economy. On the political and symbolic level, this strategy has also helped to promote Wrocław as a city open to the international community.<sup>13</sup> In its strive for success, Wrocław's city government has been the Polish leader in introducing mechanisms of gritty interurban competition, not hesitating to use aggressive lobbying to attract not only foreign investors but also cultural festivals,<sup>14</sup> and human resources<sup>15</sup> away from other cities in Poland or the

region. After two unsuccessful bids to host the World Expo, Wrocław was selected as one of four Polish cities to host the European soccer championships in 2012. It also won the title of the European Culture Capital 2016, followed by the World Games in 2017.

Place marketing is considered by urban theoreticians a key element of interurban competition, a characteristic trait of urban neoliberalism.<sup>16</sup> Shrinking resources and heightened levels of economic instability have forced mayors to engage in urban entrepreneurialism, which requires local governments to move away from their former profiles of being primarily public-service providers toward strategies targeted at harnessing private resources through high-risk activities in order to successfully compete in the interurban and interregional competition that characterizes global neoliberal economy. The neoliberal urban governance is also characterized by regulatory undercutting to attract investments, leading to further weakening of the public sector. As Harvey and other theorists show, in this neoliberal struggle, cities often rely on the generation of a particular form of collective symbolic capital that allows them to assume markers of distinction necessary for success in global competition.<sup>17</sup> A key marker of distinction for Wrocław has been the dwarves, kidnapped from their historical and symbolic context to serve the city's neoliberal marketing and development strategy.

### The Kidnapping of Wrocław's Dwarves

After the end of the communist regime in Poland in 1989, Major Fydrych continued appearing occasionally in the public domain, and his actions were followed by the media. In 2006 and 2010, for example, he unsuccessfully ran in local elections for the Mayor of Warsaw as a candidate of the Gawks and Dwarves Election Committee (Komitet Wyborczy Gamonie i Krasnoludki). On 1 June 2001, the day of the anniversary of his 1988 mass march of the dwarves, he unveiled a sizeable bronze statue of a dwarf at a key intersection on Świdnicka Street in Wrocław, which is intended to serve as a reminder of the place where Fydrych launched many of his happenings in the city. It was approximately a year later, that the Wrocław City Government initiated its strategy, *Wrocław—The Meeting Place*, in which dwarves began to figure at the forefront of the city's promotion.

The materials produced by the Wrocław's Office of Promotion use the official slogan *Wrocław—The Meeting Place*, accompanied by a characteristic picture of a dwarf with an orange hat and often a flower as a symbol of the City. This official representation of the dwarf exhibits remarkable resemblance to the dwarves that Fydrych and his sympathizers once drew on the walls of Wrocław's buildings. However, no reference or credit to the Orange Alternative movement or its leader is made. The drawing was prepared by the owner of a commercial advertising agency that was commissioned to create the city's visual identification system, and that later

became the source of the majority of the city's official promotional materials. The same agency operates the official tourist information bureaus in Wrocław where you can buy dwarf-related publications and promotional products (such as cups, key chains, pens, T-shirts, books).<sup>18</sup> You can also buy city maps that encourage you to follow a path of dwarves—little bronze statuettes that have since mushroomed throughout the city. The official Plan of the City of Dwarves (Plan Miasta Krasnoludków) published by the agency features the names and photographs of seventy-nine bronze dwarf statuettes as well as their location on the city map. The dwarves' names usually refer to places where they are placed and to public and private institutions that paid to have them produced. And so you can find Kinoman (cinema-lover) in front of a cinema complex, Nowożeńcy (Newlyweds) in front of the Marriage Registry Office, Bibliofil (Book-lover) in front of the Public Library, Paragrafek (Law Maker) near the University's Law School, Luminator (Luminance Dwarf) at the Energia-Pro Electric Company, Insercik (Insercik) in the INSERT Company Building, Bankuś (Bank Clerk) at the bank or even Solidarek (Solidarity Dwarf) in front of the Solidarity Trade Union's Headquarters. Despite the striking resemblance between the official dwarf of the city and the one popularized by Fydrych and his followers (acknowledged also by the Court), the real-life delinking of the former from the latter is almost complete. There is nothing in the material space of the city or the official and commercial representations of dwarves that make clear reference to the dwarf as the symbol of the Orange Alternative, a popular protest movement against the communist authorities.

