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'To be one's own boss': Exceptional entrepreneurs and products that sell themselves in urban Poland

Siobhan Magee

Abstract

This article discusses the aspirations of young people in the Polish city of Kraków who wish to 'be their own bosses' – to become entrepreneurs. The article makes a rejoinder to portrayals of 'the fine salesperson' as a man or woman who 'can sell anything'. The forms of personhood and aesthetics favoured in Krakówian renderings of selling instead place emphasis on a good entrepreneur not as one who *persuades,* but as one who *provides*. Comprehension of these areas explains why the salient 'moment of sale' is when an aspirant businessperson comes up with their 'good idea' for a product. Drawing from the observation that the indiscriminate flogging of goods is widely disdained in Kraków, I argue that the topic of selling opens up discussions about the local constitution of difference and the ways in which successful entrepreneurs are able to match products to demographics.

What should a person sell? This question is particularly pressing at times and in places where a remarkable number of people aspire to start their own business. In the Polish city of Kraków, the vaunted rewards of starting one's own business – the opportunity 'to be one's own boss' (*być własnym szefem)* – are not merely financial, but political, moral, and affective.[1] Businesspeople possess a modest fame: whether through shop front or stall, website or flyer, those whom they do not know nevertheless know them. However, talk of such businesses and their proprietors is particularly rife after they have shut down. I concluded the fieldwork on which this article is based in early 2011[2] and during my annual or biannual visits since the altered composition of some of the city's commercial streets has been striking. The alleged reasons why a business has shut down, leaving a papered-over shop window or as one woman put it, a 'ghost website' in its place, are numerous. These include soaring rents and the deaths of proprietors without feasible heirs, but most prominent in exegeses of failed businesses are accounts of poor sales due to lack of interest in the product. Consonant with anthropological thought that situates time as the heuristic *par excellence* for conceptualising on-the-ground experiences of capitalism (Bear 2016; Miyazaki 2003), temporal metaphors abound and are striking in

[1] One survey conducted in Poland found that over 70% of respondents had considered starting their own business (*Rzeczpospolita* 2013).

[2] This article is based primarily upon fieldwork carried out between November 2009 and February 2011.

their variety: while one shop ceased activity because, according to local hearsay, 'Kraków isn't ready for this [product] yet… maybe in Warsaw', its equally defunct neighbor was, in contrast, 'too old fashioned'. Each case, however, sees the former proprietors accused of failing to match products to markets: an unhappy jumbling of people, times, places, and things.

My aim in this article is to explore the practices and concerns of young people in Kraków who aspire to become entrepreneurs. In watching them while they work to find the capital but also the 'good [business] idea' *(dobry pomysł*) to do so, I problematise renderings (ethnographic, but also literary and cinematic) of 'the fine salesperson' as someone who 'can sell anything'. A good product in Kraków, I will argue, is one that 'sells itself'. This principle does not undermine a self-employed salesperson's agency in markets. On the contrary, it underscores an exceptional cognizance of them. An entrepreneur is not one who *persuades,* it follows, but one who *provides.*

Amid perpetually significant debates about how to characterize the sociality between those who trade, exchange, or gift (e.g. Mauss 1924; Weiner 1992; Carrier 1995; Hermann 1997; McKinnon and Cannell 2013), hunches about what will sell – writ large as imaginations of large and bountiful markets – are frequently based on knowledge of what friends and acquaintances find useful or appealing. It follows that those who meet the logistical, intellectual, and social challenges of entrepreneurship are rewarded by not having to be anyone else's employee. As Olivia Harris writes, 'the question of what makes people work is a central feature of the way that human existence is understood within different cultural and historical repertoires' (2007:137). Ask this question of aspirant entrepreneurs in Kraków and one would, I think, be met with a further question: given that we must work in order to earn money, how might we make our work as little a compromise as possible of 'who we are' when it comes to our politics, interests, capabilities, routines, and relationships? These areas of analysis help explain why entrepreneurship is not 'only' a way of making money but an ethical conviction.

In exploring these themes ethnographically, I seek to reorient recent anthropological debates about entrepreneurship's ubiquity in contemporary life. Entrepreneurs intrigue because their biographies promise uncommonly direct insights into capitalism's convergence with personhood (Barth 1967; Veblen 1904; Oxfeld 1992; Buchowski 2008). The ethnographic record reveals how people in diverse geographical locations experience the ambiguous desire-cum-necessity of 'being entrepreneurial' even when one is an employee (e.g. Knight 2015; Dolan and Rajak 2016; Sanchez 2012;

Shipley 2009). Entrepreneurship has been written about in relation to many places, including through notable studies focusing on migration or transnationalism. In the last almost three decades, however, the key question that entrepreneurs pose, 'what does it mean to be particularly invested in capitalism?' has been especially pressing in Poland and its post-Soviet neighbours. While there were many continuities between life before and after the early 1990s' 'transition' to (or 'reform of', see Hann 2008) capitalism, at stake at the time was the idea that a transformation of the economy and its attendant employment conditions would radically reconfigure relationships (cf. Pine 2002) and social classes (Buchowski 2008) and give rise to a new 'privatised' personhood (Dunn 2004). The supposed depth of this transformation, the feeling that people could – or had to – change their *selves* suggested noticeable changes in a range of types of workplaces and to owners of labour and their employees alike. And yet, consonant with prescient social theory that tells of the social responsibility felt by entrepreneurs (Barth 1967), in Central and Eastern Europe, 'small and medium businesses' were thought to have a distinctly important role in galvanising the transition to capitalism (Hardy and Rainnie 1996). Entrepreneurs mattered beyond the revenue they could generate: when analysing the names of new businesses in 1990s St. Petersburg, for example, Alexei Yurchak discovered that 'By inventing new names for privately owned public spaces their owners are *privatizing* public space not only legally (as legitimate owners) but also symbolically (as the authors and masters of the new meaning of this space)' (Yurchak 2000: 407. Original emphasis). Work on post-Soviet states exemplifies how entrepreneurs' perceived specialness can be imagined as radiating both outwards to the rest of society (as through visibility in public spaces and in the media) and internally, *within the person*.

