

LOWBROWS AS REBELS: UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES A “LOW” MUSICAL GENRE CAN CHANGE ITS CULTURAL VALUE? THE CASE OF DISCO POLO AND POPULISM IN POLAND

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Abstract

The sociology of culture and the sociology of valuation and evaluation are closely related (Lamont 2012). In both cases, social hierarchies are the primary, fundamental focal point. Usually, sociologists of culture show what the necessary conditions for building social boundaries in a given historical context are (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1984; Ang, 1985; Ikegami, 2005). The main aim of this paper, however, is to present how lowbrow aesthetics can resist fierce social critique and how social stigma related to “low” tastes can be reversed. I focus on “disco polo” – a genre of simple dance music that became popular in the early 1990s, almost disappeared in 2010s, and recently came back all of the sudden. Disco polo (henceforth: DP) formed an entire aesthetics style, comprising not only music and a kitschy (thus stigmatized and ridiculed) style of videos, but also androcentric values behind the lyrics, a specific way of dressing – with prominent status signifiers such as golden chains or sport cars. Although the empirical material comes from Poland, the core issue is far more generally applicable: the rehabilitation of the lowermost (from the point of view of Bourdieusian dominant classes) kitschy tastes (Kulka 1996; Ward 1996), which is very different from camp sensibility (Sontag 2018). How can lowbrow consumers resist symbolic oppression and derive pleasure from culturally sanctioned “shameful” objects? Focusing on the historical example of this typically Polish music genre, I will show under what circumstances the open rejection of legitimate tastes and admiration of low tastes is possible.

Keywords: social hierarchies, lowbrow aesthetics, cultural change, disco polo, Poland

Introduction: How can music change a cultural value?

The main aim of this paper is to present how social stigma related to “low” tastes (as judged by the general public and the media) can be reversed under certain political conditions. I argue that old Bourdieusian notions of field, habitus, and cultural capital

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are still useful if we realize that they need to be adjusted to a new cultural reality where cultural distinction is related more often to *how* a culture is consumed rather than *what* exactly is consumed, or where an ironic mode of consumption is omnipresent. It also needs to be highlighted that in the connected and digitalized world, symbolic struggles in two different social fields can influence each other. Under these circumstances, one can find more thorough explanations for certain phenomena that in Bourdieu's framework functioned as black boxes. I will do this by showing how musical genres can change their cultural value; the case study of "disco polo" serves this purpose. Focusing on the historical example of this typically Polish music genre, I will show under what circumstances the open rejection of legitimate tastes and admiration of low tastes is possible, contrary to the conservative Bourdieusian stance (see Prior 2011; de Boise 2016 for the review of post-Bourdieuian trends in the sociology of music).

Bourdieu, Symbolic Violence and the Limits of Oppression

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, the most prominent theoretical proposition pertaining to social boundaries and cultural hierarchies, depicts a considerably stable structure. In his major work, *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) shows how cultural divides based on taste reinforce class boundaries and, as a result, allow the dominant culture to emerge. Simply put, according to Bourdieu, "there is no realistic chance of any collective resistance to the effect of imposition that would lead either to the valorization of properties stigmatized by the dominant taxonomy (the 'black is beautiful' strategy) or to the creation of new, positively evaluated properties" (Bourdieu 1984: 384). In Bourdieu's theory, habitus guarantees this stability. This "system of durably acquired schemes of perception, thought, and action, engendered by objective conditions" tends to persist even after an alteration of those conditions (*hysteresis*) (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979: 156). In explaining social inequalities, Bourdieu put premium on early contact with culture measured by books in the family library, less tangible holiday trips "organized as cultural pilgrimages," or allusive conversations only "enlightened those already enlightened" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979: 21-22). Despite various changes in the field of culture, three old Bourdieusian key notions (field, capital, habitus) constitute a "holy trinity" in cultural sociology (de Boise 2016) and the 'Bourdieu effect' has been recognized in this academic field (Prior 2011).

Bourdieu's theoretical framework leaves little room for the discussion of fighting hierarchies. The author of *Distinction*, paradoxically, despite his critique of the logic embedded in the scholarly system (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979), academia (Bourdieu, 1988) or gender roles (Bourdieu 1998), is of the opinion that dominated classes admire the official culture or the culture of the dominant classes. As some scholars have pointed out, Bourdieu neglected music's social life and location by putting emphasis on legitimate culture as the basis for distinction, thereby revealing a relative ignorance of the complexity of popular art and culture (Prior, 2011).

