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# **Contemporary Historical Discourse on Polish Communism in a Narratological Perspective**

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**C**ommunism, its history and meaning, has been the subject of numerous works that fill whole libraries, and it is impossible to mention them all within the confines of a single journal article. Seminal and at the same time divisive works on Polish communism have been written by Włodzimierz Borodziej, Andrzej Friszke, Andrzej Garlicki, Jerzy Eisler, Krystyna Kersten, Zbigniew Landau, Adam Leszczyński, Paweł Machcewicz, Mirosława Marody, Piotr Madajczyk, Piotr Osęka, Andrzej Paczkowski, Marcin Kula, Paweł Wieczorkiewicz, Marcin Zaremba, Jan Żaryn and many others. Such works seem to grow and proliferate at a pace horrifying to those who would like to keep up with the current state of affairs or at least read the basic books on the subject. There has also been a noticeable rise in the publication of works which do not fit the traditional academic model addressed to a small group of professional readers. Oftentimes they are authored by academics, but they are written with the mass market audience in mind, and as such they elicit a huge societal response. These are works which we can situate in-between history and cultural or historical anthropology,<sup>1</sup> as well as biographies

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<sup>1</sup> It is enough to recall the most recent publication success: Izabela Meyza and Witold Szabłowski, *Nasz mały PRL: pół roku w M-3*

and memoirs.<sup>2</sup> There is also a noticeably growing appreciation of interesting works in the field of social history.<sup>3</sup>

Out of necessity, I will draw upon only a small fragment from this vast material. I will focus on works written from a certain temporal distance from the 1989 political transition, that is works that were created with the awareness that communism as a phenomenon already belongs to a past era, and that it is to be spoken of in the past tense. These texts are also equally distant from the present and, in a way, already external to the most prominent debates and conflicts of recent times, although they sometimes frame their boundaries. I also would like to view them from a substantive temporal perspective (granted by a decade). To meet this criterion I will refer to works written around the year 2000 (give or take a few years) or published within that timeframe. At the time, the way of talking and thinking about communism was already set, and today we have a chance to view and analyze it from a distance. The majority of chosen texts share an essayistic, casual character, and do not yield easily to the rigor of academic form, but for this very reason they divulge the usually hidden assumptions and preconceptions – the social universe – that rule academic discourse from beyond the scenes, working “behind the back” of neutral discourse. What is more, these works are clearly addressed to the wider public, to the “reading crowd” – the intelligentsia, not only to an elite professional circle, as their ambition is to exert a much bigger impact. A complimentary criterion for selecting texts was the deliberate reference to the term “communism” that is a self-aware and considerate attitude to that category, a comprehension of its semantical and historical fluidity. Communism can be, at the same time, conceived by the authors as an abstract form of government, as particular historical regimes, or simply as the period between 1944 and 1989 in Poland. For obvious reasons I will concentrate on the Polish context, Polish history and Polish historiography.

I will reference essayistic texts on communism authored by renowned academic historians, that is by a few particular writers to be exact: Mirosława

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z trwałą, wężami i maluchem (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2012). It is also worth keeping in mind the works of Małgorzata Szpakowska, *Chcieć i mieć: samowiedza obyczajowa w Polsce czasu przemian* (Warszawa: W.A.B., 2003); Justyna Jaworska, *Cywilizacja „Przekroju”: misja obyczajowa w magazynie ilustrowanym* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa UW, 2008), and others.

2 See Andrzej Paczkowski, *Trzy twarze Józefa Świathy: przyczynek do historii komunizmu w Polsce* (Warszawa: Prószyński Media, 2009), Anna Sobór-Świdorska, *Jakub Berman: biografia komunisty* (Warszawa: IPN, 2009).

3 See Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga: Polska 1944-1949. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2012).

Marody,<sup>4</sup> Andrzej Friszke,<sup>5</sup> Marcin Kula<sup>6</sup> and Marcin Zaremba.<sup>7</sup> All of them are historians enjoying a substantial and well-deserved admiration, although this selection can be questioned, maybe not without merit, and be considered unsatisfactory. This is certainly not a representative sample that would reveal the “communist” historical field in its completeness, and tell a definite tale of Polish communism. On the contrary, the chosen examples all belong to the mainstream and share a common strategy: they attempt to keep due distance to their subject and to perform what could be called positivist historiography.