It has been argued, however, that late capitalism's less than nurturing state–citizen relations and technological advancement's reconfiguration of time (Bear 2016) mean that everyone must become an entrepreneur – and for survival rather than prosperity. This reaches a crescendo in Ulrich Bröckling's theory of 'the entrepreneurial self' (2016, which also evokes 'the enterprising self', see Dunn 2004: 22 drawing on Miller and Rose 1990 and Maurer 1999; see also Freeman 2014). Bröckling theorises that

> [Entrepreneurship] is an *aim* individuals strive for, a *gauge* by which they judge their own conduct, a daily *exercise* for working on the self, and finally a *truth generator* by which they come to know themselves… You are only ever an entrepreneur *à venir*, only even in a state of becoming one, never of being one (Bröckling 2016: iii. Original emphasis).

These words speak of the lack of certainty capitalism provides its subjects, who must be 'always on', heedful of the threat suggested at the very beginning of this article that

business' 'winners' can quickly become 'losers'. In this article, I argue that there are more literal relationships between entrepreneurship and 'aims' or 'becomings' than Bröckling suggests. Those mentioned in what follows may or may not agree either already or in the future with Bröckling's tenet that entrepreneurship is above all else 'a form of subjectification' (iii). But what the ethnographic material on aspirant entrepreneurs presented here is particularly well-placed to show is how such a position entails practical preparations and hard work that suggest entrepreneurship as a both form of 'expertise' (see Boyer 2008) and, by definition, an 'exceptional' (Ong 2006) social position.

Poland is a postsocialist country, a relatively recent EU member state – as the headlines would have it 'Europe's Unlikely Star' (*The Economist* 2014)' and 'the only EU member to avoid a recession during the financial crisis' (ibid.). In Poland, one is often told of Poles' ingenuity in trades of varying levels of formality before, during, and after the socialist era. As such, it would be tempting to nominate Poland as a place where entrepreneurial spirit might be so widespread as to dilute its significance. And yet, aspirant entrepreneurs' renderings of both their current situations and those to which they are working frame their goal of entrepreneurship as a desired 'caesura' (Feuchtwang 2005) in their biographies. I suggest that when a society's historical and economic circumstances' have necessitated 'being entrepreneurial' (for example, as a response to a shortage economy), 'actual entrepreneurs' work hard to establish their *exceptional* suitability for entrepreneurship as a vocation (cf. Knight 2015). The difference being an entrepreneur makes cuts two ways: firstly, between members of society who are entrepreneurs and those who are not; secondly, in the trajectory of the person who is an employee and then no one's employee.

What follow asserts the usefulness of autobiography and biography (cf. Okely and Callaway 1992) and kinship (see McKinnon and Cannell 2013) for understanding capitalism and presents entrepreneurs as people particularly invested in 'difference'. It is commonly held that the work of the entrepreneur is to exploit 'economic niches' (Eriksen 2005) and that the conceptualization of consumer 'groups' ('niche markets') is a prerequisite for entrepreneurs to be able to, as one classic definition puts it, 'reform or revolutionize the pattern of production by exploiting an invention or, more generally, an untried technological possibility for producing a new commodity or producing an old one in a new way' (Schumpeter 1976 in Bröckling 2016: 70). And yet, the question of how niche markets are constructed – who constitutes them and what one 'market', as opposed to another, will buy – is quite underrepresented on the ethnographic record.

While, as an anthropological concern, the subject of difference is almost unparalleled in its breadth and influence (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 1998; Stasch 2009; Strathern 1988; Mayblin 2011; Candea 2010) it is scarcely associated with business. One stimulating exception, William Mazzarella's work on Bombay advertising executives (2003), shows that contrary to easily made assumptions about the homogenizing effects of globalization, discourses of 'Indianness' in advertising '[have] posited cultural difference as the very foundation of consumer preference' (2003: 37). A second example suggests such a concern with difference is symptomatic of (but not exclusive to) postsocialism. Elizabeth Dunn's 1998 article 'A Product for Everybody is A Product for Nobody: Niche Marketing and Political Individualism in Polish Civil Society' takes the first half of its title from a pithy Warsaw marketing executive. Dunn argues that following the 'transition' away from the state socialism that had nominally emphasized homogeneity, in the early 1990s companies in Poland palpably pushed 'special products [that] are made to meet the ostensible 'demands' or 'needs' of a narrowly defined social group, continually segment[ing] and resegment[ing] the consumer population' (1998: 22). Dunn gives the example of difference monetized through a soft drink campaign that portrayed young Poles as 'generationally different, politically different [from older Poles], and hence (and here's the punch line) one that requires its very own fruit drink' (1998: 23). This reminds me of the thick-with-quality card advertisements for Absolut Vodka placed in the centre of tables at a Kraków gallery-cum-bar in 2010 that read *Absolut Pokolenie: Talenty, Zamilowanie, Indywidualnosc, Natchnienie* ('Absolut Generation: Talents, Passion, Individuality, Inspiration'), along with other words associated with youth and modernity: 'travel', 'dancing', and 'graffiti'. In a country with polarizing politics, generational differences are much more readily spoken of, and exploited, than perceived differences in taboo topics such as sexuality and religion (see Kubica 2009; Mizielińska 2001; Pasieka 2015; Magee 2016). The point is that, whether trying to sell juice or vodka, Polish marketing and advertising executives, like Mazzarella's Indian advertising executives, grasp apertures between sections of society and prize them open.

Products, of course, precede advertising. And in contrast with marketing and advertising executives' 'segment[ing] and resegment[ing] the consumer population' (Dunn 1998: 22), aspiring entrepreneurs' emic characterization of their work is coloured not by 'breaking down' but by 'scaling up'. In Kraków, an indispensible tool for finding these 'niche' and 'new' markets are the social and working lives that informants sustain before starting their own businesses. Recurrent in what follows is the imagination of

markets that derive from insights gleaned from meeting 'actual people' who belong to such a group based on their nationality, age, or gender. The aspiring entrepreneurs said with chagrin that the time they spent 'working towards' their goal of self-employment gave them plenty of time to make the acquaintance of people who quite unwittingly educated them as to what might constitute a 'good idea' for a product to sell to 'people like them'. It is not so much that entrepreneurship 'simultaneously cloaks and facilitates a web of transactions that are often as much or more socially engaged as economically rationalized' (Herrmann 1997: 912), as that social relations *inspire* economic activity. It is at the point in a person's biography when they become an entrepreneur that the relationship that sparked their good idea – whether a deep friendship or a fleeting acquaintance – becomes 'not only' a social relationship but the pivot for the story of their business (cf. Yanagisako 2002) and, concordant with the indivisibility of entrepreneurship from personhood, serious change in one's personhood.