Fydrych has lodged many protests against the city's actions. In one official response, the Director of the City's Office of Promotion wrote: "Dwarves were in the world before he was. The 'Major' is not their owner. They were sighted on the borderlands of Poland and Germany. And as every race, they have spread and multiplied. The Orange Alternative was their bridge to taking over Wrocław."<sup>19</sup> So instead of linking the dwarves to the battle against the totalitarian state and their political and performative past, the official rhetoric puts forth an alternative narrative more commonly associated with the language of fairytales. In the city's literature, dwarves are portrayed as "real beings" that historically inhabited the city of Wrocław. Through the miniature bronze statuettes scattered throughout the city and in the simplistic printed materials dwarves are relegated to the world of fetishized fantasy. The dwarves that once served as a refined means for deliberate and associational action on the part of citizens, and that laid the foundations for democracy itself have been turned into commodities that help sell the city on the global neoliberal market of intercity competition. And it is through this process of contemporary fetishization that the dwarves, the former symbols of a multifaceted and highly effective popular movement against totalitarian regime, have been kidnapped. *Kidnapping* here is the term used to refer to the process whereby the symbol's meaning and historical legacy is turned into a commodity, disempowering it by depriving it of its meaning for social action. In a paradoxical neoliberal twist, the kidnapping has



allowed for the dwarves' epidemic multiplication. Little more than garden ornaments empty of meaning, the dwarves of neoliberal Wrocław no longer empower the powerless; on the contrary, their commodity character strips them of their former power as potent social and historical symbols.

"Major" Fydrych continues taking action in courts against the city, asking for an apology from the Mayor of Wrocław for misusing the symbol and demanding the discontinuation of the production of promotional materials that use the image of the dwarf. On the outside, the city responds by publically ridiculing Fydrych (e.g., the Promotion Office Director), but his perseverance raises concern on the part of city officials, who in their struggle for international recognition are forced to refer to real historical events to legitimate the city's claim to its position in the world of intraurban competition. When Wrocław was competing against ten other cities for the title of the European Culture Capital, its application materials and presentations presented Wrocław as a city with the tradition of the struggle for democracy. In order to legitimate this claim, they referred to the Orange Alternative and claimed it as the symbolic and meaningful basis for the contemporary promotional identification of Wrocław as the City of Dwarves. Before the hearing of the European Culture Capital Commission at the National Theatre in Warsaw where delegations of Polish cities presented their applications, the Wrocław city officials feared that Fydrych would stage a demonstration in front of the theatre.<sup>20</sup>

"Major" Fydrych, the leader of the Orange Alternative, did not show up, but the city was right in fearing him. The stakes were high. Fydrych, the original leader of Wrocław's dwarves, remains a poignant and uncomfortable reminder for the city leaders, many of whom legitimate their current position by flaunting their anticommunist pedigrees, of the falsity inherent in their current project. The discomfort that arises from the awareness of the kidnapping of the dwarves of Wrocław and turning them into fetishes—mascots for the purposes of neoliberal place marketing—touches on the paradoxes of post-1989 east-central Europe, where anticommunism weds neoliberalism and generates effects that resembles the absurd realities of post-colonial societies.<sup>21</sup>

### **Performage—Rescuing the Kidnapped Dwarves of Wrocław**

For several years, my colleague Juliet Golden and I have worked with groups of incoming international students in courses in which we use Wrocław's space to nurture the students' capabilities of critical observation, thinking, and action. In our educational and research programs, we are building on the tradition of educational anthropology and participatory action research (PAR) to produce learning experiences and outcomes that complicate the coherence of official narratives and nurture critical understanding of Central European history and cultural identity. In all of our

