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Clichés and Overexposures: Gaps and Surpluses of Polish Memory

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1.

When we examine Polish memory as it is painted in the papers presented at the conference "Polska pamięć. Ciągłość i przemiany; diagnoza i rokowania" – which were later developed into the articles presented in the current issue – we will easily notice the two main problems with the functioning of Polish memory, that were identified by the researchers. The first of these is associated with the indisputable gaps in memory, certain points or even whole gray areas, which we do not want to remember, and which were either expunged from our memory or have never truly been a part of it.[1] The second

1 Without doubt, this category encompasses a broad part of Holocaust memory, and especially those of its facets that keep score of the assent to the Shoah and of the involvement of some part of society in particular acts of genocide, or that point to the lack of any kind of opposition to those acts (these aspects are explored in the papers authored by Dorota Głowacka, Przemysław Czapliński, Jacek Leociak and Marek Zaleski). However, not only the memory of events that could be a source of shame or guilt is overlooked, but also all those forms of memory, which do not fit into the oversimplified blueprint of memory that is considered safe for building national identity.

problem – and this might seem quite obvious – is the excessive tendency to remember other events vividly, in spite of the passage of time, and even in certain defiance of it, that is associated with the repetition and replication of certain strictly determined forms of memory in an almost unchanged and possibly simple manner.[2]

Forgetting and reminiscing seem to be two aspects of a single process; a process of unifying memory, of rearranging it in such a way that it becomes a convenient tool in the construction of a certain collective identity. The dynamics between these two phenomena resembles the swing of a pendulum, which sways to one side just to return to the other in an instance. The events and problems indicated and commented upon by the authors seem to match quite strictly the aforementioned simple blueprint – either collective memory refuses to cooperate, when it comes to remembering events that are too complicated, damning, or inconvenient (The Holocaust heads this list, followed by the convoluted memory of the Polish People's Republic, and, finally, by the memory of regime change), or it reproduces subsequent memory clichés, when it touches upon events that carry identity building potential for a certain community.

This state of affairs – especially pronounced in the case of the Second World War – can be, in my opinion, interpreted as a specific kind of looping of memory. Attempts at unifying memory, of bestowing a definite shape on the past, though they are repeated regularly, do not seem to increase its uniformity at all. On the contrary, at a time when our memories of events that occurred seventy years ago should – as was suggested by Jan Assmann – gradually transition from the area of communicative memory to the field of cultural memory,[3] something goes astray. Remembrance of the Second World War, as well as the memory of the subsequent traumatic experiences of the twentieth century, seems to be still open, susceptible to change and manipulation, and ready for transformations engendered by omissions as well as repetitions.

Polish memory, especially that pertaining to the traumatic and still affective events of the twentieth century, is therefore not dynamic but rather unbalanced. However, constant returns to events that have not yet been properly

2 These kinds of memory clichés can be easily identified in the narratives of the Second World War, which are still – if we were to base our survey on the media context or even on history handbooks – based on a very simplistic model of presenting Poland as the principal victim of this nevertheless global event. An account that would reach beyond a strictly local perspective (or, at most, beyond the European context) in presenting the Second World War, is still very rare.

3 Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization. Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

assimilated into memory do not bring forth any promise of resolution. Even though, it seems, these were initially attempted in the hope of demystifying the past, of telling what r e a l l y happened, and how it happened – which always seems like a rather illusory endeavor – it, nevertheless, always fairly quickly turned out that what was really at stake was not the return to some unexpressed or uncomfortable events, but rather an attempt to construct some different, possibly coherent, version of the past. And this is possible only through persistent omissions and compulsive repetitions.

Though the matter, which I touch upon in this article, is very well analyzed on the level of particular cases in the papers presented by the participants of the aforementioned conference, it is also worthwhile to study it as a specific process that regulates the circulation of Polish memory, and to consider what, despite the passage of time, is at the root of the difficulties in constructing that type memory which – in the convenient terms proposed by Aleida Assmann[4] and Michael Rothberg[5] – could be characterized as dialogical or multidirectional.

2.