To be one's own boss *(być własnym szefem)*

In Kraków, friends and acquaintances in their twenties and early thirties who wanted to start their own businesses possessed, as Michał Buchowski puts it, an 'ethos' of entrepreneurship (2008: 67; cf. Veblen 1904; Barth 1967; Oxfeld 1992) without, technically, being entrepreneurs. They discussed business ideas, worked to improve their networks and skills, and contrasted their current lots with their imagined lifestyles. That these ways of constructing the self as a businessperson can precede the actual foundation of businesses is also reflected in Alina Zapalska's decision to research Polish female entrepreneurs' 'psychological characteristics, motives, and objectives' (1997: 76). As Carla Freeman's (2014) work on entrepreneurs from Barbados' middle-class makes clear, a striking characteristic of entrepreneurs is their distinctive selfhood's permeation not only of their time at work but of their intimate relationships too. However, what comes to the fore in Poland is depth of feeling aspiring entrepreneurs attach to 'feeling entrepreneurial' while still working for others.

It was within this context that in Krakówian evening-time and weekend discussions of 'motives' for starting one's own business there was no protagonist more pervasive than the 'bad boss' (*zły szef*). The ubiquity of dissatisfaction with management manifested itself in the minutiae of Krakówian life: the name of a cocktail and the reams of management-related problem pages in women's magazines, testifying to observations that in Poland such publications tend to be more focused on careers than – in the

tradition of many North American and Western European publications – sex and romantic relationships (see Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk 2000).

Kasia, who had grown up in a village near to Warsaw, chronicled her manager's 'reign of terror' in their finance-sector workplace. She described him as an 'old school' manager who made up for his lack of 'management skills' by demonstrating his power to humiliate his subordinates. Once every couple of weeks he would call each of his employees' telephone extensions, beckoning them to his office. He told them that the meeting was to discuss 'a member of the team whose work had not been up to standard of late'. He did not specify who this team member was. Kasia said this made people have low confidence in their own abilities and also created 'bitchiness' in the office, as colleagues speculated in hushed tones about the identity of the 'below-par worker'. Joining her firm, Kasia had been impressed by the list of unpaid training opportunities she was entitled to take; now, she thought it ironic that she was being put down by a man who was out of touch with 'modern' leadership styles and, who, Kasia said, 'felt challenged because her language skills [in English and German] were better than his'.

A common complaint was managers' disinterest in – or misunderstanding of – 'supply and demand'. When the manager in question was in their late forties or older, this was framed as a symptom of their professional coming of age under socialism. However, I also heard managers as young as in their mid-twenties spoken of in a similar way, their shortcomings blamed not on socialism but on lack of experience. Stefania, who worked for a marketing company, related an example of problems with a man in his thirties to me and some other friends when she met us after work in the smoking section of a café off the Main Square, a ten-minute tram ride away from her office. She told us that her boss had charged her with the 'impossible' task of selling forty lavish corporate teambuilding packages in two weeks. Stefania had cold-called 'over one hundred firms' (when you included, she caveated, those who had not answered their telephones) extolling the emotional, collegial, and, in the long-term financial benefits of chamber music concerts and Thai cookery classes. Stefania believed that her manager had overestimated the scale of Kraków's 'corporate culture' given that its hosting of many large companies had not undone its main associations with academia, the arts, and the Church.

Elizabeth Dunn describes kinship and gender imagery in media reports of US company Gerber's 1992 takeover of Polish food processing company Alima. She notes how, for example, 'the press described the privatization as a union between a poor but

beautiful Polish bride and a rich, older, American husband' (2000: 75). In Kraków, however, that the relationship between work and kinship was more than metaphorical was frequently emphasized. Friction between managers and their subordinates joined together affect ('feeling undervalued') and hypotheses about gendered and generational conflict. ('Bad bosses' were predominantly characterized as male. However, as one female friend remarked, 'if you're having trouble at work, it's usually worse if it comes from a woman than if it comes from a man'). To boot, and as is central to my argument that entrepreneurs are experts on 'difference', Stefania framed her manager's alleged incompetence as a kinship problem: a misunderstanding of potential markets was a misunderstanding of potential *clients*.

Difficult manager-subordinate dynamics often mapped onto delicate relationships of a much larger scale. A significant number of people who aspired to self-employment worked for transnational companies, bodies associated with opportunity and prestige on the one hand and disappointment and awkwardness on the other. In many parts of the world, the partial commensurability between quotidian workplace interpersonal relations and the large-scale, international workings of who labours for whom is far from incidental: managers have a growing practical and symbolic status in global capitalism because they enable the owners of companies to earn money from afar (see Bear 2013; cf. Yanagisako 2013). This was felt particularly keenly in Poland at the time of my fieldwork. In 2014, New York's former 'CEO Mayor' (see Brash 2011) Michael Bloomberg's eponymous media company named Poland 'the best country to do business in eastern Europe and Central Asia' (Skolimowski 2014). The rationale for this included good roads that made moving goods inexpensive and 'a large middle class' (which can be read as: 'a large consumer class', see also Buchowski 2008), but also because

> Polish labor productivity increased between 2009 and 2012 by the most among 34 countries tracked by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Even so, average monthly salaries are a third of what companies pay their employees in neighboring Germany, according to [the] statistics office [….]That's lured foreign investors (Bloomberg.com. Last accessed 4/7/15).

The prevalence in Kraków of Western European outsourced human resources companies meant that some joked of having a friend of a friend who had accidentally 'pressed the wrong button on an HR computer programme and made redundant a man in Leeds, Marseille or Munich'. And, lest I give the impression that 'poor management skills' were framed as the preserve of older people, an oft-cited grievance was that young, ambitious foreign managers 'did not understand how things are done in Poland' – a

phrase a friend who worked in human resources used after her French manager grew frustrated at 'Polish bureaucracy'.