In Bourdieu, the dominance is visible when the dominated display "cultural goodwill," i.e. they praise high art (even though they do not derive pleasure from it), glorify school (even though they do not achieve outstanding results), or are proud of the local community centre (even though they have never visited it). Thus, the relationship between lower classes and the culture of the dominant class can be referred to as "tacit acceptance", a price that the dominated class must pay to a dominant one (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979: 97). That is precisely why lower classes must distinguish between a familiar culture in private (family, close social circles, a neighborhood in some countries) and a public culture (school, work). Bourdieu noted that people tend to use different language for school and the same can be said about publicly professed preferences ("music for school," "literature for school", etc.). It is less likely that students refer to their favourite songs in a classroom discussion, because they know what the legitimate canonical texts of a given education system are, and they know that there is rarely overlap

between those two worlds. There are typical dispositions that members of lower classes demonstrate, such as practical orientation in home décor, a taste for realism in literature, or a tendency to look for familiar topics in film in private (Gdula and Sadura 2012); moreover, they tend to feel shame when in direct contact with institutions of legitimate culture in public. Nonetheless, it is common for them to be proud of the fact that a high-quality library or other cultural centre is located in their vicinity, even if they hardly ever visit such places (Gdula, Lewicki and Sadura, 2014: 111). As another Bourdieu scholar ironically noted, museums are the institutions that are always “bypassed with respect” (Jacyno, 1997: 106). Moreover, numerous empirical studies show that even if lower classes cannot literally follow the habits of higher classes, the symbolic point of reference is upper-middle or upper class (see e.g. Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). The glorification of higher strata’ glamor, as Thomas Scheff (1990: 133) demonstrates, is visible in fairy tales where royalty is portrayed as being brave, wise and generally admirable. This paper offers a “Bourdieu-lite” approach (Prior 2011: 128) by demonstrating how social recognition of a “low” music genre is possible against the will of cultural intermediaries and other members of dominant classes, as a result of symbolic struggle in the political field.

Bourdieu’s Legacy: Shame as an Effect of Domination

Within Bourdieu’s framework, class domination is deeply rooted in the emotions of the subordinate classes, as “large class of emotions results from real, imagined or anticipated outcomes in social relationships” (Kemper, 2006: 96). Yet, Bourdieu glosses over the emotional component of domination, barely touching upon it in stating that “the dominated have only two options: loyalty to self and the group (always liable to relapse into shame), or the individual effort to assimilate the dominant ideal, which is the antithesis of the very ambition of regaining control over social identity (of the type pursued by the collective revolt of the American feminists when it advocates the ‘natural look’)” (Bourdieu, 1984: 384). Post-Bourdieuian scholars have widely demonstrated that various emotions, shame or guilt being the most prominent ones, accompany social mobility (Friedman 2015), practices of remembrance (Probyn 2004) as well as modes of listening (Burkitt 2002; Becker 2010; Rimmer 2010).

It is fair to say that Bourdieu’s theory does not take full advantage of the sociological potential of analysis of emotions and emotional consequences of symbolic struggles in the field of culture. When we treat every social encounter as a struggle for power and status, as sociologists of emotions do, then emotions are reactions to either power or status and their role is to conserve the status quo (Kemper, 2006). Let us consider Thomas Scheff’s argument, which offers probably the most in-depth analysis of shame and class disgust or class stigmatization. In his interpretation, Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is a story of a middle-class man who, unlike the author, is not a genius, but an aspiring young man with deficits of capital, a fact that allows dominant classes to humiliate him. “If Werther had had pride in himself and his class, the incident might have taken a different direction. The humiliated fury which he ultimately turned on himself might have been directed toward those who rejected him instead” – Scheff (1990: 131) argues.

Similarly, it should be hypothesized that DP fans are expected to be deeply ashamed. “Class humour”, “class embarrassment”, or “rankism” understood as the ridiculing of the lower strata’s lifestyle, are notions that can enrich the classical theory of labelling (Konecki 2014). There is no reason why the emotions observed by Scheff and Kemper cannot be analysed in a wider perspective and treated as emotions on a group level, but such “macro” or historical analyses are rare. In order to move to a more general level, the techniques of making one dominated or uncertain of one’s own taste (musical habitus) or qualities, should be regarded as historical discourse as described by Hayden White (1980). The dominant classes create the nation-wide discourses and succeed in naturalizing their tastes or practices and embarrass the dominated. Rare cases of resistance

through taste always owe their success to specific historical circumstances (Lopes 2000; Rimmer 2010; de Boise 2016) as “emotional responses to music do not occur spontaneously, nor ‘naturally’, but rather take place within complex systems of thought and behaviour concerning what music means, what it is for, how it is to be perceived, and what might be appropriate kinds of expressive responses” (Becker 2010: 129).

Building upon the Polish example of DP, I will analyse under what circumstances the resistance from lower classes can be initiated. The DP culture, contrary to Bourdieu’s theory, shows that not only can lower classes build their own genuine culture (in spite of criticism coming from the dominant class), but they do not have to be ashamed.

