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# Post-Communism and Cultural Wars

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**T**he notion that people's political choices were driven not only by personal economic interest but also, or even primarily, by the values they espouse and their outlook on life was one of the most important revelations in the field of politics. If politics was considered by some to consist of mostly administrative duties, with political skirmishes amounting to nothing more than competitions yielding the best managers, now it fully revealed itself to be a field wherein diverse cultural patterns clashed with one another. We might say, paradoxically, that fundamental worldview issues are pushed to the forefront in two particular circumstances: when the economic situation in a country is either devolving or barely stable. In politics, looking for fault lines inevitably creates divisions and political options that draw on cultural values. Thus, "culture wars" were thoroughly radicalized.

In one of his books, Terry Eagleton writes that culture wars are not just the domain of humanities departments anymore. Outgrowing the infighting between proponents of canon and apostles of diversity, they became "the shape of the world politics of the new millennium."<sup>1</sup> In other

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1 T. Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 51.

words, culture became a political force to be reckoned with, expanding beyond the traditional approach that portrayed it as either dependent on politics or standing on the sidelines. However, delineating political divisions generated by cultural differences is far from easy. If we take a closer look at the rise of the neoconservative movement, a paradigmatic example of a culture war, we will clearly see that it fosters a notion about two completely different cultures co-existing within a single nation.

Exemplifying this premise is the book written by Gertrude Himmelfarb, a preeminent philosopher, entitled *One Nation, Two Cultures*.<sup>2</sup> Himmelfarb's deliberations are presided over by Adam Smith's proclamation that within all civilized societies two separate schemes of morality are current at the same time. One is liberal, the other strict and severe. The former is championed by worldly, sophisticated people, while the latter is preferred by the common folk. Naturally, establishing a precise definition of either of the two morality systems is more than problematic and the author is very aware of that. Who are the "sophisticates" and who are the "common people"? The dichotomy does not really overlap with the division into the "rich" and the "poor" or the "educated" and the "uneducated." As examples Himmelfarb provides the idle aristocracy and the art-minded bohemian crowd, the latter a favorite target of the former's ridicule. It seems to me, however, that clearly demarcating individual social groups espousing each of the two aforementioned moral systems is nearly impossible. The author makes claims to the contrary, arguing that the type of morality one stands for, rather than economic or political interest, determines whether we consider ourselves members of a given group. That particular thesis clearly alludes to Max Weber's famous essay on the Protestant work ethic and its importance to the development of capitalism, but the author also builds on, or rather, shifts the meanings of notions put forth by German sociologist towards nearly all spheres of social and political life.

In Western Europe, culture wars manifest themselves primarily during debates on the issue of multiculturalism. These discussions are no longer purely academic deliberations on the possibilities of intermixing distinct cultural patterns, the prospects of translating one culture into another, and ways to foster co-existence of two cultures within one nation. In every political campaign, problems like these are rendered into slogans used by all parties, while political theorists are forced to study complex issues, e.g. denominations in Islam, to understand how to redefine concepts like citizenship.

In Poland, cultural wars are naturally seen in a very different light. We are not facing, at least not right now, problems like mass immigration or

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2 G. Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures* (New York: Knopf, 1999).

confrontations with ethnic minorities. The majority of sociological studies seems to confirm the mass acceptance of Catholicism, regardless of how superficial the faith might be. Despite these findings, it is clear that in Poland the beginning of the 21st century also signals the onset of the kind of culture wars that translate into political differences. That particular state of affairs is a result of the fact that the conclusion of the transformation, and with it the post-communist period, ushered in the same processes that took place in every developed Western state, including the emergence of social divisions derived from cultural differences. In my opinion, this is one of the hallmarks of post-post-communism, as I try to call the system that followed post-communism.<sup>3</sup> The presidential and parliamentary elections of 2005 are considered to be the symbolic founding date of that particular construct, wherein divisions along cultural and ideological lines replaced previous taxonomies that partitioned the population into post-communists and keepers of the Solidarity legacy. The borders between the new formations, however, seem blurry at best. To some degree, we can draw an analogy between the new camps and the division into “common folk” and “sophisticates” introduced by Smith and then employed by Himmelfarb. In Poland, the worldly “salon” and its representatives were deplored as emanations of elitism that have lost any contact with the realities of the everyday lives of millions of average people a long time ago. The use of this type of rhetoric only escalated after the tragic death of the president and members of his delegation near Smolensk; the attitudes of average people were now contrasted and compared to the attitudes exhibited by members of the elite or, to use a term coined by proponents of the division, pseudo-elites.

