

Szczygiel, Przemyslaw

## Rebellion as a learning experience in the light of narrations of adults participating in protests. Selected issues

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## Rebellion as a learning experience in the light of narrations of adults participating in protests. Selected issues

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### Abstract

*The aim of this article is to show the learning potential of participation in protests in the narratives of several adults. Participation in rebellions is seen as a specific learning experience here. What is the relationship between experience and learning on the example of participation in rebellions? The author analyses this relationship, inter alia, on the example of critical practices described by Usher. This article is a part of a broader research project on learning mechanisms of adults participating in various forms of rebellion. The study is concerned with answering the questions: what and how do protesters learn? what are the social and cultural mechanisms of their learning? In this research project a biographical perspective was used. Within it, the biography is understood in a processual way. The biographical method focuses on the subjective level of experience in the socio-cultural and institutional context. The empirical material was analysed by searching for similarities and differences in rebels' narratives. The results of the study are above all the identification of learning outcomes and identity-building processes.*

**Keywords:** Biography, identity, learning experience, rebellion

### Introduction

Rebellion is an interesting and complex phenomenon. In this paper, I understand it as a specific way of being human in the world that can be an opportunity for learning. Rebellion has many dimensions – psychological, sociological, cultural and political. I see

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rebellion as an example of participatory democracy, which means engaged forms of citizens' 'active' political participation, and goes beyond the 'passive', representative model typical of liberal democracy (e.g. Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2017). My research project focuses on political rebellion, and especially protesting in public spaces. It should be added that the terms 'participation in rebellion' and 'activism' (social, political, feminist, LGBT+ etc.) are understood almost synonymously here. I see activism as a positive aspect of rebellion. Thus, rebellion would mean negating the *status quo* but also creating alternatives to the existing reality. This phenomenon can be described at many levels: biographical (as a personal experience), local (in the context of specific social groups and local communities) as well as global, especially in the form of social movements (e.g. Castells, 2012, 2017; Jezierska & Polanska, 2017; Touraine, 1985). Perfect examples of such collective rebellions are Occupy in the USA, the *Indignados* Movement in Spain, the Arab Spring in north of Africa, the Black Protests and the Women's Strike in Poland, protests against Lukashenko's regime in Belarus, Extinction Rebellion, and many others.

Rebellions, in addition to their socio-cultural and political significance, have an educational dimension. It is important to mention here that historically, adult education has its origins in social movements (Field, 2005; Grayson, 2014). The literature analysing the phenomenon of learning in social movements is rich (e.g. Dekeyser, 2001; Foley, 1999; Grayson, 2014; Hall, Clover, Crowther & Scandrett, 2012; Kim, 2016; Pilch Ortega, 2016; Tett, 2016; Zielińska, Kowzan & Prusinowska, 2011). The thread linking individual and collective rebellion and learning is particularly important in adult education research (e.g. Jurgiel-Aleksander, 2013; Kurantowicz, 2007; Malewski, 2006).

The socio-cultural dimension of rebellion has been researched in various contexts. However, what is of particular interest to me is people's personal experiences. After all, it is individuals who decide to engage in rebellious practices. For this reason, I decided to use a biographical perspective in my study. It allows me to look at the experiences of political rebellion from the point of view of politically engaged people, to observe and analyse how people change through rebellion and how they respond to these transformations. Biographical perspectives also enable us to engage with the question of what people participating in rebellions learn. In this paper, I would like to focus on learning as a key aspect of rebellion.

## Theoretical framework

In my study I treat rebellion as a *learning experience*. It means that the experience of participating in rebellions can be an opportunity for learning. What does it mean? What is the relationship between protesting and learning?

Robin Usher (2009) is one of the researchers who has analysed the relationship between experience and learning. According to Usher (2009) the meaning of experience and the learning derived from experience depends on different discursive practices. Experiential learning is defined in terms of socio-cultural and institutional contexts in which it is embedded. The meanings of experiential learning shifts between and across emancipatory vs oppressive and domesticating vs transformative polarities.

Emphasising the ambiguity of learning experiences in postmodern culture Usher (2009) distinguishes between so-called lifestyle practices, vocational practices, confessional practices and critical practices. Each of these forms of practice infuse experiences with different meanings and draw on different ideological justifications. I will present two of the Usher's learning experiences which are extremely different and can be related to rebellion.