Guilty Pleasure, Social Niches, and Ironic Consumption

The representatives of British cultural studies, Richard Hoggart (1969), Raymond Williams (1973), and Stuart Hall (1980), identified taste as an ideological tool as early as the second half of 20th century. This unmasking task resonates with contemporary researchers. In reference to Imogen Tyler’s ideas (2011), Martin J. Power, Aileen Dillane and Eoin Devereux (2014), look at popular music as a voice of dominated classes and conclude that because of this ideological pressure, watching despised or ridiculed TV series is often associated with shame. In her seminal work, Ien Ang (1985) observed that in Holland, loving *Dallas* TV series was often accompanied by guilt or feeling under attack, which is related to Fiske’s conception of “popular pleasure” (Fiske 2010: 67–68). In another cultural context, during my earlier field research in Poland, I found out that Polish rural women were aware that their favourite TV series and channels are valued as ‘low’ by the social elites, but this did not repel them from their practice (Author 2013). What seemed unexpected in this study was that rural women were able to critique the dominant narrative. This resembles Lila Abu-Lughod’s research on Egyptian TV dramas; she distinguished between two sorts of performative subjects: an certain elite who produces national television, targeting imagined audiences with national standards (e.g. Egyptian serials can be more forthright in their moral lessons compared to Euro-American dramas), and various dominated groups who “not only appreciate and enjoy but critically interpret, select, and evaluate what the elites produce, always in the context of their everyday lives” (Abu-Lughod, 2005: 21). If, contrary to Bourdieu (1984), lower classes (as categorized by the opinion leaders) can engage with the dominant narrative and defend their “guilty pleasures” (or even derive some pleasure from this guilt), then a chance to break the ideological oppression opens up. However, as we will later see, this is not possible without a fortunate stroke of serendipity. In other cases, the dominant classes’ consumption of DP could be considered as nothing more than ironic, as recently described by Peters, van Eijck and Michael (2017) in the case of Dutch karaoke clubs. The authors argue that participating in karaoke culture is nowadays more about how one consumes culture than what precisely is consumed. Middle class individuals in their sample attend the same working-class pubs as regular karaoke-goers but the attitudes of the two groups were very different. Middle class respondents varied from being ironic to “secretly serious”, while low cultural capital (LCC) individuals were invariably ‘serious’ in their approach to karaoke. In other words, middle class respondents believed that it was “acceptable and fun to do karaoke, as long as it is not done in the serious LCC way” (Peters, van Eijck and Michael 2017: 14). Even the authors of this paper (2017: 4) note, however, that contemporary omnivores are not interested in everything, because “not everything can be consumed unconditionally”. In Poland, DP has been serving as a gauge of bad taste for years; hence ironic consumption cannot explain its popularity in full.

Disco Polo – The Most Lowbrow Genre One Can Think Of

DP, a low, derided in public discourse (in press, films, television programs, internet forums), musical genre, popular in the 1990s, was far less visible in the early 2000s, but recently it became more popular than ever. Despite the symbolic violence in the form of

media discourses or internalized dispositions, DP was lucky enough to meet the fertile ground of a recent conservative political change in Poland and is experiencing its second youth.

Before I will be able to disentangle the different forces behind this twist, it seems necessary to go back into the 1990s to understand the roots of a musical phenomenon that occurred in Poland along with the democratic transformation. At that time, hierarchies were still strong, but the dissonance between official and everyday culture was becoming visible. DP came into being in the late 1980s, when the authoritarian state was struggling for its existence, and many people were looking forward to western consumption culture, which, at that time, was both appealing and mysterious (Dunaeva, 2011). Poles were fed up with a totalitarian model of culture, which had privileged artists and put forth an official cultural script. In the early 1990s there was only one label (Blue Star) producing DP records and it was eager to cooperate with every band interested in DP. As a result, the entry threshold was extremely low. DP was dubbed “pavement music” back in the early 1990s, because its cassettes were being sold on the streets, like many other commodities.

According to Bourdieusian framework, DP should never have become popular, since practices of lower classes can all too easily be transformed into objects of disgust (Law, 2006; Skeggs, 2005; Tyler, 2008). As easy and pleasant dance music, DP was a novelty. The lyrics were usually about love, vacation, and idleness, and that is precisely why official critique interpreted them as frivolous and coarse (Kowalczyk, 1997, Borys 2019, Sierakowska 2019) or being “vulgarly Dionysian” (Zaborski, 2017)². The main objections were related to the rude character, naive lyrics, low skills of performers, and lack of genuine idea behind it³. In this context, it is worth emphasizing that DP is not only the music, but also a kind of aesthetics embracing sexualized depictions of women, macho men and ostentatious symbols of social status (e.g. gold jewellery, sport cars). This aesthetics, not only in Poland but also other countries (e.g. rappers in the USA), is ODPOWIADA how lower classes see a lifestyle of a man of success. In this case, listening to music offered “the opportunity to temporarily be another kind of person than one’s ordinary, everyday self” (Becker 2010: 134-135). The aesthetics and the awareness that it is local music made it attractive. Later on, this national character of DP helped it to survive, as a new dominant force in the political, a populist party, field was seeking egalitarian, anti-elitist, forms of culture.