Disregarding the memory of certain events and attaching excessive importance to others or – in a scaled down form – preferring particular versions of the past is nothing new in Polish culture, and it is not unfamiliar to other cultures as well. The initial imbalance of collective memory, following difficult and traumatic occurrences does not seem particularly surprising. Similar challenges were faced by – not to stray too far from the subject – German cultural memory after the Second World War,[6] neither are they unfamiliar to collective memories of those communities, which only now try to reconsider

4 Aleida Assmann, "Europe's Divided Memory," in *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. Uilleam Blacker, Alexander Etkind and Julie Fedor (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 25–41.

5 Cf. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory was compellingly analyzed by Katarzyna Bojarska in the paper "Polska pamięć wielokierunkowa? (Kto nie pamięta z nami, ten nie pamięta przeciwko nam)" [Polish multidirectional memory? He who does not remember with us, does not remember against us either], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2016): 312–325.

6 An in-depth analysis of the subject can be found in the writings of, among others, Aleida Assmann. Cf. Aleida Assmann, "Re-framing Memory. Between Individual and Collective Forms of Constructing the Past," in *Performing the Past. Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe*, ed. Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree and Jay Winter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 35–50.

their colonial past. However, the one element setting Polish memory apart from the abovementioned examples is its extreme instability, which not only does not subside with the passage of time, but it seems to increase even further.

The sources of this instability lie, in my opinion, precisely with that chronic looping of memory, which causes certain events from the quite distant past to function as still novel, pertinent, and contemporary. The Second World War is one of such events – speaking in terms proposed by Lauren Berlant[7] – which being not fully apprehended, constantly influence the present affective structure. As such, this event vanished from the sphere of public discussion before it was experienced in its entirety, becoming suppressed, though certainly not erased by another event – the change of the political regime. After the year 1989, the previously suppressed, although still affective in its character, memory of the Second World War resurfaced and became a challenge for Polish identity.

The specific character of this challenge is well described by the dialectics of pride and shame, which is used with success by various memory discourses. Its workings – in this case, on the example of Polish culture – are very compellingly analyzed by Przemysław Czapliński in an article tellingly titled "War of Shames." This passage cuts to the core of the problem under discussion:

> Polish culture currently partakes in the war of two legitimate shames. The first, fragmented, internally incoherent and conflicted, grows from the ethical concern for minority rights; the second, rather narrow and combative towards any difference, refers to the ethics of majority rights, the first was not capable of satisfying the longing for respect felt by the masses, the second is generous in bestowing accolades, but only upon "comrades." The first lives by the Christian principle "Be proud, for you know how to feel ashamed!" The second champions the tribal maxim "Shame on you, if you do not know how to be proud!"[8]

Two types of shame, described by Czapliński, are responsible for the two utterly different attitudes guiding the approach of individuals and societies towards the future. The first, demands taking responsibility also for those events that do not contribute to the positive image of a given community; it treats memory not as a simple reservoir of events and behaviors that can be positively appraised from the present point of view and that can be the

7 Lauren Berlant, "Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event," *American Literary History* 20 (4) (2008): 845–860.

8 Przemysław Czapliński, "Wojna wstydów" [A war of shames], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2016): 44.

object of identification, but as a task and challenge that requires a great deal of work. The second attitude requires retaining the memory mostly – if not exclusively – of what is a source of pride, of what can serve as the building block of a favorably assessed identity.

It is evident that the first of the maxims mentioned by Czapliński is not representative of the Polish approach to memory. This was also noted by Andrzej Leder, who points out that:

> The capability of feeling such shame, the shame for atrocities that were committed by our ancestors – by the bearers of the same tradition, who have nevertheless neglected their duty to account for them themselves – had become the measure of a new sort of pride. A pride, which from a position of the future, a common future of free and equal people, bestowed judgement upon the terrible past that was hiding in the present.[9]

Analyzing the mutual relations of shame and pride and the role they play in contemporary societies, Leder recognizes that their functioning is fundamentally different among weak and strong societies. Pride arising from the ability to experience shame is characteristic of those societies which were once strong enough to force their will, through coercion and violence, upon other societies, and at the present time are self-conscious and disciplined enough to take responsibility for their past wrongdoings; thus protecting their own identity and agency that is associated with it:

> The process of confronting the faults of the preceding generations was – and still is – most tumultuous in those societies which quite recently – that is, in the nineteenth century – were historically strong enough to be able to severely harm whole communities, nations, civilizations…. Ultimately, these societies had to possess a particular kind of sovereignty, one that dictates saying: it was us! Taking responsibility also for the difficult and bad circumstances. The experience of agency of these societies all but barred the soothing words: it was someone else. Words that are typical for weak societies.[10]