Lifestyle practices are connected with the achieving of autonomy through self-expression and individuality, particularly in a sense of personal lifestyle and taste. These practices are located within the play of difference, typical for the consumer culture. Consumption is based on choice as difference and difference as choice. Our dreams, fantasies and desires, which are part of our life projects, mediate in the process of constructing identity and gaining autonomy (Giddens, 1991). The link between lifestyle practices and education is revealed in the context of production of knowledge (and taste). Education becomes a part of the 'culture' industry in educational hypermarket (Usher, 2009). Learning becomes 'the experience gained through consumption and novelty, which then produces new experience' (Usher, 2009, p. 171). The 'culture' industry produces the consumers and make consumption compulsive and necessary. We are obliged to shape our lives through choices in the world of images, products and other objects. And 'every choice we make is an emblem of our identity, a mark of our individuality' (Usher, 2009, p. 172). Within this view, experience:

is something to get immersed in, valued as a means of defining a lifestyle rather than something whose value lies in its potential for knowledge. It is consumed because it signifies in relation to a lifestyle. Knowledge is multiple, based on multiple realities and the multiplicity of experience. It is neither canonical nor hierarchical. There is no notion of intrinsically 'worthwhile' knowledge other than in terms of taste and style (Usher, 2009, p. 173).

Participation in rebellions can also be a form of lifestyle practice. Within consumer culture it is manifested by e.g. buying products typical of the rebels and rebels' subcultures (T-shirts with images of Che Guevara, 'rebellious' gadgets, CDs of our favourite artists described as rebels etc.). However, this kind of rebellion and rebelliousness is functionalist. It seems to be caught up in a consumer and neoliberal culture (Potulicka & Rutkowiak, 2010). Such a 'rebellion' does not change the existing conditions. Rebelliousness is almost reduced to the goods and products we buy. I argue that it maintains the *status quo* and power relations.

Critical practices, another type of learning experience, are more valuable in the context of political rebellion. These practices are oriented towards another type of autonomy and application of learning in the service of social transformation (Usher, 2009). Critical practices refer to the changing of particular context of social life. The experience is understood as neither 'innocent', nor taken for granted. It is rather a form of struggle to exercise power, control, and to find a 'voice' of subjects (rebels). The issues of power are key in critical practices. Power is permanently embedded in discourses, interests of particular social groups, and educational relations (Usher, 2009). In this sense pedagogy becomes a political practice. It is interpreted in terms of politics of representation in the cultural processes of shaping understandings and meanings of experiences and also the construction of social actors' identities. This 'political' pedagogy is a mediator in gaining critical awareness about our everyday experiences and power relations.

Critical practices have transformative potential and operates through specific knowledge. Usher claims that experiential learning 'becomes a strategy designed to privilege 'voice' in the service of self and social empowerment and transformation' (Usher, 2009, p. 180). Emancipation, empowerment and socio-political transformation are typical of rebels, revolutionaries and—at the collective level—social movements in which they are engaged. These entities embody critical practices related to resisting the power. Participation in rebellions is an excellent example of it. This practice becomes a specific kind of critical education and source of critical (resistant) learning.

According to Elisabeth Steinklammer (2012) ‘resistant learning’ includes two basic aspects. On the one hand, it is possibility for subjects to distance themselves from practice, contextualise it, and make connection with analysis of socio-political conditions. This aspect of resistant learning refers to consciousness-raising processes and people’s reflection. The mentioned processes can be seen as task of critical education. In turn, consciousness-raising and reflection are basis for developing alternative options for social actors’ actions (Steinklammer, 2012). On the other hand, critical education is not possible without practice: ‘practical experiences and action learning are necessary for a new practice to be developed and for the practical sense to be worked in interaction with the social world’ (Steinklammer, 2012, p. 31). Participation in emancipatory social movements ‘generate new knowledge, new theories, and new questions’ (Choudry, 2012, p. 149). We are dealing with the same ‘situation’ in participation in political rebellions like street protests. It alters people’s awareness, frees them, shapes the emancipatory orientation of action and—in turn—affects human performance<sup>1</sup>.