I would like to stress that in this text I do not reconstruct the assertions made by those historians, I do not dispute their theses, and I do not criticize their workshop or methodologies. I do not even reiterate their views on communism. As a matter of fact, the authors themselves play only a secondary role in these investigations, as my primary goal is the analysis of discursive phenomena, certain particular patterns of thought, hidden images and pre-conceptions, that can be discerned in the texts of these distinguished luminaries. I am well-aware that the resulting image will certainly be incomplete, fragmented, and imperfect, nevertheless it reveals certain crucial traits of the discourse on communism. I ask questions that are standard in literary history: what kind of narrative templates and rhetorical means are used; what metaphors, clichés, recurrent gestures and symbols are employed. I ask how the protagonists (the historical actors of a historical narrative) are construed. I refer to the kind of narratology that can be traced to Roland Barthes and I consider discourse to be the power of presupposition that pulls the strings, obscured from view by the wall of assertion.

Once more I would like to underscore that my opinions do not lay claim to correctness, or are an attempt to lecture anyone. Neither do they enrich the historical methodology. I do not engage in any normative discourse, delineate boundaries, restrict what can and cannot be done in historiography, or define the proper description of the past. I do not issue recommendations and,

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4 Mirosława Marody, „Przemiany postaw ideologicznych i przystosowanie w systemie komunistycznym,” in *Komunizm: ideologia, system, ludzie*, ed. Tomasz Szarota (Warszawa: Neriton, 2001).

5 Andrzej Friszke, „Przystosowanie i opór. Rozważania nad postawami społecznymi 1956-1970,” in *Komunizm: ideologia, system, ludzie*.

6 Marcin Kula, *Komunizm i po komunizmie* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio, 2006) (most articles significantly predate the publishing of the book itself).

7 Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm: nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio, 2001), also by the same author: „Komunizm jako system mobilizacyjny. Casus Polski,” in *Komunizm: ideologia, system, ludzie*.

what is crucial, I do not create any “true history.” If I sometimes do suggest, with hope of shining some comparative light, different possible templates for constructing the narrative or historical actors, I do so with the sole aim of revealing other variants, of introducing alternatives, which do not assert the rights of a superior historical truth.

### Creating Heroes

Nearly every narrative is built around heroes; the historical narrative is no exception. The identification of historical actors is in itself a meaningful act and one that often determines the ensuing narrative. It is enough to recall ancient *res gestae* (although it is hard to consider them a part of academic historiography, they undoubtedly are a genre of the historical narrative) wherein mighty and valiant knights accomplished eternal and glorious quests, to be praised on the pages of history for ages to come. For comparison one can recall the compound subject described by Bronisław Geremek in *The World of The Beggar's Opera*,<sup>8</sup> an entity with blurred individual traits (the nameless or pseudonymous paupers, beggars, and vagrants), that tales its tale which, as we would now say, subverts the dominant historical narrative. Geremek's work does not focus on the key players – kings and emperors – as ordinary political history would. It reveals a whole other level of historical subjectivity and a whole other level of historical *bios*. What is the relation between subjectivity and historical agency, can this agency be ascribed only to “lead” characters, or to groups and communities, and which of those should be considered as historical – such issues fall beyond the scope of this work. Nevertheless, it is worth keeping in mind the kind of historical narrative introduced by Hegel and later clarified by Marx, where social relations (Hegel and Marx) and relations of production (Marx) are considered the prime mover of history and culture, and the so-called great historical figures are considered performers, entering the stage to merely play their parts. The only viable candidate for being the subject of history that is left is the new rising class – previously the bourgeoisie, then the proletariat – although even its agency seems limited, as it rather is merely a facilitator of change, a vehicle of history. According to some interpretations this change can be viewed as an idea of history without a subject (in the traditional sense) or a construct where the subject of history is formed by the whole of humanity. Of course, this does not entail the end of historical narrative or the irrelevance of historical personas, but our understanding of them changes significantly.

8 Bronisław Geremek, *Świat „opery żebraczy”: obraz włóczęgów i nędzarzy w literaturach europejskich XV-XVII wieku* (Warszawa: PIW, 1989).