In contrast with strong societies, which build their pride on the acceptance of shame, weak societies – according to Leder – want the pride, but without the shame; in essence, they strive for the recognition of pride that is rooted

9 Andrzej Leder, "Pole symboliczne. Przemieszczanie, niewczesność. Humanistka jako wybór między pamięcią a nadzieją" [The symbolic field, mixing, untimeliness: The humanities as a choice between memory and hope], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2016): 247.

10 Leder, "Pole symboliczne," 248.

in their own impotence. This deepens even further the divide between weak and strong societies, between the influential that are ready to take responsibility for their deeds and the passive that avoid the consequences of their actions at all cost.

To a certain extent, the dialectics of pride and shame aptly describes the aforementioned phenomenon of both forgetting and reminiscing about the past. That Polish society chooses pride without shame over pride that finds strength in acceptance of guilt, is clearly noticeable at present. Nonetheless, it seems worthwhile to broaden or even restate the question about the aversion towards pride that comes from acknowledging shame, to investigate the reasons behind its fervent repression. In my opinion, this is associated not only and not as much with the desire to transfer the guilt onto others, but is mostly associated with the growing difficulty with determining national identity, with recognizing who "we" really are?

3.

The division into weak and strong societies, as it was proposed by Andrzej Leder, rests not only upon the ability – or the lack thereof – to find pride in shame. It also depends on – the scholar states this clearly – the specific use of the simple distinction into us and them, us and others. The ability to admit guilt and accept shame requires, as Leder writes, a clear declaration of how things are, that is saying: it was us who did it. What, however, happens in the case when this straightforward and fundamental distinction in the construction of communal, national, and social identity is not as simple? What if the whole difficulty comes down to the simple fact that it is very hard to find a perspective that would give a clear view of who stands on which side? The history of colonial powers is easier to grasp in this regard, as it is difficult to confuse the colonizer with the colonized or to contradict the responsibility for starting the Second World War of a country that clearly pursued it. The position of strong societies, namely those which have a centuries-long history of domination and expansion, is in this respect straightforward in comparison with that of societies characterized by Leder as weak. The past, for which responsibility should – or even must – be taken, one that is shameful, can form a much more solid base for national self-identity than a past that must be constantly explained and retold, as, in that case, it is impossible to claim complete agency or to shed all responsibility – at least not if that past is not to become corrupted by falsehoods. Clearly, the past of weak societies is not only marked by the experience of violence, but also – to a greater or smaller extent – by its application, by being on the side of the weak at one time, and on the side of the strong at another.

The memory of weak societies is therefore much more complicated and seems much less tolerant to omissions and silencing than the memory of the strong. It is also much more fragile than those collective memories that can conceal themselves behind the figure of a great empire: the political and ethical responsibility of states for specific actions is something qualitatively different from the shame experienced by a society for the actions of its individual members.[11]

If we concede – as Leder does – that Polish society is weak, it will become clear that certain incendiary elements of Polish memory, the points of overlooking or reminiscing, are mostly concerned with those moments in history when the functioning of the Polish state was hampered to a larger or smaller extent. And this means that they burden the society itself and cannot be transferred onto some more or less abstract nation-like entity.

The shame of strong societies, namely those whose culpability for certain actions is clearly acknowledged on the national and not merely social level, is – as Sara Ahmed pointed out – much less complicated. It separates individuals from the nation and the state, therefore allowing pride to be restored by, sometimes, merely superficial acts that do not lead to any kind of restitution.[12] Meanwhile, the responsibility of societies that cannot hide beyond the figure of nation or government is much more personal, much more burdensome and sensitive. The situation of Poland during the Second World War is

11 This is well illustrated by, for example, the intricacies of German collective memory relating to the Second World War. Acknowledging Germany's – as a particular national entity – responsibility for WWII was fairly easy. Nevertheless, turning that responsibility into acceptance of collective guilt on the part of German society for allowing the war to break out and for active participation or endorsement of Nazi politics was a much longer process. At a certain point a revealing dissociation of guilt occurred, where the guilt of a state as an abstract, political entity was keenly admitted, but the guilt of society as a collection of individuals was not, and overcoming this duality was not easy. Cf. Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall, *"Opa war kein Nazi." Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2002).