Political rebellion is a form of socio-cultural learning<sup>2</sup> located in the realm of people’s everyday life experiences (Malewski, 2006). Hence, as I mentioned in the introduction, investigating these learning processes from a biographical perspective can be illuminating. Inequality, discrimination, and injustice are experienced by people in diverse ways. Each person can react in her/his own way to the conditions in which she/he lives. Reflecting individually on such living conditions is crucial for current and future action towards change. However, changes are important not only from an individual point of view. Experiences of inequality are shared with other people. Generally, participation in protests as a ‘biographical’ reaction to unfair life conditions is *situated* in social interactions and has a public significance. An important part of protest are practices which allow for the joint negotiation and re-negotiation of the social and political reality.

Participation in rebellions in terms of a combination of joint action and reflection on it can therefore be seen as an opportunity to learn. I argue that this is primarily a type of informal learning (Malewski, 2006). Engaged people acquire specific knowledge and skills ‘on the occasion’ of their numerous rebellious actions. These ‘learning outcomes’ are the results of people’s actions and their individual critical reflection on these actions. It needs mentioning that I am aware that the term ‘learning outcomes’ may evoke associations with classical didactics, describing learning from the perspective of formal institutions. It can also evoke associations with neoliberalism. In education under neoliberalism, the emphasis tends to be on producing / designing outcomes that can be measured, and on the assessment of learning processes according to their efficiency (Biesta, 2010). In this paper, I focus on learning outcomes in the context of critical and ethical participation within informal learning spaces (Malewski, 2006). Street protests are an excellent example, literally and figuratively. Learning outcomes are an unplanned result of action and hold a potential for contributing to individual emancipation, transformation, and the public good.

Processes of rebellious action and learning contribute to the formation of the engaged subject’s identity. Rebellious identity is a hybrid, changeable, and multidimensional construction entangled in the discourses that constitute it. On the one hand, it is a biographical self-creation of a person engaged in various types of rebellious actions. On the other hand, it is a result of social and cultural relations. Learning as a social and cultural practice mediating in the creation of this type of identity, is a mechanism in which social interactions with the reality and other people takes place (Malewski, 2006).

In the social event of taking action against various forms of injustice, fellow rebels become ‘significant others’. According to George Herbert Mead (1962), the term ‘significant others’ refers to individuals and groups who are important in the development

of our identity (the Self). We learn from them specific norms, values, behavioural patterns and attitudes with regard to a given topic. In other words, the process of identity construction involves presence and interaction with other people and so-called 'reference groups'. These are the groups that matter when it comes to our self-definition. They can be positive ('positive reference group'—persons and groups that provide us with a guide to action, e.g. co-participants of protests) or negative ('negative reference group'—groups and persons we do not want to be identified with, e.g. political opponents) for us. It can be said that fellow rebels are our reference group for rebellious action, learning, and identity-building. They are the people we practice rebellion and learn with. From this perspective of learning we can assume that:

learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind, it means that what is learnt is mediated by the differences of perspective among the co-participants. It is the community, or at least those participating in the learning context, that 'learn' under this definition. Learning is distributed among co-participants, not a one-person act. All learning 'takes place in a social world, dialectically constituted in social practices that are in the process of reproduction, transformation and change' (Tett, 2016, p. 161).

Participation in rebellions as a significant learning experience will be analysed and elaborated in empirical part of this article with the example of several adults who were / are engaged in protests and other socio-political actions which they define as rebellious. It turned out that the biographical perspective (analysis of individual life stories) reveals a great learning potential of rebellion. I will focus only on selected aspects here—learning outcomes mentioned by the people and identity-building processes in the context of their participation in rebellions. Now, I will describe the methodological assumptions of my research project.

### **Methodological approach**

I decided to describe and understand the phenomenon of rebellion as a learning experience. In this article I am particularly interested in answering the crucial research question: *What do rebels learn?*

The subject of my research project was the learning potential of rebellion. In this study I used a biographical perspective being inspired by Danuta Urbaniak-Zajac (2005, 2011). According to her, biography presents many challenges from methodological perspective. In my study I understand it as processes of building social actors' identity, based on a socio-cultural context and learning. I also understand biography as a 'tool' which helps me to identify and describe rebels' learning.