Each of the aforementioned examples is introduced with the purpose of exposing the relativity of the historical subject's structure, encouraging the reconsideration of "what" or "who" it is and what is its makeup, but most of all how it relates to the modes of historical narratives. What is more, individuation or creation of historical characters does not seem to be the only choice laden with meaning. Their interpretation – as the source of historical processes, that is not merely in the context of their agency, but also in light of ethical categories, such as freedom, responsibility for the future, working for the greater good, or siding with evil, etc. – is of equal importance. This entanglement in the ethical field that is so commonplace in historical discourse – which would startle hardline positivists, who meticulously differentiate (historical) facts from values – is easily discernible as it obscures, first of all, its relativistic nature by usurping the right of universality in its judgements<sup>9</sup> and, moreover, by its indirect manifestation as a hidden presupposition or an allusive utterance delivered within seemingly neutral statements, or as a way of structuring and describing the area of potentiality. The aforementioned ethical dimension does not exhaust all of the possibilities associated with the construction of historical subjects; a parallel phenomenon is found in the everlasting presence of not only hindsight granted by a contemporary point of view that determines the terms of description, but also in the societal facets of the narrative, through its involvement in contemporary social and political disputes<sup>10</sup> and socio-cultural consequences, to which the past is hostage.

The story of the period from 1944 to 1989 (aside from all the nuances and multiplicity of perspectives) depicts two protagonists: the government, in its broader sense formed by the whole *nomenklatura*, and the society (or, otherwise, the government and the nation). This dualism is one of the most important among the numerous, seemingly innocent, decisions that shape the historical narrative. It is plainly clear that the notions of nation and society are fundamentally different, or at least should be, and that they refer to distinct narratives – society to the sociological narrative, and nation to the nationalistic narrative. Unfortunately, in many of the contemporary works of Polish historians, too little value is given to this seemingly fundamental distinction and as a result the aforementioned notions seamlessly turn into the other. Sometimes the category "society" does not appear at all; sometimes it occurs interchangeably with "nation"; in some cases it simply denotes the nation. Instead of "nation" the broad category "Poles" may be also used; it sits

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9 The bluntness of this judgement and its indisputability, fallacious if truth be told, are reminiscent of Bourdieu's symbolic violence.

10 Not necessarily in its immediate aspects, sometimes it simply equals adopting a certain socio-political worldview such as liberalism or Catholicism.

somewhere between the sociological and the nationalistic perspectives, with a slight bend towards the latter. Fortunately some works consequently adhere to the aforementioned distinction, but they are in the minority.<sup>11</sup>

Actors other than the society (nation) and government feature only sporadically, or otherwise they are variants of the basic subjects, as the narrative accommodates only a clear-cut, purely binary relation. And this is not due to the lack of other suitable *dramatis personae* – the Catholic Church comes to mind as a possible third actor. It is not that the Church is neglected,<sup>12</sup> on the contrary, but it is treated as a partial entity, situated within the space of “society,” and influenced by the same conditions and necessities as the rest of the social body (only to a higher degree), and exhibiting similar aspirations and needs. The Church is sometimes cast as a representation of society,<sup>13</sup> though, as a matter of fact, from a sociological perspective it would be hard to defend such a proposition. As it would be hard to defend the claim that it shared the same circumstances, experience, principles, aims and activities with the rest of society.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, only society and power are left in the game. It is noteworthy that these two entities are in most cases strictly separate, there is no common ground between society and power, no crossing between their boundaries,

11 Mirosława Marody's works may serve as an example.

12 I do not claim that the issue of the Catholic Church is overlooked or marginalized in contemporary historical research. On the contrary, there are multiple works elucidating the role played by the Catholic Church, its hierarchies and institutions, in Poland.

13 See Jan Żaryn, „Postawy duchowieństwa katolickiego wobec władzy państwowej w latach 1944-1956. Problemy metodologiczne,” in *Komunizm: ideologia, system, ludzie*, 289-302.