That particular division, however, does not introduce clearly delineated differences. Aside from describing characteristics associated, to a degree, with the cultural left, the term “salon” also encompasses traditional postulates and views held by liberals and social democrats. Similarly, during the 2005 elections, the Law and Justice party tried to separate the “Poland of the Home Army” from “post-communist Poland,” or contrast the “Solidarity Poland” with “liberal Poland.” None of these divisions, however, demonstrated sufficient power to embed themselves within the national consciousness for good, and in my opinion they are simply another rendering of the fundamental opposites of “True Poland” and the “Insincere or Inauthentic Poland.” The credibility of the opposites is based on defining the authentic within the life of a nation. In other words, demonstrating that the development of our country was dependent in nature and that the only genuine division

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3 The concept of post-post-communism was explained in my book *Politics of Time: Dynamics of Identity in Post-Communist Poland* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 143-148.

separates those who accepted and internalized the dependence from those who are able to return to the “veritable life of the nation,” neglected but still alive, becomes a political necessity. As a consequence, it breeds an opposition deeper than the one fostered by American neoconservatives; it is not about two cultures co-existing within one nation anymore, but about the co-existence of two distinct nations with separate values and goals. Needless to say, only one of them is genuine. Thus, to borrow a phrase from political theories of post-Marxism, a chain of equivalence appears, linking specific political attitudes with the concept of nation, an “empty signifier” that plays a crucial role in Polish discourse.

From this perspective, the issue of criteria used to evaluate the genuineness becomes crucial. One apparent method employed to establish the notion of an authentic nation is referencing tradition and a particular point in history followed by colonization efforts involving not only political, economic subordination but also cultural and mental subjugation. In other words, it is important to identify the onset of conquest. Proponents of this strategy associate it, at least in name, with postcolonial theory. In this case, conquest can be situated in the post-WW2 period as an effect of the imposition of a Soviet-style system. The experience supposedly poisoned the mentality of the Polish nation, leaving the interwar period as the last golden era of the genuine Polish state. Advocates of this concept do not find it inappropriate to simultaneously claim that the society failed to succumb to communist propaganda and that quite the opposite happened – its mental state survived nearly untouched, demoralization afflicting only a select few members of the upper echelons of the ruling class.

I would not like to enter into detailed arguments with these interpretations just yet, so I will just emphasize that there are at least two reasons why applying postcolonial theory to the post-WW2 period in Poland is not feasible. One is that Soviet Union’s domination was purely political and never translated into cultural subjugation. In classic postcolonial theory, the metropolis imposes its cultural categories on its subject and furthermore, the subjects themselves have to describe themselves using these categories; that was never the case in postwar Poland (and neither in Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and, to a degree, in the Baltic countries). The West remained the cultural metropolis, and it kept providing the categories we used to describe and interpret our own history and culture. Neither can I agree with the thesis about the breach in continuity, as I consider the opposite to be true: communism “froze” the traditional attitudes which later surfaced under various guises as “currents” or factions in the Party or even in the official discourse of the People’s Republic of Poland. Naturally, the discourse itself was limited by state censorship and the apparatus of coercion;

however, complete domination of Polish culture by a foreign one, a condition which I consider necessary for cultural colonization, did not occur as Soviet culture was simply “too weak.” In my book, I described in detail the failure of communists to create their “subjectification,” to borrow a phrase from Foucault. They were doomed to repeat a more or less depleted version of Christian or middle-class bourgeois ethics. Therefore, claiming that communism embedded a new morality within the populace or that negotiations between the victors and vanquished somehow changed the personality of the latter is simply a misunderstanding. Even if postcolonial theory is useful in explaining certain political decisions – for example, building statehood – its reach is limited to this particular sphere, without touching on what we might call its core, meaning the colonized peoples’ usage of categories provided by colonizing powers in the process of constructing their identity.<sup>4</sup>