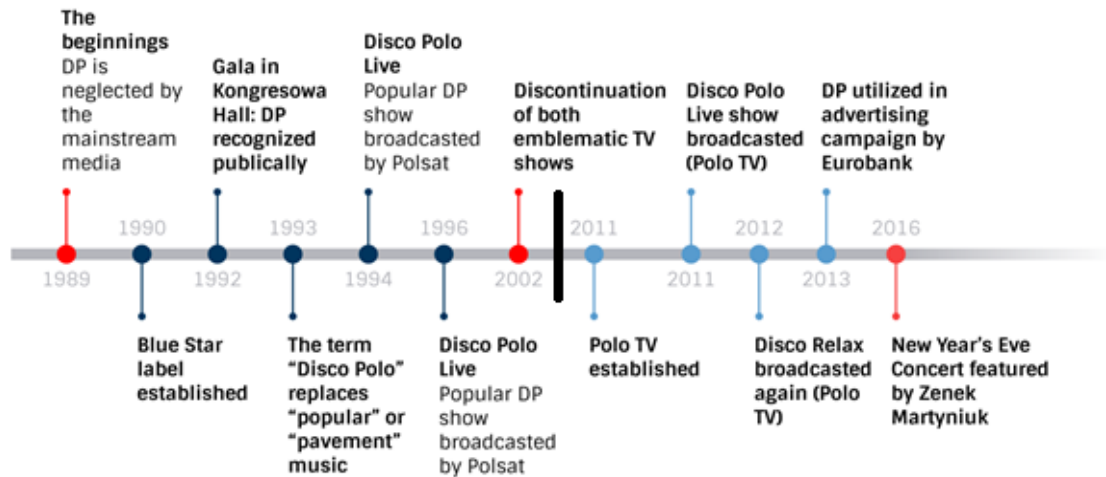
Figure 1 presents some milestones in the history of DP in Poland. From the early 1990s to the 2000s DP was riding on a wave; it gained a lot of fans, including prominent politicians such as President Alexander Kwaśniewski. Yet in terms of media coverage, DP was invisible in all but one major TV station and received heavy criticism continuously. After years of criticism for being distasteful and rude, DP almost disappeared, or at least was less visible for an audience of mainstream media. In 2002 Polsat, a major Polish private TV station and the only promoter of DP, suddenly discontinued two emblematic shows: *Disco Relax* and *Disco Polo Live*. A well-known and respected journalist, Wojciech Orliński (2004), titled one of his papers the “The Death of Disco Polo.” This is precisely what Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction would predict. If that had been the end of the story, it would have explained the popularity of DP quite well; but all of the sudden, ten years later, it turned out that the diagnosis of DP’s death was premature. Music that had all but almost disappeared from “serious,” mainstream media ended up surviving thanks to family events and celebrations (birthdays, weddings, informal parties). It

2 Another recipe for a success was to record well-known folk songs in a new disco interpretation.

3 Even if so-called neo-disco polo (the “second wave” that dates back to 2000s) eliminated some technical imperfections; the DP songs remained relatively simple and masculine, sexist – the core of DP stayed untouched.

was thus conserved in private practices, but in 2012 it very unexpectedly burst onto the mainstream media scene, taking a place it had actually never occupied in the 1990s. It was in 2012 that a particular song, “She Dances for Me,” became extremely popular. As the Polish Press Agency reported, with 96 million views on Youtube it was the first Polish song that ever placed in the Top 100 YouTube videos⁴. The return of DP is less unexpected in the online environment because cultural sociologists demonstrated that online communities and social networking sites are not formed based on class hierarchies or formal knowledge (de Boise 2016). Nonetheless, DP also returned as one of the genres presented in the contexts of big concerts and national TV; for the first time in the history, “Discopoland,” a special TV program dedicated to it, was produced.

Figure 1. Brief history of Disco Polo



Source: Author's own research.

Further proof of the return of DP to public discourse comes from advertising. In 2013, Eurobank used the theme from female DP singer Shazza's hit “Bierz, co chcesz” (“Take All You Want”), not discouraged despite its obvious sexual subtext. Recently, Star Chips, a local brand controlled by Frito-Lay, created a campaign based on a DP video clip (cf. Lubczyński, 2017). Whereas it should be noted that the advertiser's intention was ironical, DP would heretofore never have appeared in marketing communication of any serious brand, due to connotations of DP being so repellent. In this context DP is noticeably starting to serve a dual function: working as a proxy of bad taste (and, thus, a weapon of dominant classes) and as an independent subculture, a pool of lowbrow symbols, histories, and discourses (all of which can be seen/used as weapons of dominated classes).