The assertion common in Kraków that there was scarcely a better motivation for starting one's own business than being a disgruntled employee has cross-cultural resonances. Douglas Caulkins, writing about small-scale technology sector entrepreneurs in Scotland, found that most of his 'owner/ manager' (2002: 24) interviewees 'began their work careers as employees of other firms'. Many of their reasons for leaving echoed Stefania's, such as:

> [becoming] disillusioned, for a variety of reasons, with the corporation that they had been employed by for years. Frequently this disillusionment came as a result of missed business opportunities on the part of the corporation. A number of the owner/ managers described their previous employer's lack of interest or lack of ability to respond to their customers' needs or to an opportunity for a niche market. (Caulkins 2002: 26; see also Zapalska 1997: 81).

'Freedom', in Kraków, often meant tough leadership. Poor managers could be denounced not only for speaking harshly but for mincing their words. 'We need a "Margaret Thatcher type" to sort this country out', several young, quite progressive people told me, in a city that also featured a Nowa Huta square named Ronald Reagan Central Square (*Plac Centralny im. Ronalda Reagana*; see also Pine 1998: 110). Entrepreneurship was a topic of exceptional interest because, while the people I knew often associated 'the free market' with freedom when drawing comparisons between life during and after state socialism, on a day-to-day basis many people did not feel free while working for others, especially those who provided poor leadership. Entrepreneurship, in some people's estimations, constituted capitalism's truest distillation, the most logical transliteration of an idea into praxis (see also Dunn 1998).

Some people were managed in their workplaces but acted 'as their own bosses' by developing small businesses in their free time. By 2013 Stefania was working for another marketing company but had also began her own photography business, specializing in pictures of weddings and engagements. Such an example highlights the temporal manifestations of entrepreneurial aspiration, which brought to the fore both the ways in which people divided up their days and weeks, and their longer-term career trajectories.

'In the starting blocks' *(w blokach startowych)*

In a disappointing job one could nonetheless cultivate not only the motivation to start a new business but the skills – and the contacts – needed to do so. Further, when conceptualised as 'not forever' or 'non-permanent' (these were relative terms: one

woman told me that she would stay in her stressful recruitment job for 'five more years - not long') an unsatisfactory job could be reframed as productive because it provided the money to prepare for a new position as 'one's own boss'. 'The way I think about it is: "when I'm in this job, it's not a complete waste of time but I'm in my starting blocks" *(w blokach startowych)*', Jarek, a customer service representative, told me. This was an ambiguous metaphor, connoting both readiness for action and frustration. 'In the meantime', he said, 'I'm working on myself'.

Preparation for self-employment sometimes involved evening courses in I.T. and, less frequently, 'cultural diplomacy' courses. Most common, however, were language classes. The streets of Kraków were crowded with language schools advertisements depicting variously Big Ben, red telephone boxes, or suit-wearing, mobile telephone-brandishing businesspeople. Salient to this article's theme, in 2009, I sat in on an English as a Foreign Language evening class for which the week's theme was 'work'. I was struck by attendees' knowledge of specialist language. Asked about his 'main skills', a perfume and aftershave salesman spoke of his adeptness with 'a multi-platform approach'. Using the language of fantasy, destiny, and compatibility more often associated with romantic relationships, the class filled in a multiple choice quiz titled 'What's Your Ideal Job?' While practicing the subjunctive tense, therefore, the students practiced both 'selling themselves' and approaching work not only as a day job one does, for example, before attending an evening class, but as a site of 'aspiration' (cf. James 2017).

Arguably the most important form of preparation for self-employment, however, was the foundation of a business 'on the side': working on upholstery, web design, or dance classes. Some people thought they needed premises to be a 'proper business'; others, a bank account. Also much-vaunted, however, were the perks of an 'office-free job'. That one *could* work with a laptop on an exotic beach was, through its rhetorical value, more significant than a plan to actually do so. Each of these conditions were considered important steps towards being able to resign from one's current position as an employee. Many imagined the satisfaction of their 'side job' becoming so fruitful as to become their 'main job'.

These narratives evoked a 'split screen' with a person's current situation on one side and a hoped for and worked towards life of self-employment on the other. The image of a person at work but dreaming of another form of employment to which they attach radically different moral and affective value appears at several provocative junctures in social theory. Jacques Rancière, in *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in*

Nineteenth-Century France (1989), writes of restless artisans who take little enjoyment in daytime labour seeking succor in the evening hours that were, in contrast, their own. This seems a far cry from the lot of the young woman with a Master's degree from the Jagiellonian University whose time at work is marred by her marketing executive colleague's promotion over her. However, Rancière's words resonate with certain disenchanted Krakówians' uses of the workplace to plan, dream, and intellectualise.

Then there was the question of what it meant that some young people in Kraków worked at their day jobs and then used their evenings and weekends to work for free. 'Leisure' was a relative concept when evening work, such as photographing a friend's play in order to build a portfolio of images, or doing coding work for the 'learn a language online' website that one's sister wanted to set up were more satisfying not only than one's day job but than archetypally relaxing yet, it was understood locally, ultimately unproductive activities such as watching television. The 'second shift' (Hochschild and Machung 1990) or 'double burden' (see Corrin 1992; Pine 2002), has specific historical resonances in postsocialist contexts, denoting what it meant for women in particular not 'only' to look after children following a (compulsory) day working outside of the home and, but to also engage in additional 'unofficial' paid work needed to make ends meet. However, at the time of my fieldwork people often emphasized how, not only harking back to the socialist era but as an artifact of enduring ideas about money and relatedness, doing work for kin 'for free' was both morally and socially important and a good way of 'practicing' one's desired profession. In working, at least initially, for kin, business aspirants found a context in which they were treated (most of the time) with patience and support usually absent from formal workplaces. For business aspirants, the 'gifting' of unpaid labour was conceptualised as a process of gaining while giving away: growing in experience and, if a job was done well, reputation.