In the other version of right-wing usage of postcolonial theory, the mythical genuineness of the nation is placed deeper in history – the opposition between the authentic Polish being and Western-imposed ideology is constructed herein. In this context, “sarmatism” appears as an expression of purely Polish authenticity corrupted by Western European thought. Needless to say, Polish genuineness is “better” than any other Western ideology, as Ewa Thompson brilliantly expounded:

Sarmatism implies a Thomist and Aristotelean perception of reality, according to which everyone knows good from evil, justice from injustice, etc. In Poland, and in Polish intellectual life (and, unfortunately, in the political life as well), we often witness displays of such touching naïveté. Poles believe that if we reveal behind-the-scenes scheming to the world, the masses will collectively rise up in disbelief shouting “For shame!” That obviously will never happen. And that is not all; Sarmatism places the human being in the center of attention. The people are of utmost importance, the state, the conquest of neighboring nations, and philosophical systems are all less so. That is why Sarmatism distinguishes Poles from their neighbors. It is the complete opposite of either Russianness or Germanness. In Russia, the state, the office, the institutions are paramount. As Fyodor Dostoyevsky put it, Russians cannot exist outside Russia. Germans, on the other hand, have a very theoretical relationship with reality, manifested in the continuous imposition of new philosophical systems. All of it is complemented by a policy of territorial conquest and colonialism, expressed in concepts such as *Drang nach Osten*. While it is true that after the Second World War that particular

4 Koczanowicz, *Politics of Time*, 89-102.

tendency was successfully checked, in recent years it has started to rear its head again.<sup>5</sup>

Such a perspective might improve the self-esteem of Poles, but at the cost of simplifying the history of Polish culture and its complex, as in all national cultures, relationships with neighboring countries. What distinguishes our country among others is this multifaceted and ambiguous character of our culture. From the influence of radical Arian reformation to Catholic mysticism, from fascination with Western thought to oriental influences, from expansion and cultural assimilation of the Eastern Borderlands to assimilation into German and Austrian culture in Silesia – these are all incredibly complex processes that cannot simply be reduced to a single label of “sarmatism.” Introducing and accepting such a label might be understood only when we consider it a symptom of Polish identity issues arising as a result of ongoing and increasing integration with Western Europe and globalization. In such a case, sarmatism might serve to ostensibly defend the most important elements of Polish culture and identity. This defense, however, quickly turns out to be superficial, as it protects not a complete identity but it was a narrowed-down version, reduced to slogans associated with right-wing political entities. The concept of sarmatism imparts a certain grandeur on these entities and introduces a conviction that we are dealing not with a consciously constructed narrative of culture, but the universal destiny of a nation. In Polish political culture, where the concept of nation is the dominant “empty signifier” organizing distinct discourses, such a definitive reference to history is very important to current politics, as it confers a “hegemonic” political advantage on proponents of specific options.<sup>6</sup>

The ideas of Polish republicanism are presented in the same vein, although without references to postcolonial theory. In this case we are once again dealing with an equally fictional concept of a “special destiny of Polish cultural and historical development,” which resulted in the creation of a particular type of democracy that combined national and religious values with public ones. In other words, liberal or any other democracy that does not respect these moral values is not compatible with the spirit of the nation. The supposed wellspring of these ideas is the ethos of the Nobles’ Democracy, which brings us back once again to the idea of sarmatism. A right-wing pundit once stated that positivist critics of Henryk Sienkiewicz’s literary output simply did not realize

5 E. Thompson, “Polski nacjonalizm jest niezwykle łagodny” [“Polish Nationalism is Unusually Mild”], *Dziennik*, 31 Mar. 2007.

6 Naturally, when using categories like “empty signifiers” or “hegemony” I am referencing the rudiments of the discursive concept of politics created by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

that he alone managed to capture that unique ethos of Polish democracy in his works. In my opinion, even Sienkiewicz would be surprised if he knew that Zagłoba was promoted to a beacon of democracy!