Biographical approach in my research enabled me 'to understand the orientation of the individual and his experiences related to learning throughout life' (Merrill, 2011, p. 15). The individuals' lives are created in a specific context (e.g. social and political conditions). It means that individuals do not have complete freedom in constructing their life paths:

Life planning is done in the field of tension between social expectations, individual attitudes and aspirations as well as specific living conditions and interventional influence of institutions (Urbaniak-Zajac, 2005, pp. 117-118).

The biographical method allows to study these tensions. Generally speaking, it focuses on the analysis of the subjective (individual) level of the experience in the social, cultural,



institutional and political context (Alheit, 2009, 2018; Merrill, 2011). It also analyses the problem of individual autonomy and social determination in general. As I mentioned before this is particularly evident in the case of rebellion. Institutional politics, the operation of power, discourses on power, visions of politics and social order and many other are part of a significant context. The rebels are ‘co-created’ by this context, and the context is changed by rebels.

I conducted my biographical research in a discursive way. Alicja Jurgiel (2011; 2013) points out that this kind of research ‘discusses with itself’. It is also believed that the story (text) ‘occurs’ in the intertwining of social practices and written discourses. The narratives of the respondents, as well as the product of researcher’s work are treated as a kind of discourse. Tomasz Szkudlarek (1997) notes that texts are ‘essentially open, multi-discursive, i.e. they can be read and interpreted from many discursive positions and at the same time many subjective positions simultaneously’ (p. 183). Thus, the same statements of the respondents, depending on the researcher’s knowledge and position, can be interpreted in different ways. The generated knowledge is not closed or ever finished, it has a local character.

I collected the research material using a biographical interview, beginning with the question *How did it happen that you participated in demonstrations/ protests?*. That interview was semi-structured because it contained specific dispositions about learning, for example I asked: *What is the significance of participating in demonstrations for you? What did you learn during the demonstrations?* etc. The interview material was transcribed, coded thematically, and analysed by comparing different and common threads in the biographies. I focused on themes concerning learning, identity perceptions (and identity-formation) and relations with other rebels.

In the course of my research project I conducted 22 interviews with people from Poland (15), Belarus (1), Spain (5) and Mexico (1). The final analysis allowed me to identify common issues in the empirical material as learning outcomes and identity-building processes in rebels’ biographies (it is worth noting that these common threads appeared in the entire research material—22 interviews). For the purposes of this article, I will briefly present and discuss portions of five biographical accounts in which the indicated thematic threads appeared. The criterion for choosing these five biographies was the variety of ways of experiencing rebellions by the people selected. In each of the selected interviews, the interlocutors understood rebellion in different ways, participated in diverse political actions and acted different roles (participant and / or organiser of rebellion).

The interviewees in this text come from various contexts. Despite the differences these five people have many things in common. Interlocutors define themselves as rebels. Each of them participated in street protests many times. They share the experience of oppression and dissatisfaction with many situations and various arbitrary, negative political decisions in their societies. They also share the desire to overcome the experience of oppression. Besides that, these rebels even want to create a new social and political order of things. They are engaged, socially sensitive and recognise the subtleties of power relations.

The first biography (interview 4)<sup>3</sup> belongs to a Polish woman. She is an activist, a member of a political party. She went to her first protest at the age of 12. She has organised Mayday parades and taken part in anti-militarist and pacifist demonstrations as well many others. The woman participated in ‘rebellious’ events both in Poland and abroad (Greece, Finland, etc.). For this person, in Polish political context the most unfavourable and motivating factors were the state’s bad economic situation (high level of unemployment and poor wage conditions) as well as attacks on the state’s ideological

neutrality and the influence of the Catholic Church. These are the issues that she rebels against.

The second biography (interview 18) is story of a Polish social and feminist activist, and coordinator of many educational and cultural projects. This person is particularly concerned about the bad situation of women and LGBT+ community in Poland. She wants to struggle for human rights and to build a community on the basis of alliances between people or groups that can provide power to express disagreement and make changes. The most important rebellions for her were Manifas<sup>4</sup> (and participation in their organisation), and a number of events supporting LGBT+ people.

The third biography (interview 12) belongs to a Catalan male whose activism began with university protests in 1997. His significant rebellions were the protests against the war in Iraq, Mayday marches, parades during the National Day of Catalonia (September 11<sup>th</sup>). He supported Spanish *Indignados* Movement and protested against injustice – rising costs of education and the situation of working-class people in Spain (Catalonia).

