

POPREBEL

Post-transformational dissatisfaction in Poland and the rise of populism

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“This is not the Poland that we were fighting for”

- Despite overall economic development, improvement of quality of life -> post-transformational dissatisfaction persists among parts of Polish society.
- Populist promise of “good change” and establishment of Fourth Republic (marking a clean break from the Third Republic (1989-present)).
- Here, post-transformational dissatisfaction is presented as seen through the lens of nonfictional narratives – reportage – “translating” to the wider public the perceived dissatisfaction, inequality and injustice.
- Reportage as a way to communicate and channel collective emotions and perceptions.
- Demand/supply: cultural narratives explored in the paper could be seen as part of the demand aspect of populism.

New Poland as alien space

- Early reportages from the period of transformation -> new reality perceived as deeply alien, strange, uncanny
- Piotr Lipiński “Strzeż się szaraka [Beware of the Grey One]” (1992/reprinted 2018): reportage from a symposium of Antrovis, organisation for those who believe in aliens
 - *The aliens’ visits have intensified in Poland, when it entered a new era in 1989: the era of freedom, democracy and capitalism. Perhaps for this reason – or because of the removal of censorship – the press wrote ever more frequently about the visitors from the stars. During communism aliens did not visit us as often. Besides, people did not end up in job centres. (Loc. 166-169)*
 - Link between the feeling of insecurity (due to poverty, unemployment etc.) and the belief in otherworldly civilisations
 - Dystopian/Utopian visions of end of civilisation on Earth – help will come from other planet, but only to selected groups: Slavs are the chosen people, while Westerners will perish; those who will be saved, will live in a utopian world on a different planet

Populist response – insecurity vs. stability

- The insecurity and fast pace of changes, felt as **strange, surreal, confusing and alienating** for many Poles, meant many turned to unrealistic dreams or conspiracy theories.
- Thirty years later, some of this deeply felt alienation (or, in Maria Janion's words, feeling "strangers to ourselves" – *sami sobie obcy*) finds a response in populist promises of "good change".
- Promises of **stability, social benefits, protection from the state, security** -> response to the perceived instability, confusion, fragmentation (resulting both from the (ill) effects of transformation, as well as from globalisation)

Cheated out of what they deserve

- The fates of former oppositionists as depicted by Jacek Hugo-Bader in *Skucha [Jinx]* (2016)
 - *Some colleagues in independent Poland shine in politics, others make fortunes, yet another ones have nothing to eat – I write over twenty years ago. Many do business, some cleaner than others. A few people get retired, some – get imprisoned. Some – for something, others – for nothing. A few people already know that they wasted their life, dawdled, squandered twenty-six years. A few guys and girls think that the struggle for freedom is only beginning. A couple of people die, others become alcoholics, some get divorced and a few are depressed. (Loc 283)*
 - A suggestive scene of a party, where oppositionists joke about who will get which ministry once the communists are ousted - indeed, some became ministers, the new elites – but some became the victims of the very transformation that they were fighting for.
 - Among them, bitterness and disappointment is high – they blame their former brothers-in-arms rather than the excesses of the free market
 - They deny the post-1989 democracy any legitimacy and feel a sense of historical injustice:
 - Those people from “Solidarność” that got to power, they are bigger thieves than the communists. They don’t do anything **for the people**, but only for themselves. So I respect the reds more and that is why I vote for them. At least they don’t change their views. (Loc. 2966)
 - The narrator talks of inequality among former communists with higher pensions and former oppositionists, barely surviving:
 - *The lack of settling of accounts is something that lingers and pulls us deeper, causing bad blood (...) It is our misfortune, the founding sin of the Third Republic, the founding injustice. An unexploded bomb is built into the fundamentals of our country, and it can cause a blast at some point. Or someone can detonate it. (Loc. 1984)*

Populist response of Law and Justice: “detonating” and inciting such sense of **injustice**, focus on **history**, replacing some Solidarity heroes with others, “**settling of accounts**” through lustration and cutting down on the pensions for employees of the communist apparatus etc.