Aside from the abovementioned strategies of constructing the genuine character of a nation, one other option, previously just a blip on the radar, was buttressed after the Smolensk crash. Instead of referencing tradition it tries to utilize direct existential experiences, although it still makes use of specific correlates in history. The authentic existence of the nation was made synonymous with an individual's experience of his own being. Experiences that simultaneously existential and political, like the Smolensk tragedy, intensify political infighting driving them to extremes. Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz's widely commented upon poem "To Jarosław Kaczyński" is a classic example of melding existential themes with political agitation:

The motherland is in need again – that is: scoundrels  
 Are once again scheming and working their angles  
*Poland – they say – is truly right and good*  
*But should first apologize to those it hurt*  
*Poland – they say – is well and fine*  
*We'll civilize her by making her kneel on peas*  
 She should smarten up and change her ways  
 Because we can't live with these cantankerous *mohers*  
 And again there are two Polands – her two faces  
 Jakub Jasiński gets up from Mickiewicz's book  
 Poland did not ask him whether he was willing to die  
 And he knew – that he had no choice  
 Two Polands – the one about which the prophets knew  
 And that which the Tsar of the North takes into his arms  
 Two Polands – one wants to please the world  
 And the other – taken on the gun-carriage . . .  
 Wearing our blood like a royal standard  
 Our ancestor's most sacred hidden wound  
 They'll say it's pathos – but we need it  
 As it's a matter of our eternal fate  
 What shall you do? – ask us our ancestors  
 But there's nobody else to answer beside us  
 What divided us – it can't be put back together again  
 We cannot give away Poland into the hands of thieves  
 Who want to steal her from us and sell her to the world  
 O, Jarosław! You still owe something to your Brother!



Where are you all going to? What will happen to Poland?  
 Questions asked by the scorched corpse  
 The thing is, you need to do something about it  
 So hang in there, dear Jarosław

Milanówek, April 19, 2010

In the poem, contrasting the authentic nation with the inauthenticity of its existence is the source of dramatic, existential tension. The opposition quickly takes the form of: us/them, or even: the authentic existence of the nation – a nation deprived of its character. The category of authenticity again becomes crucial, but this time it is understood in a very peculiar way. In Rymkiewicz's poem, the "scoundrels" are defined by two distinctive features: they want to modernize Poland and they want to apologize for harm we have inflicted upon others, therefore, they are looking at their own nation from the perspective of the "Other." These features are linked with two others: foreign influence embodied by the Tsar of the North, and the Poland that "wants to please the world." This semiotic chain is based on the figure of otherness, the subordination of Poland to foreign goals and foreign values.

Therefore, it becomes necessary to contrast these tendencies with the "authenticity" of the existence of the nations and, probably, its incarnation within the state. This genuineness is founded on death, it merely guarantees the existence of the nation. When we look at death from this perspective, it is not something that happens for a reason, it becomes a self-contained value that decides the authenticity of a nation. Thus, politics is reduced to nothing more than genuineness which, in turn, is based on existence's openness towards death. The author of the poem, and a plethora of pundits after him, suggested that such an approach is a continuation of Polish Romantic traditions. There is a kernel of truth in the claim, as Polish Romantic tradition is capacious enough to effortlessly "serve" diverse ideological options - from leftist (Władysław Broniewski) to extreme right wing. However, I think that in this particular case the ideas espoused by German "conservative revolutionaries" like Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt, and most of all Martin Heidegger serve as the primary reference point. As recent studies show, the latter had no problem with applying his philosophical categories to nationalist political analyses. In his book about the German philosopher's unpublished seminars from 1933-1935, Emmanuel Faye writes:

Heidegger was fascinated with the relationship between man and the *Gemeinschaft*, his ability to fashion (*gestalten*) a community and to create a *polis*, a state. Thus it is not the state that is the condition of politics. The

state is possible only if it is based on the political being of man. Heidegger means to designate by this not the individual will of man but the power of the community that encompasses all. That totalizing – not to say totalitarian – conception of the political community is the foundation of his entire doctrine. He therefore rejects all vision of politics as a limited domain, alongside one's private life, economics, technology, and so on. For him, that conception leads to a degradation of the political, which he assimilates to the politician who knows how to play "low parliamentary tricks" (*parlamentarischen Kniffen*). It makes one wish that the criticism of Heidegger would focus on the term *Schlag*, the murderous blow of totalitarianism; when he uses the term it is, by contrast, to justify that violence and legitimize it by inscribing it within being itself.<sup>7</sup>

Without going into complex specifics of creating the ideologies behind revolutionary conservatism, I would merely like to state that in my opinion, their core category construes the nation to be an expression of the existence of individuals. Thus, the nation becomes neither a cultural nor an ethnic category, but an existential one. But how is the existential being of the nation realized if, at a political level, it is supposed to guarantee its authenticity contrasted with ostensible survival?