The fourth narration (interview 2) belongs to a Mexican woman who had been involved in rebellions since the first socialisation experiences with her parents who struggled against the unfair system in the country. Then, she participated in university protests, in events supporting the leftist presidential candidate in Mexico as well as protests against the privatisation of the state. The bad situation in Mexico—corruption, privatisation, and violence—is important for this person.

The last biography (interview 10) analysed in this text is a story of a Catalan male whose rebellions started with the general strike in 2010 in Barcelona. This interviewee was worried about police violence, the impact of a reform of labour law and political corruption. The most significant rebellions for him (besides the general strike) were numerous pickets in the district, meetings and other activities in local collectives. The experience of self-organisation of people is crucial for him.

As we see, the respondents were engaged both in single actions and in recurring events. It can be said that some of the events were even continuous. The respondents express themselves as participants and / or organisers of the rebellions. What do the rebels learn in the context of participation in all of these protests? What are the effects of their action and learning at the level of rebels' identity?

## Learning outcomes as the effects of rebellion

The interviewees talked about their participation in rebellions in the language of learning. They repeatedly spoke about the issues they learnt during their participation. In other words, learning outcomes appeared in their narratives very often. I will present some of them in this section.

The first person mentioned such issues as learning to be humble. She met many people and groups during the protests. For her, rebellions are opportunity to learn the opinions and ideologies of other people. It is also important to her to learn about her own ideology:

(...) if these are demonstrations organised by different organisations, many different political entities appear; then I get to know some other aspects of my own ideology, for example some issues – not only economic, but also feminist, LGBT and environmental; there is simply a whole spectrum of such organisations, a lot of legal aspects. (interview 4)

Participation in rebellions, which has a strong social character, for her is based on ‘self-knowledge, self-education’. For example, she acquired the ability to organise political demonstrations:

It is not like you just go out on the street at any time for protesting. You have to fill in a certain form [document], you have to follow certain rules; if you want to have demonstration well organised, you must have some slogans, a short art performance and other forms like a happening, performances (...). (interview 4)

What is more, rebellion is perceived by this person as exerting influence on society and politics, and as a tool for confrontation with ‘political opponents’. This clear perspective of an organiser and politician shows that learning takes the form of strategic thinking. It is both learning derived from rebellion and learning how to organise and use the rebellion for some social and political purposes.

The second respondent talked about learning as an experience in which ‘together you can make a good noise’. She learnt about many social and political problems (homophobia, non-respect of women’s rights) and the potential of other people which reveals itself when they participate in ‘rebellious’ events. As an activist this woman reflected on how to motivate people to act: ‘You need to identify some sources of tension somewhere in society and work on these sources’. She defined ‘sources of tension’ as social and political problems that others experience. According to the activist, if people become aware of these problems and the scale of their impact, they will act together to change the situation. As we can see, there is an interesting thread of learning to participate in rebellion and involving other people in it.

She was also concerned about whether the opposition groups understand the messages sent to them in general and claimed how difficult the dialogue was:

I can see that sometimes it is difficult for me to argue something and after leaving such demonstration where I am among people who understand it all... we are just like that, we are on the same level of understanding facts and similar values... and then, when I leave the demonstration I meet people who do not perceive something as a problem or see it completely differently. (interview 18)

She noticed that the dialogue with other people—especially those with different worldviews—is a real problem in a diverse society. She sees society as a conflictive entity. In her opinion people are different, they have different interests and perceive social problems differently, which can cause the conflicts. The critical awareness of the conflicts in society—obtained through participation in rebellions and reflection on rebellions—do not discourage this respondent from trying to build alliances and community of rebels.

The third interviewee admitted that he learnt that not everyone thinks and feel in the same way. He sees this issue differently than the previous respondent. According to him everyone is different and this is an opportunity to learn about the ideas of different people. The discussion—as one of the forms of social interaction mentioned by this respondent—is enriching because, in his opinion, it requires to distance oneself from one’s point of view:

We can go to the demonstration with two hundred or maybe four hundred people with whom we agree, but also there are the people with whom we disagree... Actually it enriches us. This is good, it shapes us and allows us to be critical. Not everything is black and white, there are different shades. (interview 12)

This quote is an excellent example of rebellion as a critical practice (Usher, 2009) and resistance learning (Steinklammer, 2012). In this case the personal experience (beliefs,

attitudes and knowledge) is point of departure in consciousness-raising. In this manner, rebels while discussing gain theoretical distance from their personal experience to emancipate and empower themselves.