In the following part, I shall discuss three hypotheses regarding the revival of DP. The first one describes DP as a guilty pleasure. The second, treats it as a by-product of the media system. Both turn out to be insufficient, yet for very different reasons. Subsequently, I introduce a third hypothesis that sees lowbrows as conservative rebels. I argue that the resurrection of DP was possible partially thanks to the new right-wing and populist government that justifies it as a genre that has always been appreciated by the Poles and enjoyed only in private, but cannot be officially recognized because of liberal, cosmopolitan elites. In this narrative, which is widespread throughout the nation, the intelligentsia was ostensibly powerful enough to make it disappear from mainstream media for long years, yet not forever.

⁴ Source: <http://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news,507998,ona-tanczy-dla-mnie-w-zestawieniu-swiatowych-hitow.html> [9.04.2017].

Lowbrows as Human Animals – Evolutionary Aesthetics and Guilty Pleasure

The popularity of DP can be explained as a result of it being easy, non-demanding music. One can argue that DP is a natural and simple response to the poor musical education in Poland. For a long time, researchers of the Polish musical scene have been alarmed at how limited musical education is in Poland; Poland is also among the countries in Europe with the lowest number of art lessons (Arts and Cultural Education at School in Europe 2009, see: Białkowski, Grusiewicz and Michalak, 2010). In these circumstances, non-demanding music becomes the definition of a “good”, or widespread and socially accepted, music.

This implies that DP was able to speak to people’s natural proclivities, as suggested by evolutionary psychologists – a taste for symmetry or rhythm, a regular and non-complicated melodic line, or life-related, down-to-earth lyrics, dealing with issues common to all human beings (Dissanayake 1992; Dutton 2009). Lyrics of a typical DP song explore one of the following: sexual contests of male protagonists, unrequited love, summer flings, and DP songs are usually simple, lacking any twist; the lyrics merely consist of pure clichés. For the general public, clichés enable fast and frugal communication. Responses to DP are not intellectual but more spontaneous, casual and uninhibited. Ien Ang (1985: 84) also noted that “experiencing a pleasure is not a conscious, directed activity (although one can strive for it), but something that ‘happens’, something which comes over the viewer according to his or her feelings.” DP is not demanding, nor thought provoking – it is just easy to enjoy. These qualities of DP could easily go unnoticed in a Bourdieusian framework, as his “programme for a sociology of art leaves important questions unanswered, particularly regarding questions of form, style and content” (Prior 2011: 135).

The second “natural” advantage of DP is what Anna Kowalczyk (1997) dubbed “minimal distance” (see: Borys 2019, Sierakowska 2019). Lyrics usually show regular people, “just like us.” It resembles Bourdieu’s notion of “familiarity,” introduced in reference to the social behaviour of the lower social strata. It allows the working class an indirect opposition to the manners of dominant classes, for instance, making meals “free-and-easy” by not changing dishes between meals (Bourdieu 1984). For the lower strata, it is important to always feel at home and be in charge of the situation. This does not, however, imply that DP aesthetics has egalitarian underpinnings. In the male DP world, there is certainly room for symbols of status, such as sports cars, gold jewellery or trophy wives. Moreover, instruments such as keyboards manufactured by leading brands such as Roland, Yamaha or Casio, are symbols of ostentatious consumption in contrast to traditional rural music performed with simple instruments. Paradoxically, protagonists in the DP world possess those symbols, but they still resemble ordinary people rather than social or economic elites in their way of talking, their choice of words, or the “familiar” attitude described by Bourdieu. What makes DP stand out is also the openness to fast upward mobility (the possibility of gaining status symbols), which matches the expectations of citizens of a country that is always ‘behind’, always feeling the need to catch up with the West.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that this “naturalistic” interpretation helps deconstruct the “charm” and popularity of DP, it is unable to explain why at a certain point it almost disappeared from the media. An argument rooted in media studies deals better with this phenomenon. Insofar as the media studies perspective highlights the structure of the media system, it can be dubbed “techno centric.”

Lowbrows as a Byproduct of the Media System

In the early 1990s, despite the prevalence of the moral superiority discourse, of class humour, and of fierce critique from public media, the first and at that time biggest, privately held TV station in Poland, *Polsat*, decided to promote DP. By that time

Polsat was interested in maximizing their market share at any price, and lowbrow music seemed to be a recipe for success. The popularity of DP and its marketing value had also been leveraged in politics, most notably when Aleksander Kwaśniewski, in his presidential campaign of 1995 (Szalkiewicz, 2013). DP became *Polsat*'s hallmark for years to come, which, together with the stand-up comedians, erotic shows and action films that fill the season schedule, resulted in *Polsat* being labelled as a lowbrow station (Mielczarek, 2013). When, in the second half of 1990s, the competition from newly established private stations arose, *Polsat* tried to change its image and increase profit margins by including new types of audiences. Hence, it started abandoning some of the programs. The competition for mainstream viewers was one of the possible reasons for discontinuing DP programs in 2002.