I have outlined the ways in which those who aspire to be entrepreneurs keep in their minds the image of how they wish to work – that it, for themselves – while engaged in unsatisfying work as employees. Sherry Ortner's 'Class of '58' New Jersey high school classmates, when interviewed by Ortner in the 1990s, commonly used 'success' as a discourse through which to make sense of what had (or had not) happened to them in the decades following graduation (see Ortner 2003). Such an image suggests a defined personhood, moving between events and circumstances and one that, while inevitably contoured by happy and unhappy times at work or in relationships, situates a person's circumstances as something by and large external to who they are. Success and

failure can each to some extent therefore be 'put on' or 'taken of' like clothing (see Turner 1980). In Kraków, in contrast, and for people at least a generation younger than Ortner's informants, there was the potential for there to be quite a considerable gap between one's personhood and their identity. People often talked about their work in terms of 'truth', talking about what they 'really' or 'actually' wanted to do. This speaks to the tenet that a key symptom of what is seen by some as neoliberalism and by others, more specifically, as postsocialism (see Kipnis 2008; cf. Dunn 2004) is the moral imperative – although ultimately unrealizable for most if not all – of making the internal and external parts of one's self 'match up'. Actions as seemingly mundane as signing up for an evening class can be conceptualised as part of such a project. The potential (and, for some informants, actuality) for these steps intended to ready young people to be their own bosses to be tiring, 'a waste of money', to reveal discouraging lacks of aptitude they had not previously known they possessed or, simply not to bring them any closer to working for themselves speak to the notion that 'working on oneself' is an ubiquitous manifestation of 'the paradox of an obligation to be free' (Bröckling 2015: 5). 'Being yourself' can take a significant amount of time and money (see Dunn 2004).

The inherited desire to be one's own boss

'[S]ome entrepreneurs believe that one must have the right "genes" for creativity' (2008: 67) writes Buchowski when dissecting what class meant in a small town in 1990s Poland. In late 2000s and early 2010s Kraków, in contrast, it was the intergenerational transmission of memories and skills rather than the more 'biological'-sounding 'genes' that young people used to pin their dreams to a grander backdrop of multigenerational professional destiny, although it is striking that a similar sentiment, if uttered through contrasting idioms, exists.

At the time of my fieldwork, Szymon was the thirty-year-old married father of an infant son. Szymon grew up in Nowa Huta where his father had 'worked in the Steelworks when nearly everyone worked there'. However, Szymon continued, 'in 1989, when "the changes" [back to capitalism] came, he [Szymon's father] started the construction business. I saw that step-by-step, you can dream of something and achieve it'.

Szymon, in common with his brother, worked for his father's business not as a builder but with accounts and, as he put it, with 'ecommerce, with the business' its online presence'. In case I have given the impression that only those who disliked their

managers wanted to leave their jobs, Szymon spoke animatedly of his supportive parents and siblings. In particular, his father's positive personality traits made him both a good businessman and 'a good man': 'I always thought that my father was very tough in some ways. I have a good connection with him, I can speak with him. He gave me some guidelines and I found him particularly inspirational after I became a father'. Such praise of business expertise and remarkable moral and familial personhood contrasts with the earlier example of Stefania, whose manager was apparently difficult because his poor understanding of others hindered his relationships with both his employees and with 'markets'.

Yet Szymon was not satisfied with his position in the family business. A political science graduate who had completed an internship in Brussels, worked as a labourer in Dublin, and who boasted an impressive graphic design portfolio, Szymon told me:

> To tell you the truth, I don't like my job situation at the moment so I'm trying to do something else. I like to write the blog, but I don't like to sit at the computer and analyse things. I am not an analytical guy. It's very stressful trying to do something I don't enjoy. But it gives me money for now so that's ok.

Between 2009 and 2010 Newsweek Polska assembled a list of Poland's 'best' *firmy rodzinne* (family firms). Writes an unnamed journalist, 'Family businesses account for more than 10% of Polish GDP and provide employment for nearly 1.3 million people… We aim to promote companies in which a friendly atmosphere, the stability of the company and the employees, are placed higher than pure profit' (My translation). And yet, up-close in Kraków, working with kin was sometimes cast as a mixed-blessing. For a start, the determination and talent associated with founding a business were so highly prized that a parent's removal of such an opportunity for their son or daughter was morally threatening. Parents had responsibilities, I was told, to pass on *możliwości* ('possibilities', 'opportunities') to their children. These could take the form of introductions to powerful individuals to whom the family had ties; they could be skills; or they could be the money necessary to study, but they must not eliminate the need to work. To remove the need for 'hard work' *(ciężka praca.* cf. Mayblin 2010*),* which shaped character and, theoretically, would lead to the satisfaction of accomplishment, was to impede a child's pathway to adulthood.

Those working with or under their parents often emphasized the ways in which they had innovated the company's product. The thirtysomething scion of a prosperous wholesale fur business took pride in having been influential in the firm's decision to switch most of their production from full-length fur coats to the more profitable fur accessories. He thought women wanted fur less and less for its practical

properties and more for its symbolic value. As he put it, 'today, a lot of people like something else [some other textiles] but ladies still want something small, like a flower, made from fur'. Other people used as a point of reference the impracticality of wearing long fur coats that might get in the way during driving, a relatively recent concern when one considers the depth of fur's history. But the scion's trajectory fits very well with what Danilyn Rutherford marks out as a distinctly interesting aspect of family business, not to mention one that chimed with Krakówian understandings of hard work and social change: '[that] what looks like a threat [to a business] could be an opportunity' (2010: 280).

This multigenerational entrepreneurial spirit was not only part of narratives concerning firms that had achieved longevity and relative affluence. A man in his mid-twenties who worked in Kraków for a French consultancy company but who wanted to start his own business centred the story of his entrepreneurial aspirations on his parents having opened a grocery shop in the early 1990s. The shop had subsequently closed because of too little turnover. He was, however, intent on telling me that the *opportunity* to do this, the *experience* was what had been key. 'If they hadn't tried it, they always would have wondered what it would be like', he said.

The framing of Krakówian enthusiasm for enterprise as a matter of inheritance was not the preserve of children of businesspeople – actual or aspirant. The children of teachers or factory workers were equally likely to have inherited such enthusiasm. It was often asserted that all Poles had needed to be entrepreneurial during socialism, doing extra jobs, provisioning through social relations, and maneuvring ineffective management. This had ramifications for the class positions of those who aspired to be self-employed at the time of my fieldwork, as well as for the aesthetics associated with entrepreneurship. A graduate of Jewish philology or medieval history was just as likely to aspire to own her own business as one of accountancy or business studies. Many were keen to point out that the reality of a young self-employed person in contemporary Poland by no means fit the political or aesthetic associations indicated by, on the one hand, outdated images of rundown cottage industry (which some associated with work in 'black' or 'grey markets' during state socialism see Pine 1996: 445) or 'piecework' (see White 2004) or, on the other hand, 'yuppie style…briefcase style', as one woman put it. Distinctions between those in Central and Eastern Europe who are powerful because they are intelligentsia and those who are powerful because they are technocrats are perpetually convincing (e.g. Konrád and Szelényi 1979), but an intriguing quality of

entrepreneurship, framed as it is in Krakow as entailing both insight and organisation, is its straddling of both categories of influential personhood.