The same person notes another important issue in this context. He claimed that because of capitalism as a global condition it is difficult for rebels to remain consistent. He said that on the one side he buys and consumes, and then he protests against big corporations... Despite the difficulties he tries to participate in his everyday struggle. That is why the experience of rebellion for various reasons gives this person 'a sense of being part of something important, something that you believe it can change something' and says it builds self-esteem.

The fourth respondent also mentioned many learning outcomes of participation in rebellion. She learnt to interact with others, listen to others, discuss, understand ideologies and theories (e.g. economic theories). She also claimed that she had acquired belief that 'you can do a lot of good things with other people'. The respondent acquired the ability to distinguish different discourses and different people from the point of view of their needs and worldviews. She learnt to appreciate the knowledge of 'ordinary' people (*el pueblo*). In this context she mentioned that during a protest she learns more about social and economic inequalities from co-protesters (experiencing these everyday), than from someone who has formal economic education and knows 'theories and mathematical concepts'. For this respondent protesting is connected with everyday experience. It is 'the only way to be heard', 'an attempt to put pressure on politicians' and 'opposition to something'. It is also 'support for a particular political candidate' and 'waking up from a lethargy' which is a real powerful and consciousness-raising process that gives 'voice' for protesting people.

The fifth interviewee talked about learning that social assemblies he participated in

(...) have a power structure... but it is a small power. There is no... there are not so many activists in Barcelona, right? Well, there are many different cases. Activism [means that] three people start screaming, a hundred of people hear it, and you have already done something, right? (interview 10)

The power mentioned by the respondent can be interpreted as a kind of 'small' counter-power created in rebellion practices in relation to an unfair world (the meetings of the collective in which the respondent participated concerned, inter alia, problems in a district, and the creation of social-change projects). We can call them 'micro acts' of resistance described as actions in *relation to power* (Szkudlarek, 2009). This perspective describes the power inherent in joint actions of people: making a joint reflection on the 'harmful' power and social relations, putting themselves in opposition to this power, joint conversations on what is unjust, debating possible changes in a district, discussing possible action plans, and finally, the introduction of these 'powerful' changes.

From the point of view of emancipation such learning outcomes as knowledge about functioning of the city and society, general methods of social and political action, listening and public speaking gain in importance here. The interviewee also pays attention to the knowledge about generational differences and teamwork which shows the challenges for collective action and learning:

For example, in my neighbourhood there are people who were educated in the Franco's era, right? There are more and more people aged sixty years old who are good at using e-mails... on the communicative level. Then the question of software, posters creation. It already is complicated. Well, the topic of teamwork is noticeable. Because... my generation studied using different pedagogical methods, in my opinion not very good, but better than those in Franco's times. (interview 10)

The differences between the people of different generations (with different educational and political backgrounds) can be problematic but also become the 'engine' to overcome problems and to act together in local community. Such an individual and collective learning outcome enables rebels to create bonds and relationships with others, and finally the influence on someone's own life and surroundings. Participation in rebellions becomes a source of learning of how to be with others in a cooperative way. The critical and emancipatory potential of rebellion is clear here.

Summarising this part of the paper, I argue that participation in rebellion result in a number of learning outcomes. These outcomes have both individual and social (public) significance. On the one hand, rebels talked about individual 'benefits' and acquired competences like knowledge of various ideologies, organisational skills etc. On the other hand, they mentioned 'social' things like dialogue, understanding other people, building relationships and teamwork skills. Teamwork can be seen as a complex competence when it comes to participation in rebellions. The potential of teamwork is important especially when people with different (cultural) capitals work together and want to achieve common goals (as in the aforementioned collective in the district of Barcelona). Significantly, individual and social perspectives of learning are blended here.

## Rebels' identities

The learning experiences of the rebels were strongly related to the identity-building of social actors. In case of my study identity is, above all, the result of learning in the context of participation in rebellions. The threads related to identity and identity-building were present in the analysed biographies, too. I will present and develop some of them in this section.