This "techno centric" explanation is simple and convincing, but it is not fully satisfactory. It deals smoothly with the vanishing popularity of DP. The first problem with the techno centric approach lies in the fact that at the beginning, in the early 1990s, nobody initially promoted this music in television or radio. From 1989 to 1992 no serious broadcaster, included state-controlled media, mentioned it at all (Kowalczyk, 1997). This makes the techno centric argument unconvincing. Moreover, there is still the open question as to which factors enabled DP to be revived ten years later. It is possible that the pluralization of media, the emergence of digital television and dozens of new thematic channels allowed the return of the genre (Pawlicka and Szypulka, 2014), but nowadays the media presence of DP is not a simple by-product of this process, as DP burst onto the mainstream TV channels, including public television. Moreover, the "techno centric" argument treats media systems as independent from dominant discourses and values the dominance of economic capital over the cultural.

We can indicate another problem with this explanation by referring to the distinction of three media systems, put forth by Antonina Kloskowska (1983). It stems from the fact that DP has its roots in small concerts and rural barns and not mass media. Kloskowska placed the "second" cultural system (direct contact between artist and audience) in opposition with the "third" one (intermediated mass communication), which are both different from the first system, based on face-to-face communication (Kloskowska, 1983: 363-370, see: Matuchniak-Krasuska 2003 for the English-language discussion). Whereas the techno centric explanation concentrates on the media ("third system"), it neglects the first and second cultural systems, both of which were crucial for the development and spread of DP as a genre in its own right. In this light, I am going to present the third explanation, the one that takes into account those crucial systems and deals both with the DP boom of the early 1990s and its rebirth in 2010s.

Lowbrows as Conservative Rebels

In the case of DP, changes in the political field created a discursive force that allowed for some transgressions in the cultural field and weakened the official disgust. It was precisely the situation when one set of taken-for-granted aesthetic dispositions meets another one, and "allodoxia" occurs (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979: 156). When two discourses compete and produce very different social hierarchies of tastes, people are confused. The new, populist, political discourse in Poland (Stępińska et al. 2017) leveraged the pan-European "crisis in middle-class authority and security", as depicted by Beverly Skeggs (2005: 968). Under these circumstances the dominated classes started challenging surveillance, or "not authorizing those who have been positioned with more moral authority" and "blocking their ability to apply moral value judgement" (Skeggs, 2005: 976). To understand the case of "DP conservative rebels", we first need some context to be introduced.

On May 24, 2015, a lesser known, conservative nationalist politician Andrzej Duda representing PiS, a major right-wing party, unexpectedly won the presidential election and six months later, PiS dominated the parliament in the national election. Poland has

had right-wing governments before, and given that the society is more conservative than liberal, this should not have been a radical change. But despite the pre-election declarations of PiS leaders, all iterated in a moderate, conciliatory tone, the cultural revolution started right after the new government was sworn in. The three notable examples of controversial actions were undermining the independence of public media (Gocłowski, 2016), anti-abortion campaign (Graff and Korolczuk, 2017; Kubisa, 2017) and the changes in Constitutional Tribunal, which resulted in the accusation that the Polish government undermines the rule of law discussed in the European Parliament (Davies, 2016).

Regarding cultural policy on the national level (understood as a body of operational principles as well as procedures and practices providing a basis for cultural actions), a key characteristic of the new government, PiS, is that it should strive to be anti-elitist. Their campaign's main slogan was "A Good Change," and it soon became clear that it was a far more than just a slogan. The new government attacked many privileged occupational categories, including lawyers, European politicians, and cultural intermediaries. PiS' main message was that now the government represents ordinary people. They were seeking allies and this opened a huge opportunity for DP artists. With its folk nature and Polish roots, DP represents great symbolic value and thereby presented a good weapon in the symbolic struggles. That is why the following statement before a memorable 2016 New Year's Eve Show, made by the new head of national television TVP (also a prominent politician of PiS), is hardly surprising:

Zenek Martyniuk is the most prominent representative of disco polo music, adored by Poles. He has 100 million views on YouTube. The idea of inviting him to "New Year's Eve with Second Channel" was brilliant. We have to end up with prudishness and hypocrisy. (cited in Orłowski, 2017)

This discourse, on one hand, allowed many people to acknowledge their music preferences in public. Unfortunately, we do not have data on DP popularity gathered after the 2015 election. The newest source is the Central Statistical Office of Poland's report (GUS 2014) stating that 12 per cent of people with higher education (treated as a necessarily imperfect indicator of cultural capital) and 30 per cent with vocational education listen to DP. Overall, DP was liked by 23.5 percent of Poles. These preferences were expressed in the time when the populist discourse was already present and was becoming more popular. As hard data is scarce, it is worth paying attention to newspaper articles reporting that DP is also gaining a presence in bigger cities, with DP bands playing concerts in student clubs (Śmigiel, 2013; Węglarczyk, 2013). All journalists, based on their research, claim that the DP audience is no longer composed of lower social strata – the genre is also attracting the middle class (e.g. engineers, corporate Poland) or students, namely the future intelligentsia. Even though this shift cannot be confirmed empirically, public opinion has certainly changed, as documented by various journalists (Śmigiel, 2013; Węglarczyk, 2013; Zaborski, 2017). Even if at the moment it can only be measured by media coverage and more positive attitudes towards DP in the media, this symbolic change puts many elements of Bourdieu's theory of distinction into question.