I think that using categories borrowed from biopolitics and the works of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Roberto Esposito might be helpful in answering the question above. A genuine nation, or maybe the genuine existence of a nation, is realized outside of any social conditions or, to use Agamben's categories, it exists in the form of "naked life." Categories used to describe a nation in such a state of existence are related exactly to the biological substrate itself: "massacre," "hanging," Poland "taken on the gun-carriage." Jakub Jasiński appears: "Poland did not ask him whether he was willing to die /And he knew – that it was not his place to choose." Naturally, the protagonist is strictly a figure of the naked life, his "empirical" experiences do not matter, and neither does his fascination with the French Revolution or Voltaire. He appears as an emanation of the nation which, in order to survive, has to be reduced or – as the poem's author intends – elevated to a purely biological existence. Thanks to that, a nation can operate outside all social ramifications, as a community that does not owe anything to foreign influence. Such a nation has to be immunized against similar outside influences, which forces it to reach its own limits and contradict itself. Roberto Esposito suggestively elaborated on the subject in his work

7 E. Faye, *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933-1935* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 116-117.

on biopolitics, pointing out that the bio-spiritual incorporation, specific to modernity, “was the final result of an immunitary syndrome so out of control that it not only destroys everything that it comes into contact with, but turns disastrously on its own body.”<sup>8</sup>

The abovementioned does not mean, however, that I think any sort of association with or reference to dependence and post-dependence discourse necessarily results in right-wing politics. However, radically changing, or even twisting the nature of the idea of postcolonialism might lead to such a turn of events. According to me, the theory itself is not about discovering the authentic existence of a nation, but rather, to put it briefly, about revealing dilemmas, negotiation strategies, and compromises that are formed during centuries of proximity between two cultures: the dominant one and the subordinate one. Needless to say, the problems are not Poland’s alone, they are a major concern in other countries of Eastern Europe; for Poles, however, the matter is a little more complex, given the fact that our country participated, to some extent, in shaping the culture that was considered dominant. In multiple instances, Polish intellectuals influenced the shape of what was becoming modern Europe. One paradigmatic example of such an intellectual would be Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, a thinker clearly incompatible with the “Aristotelean and Thomist sarmatism” framework, who laid the foundation for, to borrow a phrase from Charles Taylor, the “moral order,” that is the generally accepted social notions that have dominated Western intellectual life since the dawn of the modern era.

Poland, however, far from being the only state in Europe to do so, moved through various stages in its relationship with the western part of the continent. In his well-documented book about the invention of Eastern Europe by the French Enlightenment, Larry Wolff posited that although the region was weird enough to be constructed by the Occident, it turned out to be not as exotic as the Orient and that is why it remained suspended between the two cultural realms.<sup>9</sup> The East-West dichotomy is a relatively new invention that replaced the previous division of North-South that prevailed in Europe for centuries:

Just as the new centers of the Enlightenment superseded the old centers of the Renaissance, the old lands of barbarism and backwardness in the north were correspondingly displaced to the east. The Enlightenment had

8 R. Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 165.

9 L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

to invent Western Europe and Eastern Europe together, as complementary concepts, defining each other by opposition and adjacency.<sup>10</sup>

The invention of Eastern Europe is closely linked with other inventions: the Orient and Western Europe. Eastern Europe is distant enough to serve Western Europe as a mirror; not distant enough, however, as the Orient, a term which implied a complete reversal of civilization and barbarism, making Eastern Europe an entity “in between.”