14 In this case, it does not make sense to talk either about a structural homology of historical experience, historical goals and strategies, or about conferring of rights, therefore there can be no real representation. The circumstances of the Church as an institution are fundamentally different from the circumstances of the majority of other groups of Polish society, in the timespan between 1944 and 1989. The aforementioned representation is therefore metaphorical in nature, it plays out in the sphere of contemporary imagination, where the Catholic Church of the period ceases to be a historical institution with its own set of rules and goals; one that is otherwise polyphonic and multilayered; and becomes a clear image, an icon of goodness and freedom, which heroically or wisely resists the onslaught of an external opposing force, therefore becoming a stand-in for the whole society. This metonymy of history (*pars pro toto*) occurs in a twofold sense: first, there is evident handpicking of certain aspects and traits from the history of the institution; secondly the history of the church replaces the history of the whole society. This kind of narrative introduces the “metaphoric self” into the story of heroic resistance against an external enemy that was upheld by the “noblest part of society.”

and no intermediate links. The binary structure of the field determines the contradictory relation between the two subjects and significantly influences the story of the past by endowing it with a characteristic trait of inevitable antagonism. This view comes in direct conflict with detailed research. Let us consider, however briefly, certain aspects of the field. Were we to take a closer look at the societal “background” of top party leaders (Bolesław Bierut, Hilary Minc, Władysław Gomułka), their friends, family, associates, their history and upbringing, we would find that the assertion of the isolation of power is plainly false. It is also worth examining the characteristic phenomenon of identification with “our man in power” (as exemplified by Edward Gierek and his popularity in Silesia, especially at the onset of his career); to reflect on the societal environment of councilors, MP’s, party secretaries at the local level, and the families of party members and their social and neighborly relations. The phenomenon of double membership in the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR) and Solidarity (it is estimated by historians to be around one million individuals) would also help explain a lot about the period. The image that would surface from such research would be hard to categorize as depicting a grand rupture between the “power” (which, based on the historical narrative alone, could be considered to have come from outer space, or at least to have appeared *deus ex machina*) and “society,” as a metaphysical hiatus, which separates two distinct personas. Even the sole enumeration of the aforementioned issues reveals to us a subsequent complication in the dualistic construct of the narrative. If the “power” and “society” are supposed to be the heroes of history we must consider who these two subjects are exactly. In short, we must ponder the questions: power, that is who? Society, that is who?

The majority of referenced works portray the two entities (power and society) as monolithic figures, their voices become homophonic and purified. It is worth considering who exactly falls into the “power” category? Only members of the political bureau? General or First Secretaries? Or, all secretaries? All members of the Communist Party? Or, more broadly still, all those holding public office in Poland? These are not purely rhetorical questions. With each answer the notion of “power” not only changes its scope, but also its content. Each time we construct a different subject, with distinct social relations, with a different structure of agency, accountability, alienation, or social recognition, we enter a new level of political *bios* and it is a different historiography that we practice.<sup>15</sup> It would be trivial to reiterate that of which historians are well aware of, namely that “power” also underwent a substantial change in time,

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<sup>15</sup> Either political history or social history.



and that it was perceived differently in 1946 than it was in October 1956, and that 1981 brought on further change.

Two heroes – power and society – therefore meet eye to eye. Monolithic, unambiguous, entangled in a dialectical embrace, depicted “but as two gods, each equal on his sun”. Power controls the game, it makes the crucial moves. Society reacts, answers, conforms, and resists. But it must be noted that power finds itself in an ambiguous state: on the one hand it is the active force which initiates events, but on the other its agency is limited, in a way evident to all writers, by external geopolitical structures, namely, the Yalta Agreements and subservience to the Soviet Union.

Therefore, power does not attain the status of a true actor of history, what entails interesting ramifications not only in the case of the notion of agency, but also accountability. Consequently, even with the assertion of limited agency, the hero “power” is made accountable and, when brought before the contemporary tribunal, is always found guilty. Categories such as guilt, expiation, restitution, atonement, and punishment became devices organizing the “communist” field of discourse. They have monopolized and shaped the canon of cultural practice and framed the discourse of the past as collective traumatic memory. It seems interesting that historians almost never (aside from the discussions centering on the introduction of the martial law in Poland in 1981) seem to bring up the question of whether the power took responsibility upon itself, did it act as an actor making deliberate decisions and was it aware of their social consequences – that is rationally, intentionally and morally. Rather it is granted only limited instrumental rationality that comes down to securing its own replication or, otherwise, the reproduction of its external pattern.<sup>16</sup>

This model of representation of the lead actor in the historic narrative is present in the works of all aforementioned authors. Even more telling is the silent identification of power with its top tier functionaries, which means that a whole field of social relations and interactions is beyond the main focus of historical research. And although it becomes a topic of interest for anthropologists,<sup>17</sup> it disappears from the field of view of academic historians.