programs, we use critical ethnographic methods and participatory action research to help students and ourselves learn from the material and lived history of Wrocław in order to generate more complex interpretations of its past and raise critical historical consciousness. We draw on the historical materialist notion of history that sees the power of material urban history to awaken critical consciousness, and we help students in finding complex histories that have been at work in the making of the city.<sup>22</sup> We see the city as a changing organism constantly created and re-created through urban practices, in which we as anthropologists, educators, and students—and global citizens—are taking an active part.<sup>23</sup> Against the various officially promoted discourses of smooth historical trajectories and a triumphant contemporary city, the themes that pervade students' work usually bring out frictions and ruptures, and tend to focus on past and present issues of conflicts and reconciliation (ethnic, class, national, political, religious, and military) and problems of social justice as they map out onto the urban cultural landscape.<sup>24</sup>

Our pedagogy is developed around three stages of learning. The first stage builds of the notion of cultural therapy and the power of ethnographic observation to unmask the unconscious assumptions of culture.<sup>25</sup> The second phase of our work is informed by the notion of cultural production and cultural organizing strongly grounded in participatory action research and praxis<sup>26</sup>—we work with students to turn their critical reflections into action, reality-changing projects. The third phase providing a closure to our pedagogical process are presentations usually open to the public and the media—formal stagings that help students process ethnographic knowledge and express it through performance to become empowered intercultural agents in a global fieldwork context.<sup>27</sup>

Two years ago, a small group of students from Portugal and Romania who took our Urban and Action Anthropology classes, in their final projects turned their attention to critically assessing the dwarf epidemic in the city. Like many visitors, they came across the bronze statuettes of dwarves upon arrival. Here is how a student from Portugal describes his discovery:

When I arrived at Wrocław I started, as everyone, to enjoy the city. The architecture is in my opinion the first thing that catches your attention, then I started to walk around the Market Square and all those beautiful and colorful buildings made me feel very peaceful . . . the movement of the people, everything seemed to be perfectly chosen to be there. I was surprised when I saw on the ground a little metal toy. I didn't realize what it really was, but I remember that I didn't try to find a definition, I just enjoyed the idea and thought that they put it there to give a "special touch" to the city. Then I started to see these little toys all around and it started to make me curious. (Helder Ferraz, Student of Educational Sciences, Portugal, December 2011)

Similarly, a Romanian student wrote her perspective on her first encounters with the dwarves:

When one first visits the city, it is impossible to miss the dwarfs. They are everywhere, posing in different roles adapted to the location: in front of a restaurant one would notice a chef gnome, in front of the bank a dwarf would withdraw money from a miniature ATM, on the street where the old prison of the city used to be, we can see an “imprisoned gnome.” Of course, it is a great tourist attraction, coming to Wrocław and leaving without photographing yourself with the gnomes would be almost as pathetic as going to Paris without immortalizing yourself in front of the Eiffel Tower. Tourists hunt them in the city, children hug them (yes, I have witnessed that several times), the local businesses fight for having one in front of their shops, the touristic shops pack their shelves with key holders, cups, post cards, toys that all wear the “gnomist trademark” of Wrocław. During our first days here, seeing the dwarfs displayed all around with great local pride, we legitimately asked ourselves: why dwarfs? We could not find any official information on their origins and even when we were asking students that actually live in Wrocław, no answer has been given to us. It seemed like there was no particular story behind these gnomes, they were simply random statues put here and there to add some fun to the experience of walking in the streets. (Cecilia Laslo, Student of Marketing, Romania, June 2012)

In their reflection papers, Helder and Cecilia reveal just how successful the kidnapping of dwarves has been. Helder, upon his arrival, saw the city’s ordered beauty—“everything seemed to be perfectly chosen to be there” including the little statuette of a dwarf upon which he stumbles and which he calls a “metal toy” and whose meaning he did not seek to know: “I just enjoyed the idea and thought that they put it there to give a ‘special touch’ to the city.” Cecilia who came to Wrocław from Romania speaks of the omnipresence of gnomes as tourist attractions, referring to the “gnomist trademark” of Wrocław. In their recollections, the students testify to finding no connection between contemporary dwarves as objects of city marketing and their historical legacy as the empowering symbols of the Orange Alternative: “[We] asked ourselves: why dwarfs? We could not find any official information on their origins and even when we were asking students that actually live in Wrocław, no answer has been given to us. It seemed like there was no particular story behind these gnomes, they were simply random statues put here and there to add some fun to the experience of walking in the streets.”

