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"You can shoot!" – the social world of sports shooters in Poland

Abstract

This work presents the results of qualitative research on the environment of sport shooters in Poland. The theoretical framework of the work is the theory of social worlds (Shibutani, 1955; Becker, 1976; Strauss, 1978; Unruh, 1980; Clarke, Star, 2007). This concept requires attention to be focused on the practices of a particular community, but also on the technologies used by its members, places where they indulge in their activities, and discourses, in which they participate. My research was exploratory and ongoing using techniques such as participant observation, visual analysis and in-depth interviews. As part of the research, I used existing data, including quantitative data on shooting environments.

Before I develop the above-mentioned issues, in the further part of the introduction I would like to explain why I believe that sport shooting in Poland was worth making the subject of scientific research. I believe there are at least three reasons for this. Firstly, regardless of political views and attitudes towards the issue of access to firearms, firearms are an integral part of social reality, and access to them is not - and for a large part of history was not - reserved for dispositional groups with exclusivity in use of legal violence. This alone makes weapons and their practices worthy of scientific scrutiny. And sport shooting is a sphere of practice that makes threads related to weapons appear in our everyday life. Secondly, sport shooting in Poland (but also in many other countries) is developing dynamically. I mean both the number of people shooting sports, the number of sports weapons on the market, as well as the financial outlays for this sport incurred by people practicing it. All these indicators are growing in Poland. There are also new shooting ranges and entities providing services for sports shooters. In other words, we are witnessing the increasingly strong institutionalization of a new sphere of social practice. Thirdly, firearms - or rather access to them - is controversial. This applies in particular to the United States. However, also in Poland, access to guns is a topic that divides people (see Seń & Zielińska, 2019). This is related, among others, to the many widespread views on firearms, some of which are treated by many experts and practitioners as baseless myths. The same is true of common ideas about people who have guns: many views have grown around shooters, not necessarily in line with reality. This sphere of ideas about shooters and shooting is important because it matters in the context of shaping many policies, including the policy of access to firearms, national defense or internal security and the prevention of criminal behavior.

Although shooting in Poland and the issue of firearms in the hands of civilians are important topics, they have not received many scientific studies. Even if there are works of this type, they most often belong to the field of forensic science (Kulicki, 1972, 2001; Kaczmarek, 2000; Kasprzak, Brywczyński, 2013), forensic medicine (Bloch-Bogusławska, Engelhardt, Paradowska, 2007; Trnka et al. , 2008) and shooting in the perspective of training players and physical culture (Kurzawski, 2005; Baranowski, 2008; Budnik-Przybylska, Staniszewski, 2018). Shooting in sociological terms in Poland is poorly researched. Among the scientific studies on this subject, you can find a book on a specific group - hunters (Rancew-Sikora, 2009) and an article on sport shooting analyzed in the context of social capital and social commitment (Kołodziej, Kołodziej-Durnaś, 2023).

This work does not try to develop the entire research niche indicated earlier, but focuses on its fragment. I am not interested in all types of shooting here, nor in the wide spectrum of

practices related to firearms in the hands of civilians. I am focusing here on a very specific segment of social practices, on a group which, as my initial diagnosis showed, should be relatively easily accessible for research. Using the tools of social sciences, I draw a picture of the sports shooters community. I show why these people strive to own a gun, what the sport shooting activity is all about, and what other practices sport shooters engage in. I also show what shooting sport means for their relatives and friends and what impact the possession of firearms has on the functioning of households.

I propose to consider my work in terms of an anthropological guide. Firstly, the term "guide" is intended to indicate the resignation from claiming to provide complete and systematic knowledge. This work is the result of a research reconnaissance and an attempt to understand the phenomenon. Secondly, the term "anthropological" indicates that I am using a specific method - the approach of cultural anthropology. Third, this work is also a "guide" in the sense that it is intended to enable readers to form their own opinions about marksmanship and firearms in the hands of civilians. I am far from merciless criticism of the milieus using the weapons that were practiced in the past, e.g. in relation to the milieu of hunters (Rancew-Sikora, 2009; Wojciechowska, 2010). At the same time, it is not a work praising the practices of the shooting community, as is often the case with the works of participants of the shooting social worlds (ADARMA, 2023; MILMAG, 2023; Turczyn, 2023). This type of insight into what shooters do is important, for example, due to the emerging policies of access to firearms in Poland.

I would also like to explain the meaning of the title of this work: "You can shoot! – the social world of sport shooters in Poland". At the shooting ranges, the command "you can shoot" is given very often, which is given by the shooter informing all present that they can start firing and at the same time no one has the right to be behind the firing line. This slogan refers to a very important thread that will often come back in my work, namely the very strong safety culture in the environment I studied. If I had to point to one most important feature of this particular social world, it would be very strict, almost embodied security procedures. However, the title has at least one more meaning. It communicates that access to firearms in Poland is relatively easy. Although the sports shooters community itself is hermetic (at least due to specialist knowledge and technical skills), access to firearms in Poland has become much easier in recent years. It's not just about the relatively low cost of licenses and the gun itself, but also about the fact that representatives of the shooting world are keenly interested in recruiting new members and further institutionalization of shooting. In the simplest way of explaining the rest of the title, the social world is a specific, separate, cultural area with fluid borders, within which participants take specific actions.