16 Which all in all does not preclude a devilish wit. An actor's image must not be coherent.

17 I have mentioned these ever more numerous and interesting works earlier. It is nevertheless worth considering the grave consequences resulting from the methodology of this rather young, in the Polish context, discipline. Despite the numerous benefits of anthropological research, such as comprehensive and hermeneutical approaches to the subject, despite the premise that culture is a whole, and so on, it is sometimes evident that the authors seem to treat the world at the center of their research as in some respect oriental. They search for the exotic, the unusual, and even for barbarity and difference,

There is less and less space for a historiography that would take on the task of representing the whole spectrum of social issues, interrelations, dependencies, micro- and macro-powers – reality in all its complexity. There is an increasingly clear dominance of the kind of political history that focuses on the actions of party leaders, on an analysis of the institution of power, its acts and gestures, as well as documents, relations with the Soviet Union, and so forth. The analysis of power, although highly incomplete, dominates the whole field, it rearranges history into a sequence of subsequent notifications and directives. Therefore a unified political history overwhelms the field of potentiality of social history.

It is time to shift attention to the second hero of contemporary history, that is society. This persona seems to be even more interesting. Its field of activity is set by historians between two, not so distant, points. The authors surprisingly agree in this case on a binary mode of social reaction, namely adaptation and resistance.<sup>18</sup> Both these attitudes, it is clear, belong in truth to a common field. That is, as I have mentioned, they introduce a relation of strict antagonism between the two heroes, of a fight or a struggle that presupposes either submission to the historical necessity, or an active and noble resistance against external violence. The changing social and political circumstances in the nineteen-fifties have, according to Andrzej Friszke:

Created ground for both stances of adaptation and resistance. Adaptation – conformism even – as such attitudes were rewarded and made career easier. Resistance as the system of orders, prohibitions, and control has deeply interfered with the sense of truth, justice, and the realization of various needs. [...] Virtually every individual experienced moments when choice had to be made: succumb to expectations contrary to the inner sense of righteousness or resist.<sup>19</sup>

Both attitudes are highly meaningful: on the one side we have conformism, careerism, lackeyism, and pursuit of rewards; on the other we have truth, righteousness, justice, and morality. There is no conceivable symmetry between the two. One equals surrendering to external influence and evil, the other means independence and staying true to values. However popular this

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which not only and not always characterize the described area, but are rather the result of the writers' own gaze and the current strong cultural tendency to change the not so distant past into a sequence of icons and "cult" (though at the same time "lame") objects.

18 See especially the aforementioned work of Andrzej Friszke "Przystosowanie i opór."

19 Friszke, "Przystosowanie i opór," 141.

view might seem among Polish historians, it deserves critical reexamination: is it not possible for “resistance” to arise from complacency to external pressures or from the influence of social and historical conventions? Does “finding oneself” in the “new reality” really amount to a loss of social decency, a denial of truth and justice? What does “adaptation” in truth really mean? Does it encompass all that which does not fall under the category “resistance”? What actions and attitudes can be characterized this way? Daily shopping? Benefiting from theater tickets provided by the workplace? Having coffee in a coffeehouse? Working in a factory? Being the Dean of the History Department at the University of Warsaw or The Catholic University of Lublin? Stating these basic and, it would seem, self-evident questions shows that the space between resistance and adaptation seems to be very narrow, the division between them problematic, and the categories themselves uncertain. Additionally, this structure does not seem to have the capacity to describe even partly the richness of life during the 1944-1989 period. This is a meaningful “trimming”; the narrative places the actor “society” in a heroic convention, in which only three roles are available: there is a place only for the power, the heroes, and the adjusted (in an alternative narrative: traitors).