The frequently uttered tenet that being entrepreneurial was 'a Polish trait' echoes Daniel Knight's Greek informants' economic crisis-era reflections that, for example, 'Greeks are very entrepreneurial, very creative; you do not have to go far back in history to discover how we deal with devastation' (2015: 123). The construction of entrepreneurship as a 'Polish trait' that can be transmitted intergenerationally contrasts with the abundance of ethnographic accounts of traders, entrepreneurs, and merchants (amongst other terms), as 'pariah capitalists' (see Oxfeld 1992: 267), outcast either because they sell or are forced to sell because they have been outcast. It contrasts with accounts of periods in Polish history when some sections of society conceptualised capitalism as threateningly 'un-Polish' (Steinlauf 1997: 10-11 in Tucker 2010: 29).

In addition, some of the people I knew sought to distance their work from the entrepreneurial activity that had taken place under state-socialist Poland. While they were proud of the ways in which elder kin but also previous generations of Poles more generally had used entrepreneurialism as a key mode of survival, it was my impression that 'making deals' and 'using networks'' ubiquity in the past meant that late 2000s and early 2010s' entrepreneurs were eager to show that it was possible for a whole population to be skilled at entrepreneurial activity if the society's goal was *survival* but that the story was rather different if people were aiming – as the goal of a capitalist society was thought to be – for *prosperity*. Only some had the skill and dedication needed to excel at entrepreneurship, to really *be entrepreneurs* and so one did not meet, as one man put it to me, 'amateur entrepreneurs' in contemporary Krakow. People who worked in the fur industry, for example, had their own, unusually granular take on this: repair work sometimes brought in fur garments that they said had been inexpertly tanned during the socialist era, or that were pelts from animals felt undesirable now. This showed that while people had been able, when their socio-economic context required it of them, to do the work my furrier informants now did, the low quality of their work betrayed the difference between people who 'had to' do such work, and that of those for whom it was a vocation.

This surviving-prospering dialectic also played out in ideas about ambition. Most of the people written about here were children in 1989 and their inherited memories of socialist-era work culture (which also squared with what some older people told me) saw 'ambition' as having been either discouraged or impossible for all but Soviet *nomenklatura*.

That this stood in stark contrast with renderings of ambition at the time of my fieldwork evokes Yurchak's findings in 1990s Russia: appraising the respective tropes in magazines about businesspeople in the 'communist [and] neoliberal' (2003: 78) eras, Yurchak notes that 'the term *kar'erist* (careerist) – an individual whose central goal in life is a successful personal career – in the pages of *Kar'era* acquires a positive meaning [in 1990s Russia], whereas in Soviet times it was purely negative' (ibid.). What runs between these contrasting (in time and place) post-Soviet contexts, is both the credence that capitalism alone offers the opportunity for a person to 'give their all' to their work and, it follows, the notion that entrepreneurs distinguish themselves from others by being, as one of Yurchak's informants puts it, 'true careerist[s]' (2003: 79).

Knowing others

I met with Szymon again several months after the meeting during which he told me about his desire to start his own business. The two-floored coffee shop, part of a chain, was almost an embarrassingly apt as a place to meet because customers on neighbouring tables were engaged in activities often understood as the work one did to find work (or better work): a Spanish-Polish language swap, apparently engrossing laptop work, a fleetingly-audible job interview. In this setting, Szymon told me

> Sometimes I'm very tired, I'm sick of working, I've had enough, I'm done. I will leave this country or whatever, but having my son now gives me this feeling: I leave my job at 7pm, I'm tired and I go home and I see this kid [his daughter] and I'm smiling. Temporarily, I've found the meaning of life. I have some money but it's not a passion. I'm still looking for something that is a passion and it will give me money. We're in work for half of our lives and so if you can find some job that's a passion and gives you money, cool. But I'm still on a low level because I don't know what I want to do or how I can get money from it. I'm still waiting for my 'good idea'.

Szymon was far from the only person I met in Kraków who had the ambition and the skills locally understood to make a person suitable for entrepreneurship, yet whom a 'good idea' eluded. An entrepreneur's personhood was fixed to the specific wares that they sold, the selection of which was never arbitrary. While a person could possess entrepreneurial skill and aspiration without yet being an entrepreneur, they could not be a proper – in either sense of the word – entrepreneur without knowing 'others'.

'Just a conversation with one person, a trip somewhere…', said Agnieszka, a disillusioned PhD student, awaiting inspiration about a product she could sell. Anthropological literature includes many examples of the ways in which 'markets', and even 'the market', are not as impersonal as the terms might imply. In turn, apparently

intimate conferences of material or immaterial property as gifts and inheritances are part of, rather than distinct from markets (Parry 1986). Even with this context in mind, the extent to which many friends and acquaintances described thinking up a good product as fundamentally a matter of relationships, of *knowing others,* was striking by virtue of its scale. When voiced, for instance, by Agnieszka, it was surprising in its literalness.

In contemporary urban Poland those who sold seldom expected their customers to be only those with whom they had social ties outside of commerce. However, Krakówian musings on what to sell chime with vender-customer relations found in times and places when 'the market' and 'demand' were less distinguishable from the vender's household and social life. James G. Carrier describes shopkeeper-customer relations in the US and the UK in the eighteenth and nineteenth century:

> [T]raders appeared not to have thought of 'consumer demand' as an abstract aggregate. Instead, it was a set of people with ties to individual shopkeepers. Such an attitude helps explain why shopkeepers wanted to have an established body of customers and disliked poaching the customers of others (Carrier 1995: 72, discussing Carson 1954: 97-98).