According to the new political discourse, visible in Jacek Kurski's quote, the nation was enslaved. It might have had its aesthetical sensibilities, but "ordinary" Poles were ridiculed and both mainstream media and social elites refused to recognize them for over 25 years. Such a discourse enables an articulation of a growing mistrust for cultural hierarchies (Schwarz, 2015), which is prevalent but becoming less and less obvious in modern societies (de Boise 2016; Peters, van Eijck and Michael 2017). This discourse, however, is not fully egalitarian as it has at its core the despised liberal elites: PiS profited from an old division between "us" (ordinary people) and "them" (elites) that was strongly consolidated during authoritarian rule (1944-1989). The democracy was unable to bridge this gap right away: at the beginning of the 1990s, a time of turmoil in Poland, the major

sides of conflict changed but its essence stayed untouched: new elites replaced the old ones (Pareto, 1983). The side effect of this change was a new antithetic (binary) vision, built on the harm of those whom the political transformation excluded from the group of beneficiaries of change. According to the narrative of PiS, the nation was deceived by liberal elites and left alone. Now the nation is not alone and it does not have to be ashamed anymore. In this sense, listening to DP is not only patriotic but also morally right, as it is an act of disobedience to corrupted elites. This moral discourse reinforces tastes long kept hidden, dissolving the shame around them enough for them to emerge in the public sphere. In contemporary Poland, moral and aesthetics discourses are closely related, as Michèle Lamont (1992) demonstrated in the case of North American culture.

Is DP a Genuinely Polish Phenomenon? Discussion

The case of DP and its revival after 2010 shows how social hierarchies can lose their importance and power when there are new populist forces that build upon the inequalities. To what extent the rehabilitation of tastes perceived so far as lowbrow by populist and nationalistic governments and their discourses is unique to Poland is an intriguing question. Since the forms of cultural resistance are rare and distributed very unevenly in terms of geography, it is worth analysing the cultural context where they have appeared.

While it is difficult to find similar music phenomena in Europe, it is much easier to indicate affinities between DP culture and the redneck culture in the U.S. The American redneck ethos can be best defined by what it is not: highfaluting (or “farterist,” as Israeli natives would have said; Schwarz, 2016), overly intellectual, and most of all, international (Fenimore, 2014: 6). Both subcultures live in particular geographical locations (American South and Polish East respectively). Moreover, both subcultures are a conservative response to the uncertainties of changing world. Thus, the similarities between redneck and DP ethos are difficult to overlook⁵. Cooper Fenimore (2014) noted that many people in the United States treat redneck culture as a “response to globalizing forces that threaten previously unchallenged hegemonies predicated on “traditional” values of home, hearth, heterosexuality, whiteness, and patriarchy” (Fenimore 2014: 2). This aspect of redneck identity perfectly resembles the situation of Polish DP fans, who also subscribe to Polish values of familiarity, equality, and locality.

Despite these attributes, both representational histories are very unfavourable. In the Polish language, the phrase “disco polo” is often used to emphasize the low quality of the particular song, and in a similar way, “redneck” is a derogatory term in the U.S (Fenimore, 2014). Even in a highly popular reality show featuring ‘rednecks’, “Duck Dynasty,” they were not praised for their culture; the show was rather a satire, since it was executed from the patronizing position of dominant classes. Yet, in some, rare contexts, redneck culture does have positive affiliations. Their representation can be ambiguous as regards the American ideal of self-reliance to which rednecks subscribe (Peterson, 1999; Fenimore, 2014). In the US, the myth of frontier and traditional masculinity was strong enough to serve as fuel for the advertising industry, becoming integral to the narratives of brands such as Marlboro or Jack Daniels (Holt and Cameron 2010). On the contrary, in Poland, this subversive, liberating (but anti-liberal) potential was hidden, and until recently, the only connotations of DP music were negative. It can be partially explained by the different foundational myths of both cultures: American egalitarianism and the ethos of the self-made man (Pendergast, 2000; Ducan, 2014) and Polish nostalgia for gentry and the “golden” age of the 16th century. That is why, it can be hypothesized that cultural boundaries were stronger in the hierarchical Polish society until a recent political change that resulted in the emergence of anti-elitist discourse. After this shift, DP revived as a

⁵ The main difference lies in the fact that DP culture is not necessarily associated with moral degeneration (e.g. incest recurring in American discourse on rednecks), poverty and racism.

musical genre and TV stations recognized its existence.