Through such means contemporary historiography creates a narrative macrostructure, a meta-narrative of treason and fidelity that is a precondition, an existential and axiological presupposition, which should be strictly observed by the story of communism, the PRL, and the years 1944-1989. It is noteworthy that a third, most obvious, possibility is obscured by “resistance” and “adaptation,” that is the path of those who in this way or another accepted the power at least for some time. In the general picture of society, previously highlighted, against common sense and numerous detailed research, there is no place for commitment. Such a stance is barred from the set of feasible responses.<sup>20</sup> The reasons for this decision seem to be straightforward. This element unsettles the clear agonistic image of the two completely separate subjects: the absolutely external power and the society, whose morally superior part found itself in resistance (the rest has fallen into a more or less degrading collaboration). Yet it would seem that an understanding of what such commitment or support was, what it entailed, and how it manifested, should in itself prove interesting from the point of view of historical research.

It is symptomatic, in fact, that the stance of commitment has already been partly utilized by the public discourse. It is not difficult to recreate some of the narrative models that are deemed plausible and to point out a few not

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<sup>20</sup> The committed, or accepting, cannot appear without “translation.” They must be transposed onto other categories. In the aforementioned passage from Andrzej Friszke’s work, they appear as careerists.

incompatible variants: a seduction by miasmas and mirages (the tale of “joining a false religion”); craving for power and retaliation on the previous political order by the “people from nowhere” – those with low social and cultural capital (the tale “mob in power”); or finally the opportunistic, independent of the circumstances, instrumental need of making a career and of an unlimited consumption of material and symbolic goods of dubious worth (“careerists in power”, alternatively “traitors at the table”). The narrative of commitment of members of “the society” (but also of “the power”) through seduction (occurring in an erotic or religious manner) oftentimes takes on the form of ‘confessions after the fact’ of a remorseful former adherent, who through his whole later life attempts to right the wrongs he has done.<sup>21</sup> The public discourse has therefore appropriated those narrative models which fictionalize the experience of commitment in a specific way, by not only structuring them in light of the well-known finale, which is the political change after 1989 (if they lost, they cannot be right), but also by placing them in a narrative endowed with an extreme moral dimension (at the limits of inferiority, pure negativity), wherein the field is divided into two fundamental sides – power and society, and the social side has its heroes and traitors. Such a division is inevitable, if we consider the heroic model to be the supreme and practically sole narrative archetype.

The difficulty caused by this format arises not only from the fact that it seems skewed, but most of all from the fact that this archetype does not leave room for an accurate description. It is worth taking the opinion of Mirosława Marody under consideration. She has noticed the vagueness of attitudes and the category of commitment itself, and has shown that a critical reexamination of the criteria of that commitment ought to be undertaken. She has also stressed that from the year 1958 through most of PRL's history, at least until the 1980s, the “ideological principles of the system were accepted, but its institutions were rejected.”<sup>22</sup> This assertion seems interesting not only for its immediate message, but equally so for its incitement to a more nuanced reimagining of commitment or acceptance, it therefore opens the question of

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21 See Maria Hirszowicz, *Pułapki zaangażowania: intelektualści w służbie komunizmu* (Warszawa: Scholar, 2001).

22 Marody, “Przemiany postaw ideologicznych,” 131. Also compare “similarities between social attitudes at the start and the end of PRL tempted to put forward a thesis about a fundamental rejection of the communist system by Polish society. Although this temptation is still strong, it should not be acted upon. It is not the case that the attitude of Polish society towards the communist regime, and especially towards the ideology it preached, as well as the patterns of behavior within the system, have remained stable through the 45 year period” (Marody, „Przemiany postaw ideologicznych,” 128-129).

what gained approval (and sometimes even acclaim), whose approval, and in what kind of circumstances, what was the nature of that consent, and what ideas and social stakes lay at its foundations.<sup>23</sup>