12 Cf. Sara Ahmed, "Shame before Others," in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 119–120. "The expressions of national shame […] were problematic, as they sought within the utterance to finish the action, by claiming the expression of shame as sufficient for the return to national pride. As such, they did not function as a return address; they blocked the hearing of the other's testimony in turning back towards the 'ideality' of the nation. It remains possible to express shame before others without finishing the act, which refuses this conversion of shame to pride, in an act of shame that is not only before others, but for others." Ahmed points out that not all forms of public display of shame are an act of opening to dialog with those who have been wronged. On the contrary, shame oftentimes serves as a kind of public closure of debates on a given subject.

a good example of this. Since October 1939 the Polish society became stateless and found itself under total control of a foreign power forcing it to conform to a particular political and legal order. The existence of the Polish government-in-exile did not change this situation – although this government was able to represent, on a small scale, the interest of an abstract state entity at the international forum, it had little actual power over the events taking place within the borders of the pre-war Polish state. This remains true even when we account for the functioning of military formations within the country or of the Polish Underground State – their presence was important, for various political and some social reasons, but it did not counterbalance the influence of the German Reich (the influence of the Polish Underground State on citizens who were not directly involved in its operations was minimal). What all this means is that the responsibility for actions – both right and wrong – committed by Poles during the Second World War cannot be easily dismissed by attributing it not to the society, conceived as a collection of individuals, but to some abstract body politic that would act as its substitute.

All of this fundamentally changes the perception of shame and pride. Pride arising from the actions of a handful of individuals easily achieves collective or national dimensions in the eyes of the general public. In turn, shame is either completely erased, becoming something experienced individually, at the most, or turns into something much more sensitive – if it becomes a part of the collective consciousness. Such shame and such pride make the already unbalanced process of constructing national self-identification even harder. For shame to grow into a source of national pride it needs to be experienced as part and within the boundaries of a defined identity – one which is not subverted by it, but, on the contrary, which it itself supports through the affirmation of its centuries-long duration. Though, if that continuity is broken at any time, then things get much more complicated.

4.

In my opinion, it is worth considering contemporary processes occurring within Polish memory, especially that which refers to the twentieth century, as an attempt to reconstruct such an identity which would be rooted in the belonging to a particular nation state rather than to a certain society or nationality. What is at stake in this game is the image of "Poland" as a national entity even in those periods when Poland could not be considered an independent state. It is therefore an attempt to rewrite history and its memory in such a way, as to be able to maintain the continuity of Poland and, consequently, a connection with a particular country and collective identity. In terms proposed by Leder, this would be an attempt to create a coherent "we,"

even though – and maybe for the very reason that – it was very unclear in certain periods of history, who "we" are and if there even is a "we" of any kind to speak of.

The construction of a particular community, of this supreme "we," which is moreover legitimized through belonging to a concrete nation, is currently underway with the aid of a rather simple mechanism, one which was mentioned at the beginning of this paper. What I have in mind is the incessant repetition, the returning to events that can easily be classified in an unambiguous way. This one-sidedness entails, on the one hand, the need for a clear and firm delineation of the difference between "us" and "them," and, on the other, an equally strong need to feel proud of what "we" have managed to achieve. For this reason, the most important role in the memory of the Second World War is played by those events which were initiated by "us" and which – and I view this as equally important – can be associated with the workings of the state.

The growing stature of the Warsaw Uprising as a particularly important event for the building of Polish memory is a direct result of the two aforementioned factors. This was one of the handful of moments in the Second World War when "we" were potent, and "we" made the decisions. Although opinions on those decisions – not to mention their consequences – are varied, the Uprising itself occupies a special point in memory, connecting the phantasy of agency and potency of Polish society with the illusion of the functioning of a Polish state during the occupation. This Uprising is contemporaneously interpreted as a form of military action, and therefore as a manifestation of the nation state, while also being an embodiment of the societal, grassroots, striving for action, arising from the spontaneous need to resist the oppression.