The class in which Helder and Cecilia participated focused mostly on anthropological excavations of the German and Jewish prewar heritage of the city. We did not explore or focus on Wrocław’s dwarves, but students learned about the Orange Alternative movement in a different class on the history and culture of Central Europe. None of the classes that students took included critical examination of dwarves in their kidnapped form as bronze statuettes in Wrocław’s landscape. In the Urban and Action Anthropology course, however, we focused on nurturing the students’ historical consciousness and their ethnographic observation faculties, and encouraged them to apply their knowledge to the material urban space around them. The connection of historical knowledge and ethnographic observation led to students’ critical reflection on observed realities:

During the classes I started to hear the teachers talk about the dwarves and the Orange Alternative and for the first time, I should say that I was disturbed with the city and the fact that I did not hear a thing about it. During the classes we started to talk about the history of Poland and of course Wrocław, the German and Russian occupations were for me the most impressive occurrences, and of course the terror of the Nazi regime and the concentration camps, the violence of the histories and the horror of the mass murders and the pleasure in killing people, made me depressed and I remember that during the weeks that followed I was very introspective. (Helder)

Herder reveals how learning about the city's past in the course of his classes lead him to change his stance of unquestioning enjoyment into that of curiosity, introspection, and even disturbance, eventually leading him to develop a critical action research project focused on the presence of dwarves in Wrocław's urban space. Cecilia signals the students' determination to reclaim the memory of the Orange Alternative and relink it to the dwarves that occupy Wrocław's space today:

Our teachers explained what the dwarves stand for. We were baffled to find out that their narrative dates back to the very recent history of the city—the Orange Alternative, a very outrageous, yet innovative movement started in Wrocław in the '80s. If after only 30 years the memory of this event has faded and no official leaflet or brochures talks about this, what will happen 50 or 100 years later? We thought to ourselves: this is too new and too important to be ignored, especially since the current municipalities fervently use this symbol in their marketing strategy. (Cecilia)

In order to receive a grade for the Urban and Action Anthropology classes, and in accordance with our teaching methodology, students were required to critically reflect on a phenomenon in the city's material landscape and produce a project that would aim to turn their critical standpoint into action. The project that Herder, Cecilia, and their Portuguese colleague Carmen prepared was titled "Performedge," and its goal was to rescue Wrocław's dwarves from their life as commodities.

Performedge was defined by the students as an interactive exhibition and performance space dedicated to the Orange Alternative, "a cultural center remembering the past, enriching the future and happening in present times." As the location, they chose a neglected small building on the Oder River in the center of the city (literally a dwarf-sized structure built into the river embankment), which they aimed to transform "into a space of memory." They proposed painting the exterior of the house orange—the color of the Orange Alternative—"to be striking enough to catch the eye of the passersby." They designed the street-level floor of the house as a "remembrance space (oriented towards the past)" and the river-level floor as a space for "developing interactions within small communities nowadays (orientated towards the present and the future)." The street-level floor was to hold a permanent "Orange Alternative exhibition," displaying "photos, short footages taken during those times, testimonials of participants . . . anecdotes related to this happening, . . . a military uniform as a memento about the initiator of this movement and his

extravaganza—Mayor Friedrich [*sic*].” They also planned to add “a lexicon and a map of the nowadays existing dwarfs.” The river-level floor “would play the role of a performative room, an open space for the small community that dares to think alternatively in the current days. Basically a cafe (where the waiters would obviously be dresses as dwarfs) the space would also be hosting small exhibitions of local artists (painters, sculptors, craftsmen), workshops for children, dwarf parades.” Students wanted to dedicate the cafe to Major Fydrych, whom they planned to invite to use the meeting space at his will. “The profit from the cafe would only be invested in the activities of an NGO that would run Performedge . . . by placing the cafe on the river-level floor we want to make sure that everybody first passes through the exhibition room, without missing the historical dimension of this project.” In addition, the students planned a range of activities, including a “performative network” in the city of Wroclaw—linking Performedge with “other politically and socially engaged pubs, cafes and cultural institutions . . . in order to “promote each other’s activities through leaflets and brochures, updating the customers with the latest events happening in these places.” In their conclusion, the students reflect on the name of their project: “The name illustrates exactly what we would like to change in the Wroclawian society: we want to stimulate the locals to have more **PERFORMATIVITY**, to start looking behind the evidence and to explore the recent history of the city where they live. ‘**EDGE**’ stands for the physical location of the house (on the ‘edge of the river’), but also for a more metaphoric element concerning an edgy (as in ‘inquisitive’) way of living.”