When we talk about society it would be prudent to ask, who are we really talking about, and to reflect upon the principle of representation. Who represents society? Analysis of generalized social responses sometimes overshadows the trivial fact that the postwar society was strongly divided (with significant divisions based on social class criterions) and this alone would make it impossible to expect a unified response towards, let us say, the PKWN Manifesto [The Manifesto of the Polish Committee of National Liberation]. Common sense tells us to expect a different response from Countess Potocka than from a pauper from Zawidz. And the new self-made intelligentsia, or middle class, had still a different (and one would expect complicated) attitude towards it. Is it possible to find a single factor that all these cases have in common, and should it even be attempted? Would clarifying them really be an easy task and would that not once again equal a gross oversimplification? Does the idea of a homogenous society founded on the image of “common man” not once again overshadow the conflict, and oftentimes the violence, also of the symbolic kind, that took place not only at the intersection of power and society, but also plagued exactly that which we call society itself? Constructing the image of a homogenous historical actor entails an erasure of the social, cultural, and class conflicts that inevitably occurred within a society which quite violently changed its hierarchical and traditional structure.

Is it then worth paying attention to the problem of who is considered by historians to be the lawful representative of society. Who is the actant of history? I have already mentioned that those who accepted the new social order (either in its entirety or only its ideology, or parts of it) are not taken into consideration, as they are considered a minority. Mirosława Marody writes in the excellent, aforementioned study: “a uniformity of attitudes and behaviors [towards communism] was characteristic of only small groups of individuals – on the one hand those who engaged in armed resistance against the imposed regime and the emerging institutions of the communist state, and on the other hand those who identified with the new Polish order and played an active role in its creation. For the greater part of Polish society at the time accepting the divide between the symbolic sphere [attitude towards the communist ideology– K. C.] and the sphere of action was a price (higher or

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23 The question of consent is associated with the question of legitimization. I will return to it in subsequent section of this article.

lower) that had to be paid for the opportunity to participate in the process of rebuilding the country, or even recreating a life, after the destruction of war.”<sup>24</sup>

The author, following Krystyna Kersten, distinguishes the ideological (or symbolic) level and the sphere of practice, directing attention to the various spheres of engagement or rejection; these spheres could probably be expanded even further. Marody emphasizes the transformations of ideological attitudes in time and refers to cyclical research conducted among the Warsaw students. In 1958, respondents answered the question: “would you like the world to evolve towards some kind of socialism” (a general endorsement of the system’s principles) with a “strongly agree” at 24%, and “agree” at 44%; in 1978, it was 21% and 45% respectively; only in 1983 the answers shifted to 8% and 34% respectively.<sup>25</sup> Such a numerous group can hardly be considered marginal, contrary to what the author claims, even if it was just a superficial acceptance of an unspecified idea of social justice, which in itself did not preclude resistance to such institutions as censorship or the Security Service [Służba Bezpieczeństwa]. This kind of attitude or rather attitudes does not destroy the fundamental image of society, which remained in ideological resistance against communism and chose compromise with power for the sake of everyday convenience. What stands out is that such a society is always reactive; it is not the subject of any action and even the postwar rebuilding process is socially depersonalized: it is an external process that one can join, but “there is a price to be paid” for that.

### Emplotments

The creation of the actors of history determines the narrative and, conversely, the choice of narrative affects the formation of heroes. I consider emplotments (or narrative patterns)<sup>26</sup> to be meaningful chains of events, formed into basic macrostructures in such a way that they organize various narrative elements (facts), endow them with a specific meaning, and determine the rhetorical and interpretative force of historical writing. Independent of its truth value, each story is a modeling of complicated historical matter at its most basic level through the selection and choice of relevant facts, but even more so through their reconfiguration and endowing them with a universal meaning.

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24 Marody, „Przemiany postaw ideologicznych,” 127.

25 Ibid., 130.

26 See Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” and “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” in *The History and Narrative Reader*, ed. Geoffrey Roberts (London: Routledge, 2001).

The story of two protagonists, that is about power and society, that can be inferred from contemporary historical texts on communism, is constructed on the basis of certain generic beliefs, or plot types. The most significant of them is the aforementioned heroic type of narrative, that is the story of society's heroic resistance to power.