The memory of the cursed soldiers – which recently became prominent in the public discourse – is similar in character, though it is smaller in scale. The very notion of "cursed soldiers" points to a certain meticulously hidden paradox of memory. A soldier is always a member of an army of a particular state, he is a part of the armed forces, and not – as in this case – a partisan, someone who opposes the power of the state. The fact that we are currently talking about cursed soldiers and not, for example, about the members of the anti-communist guerilla, is also telling. According to the logic of this designation, the post-war underground – not supported, at least officially, by the government-in-exile – constituted a "state" to a greater extent than communist Poland ever did. Therefore, the creation of the mythology of the cursed soldiers, as well as that of the Warsaw Uprising, evidently serves the construction of a strong, easy to grasp, and potent Polish "we," which endures despite political turmoil.

This way of constructing identity and collective memory has, nevertheless, some quite clear downsides. The most important among them is its extreme

selectivity. History of societies which I would define not so much as weak but as unstable – partly borrowing from Andrzej Leder's terminology – does not mainly consist of acts of power, dominance, or even agency. Resignation and attempts to deal with domination are much more prevalent here, there are also more numerous and nuanced responses to subservience and therefore the scope of the relationship with the "other" is infinitesimally more complicated. Nevertheless, not much is left, when the memory of the past is cut down in order to conform to some pre-defined blueprint.

The selectivity of such a memory results, on the one hand, in the inhibition of all that does not fit the model of the potent and active Polish "we" and, on the other, in a stubborn repetition of the invariable cognitive schemata, returning to certain clichés and truisms that can be useful in filling the empty places in memory deprived of non-acceptable memories. Even the introduction of subsequent memories is oftentimes done not in order to fill in holes and gaps, not to bring nuance to oversimplified versions of memory, but to substitute one cliché for another, which is constructed in a similar manner. This mechanism guarantees that even if an event that was previously absent in public discourse becomes part of collective consciousness, then it is swiftly made to conform to already existing memory clichés. This is what happened, for example, in the case of the Volhynian massacre that has been swiftly incorporated into a rather simple narrative of the subsequent misfortunes of the Polish people, instead of becoming a basis for a deeper examination of the problems of national identity and conflicts resulting from ill-conceived nationalism.

Collective memory constructed in this manner and the identity which is based upon it is – despite intense attempts at its unification – extremely fragile. A narrow, rigorous pattern of memory necessitates treating anything that goes beyond it as endangering the delicate balance. In such a vision of history each new event, which does not fit neatly with the already established memory clichés, might force a reconstruction of the whole, still unstable, social and national identity; it is not so much treated as a challenge, but simply as a threat. This kind of memory is the opposite of dialogical or multidirectional memory, it is a specific kind of paradigmatic memory, which constructs an identity around a specific event and its interpretation, subjecting visions of the past to its requirements, and not a memory that is a nexus of various events and which can be a source of diverse models of identity. This is why Polish memory reacts in such a nervous way to other than paradigmatic versions of memory. For example, the memory of the Holocaust is not considered as a parallel memory or a memory that fills the obvious gaps in the ways of remembering war during the time of the Polish People's Republic; rather, it is seen as a conflicting memory which substitutes the memory of the Second

World War as a destructive event for the Polish nation and statehood with a version of memory which burdens, to a higher or lower extent, Polish society with an unwanted and incomprehensible shame.

The only way to overcome this specific stalemate, where both the collective and individual memory are held hostage to the need of producing a coherent identity, is through the acceptance of the fact that diversity and multidirectionality of memory need not lead to chaos and instability, and that diverging versions of the past must not necessarily be contradictory. Nonetheless, this requires – paradoxically – undertaking work not so much on the past and its memory but on the present and the future, which should become a more prominent point of reference for the construction of collective identity.

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Abstract

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Tabaszewska examines two key issues in the functioning of Polish memory, namely forgetting and contemplation. They can be seen as two aspects of the same process of standardizing memory, of constructing memory in a way that is supposed to turn it into a comfortable tool in the construction of a given collective identity. Forgetting and contemplation can therefore be read as a memory loop of sorts, rooted in the need to reconstruct an identity based on belonging to a given state. The selective and stereotypical aspects of collective memory largely result from attempts to produce an image of the past that would legitimize a sense of belonging to a stable state organism looking back on hundreds of years of continuity.

Keywords

collective memory, cultural memory, affect, forgetting, shame, pride