Performedge was a project based on the critique of the lack of historical continuity between Fydrych’s 1980s antitotalitarian movement and the present commodification of its leading symbol as an instrument of city marketing. In the tradition of participatory action research that aims to turn knowledge and reflection into practical social action, the students proposed to create an interactive living discussion and meeting space where dwarves could continue living their lives as animators of social action drawing on the powers of their historical legacy. The students, empowered by the skills of ethnographic observation and critical action research, made the key connection of cultural critique between the historical knowledge and existing urban space and in their project decided to rescue the kidnapped dwarves of Wroclaw.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I aimed to contribute to the knowledge of “actually existing liberalism” by showing how an important feature of the Wroclaw’s symbolic politics is the commodification and fetishization of dwarves, the historical symbols of an anti-totalitarian movement that used the image of a dwarf as a means for people’s deliberative and performative participatory action, and ones that helped lay foundations for democracy itself. Today, the historical legacy of dwarves as a means of

associational and social action has been disguised in the city's promotional strategy, which has turned dwarves into commodities, markers of distinction that help sell the city on the global neoliberal market of intercity competition. I showed, however, that through the critical ethnographic and pedagogical practice we can inspire action, which is a source of hope—at least on a conceptual level—that the kidnapers will eventually have to release the dwarves and return their symbolic meaning to Wrocław's public realm.

## Notes

1. Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, "Cities and the Geographies of 'Actually Existing Neoliberalism,'" in *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring in North America and Western Europe*, ed. Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, 2–32 (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 2. I thank Pauline Lipman for calling my attention to this literature.

2. Pinterest—Wrocław: Dwarf City, <http://pinterest.com/labirintia/wroclaw-dwarf-city/> (accessed 25 January 2013); About.com, Eastern Europe Travel, "Wrocław's Dwarves Find All of These Whimsical Statues in This Polish Destination City," <http://goeasteurope.about.com/od/poland/a/Wroclaws-Dwarves.htm> (accessed 25 January 2013); Photoblog, Wrocław—the city of dwarves II / Wrocławskie krasnale II, <http://www.photoblog.com/dreamie/2010/03/22/wroclaw-the-city-of-dwarves-ii-wroclawskie-krasnale-ii.html> (accessed 25 January 2013); Krasnale.pl, The Official Website of Wrocław's Dwarves, <http://krasnale.pl/en/2011/08/25/name-a-pendrive> (accessed 25 January 2013).

3. Helga Leitner and Eric Sheppard, "Economic Uncertainty, Interurban Competition and the Efficacy of Entrepreneurialism," in *The Entrepreneurial City: Geographies of Politics, Regime, and Representation*, ed. Tim Hall and Phil Hubbard, 285–308 (Chichester, UK: Wiley, 1998).

4. I thank my colleague and friend Juliet Golden for her help and for suggesting *kidnapping* as a fitting term for the variety of commodity fetishism that I am trying to describe.

5. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin Books in Association with New Left Review, 1976, 1990), 164.