The addictive power of conflict

- Former oppositionists still addicted to the “heat of the battle” excitement
 - *Even after a bloodless, not very murderous war, a veteran is engulfed by a heavy feeling of emptiness, sorrow, as if he returned from a wonderful, very long journey, as if he was touched by a post-vacation melancholy, an autumn sadness and depression – just ten times more intensive.* (Loc. 2749)
- Especially the ex-oppositionists that are unemployed and lost their purpose, engage in a variety of long-lasting conflicts, often pointless and irrational
 - Draining disputes with public institutions, house administration, ex-wives, often over small or insignificant matters
 - A son talks of his mother, a lawyer fighting with pharma companies: “When all this was over, all this damn conspiracy of yours, my mother had to come up with a new game altogether. And again, this was all that counted (...) She invented a new war for herself” (Loc. 4418).
 - Legacy of conflict and struggle for independence: later - lack of purpose and relevance

Populist response: maintaining high level of **conflict** that fuels engagement, provides meaning; **polarization** that provides purpose and ways to identify with a cause;

The humiliation of precarity

Despite the successes of economic development in Poland (Poland as the “green island”) – Marek Szymaniak in his *Urobieni [Overworked]* (2018) portrays precarious and humiliating work conditions are a deeply-felt problem of the Polish job market.

In the words of Bogdan: “Working for too long makes you numb. The person becomes a prisoner of his work. He dreams only of getting some sleep (...) I have this need to remain human. Have time for books and to go hiking. To be a person, and not just a machine for work. Even if it means poverty”(Loc 270).

- Instances of workers’ rights abuse, mistreatment, humiliation, dehumanisation, unrealistic targets, physical exhaustion – in both factory jobs and, to some extent, in high-skill jobs, due to constant pressure to perform better.
- A collectively felt lack of time for rest and for family life While this is partly a local issue, linked with insufficient implementation and control of labour laws, it is also the effect of economic globalisation.
- Populist promise of „**stability of employment**” (A. Duda) and „dignity and development” (M. Morawiecki)

The threat of the other

- In Marcin Kącki's *Białystok* (2016) and in the collected volume by young reporters (incl. Małgorzata Rejmer, Ziemowit Szczerek, Kaja Puto and others), *Obrażenia – Pobicz z Polską [Injuries: Struggling with Poland]* (2016), many of the texts point to the threat, fear and aggression towards groups considered as Other.
 - Need for scapegoating and blaming whoever is different: refugees from a local asylum centre, non-whites, foreign; but also homosexuals and those who conduct programs on anti-Semitism
 - A Białystok teacher, Anna, for her involvement in the rediscovery of the Jewish past, receives texts with threats; “[y]ou will burn in a furnace together with the Jews that you are helping” (128), “you will die with a knife in your back” (128)
 - A mother whose daughter married an Indian and was forced to emigrate after continues threats, now sees the power of extreme right-wing symbols visible around the city:
 - “She notices the surprised looks of the people, but she scratches until the only thing left of the sticker is glue. She blames herself that only now, when her children ran away, she understands the force of these swastikas, stickers, which were there for many years” (174).

Populist response: playing with **xenophobia** (esp. regarding migrant crisis) and **homophobia** (more recently) to create **symbolic enemies** and create a sense of **threat**

Conclusions

- The populist rhetoric of Law and Justice and their allies skilfully identifies those perceptions, emotions and attitudes, as well as various cultural and social issues, that were previously not well (or not adequately enough) represented in the public discourse.
- The two contrasting images of the world as presented by the populists headed by Law and Justice and by the liberal opposition exist in parallel
- Clashing narratives:
 - narrative post-Round Table celebration of democracy vs. narrative of historical injustice and exclusion of some oppositionists
 - narrative of economic success and development (“green island”) vs. Narrative of work instability and humiliation
 - narrative of cooperation vs. narrative of conflict
 - narrative of diversity vs. narrative of threatening Other