Wolff also posits that the invention of Eastern Europe took place in six separate intellectual operations: entry, possession, imagining, mapping, addressing, and peopling. As I cannot give a concise summary of these rich passages from Wolff’s book here, I will try to provide a few examples instead. In his account of his journeys, Count de Segúr wrote that after entering Eastern Europe one experiences a feeling of strangeness and otherness as “one has left Europe entirely,” while the region seems to be an “inconceivable mélange of ancient centuries and modern centuries, of monarchical spirit and republican spirit, of feudal pride and equality, of poverty and riches.”<sup>11</sup> Eastern Europe is also a region where the wildest and strangest sexual fantasies are fulfilled, as are fantasies about boundless possession. One classic example are Casanova’s memoirs, wherein he elaborates on his sexual adventures in Poland and Russia. There is no place in them for sophisticated erotica; instead, the memoirs offer tales of buying women and their unconditional subjugation. The situation does not change even though a girl bought in Puławy runs away right after the purchase “like a thief.”<sup>12</sup> Possession was closely related to the image of Eastern Europe as a place pervaded by a strangeness that is hard to understand. In *The History of Charles XII*, which was the primary source of information about Poland in the 18th century, the country is described as a “part of ancient Sarmatia,” while the Sejm, the lower chamber of parliament, was described thusly: “sabre in hand, like the ancient Sarmatians (...) their ancestors, as little discipline, the same fury to attack.”<sup>13</sup> When Mozart went to Prague to attend the premiere of his *Marriage of Figaro*, he was struck by the strangeness of the culture and language; he wrote to a friend: “I am Punkitititi. – My wife is Schabla Pumfa. Hofer is Rozka Pumpa.”<sup>14</sup> The author

10 *ibid.*, 5.

11 *ibid.*, 19-20.

12 *ibid.*, 62.

13 *ibid.*, 91.

14 *ibid.*, 107.

of the quoted book mentions that travels through the alien land encouraged the imagination, which resulted in the famous composer effortlessly coming up with new identities for himself and his entourage. Wolff also points out that imagination helped to create imaginary maps of the region as well as beliefs and prejudices about the population inhabiting it. The desire to change Eastern Europe will be a natural consequence of its invention. The author writes about Parisian salon sending physiocrats to Poland, which for him naturally bears a resemblance to emissaries dispatched by the International Monetary Fund to post-communist countries of Eastern Europe. Especially interesting is the relationship between Stanisław August and his Parisian caretaker, Madame Geoffrin, the person responsible for establishing one of the most famous salons in the French capital. I will only bring up the final part of the story. After Stanisław August was elected king, he wrote to Mme Geoffrin: "*Ma chère maman*, will I then never see you again? Will I then enjoy no more of the sweetness, the wisdom of your opinions. For from there where you are, you can give me maxims, but advice is out of range."<sup>15</sup> Maybe Stanisław managed to precisely capture the dilemma of relations between these two parts of Europe: "maxims yes, advice no," clearly delineating the limits of allowed interference.

I do not find the fact that this particular books does not really function in Polish intellectual discussions all that unusual, although it would seem that it is a perfect fit with Polish right-wing postcolonialism, given that it touches on themes of ideological subjugation of Eastern Europe by the Western part of the continent as well as constructing Eastern Europe as immature in a civilizational and cultural sense and thus requiring constant supervision. Nevertheless, Larry Wolff depicts how complex such a relationship can become, especially when it does not allow unchallenged assignation of special roles to particular nations or unambiguous indication of who was the victim and who was the tormentor. The most important thing, however, is that Poland does not get a special place in history, it was not particularly persecuted, nor was it chosen to serve a higher purpose. It shared the fate of other peripheral countries of the region and in the eyes of the West it is practically indistinguishable from its neighbors. The mythology of Polish postcolonialism, on the other hand, is rife with familiar tropes regarding the special role and situation of our country. Distinguished historian Maciej Janowski quickly does away with the myth:

For 150 years Poles were fed with tales of their own grandeur, innocence, and – therein lies the rub – uniqueness. The latter is the source of a most

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, 244.

fundamental problem. Because Polish history is not unique; no country, regardless of its peculiarities, has a history that could be called unique. The fortunes of Poland are fairly typical for a normal peripheral country with an average, primitive economy, and a normal, unexceptional imitative culture, adopting foreign ideas rather than producing its own.<sup>16</sup>