6. Michael T. Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 31–32.

7. Official Webpage of the Orange Alternative: Orange Alternative, Revolution of Dwarves, <http://www.pomaraneczowa-alternatywa.org/index-eng.html> (accessed 1 February 2013); "Śmiechem obalal PRL. Poznaj Majora krasnoludków," *Gazeta Wyborcza Wrocław*, 27 January 2012, [http://wroclaw.gazeta.pl/wroclaw/56,35751,11042704,Smiechem\\_obalal\\_PRL\\_Poznaj\\_Majora\\_krasnoludkow\\_FOTO\\_.html](http://wroclaw.gazeta.pl/wroclaw/56,35751,11042704,Smiechem_obalal_PRL_Poznaj_Majora_krasnoludkow_FOTO_.html) (accessed 1 February 2013); Film: Mirosław Dembinski (Director), *The Orange Alternative (Pomaraneczowa Alternatywa)* Poland, 1988 (b/w, 35 mm).

8. Official Webpage of the Orange Alternative, *ibid.* (accessed 1 February 2013).

9. Elżbieta Matynia, *Performative Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2009), 5.

10. *Ibid.*, 10.

11. Jeffrey Goldfarb, *The Politics of Small Things: The Power of the Powerless in Dark Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

12. Wrocław's unprecedented success in urban development has been attributed to the City mayors, members of local right-wing cohort, that have led the city uninterruptedly for more than twenty years. The current Mayor of Wrocław, Rafał Dutkiewicz, who has run the city for the past eleven years has been repeatedly featured by the media as the most successful mayor in Poland. ("Rafał Dutkiewicz najlepszym prezydentem w Polsce," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 29 May 2012), [http://wroclaw.gazeta.pl/wroclaw/1,35771,11825148,Rafal\\_Dutkiewicz\\_najlepszym\\_prezydentem\\_w\\_Polsce.html](http://wroclaw.gazeta.pl/wroclaw/1,35771,11825148,Rafal_Dutkiewicz_najlepszym_prezydentem_w_Polsce.html) (accessed 3 February 2013).

13. Hana Cervinkova, "Wielokulturowość w służbie budowy miasta," *Gazeta Wyborcza (Wrocław)*, 17 December 2011, 1.

14. This is the case of the highly acclaimed Era international film festival, previously hosted and developed in the much smaller city of Cieszyn and now permanently transferred to Wrocław.

15. Under the slogan, *Wrocław Now!* Wrocław has carried out a campaign that promotes the city as a place where young people, students, and university graduates from Poland and the Ukraine can find jobs and future. Katarzyna Witak, "Wrocław—stolica polskiego marketingu?," Internet Portal—*Dla studenta.pl*, [http://naszymzdaniem.dlastudenta.pl/artukul/Wroclaw\\_stolica\\_polskiego\\_marketingu,19829.html](http://naszymzdaniem.dlastudenta.pl/artukul/Wroclaw_stolica_polskiego_marketingu,19829.html) (accessed 2 February 2013).

16. David Harvey, "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism," *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 71, no. 1 (1989): 3–17; Brenner and Theodore, "Cities and the Geographies."

17. Brenner and Theodore, "Cities and the Geographies," 20.

18. Official website of the Orfin advertising agency. *Orfin—pamiętki i upominki*, <http://orfinsklep.pl/category,184309,wroclaw.html> (accessed 2 February 2013).

19. "Śmiechem obalał PRL. Poznaj Majora krasnołudków," 2012, *ibid*.

20. Personal experience of the author.

21. Achille Mbembe, "The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony," *Public Culture* 4, no. 2 (1992): 1–30; Hana Cervinkova, *Playing Soldiers in Bohemia: An Ethnography of NATO Membership* (Prague: Set Out, Prague Series in Sociocultural Anthropology, 2006).

22. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 256–59; Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscape as Public History* (Boston: MIT Press, 1995).

23. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

24. Hana Cervinkova, "International Learning Communities for Local and Global Citizenship," *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults* 2, no. 2 (2011): 181–92.

25. George Spindler, "Three Categories of Cultural Knowledge Useful in Doing Cultural Therapy," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1999): 466–72; Paul Willis, "Cultural Production Is Different from Cultural Reproduction Is Different from Social Reproduction Is Different from Reproduction," *Interchange* 12 (1981): 2–3.

26. Julio Cammarota, "The Cultural Organizing of Youth Ethnographers: Formalizing a Praxis-Based Pedagogy," *Anthropology & Educational Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2008): 45–58.

27. Cervinkova, "International Learning Communities."

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