In late 2000s and early 2010s Kraków, as in Carrier's sources, 'consumer demand' was frequently framed as a matter of kinship. When businesspeople in any geographical location speak of a 'gap in the market', they are likely to be conjuring an instance in which political or economic upheaval means that services or goods which previously would have been provided either by the state or by kin now needed to be paid for. In Kraków, this space was occupied by childcare, which was unanimously framed as having been 'better [i.e. more readily available] under socialism [when there had been a full employment policy]' (see Galbraith 2008). I was unsurprised, then, when several women unrelated to one another told me that they wanted to start private nurseries. I met Ula, who was in her early twenties at a Kraków language swap club an hour-long bus journey away from her village. (Held either in the musty church social rooms for a fee of 2 zloty or in a bar for the cost of a coffee, language-swap clubs were affordable alternatives to language lessons.) Like most aspiring businesspeople, Ula's description of her situation coalesced dissatisfaction with her current job opportunities with anecdotal evidence substantiating the need for her proposed endeavour. 'I went for an interview with a big phone company and they told me I had the job', Ula told me, 'but then they called two days later and said it was off – without giving me a reason'. Then there was the 'consumer demand' writ large through social ties: 'lots of my friends, and my sister-in-law, are facing these sorts of problems with their kids at the moment [not finding childcare for them], so my husband and I have been saying to each other, "why shouldn't

we be the ones to make this happen?"'

Using the city differently to locals, foreign visitors to Kraków inspired an important subset of 'good ideas', of proposed 'things that sell themselves'. When, for instance, I asked an acquaintance if he planned to go to the Christmas Market held in the Main Square, he replied (not as sharply as it may appear when written down), 'I am not, because this sort of thing is only really for children and foreigners'. During a period when there was fairly diverse tourism to Kraków, which was promoted internationally for its beautiful landscapes and complicated history, local businesspeople made broad-brushstroke observations about what visitors of different nationalities would buy. A retail furrier was vexed that German and British tourists sniffed at fur and yet could be seen on the city's streets wearing lots of fur's less divisive underside: leather. Cafes, bar, and restaurant clienteles were often characterized in terms of nationality: North American and Israeli visitors in restaurants and hotels in Kazimierz, the Old Jewish Quarter; US, Canadian, British, and Irish teachers of English or small Kraków business owners in the Irish bars. It was understood that a person's nationality informed both the reason why they were in Kraków, and the aspects of Polish culture and more familiar things that they would want or need. My landlord, for example, a constantly smiling man in his fifties, told me that 'he had bought a microwave for my flat when he heard from the letting agent that I was British'.

Several business ideas to which I was privy hinged upon 'cultural mediation'. I met several people in their twenties, for instance, whose business ideas had been stimulated by friendships of varying levels of closeness with members of the sizeable number of international medical students (particularly Norwegians) whose education was 'outsourced' to the Jagiellonian University. A woman in her early twenties, herself a student from Gdańsk, said that she had two ideas for businesses that would help 'people like her Norwegian friends'. The first was a 'luxury' letting agency (Norwegian students in Kraków allegedly received generous stipends from their government). The second was a Polish language tutoring service that dealt specifically in the vocabulary that non-Polish medical students (who were taught mostly in English) needed in order to carry out hospital rounds in Kraków. What was important here, the young woman noted, was that she always went out of her way to help her friends find accommodation, or practice speaking Polish for free and would 'of course', she said, continue to do so. Her friendships had, however, drawn her attention to a gap in the market. While she would not sell to her friends, she would consider 'helping', she told me, 'people in the same

situation as them, but strangers'.

Emphasis was placed on entrepreneurs as people who provided goods that were already needed or wanted, rather as people who than persuaded others to buy their wares, coercing them. These ideas can be traced to the socialist era provisioning practices in which procuring goods was difficult. I was told over and over again that those who had goods, whether through powerful connections, smuggling, hoarding, producing one's own goods, or holding strategically important jobs, possessed particular moral and social gravitas. However, just as it is impossible to state whether or not any feature of life is either solely or in part 'a result' of postsocialism, the tenets about selling I have outlined speak 'not only' to ideas about postsocialism, but to notions of propriety and commonsense. Men and women did favours for their friends 'for free', while also cognisant of the scope for scaling this up into business ventures that aided 'people *like* their friends'. And so it was that poor business ideas were sometimes framed as failures of relatedness. 'Who did they speak to about this?! [before setting it up]', asked one woman, unsurprised at the closure of a short-lived 'online bakery'.

Propriety

The tenet that what people were willing and able to buy was highly differentiated and based upon aspects of their identity came to the fore in the distaste felt towards goods being 'flogged', or, attempting to sell goods without a target demographic.

These ideas manifested themselves through distaste towards advertising campaigns that were 'shameless' (*bezwstydny*) or 'silly' (*głupi).* One woman, describing her search for clients for a jewellery business made from recycled materials said that when she met a customer it was like 'a missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle, a key going into a lock'. This reflected a tendency for people to use advertisements to 'show customers where their business was', as one furrier put it, 'to signpost', rather than to try to turn them into consumers. The lack of high street visibility of smaller businesses, whether fur workshops set in homes or new businesses that comprised solely of proprietors' evening and weekend hours and businesscards made available at craft fairs, made this particularly important.

In more public domains, acceptable advertisements married 'message' with 'medium' (cf. McLuhan 1964). Cat food brand Felix's staging of the World's Biggest Ball of Wool Fight' on the 2011 *Dzien Kota* ('Day of the Cat'), for which hundreds of Krakówians wearing pointed ear-topped Alice bands congregated by the Adam

Mickiewicz Monument in the Main Square, for example, was praised at least by some for its irreverence. This contrasted with the damningly ironic faces of capitalism found in low-paid street flyering. Flyers were already objects of disapproval if they were not handed out only to specific demographics such as 'fashionable young people' or 'tourists'. But it was also common to see older people, especially older men, distributing flyers for products ill-suited to the demographic to which *they* belonged such as pamphlets advertising beauty treatments or hosiery. 'Just take the fucking paper!' a flyerer muttered when a passerby refused with a mute shake of his head an English-language flyer advertising a refurbished bar's 'happy hour'.