The first biography (interview 4) I will discuss is of a person who defined herself as activist, engaged in actions of a leftist political party. It is important for her to 'present your own point of view to a wider range of people, simply to influence politics, and what is happening in Poland'. This statement shows a strongly instrumental nature of her actions and the respondent's desire to increase a political capital of her and her group. The woman emphasised her participation in rebellion from the point of view of similarities in terms of commonality and familiarity with other leftists:

There are the same environments in which you move around, the same leftist sauce [*laugh*].  
(...) For many, many years. (interview 4)

So, if you already are active in the political party, or in a few such friendly organisations, then you are already known and we are friends there somehow, there is no competition there. (interview 4)

Participation in rebellion built her identity as a rebel, well-known in a local community and among groups or like-minded people. Friendly relationships could have played a powerful role in identity-building processes here. The feeling of being in a community of people who sympathise with each other, build social bonds and work for a common goal were strongly emphasised in the literature (cf. Kurantowicz, 2007).

The second respondent (interview 18) defined herself as an activist and feminist<sup>5</sup>. From the point of view of identity formation, participation in a Gender Studies students' group was important for this interviewee. She met girls with feminist views there. They read feminist text together, discussed, and organised Manifa unofficially: 'I found myself in it, well, then I also started to participate in the organisation' (interview 18).

Protesting was a ‘natural consequence’ of working in a group, this person told me. The woman emphasised community ‘nature’ of her identity as rebel. The interesting thing is that she also gave an example of negative reference groups. The identity-building in opposition to the hostile groups during the protests and other actions was evident. Protesting in this context is ‘such a safe space... it becomes a space for all participants *inside*, because we see that there are some hostile people or groups *outside*’ (interview 18). Moreover, protesting in public spaces is an opportunity to ‘show that we exist’. The experience of rebellion becomes a ‘visibility policy’ (Szkudlarek, 2009).

The third interviewee (interview 12) pointed out that when he is in a protest, he feels important. He participates because he wants to help others and engage himself for others. The same person emphasised the need to be coherent in everyday life and during socio-political struggles. He is aware of his roots in the culture of consumption and capitalism. For him, protesting is a critical practice (Usher, 2009) which requires awareness of his socio-cultural entanglements. Protesting is his way of being ‘critical’ in the world. As a rebel, this respondent demands from himself to be aware of the pitfalls of living under capitalism.

The fourth respondent (interview 2) is an example of a person concerned about unjust and corrupt state (Mexico). It is significant for her to ‘rush into the struggle for the good, which is to save the state’. She defines herself as a person from ‘the people’ (*el pueblo*) who wants to have an influence on immoral politicians—the political context of this person’s narrative testifies to genuine care for the state and fellow citizens.

The same person is disappointed with the dogmatism of her former fellow rebels. She accuses them of rigidity of thinking and lack of dialogue which leads to disaster:

I had my friends with whom I went to demonstrate, and so on. And now they are very (...) dogmatic. (...) Now everything is Marx, Marx is right, and only Marx will save us. And they became like in religious fanaticism, they believe that only they are right. If a person wants to protest in a different way, they accuse him of being stupid (...) so I do not like going out with them anymore or engaging in discussion with them (...).

This critical appraisal of one’s own positive reference group shows power of reflection and learning of this person. This reflection on rebel fellows becomes meaningful, in so that it allows the woman to go beyond (to free oneself from) the strong social mechanisms of the identification with a group. This ‘old’ positive group of protesters has become a negative reference group for the respondent.

The fifth interviewee (interview 10) believed that rebellion in the form of participation in activism ‘gives him life’. A specific place could have played an important role in this identity-building process. According to this person it is impossible to ‘gain a foothold’ in a given place, if we have no influence on this place. The Catalan, involved in the life of Barcelona, emphasised the importance of other people and relationships for identity-building in a given place:

they love you... there are interpersonal relations... for me it is already participation. I also do not want to idealise this word in a political sense. Well, let it be people who are in some place, integrating and getting to know each other. I refer to ‘getting to know’ about making friends, mutual help. This is participation for me. (interview 10)

In the presented threads concerning identity and identity-building several regularities were found. The rebels’ identities appeared in interesting dimensions: individual versus social and consciousness versus action. The individual (personal) dimension is articulated by speaking in the first person. ‘I am feminist’, one of the interviewees declared. While the social (collective) dimension means speaking in plural, as a group, collective,

community of rebels. 'We are the same leftist sauce', another person (interviewee 4) joked. Rebels identify with a group, a community. At the same time, they distance themselves from others (political opponents, hostile groups, and even the people who were their friends in the past). It shows the importance of relational (interactive) aspect of identity-building. The consciousness aspect relates to the reflection undertaken by the persons and building a story about participation in rebellions. The action dimension refers to concrete activities, actions taken by rebels in the private-public sphere—participation in street protests, debating in collectives, organisation of rebellious events, and others.