It seems that only admitting that Polish history is normal and average might pave the way to an honest debate on the place of our country in European or even global culture. This is where, in my opinion, we might apply postcolonial theory, by way of using its emancipatory character, to Polish history. Postcolonial theory was not created to impart a rank system on nations, or to fulfill the conservatives' dreams of returning to a utopian, pre-conquest national unity. Its primary message revolves around emancipation, liberation from myths imposed by the colonizing powers and those that nations impose on themselves. In this sense, postcolonialism clearly references Karl Marx and Western emancipatory tradition associated with his thought. The idea was emphatically expressed by Dipesh Chakrabarty in the concluding chapters of his book: "As I hope is obvious from what has been said, provincializing Europe cannot ever be a project of shunning European thought. For at the end of European imperialism, European thought is a gift to us all. We can talk of provincializing it only in an anticolonial spirit of gratitude."<sup>17</sup> Nearly forgotten thinkers, like Ludwik Krzywicki or Kazimierz Kelles-Kraus could be considered Polish counterparts of scholars pioneering early precepts of postcolonialist theory, as both of them read and commented the works of Karl Marx to better understand the problems plaguing the nation. That group should also include Julian Brun, a generation younger than the two aforementioned thinkers, whose famous book *Stefana Żeromskiego tragedia pomyłek*, first published in the *Skamander* monthly, portrayed the tangle of national and social conditions and determinants that shaped the Polish nation in early 20th century.<sup>18</sup> None of these scholars ever referenced the mythology of sarmatism reputedly corrupted by the West in their works. On the contrary, they attempted to point

16 M. Janowski, "Polityka historyczna: między edukacją historyczną a propagandą" in *Pamięć i polityka historyczna*, ed. S.M. Nowinkowski, J. Pomorski, and R. Stobiecki (Łódź: IPN, 2008), 234.

17 D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 255.

18 First printed in *Skamander* no. 30 (1923), reprinted in: J. Brun, *Stefana Żeromskiego komedia pomyłek* (Warszawa: Spółdzielnia Księgarska "Książka," 1926). After the war, the latter edition was reprinted with a foreword by L. Kruczkowski and an introduction by J. Kurowicki (Warszawa: Alma Press, 1986).

out how hard it is for a modern nation to shun the spiritual and economic yoke of feudalism and emphasized the necessity of establishing a modern Polish nation through conflict that would merge national and social liberation. In other words, instead of a national policy based on resentment towards the West, it would be a policy of emancipation incorporating Western thought.

Maybe it is this theoretical avenue that Maria Janion opened up with *The Incredible Slavs*; in the book, she formulates a program whose goal is to open Polish culture up to diverse outside influences and thus radically transform the nation. In the conclusion, the author writes:

Poland is a paltry and flat monolith, mostly nationalist and Catholic. That is why it is so tiresome to its citizens, who want nothing more than to leave it for Europe, understood as a space, where culture is unbound. We might even put up with the lack of southern sun if only our culture was more diverse, colorful, and unshackled from colonial and postcolonial obsessions.<sup>19</sup>

Janion's position is close to the intentions of the pioneers of postcolonial theory. It is supposed to serve as an instrument of emancipation that will purge the culture of the oppressed of its internal limitations that were imposed on it by the oppressors. Applying postcolonial theory to the situation of our country might have a reinvigorating effect; it would allow us to look at the limitations and idiosyncrasies inscribed within our culture from a new perspective. Overcoming cultural limitations would open up a new political space, free from fears of subjugation and losing identity.

Given my sympathy for this sort of emancipatory therapy for culture and despite the doubts about right-wing postcolonialism I might harbor, I cannot help but wonder whether we humanists are falling prey to a host of illusions in our discussions. Illusions that we might call culturological. We engage in discussions and debates, collectively assuming the existence of continuity of culture and its traces; a continuity that transcends economic, political, and social changes. I do not think, however, that that sort of assumption is in any way legitimate. Furthermore, it might even be dangerous: trigger illusions of continuity where there is none, and create artifacts that have a surprising propensity to become political facts. If the humanities are to be a responsible and accountable field of study, they will have to confront that illusion sooner or later.

*Translation: Jan Szelągiewicz*

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19 M. Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna [The Incredible Slavs]* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006), 330.