Coercion could also be sidestepped if one was to pay close attention to the goods at hand. The fur industry people whom I met seemed to use not the words *odbiorca* or *kupujący* to describe those who came to them but *klient,* a word that connoted, if not friendship as such, but repeated custom rather than, in a way that the others did not: repairs and renovations, in addition to recommendations to friends. Fur was prestigious because it was a 'demanding' material that needed the work of an expert. A client asked a furrier how much it would cost to affix a chinchilla fur to the collar of a sable jacket. She liked the idea of the contrast between the sable's relatively short hairs and the chinchilla's fluffier fur. The furrier pursed her smiling lips slightly and said 'that does sound pretty. However, before we go ahead with this, I should say that chinchilla tends to go yellow after only five or six years. It's not a practical creature. But of course we can go ahead if that's what is desired'. The furrier used 'we' to describe the proposed remodelling. Such furrier-client amity maintains a formality and propriety based on a register of speaking which in which onus is placed upon the demands of the fur rather than those of either client or furrier.

Credence in 'good innovation' and 'bad innovation' cut across industries. When I told a Kraków-based furrier that a furrier whom I had visited in another part of the country had told me about his new 'summer storage units', refrigerators in which clients could pay to keep their unseasonal garments fresh and clean and out of their way, the Krakówian furrier replied that the idea that such a service was necessary was 'fairytales' *(bajki)*. Magdalena Crăciun describes how in Romania and Turkey selling fake branded goods sometimes affects in traders the sensation that they themselves are 'inauthentic' (2014: 146). In Kraków, selling frivolous goods that fooled customers and wasted their money called into question the seller's own intellect. 'Good innovation', in contrast, was often identified in business ideas that were framed as 'bringing a product to

Poland'. This was applied to certain types of fur accessory (for example, colourful furry shapes that clipped onto handbags). It also described expensive Italian-produced coffee making equipment available at a lustrous 'concept store' in the centre of town. This fed the idea that entrepreneurs were unusually attuned to their surroundings, alleviating 'feelings of being behind', of which many people in Kraków spoke, sometimes in reference to themselves, sometimes in reference to 'their country'. This sentiment evokes a contrasting ethnographic example of anxiety under capitalism: Hirokazu Miyazaki's Japanese securities traders' fear that they are 'behind' their US counterparts-cum-colleagues (2003). In doing so, it shows the locally-perceived high stakes of entrepreneurship: that 'being modern' could be writ large through what was to be found on a shop shelf. Regardless of whether or not they would describe themselves as 'doing good by doing well', entrepreneurs, like other people uncommonly invested in capitalism, occupied a pivotal societal role as actors whose working lives revealed something about the robustness of the society in which they lived and worked.

Conclusion

What can be revealed by a focus on aspiring entrepreneurs as opposed to those who have already 'made it'? In the first instance, Bröckling's argument that entrepreneurship is a desire that can never be fully satisfied, that it is a goal towards which one works rather than a state of being (2016: iii) resonates with the Krakowian context because, as detailed in this article's opening vignette, entrepreneurship is not only a compelling endeavour but a risky one. Those who open their own businesses do so knowing that they may need to close them. However, I have also made apparent the importance aspiring entrepreneurs place upon contrasting what their work as a self-employed person will be like with the unsatisfying work with which they are currently engaged. When making these comparisons, entrepreneurship is seldom framed as an 'escape' from being an employee. Indeed, it is too admired a vocation as to be a 'last resort' and local ideas about the value of integrity and resilience as character traits give short shrift to 'running away' from difficult work. Further, in line with the quite frequent connections people make between entrepreneurship and what is 'real' or 'truthful' (see also Yurchak 2003; Bröckling 2016), spending time working for a company that fails to measure up to the one which one wishes to found gives rise to many realisations about what skills are required of a successful businessperson and a desirable product. Those written of here also acknowledge that working for other provides the time to develop skills associated

with successful entrepreneurship, from foreign languages and IT skills to how to work with customers and colleagues. The drive to become an entrepreneur is captured well by a heuristic commonly associated with migration studies: 'pushes' and 'pulls' (see Brettell and Hollifield 2000: 3). People anticipating a geographical move and people desiring a move into entrepreneurship undergo a mixture of affective and practical preparations, as well as taking a gamble they hope will pay off.

While I have argued the exceptionalism of entrepreneurial personhood, the article has been in part a caution not to let what exactly is being sold slide out of view of estimations of such personhood. In a Krakówian context, entrepreneurial personhood is quite indivisible from the entrepreneur *and their customers'* credence that their product constitutes 'a good idea'. Within anthropology, there could scarce be an emotion-cum-motivation-cum-state-of-being more frequently associated with markets than 'desire' (cf. Sopranzetti 2012). This is the indispensible ingredient in Lake Como silk empires' multigenerational *'forces of production'* (Yanagisako 2002 in McKinnon and Cannell 2013:18. Original emphasis) but also the means by which, for certain Rhode Island women, attending a friend's Tupperware-style sex-toy party ignites not only the drive to buy but to 'reshape sexual practices' (Curtis 2004; see also Mazzarella 2003). In highlighting the prominence of 'goods that sell themselves' in Krakówian economic and social life, my aim has not been to undermine the agency, or indeed the 'desire', of entrepreneurs. Nor have I suggested that, in choosing goods which 'suit them', consumer desire is extinguished by the local understanding that what people buy is rather predictable, because it is embedded within their membership of generations, classes, genders, and nationalities. Rather, I have argued that seeing the key 'moment of sale' as when someone conjures up an idea of what to sell gives indispensible weight to the biographical details that make people want to sell in a city with the mixed-blessing of being a fast-expanding business destination. Little weight is assigned to being able to 'sell anything'. According to local notions of kinship knowledge and propriety, asking 'what will I sell?' is tantamount to asking 'who shall I be'?, hence the worry assigned to not yet possessing a feasible business idea. For the entrepreneur as for the consumer, the desire that matters the most is that which led to provisioning of what was missing, of that which was *needed*: this is deeply different from contriving gimmicky products and services. In Kraków, returning to Dunn's work quoted at the beginning of this article, 'desire', when a productive force rather than a source of silliness or squandered money, is another word for difference.

Entrepreneurs are uncommonly 'public' citizens. When a person sets up shop they are not only exposing themself to the possibility that their projected audience will not wish to buy their produce (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]), they are offering up *themselves* for appraisal on grounds of commonsense, morality, and expected longevity. People who sell are also prodigious consumers and investors: narrating family histories, cultivating skills, and reflecting on social relations. What seems most important about 'things that sell themselves', is that they are provided by the 'correct' entrepreneurs.

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