This is clear that the political context of participation was also important in identity-building of rebels interviewed. The Mexican presidential election and the 'rebellious' events around it, the violence of the police in Spain, corruption, failure to respect minority rights, and rebels' reaction on that. It occurred to me that the relationship between individuals and the world they live in is important from the point of view of action, learning and identity-building of rebels. According to Steinklammer (2012) individuals are shaped by their experiences with the surrounding world and their acquired knowledge about this world. The social and political world:

constitutes a reference point for our actions, a socially and culturally pre-structured framework we adopt by participating in it and by interacting with others and to which we attribute meaning (Steinklammer, 2012, p. 28).

What is more, the participation in the social and political world becomes:

the basis for the production of meaning for the structuring of our actions. In not only shapes how we appropriate the world, how we understand, attribute meaning to and act within it, but also how we see ourselves, our taste, our relationships to our own bodies and how we interpret our own actions (...) (Steinklammer, 2012, p. 28).

Identity is therefore a dynamic and processual phenomenon as Malewski (2006) argues. It is in a constant process of change under the influence of critical reflection, learning and rebellious actions.

What seems valuable to me in the analysis of these rebels' narratives is that participation in rebellions and learning derived from this experience make people distance themselves from external determinations of the social and political order, and from discourses on power, etc. Subjective agency emerging from the rebels' participation and learning shows the power of constructing both a new context as well as their own biographies. In this sense, the appreciation of these individual learning experiences seems to be inspiring from the point of view of emancipation, empowerment and socio-political change and helps us to understand rebelling people's experience better.

## Conclusions

This paper focused on the learning potential of participation in rebellions through an exploration of the account of some Polish, Catalan and Mexican rebels. The concept of learning experiences in the context of postmodernity proposed by Usher (2009) was the starting point for the analysis of rebels' actions and learning. Participation in rebellions was treated as a specific learning experience, critical practices, shared with other people very often. The findings presented in this paper offer some contribution to research on individual (biographical) learning processes in a broader social and political context. The use of the biographical perspective was of great importance in this study. This allows us to examine the problem from the point of view of individual experiences of people. In a

sense it underlines the value of individual experiences of each rebel. Participation in rebellions was seen here not only as a socio-political activity, but also educational (learning) experience showing the relationship between action, learning and social actor's identity-building. It can be said that learning takes / took place through rebel's social and political mobilisations. They learnt what the world and people are like, what does cooperation look like and what problems does it involve, how to build relationships and how to act (this thread was present especially in organisers' stories).

Rebels' learning was a part of their everyday life (everyday struggles as one of the interviewees put it), in practical actions and social interactions with other engaged people and groups. They seem to have learnt who they are and how to be rebels. I argue that this informal learning is part of broader citizens' culture, beyond the biographies studied. The phenomenon of participation in rebellions opens new spaces for thinking about lifelong learning: the potential for emancipation, critical reflection and effecting changes in existing conditions which shape human biographies. These conclusions are important from the point of view of learning democracy, causative power of engaged people and active re-construction of the world by social actors. I think it gives hope in a divided and conflicted world dominated by dangerous discourses, practices and consequences of them.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The interesting topic on resistance to power in the context of rebellion was described by scholars like Gramsci (1971), Szkudlarek (2009), Choudry (2012), Steinklammer (2012) and others.

<sup>2</sup> The social dimension of learning experiences has been analysed by researchers like Lave & Wenger (1991), Illeris (2004) Kurantowicz (2012), Jurgiel-Aleksander (2013) Evans, Kurantowicz & Lucio-Villegas (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Selected biographies are numbered in accordance with the order of the conversations conducted during my study.

<sup>4</sup> It is the name for the annual demonstrations organised on the occasion of Women's Day.

<sup>5</sup> I write more about feminist identity-formation in another publication (Szczygieł, 2019).

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