In this sense, I perceive Polish anti-elitist discourse as an example of guarding against symbolic violence, which is similar to Ori Schwarz's (2016) analysis of the "farterm discourse" in Israel. Schwarz describes "farterm" as a discursive category that emerged in Israel in the 1990s to denounce vain pretense and became ubiquitous in the everyday evaluation. "Fartermists" are accused of "consuming high-status cultural objects for social distinction, showing off their (alleged) refinement while sacrificing pleasure (use-value) for sign-value" (Schwarz, 2016: 144). This category is similar to the English "fancy-schmancy," except it is not a discourse exclusive to socially deprived classes⁶. Similarly to Polish anti-elitist discourse, anti-fartermism is spread across different social classes and circles, not always possessing low cultural capital (Schwarz, 2016: 152). What makes these two cases different is the fact that anti-fartermists do not have their distinctive culture and participate in various mainstream activities, while Polish anti-elitist discourse has produced its own music.

Another issue that should be discussed is the difference between DP and other kinds of "subversive" music that try to undermine the existing hierarchies. Some analogies can also be found between DP and jazz (Lopes 2000; Kirschbaum 2012), as this genre was also initially considered "low", mainly because of the lower-class association of jazz musicians, who generally lacked formal musical education and tended to be the people of colour. Paul Lopes (2000: 166) argues that the increasing value of jazz resulted from struggles between different class fractions within the music field and that the modern jazz paradigm was a specific (though not overtly conscious) strategy adopted in these struggles. Musicians with dominant class origins managed to become a part of cultural production, creating a special restricted subfield of popular art (in addition to the Bourdieusian restricted subfield of art, the subfield of commercial bourgeois art, and the subfield of commercial-industrial popular art) (Lopes 2000: 173). The case of DP is different mainly because the transformation allowed DP to be considered a regular type of popular music, as opposed to a shameful, aberrant by-product of mainstream music production. It was not the transformation from a popular art to a more sophisticated form of it; if genres were people, we would have said that DP moved not from the working to the middle class, but rather from the underclass to the regular middle class. The new moral discourse can help us understand how DP can be consumed in other than simply ironic ways.

Conclusion

In this paper I showed how a despised and derided music can participate in symbolic struggles, albeit playing a passive role. Lowbrow tastes might have been deeply embedded in our class habitus (or, as evolutionary psychologists would argue, they are rooted in our evolutionary past) but they have always been looked down upon as shameful. This "class humour," a situation where the dominant class ridicules the dominated, is understandable in the framework of Bourdieu or theorists of the sociology of emotions. The paper demonstrated that there are two major factors behind the rebirth of DP in contemporary Poland: hidden folk tastes, oppressed just as Bourdieu's theory of distinction would argue, and a political shift that encouraged the lowbrow audience to question the legitimacy of a dominant culture, which Bourdieu had not predicted. At least not entirely, because we must make the disclaimer that Bourdieu did not *exclude* the possibility of change: in his theory, social fields are dynamic and even the static nature of habitus cannot prevent them from being shaped by constant symbolic struggles. Nevertheless, he did not give examples of such changes, nor define their necessary conditions.

I argued that the changes of the 1990s and the liberalization of music allowed DP

6 This phenomenon was analyzed, among others, by Beverly Skeggs' (2005) in studies showing how lower strata critique "cultural pretensions".

music to come into being but not to enter the mainstream. Distinction mechanisms and moral panic were not absent, but were delayed. After several years of critique for being distasteful, it seemed like DP would die off for good, but, suddenly, DP returned. What is more, for the first time in the history it was treated seriously, as one of legitimate music genres. That would have been impossible without the populist anti-intellectual discourse that had been ignited by the new government, whose principal aim was to humiliate and eradicate all elites.

Although the first concern of the new government was to rebuild the country (following Victor Orban's Hungary), the side effect was to legitimize despised tastes. With such official legitimization (the previously quoted minister inviting a DP star to the official New Year's Eve program is the best possible example), people felt free to admit that they enjoy DP, consumption of which until then was reserved for weddings or private parties. The double bind dissolved and private practices could eventually be exported to the public sphere.

The revival of DP is not the only sign of an anti-elitist cultural shift in Central Europe (and visible also in other countries such as USA, UK, or France), but it demands attention for two different reasons. First, DP is a rare case of lowbrow aesthetics that managed to break into the mainstream. What is common among the other popular political leaders and artists who attracted lower classes throughout recent history is their marginal or niche position with respect to mainstream society (e.g. when in 2006 Samoobrona, an extremely populist party become an insignificant member of a wide right-wing coalition in Poland). DP is different insofar as it acquired a position in mainstream culture. The rebirth of DP culture is a stark example of lowbrow rebellion that encourages us to rethink the strict Bourdieusian model. Second, DP case is special as it is not just a response to the dominant tastes, not merely a counter-culture such as the anti-farmerist discourse in Israel. It is rather an independent musical subculture with its own codes, symbols, and history, a subculture that is fighting a stigma built up from years of critique; so far, it seems to be winning this struggle.

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