One of its variants is the narrative of treason, very popular in public discourse, which is simply determined by a connection to the "communist system". A story about the society of heroic resistance must arrange the field in such a way that it casts the parts of heroes and traitors and becomes associated with a certain kind of moral discourse (popular mostly during the eighties, derived from personalism and present until this day in conservative narratives), namely the discourse of values (always in the plural, always framed in broad terms and without details), which segregates the participants of past, and even current, events into those who were faithful to values (whatever this may mean, it certainly means that they stood against the new social, political, and cultural order named as communist) and those who betrayed these "fundamental values." Depending on the type of narrative, the betrayed righteous – who stand against the wicked – will be made up of either a handful or most of society (in such conceived community there is a place for the repentant).<sup>27</sup>

The voice of professional historiography sometimes lends credibility to this kind of story, although when it does it still rarely hits the mark with the hard supporters of the treason narrative. The betrayal metanarrative is sometimes contrasted by historians, as I have previously mentioned, with the macrostructure "little man" that is a vision in which the majority does not take up a fight against the regime, but neither does it contribute to the development of the "political system", and instead tries to find its place within the unaccommodating, imposed reality. Speaking plainly: the people made the best of what they had, somehow managed to make ends meet, but in all this they knew what they knew. This type of narrative, moderate, suggestive, and convincing, obscures, as I have mentioned, the complexity of attitudes exhibited by the whole society, its inner polarization and the multilayered, intricate divisions within it. At the same time, it conceals from view the fact that the criteria of this "complacency" or acceptance were highly diverse. An obvious result of this process is a reduction of any intermediate and hybrid forms, but primarily it results in a denial of representation to a significant part

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<sup>27</sup> It is symptomatic that the criteria of „struggle“ mostly remain unclear, for some it will be the deeds of the "cursed soldiers," for others wearing a resistor in the 1980s, for others it would be stealing toilet paper from the workplace or listening to Radio Luxembourg. Each time the group of traitors and representatives of the righteous nation rearrange radically.

of society (the adherents), or conversely, granting the right to represent the whole of society to its specific part.

For historians the metanarrative of social resistance seems obvious, therefore even if they dismiss the story of treason and decay, they still remain within the framework of heroic narration, disregarding out of hand other conceptualizations and removing from sight facts and tendencies they are well aware of:

Today nobody disputes the fact, that the political model, which for forty-five years constituted the institutional framework of social interactions in Poland, was a foreign model and that it was imposed by force. Nevertheless, [...] it enjoyed the backing of a large proportion of Polish society, for whom it became a gateway to social and cultural advancement.<sup>28</sup>

This is a stable model and nobody disturbs the *status quo*, nobody questions it, and although everyone is aware of that “nevertheless” it is not taken under consideration in the big picture of that era.

The theme of power as a foreign element seems to be particularly interesting in historical narratives. It is clear that the postwar relations and international accords, and most of all the Soviet Union have determined the introduction of the system that named itself “People’s democracy” in Poland. The demarcation of global spheres of influence was of utmost importance in the whole process of political transition. But all of this does not necessitate that the power was foreign and does not unequivocally dictate the attitude of citizens towards the new order (and we cannot speak of rejection in every case). What is more, most Polish historians do not share the view which considers the time between 1944 and 1989 as a time when Poland was under occupation by communist or soviet power, and consider it to be a gross oversimplification.<sup>29</sup> Still within their texts there is a detectable presupposition, or a basic idea, of a power that is external in its relation to society (completely,

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28 Marody, „Przemiany postaw ideologicznych,” 137.

29 Nonetheless this is an image that often returns in the public discourse, that of historians included. It received a novel formulation in Polish postcolonial research, which treats Poland in the years 1944–1989 directly as a space of colonial, cultural, and political domination of Russia (and not necessarily The Soviet Union), cf. the works of Ewa Thompson. Oftentimes these narratives are inherently contradictory, they speak of cultural and intellectual dominance of Russians and at the same time exhibit a conviction of the cultural, social, and political superiority of Polish society. What is interesting is that this inconsistency does not diminish the rhetorical force of nationalistic or anticommunist discourse.



and from the start to the finish), remaining in a state of permanent *agon* with it, always opposed and detested, foreign, subservient, influenced from the outside by the emissaries (or cronies, in the popular discourse) of the Russian empire or soviet communism. At the heart of it, this image lays a precondition to the occupation hypothesis. Certainly, the statements of mainstream professionals are not delivered in such a straightforward and frank manner, nevertheless they still manage to capture the imagination. For example, in professor Kula's texts we can often find plotments which recasts the seizing and exercise of power in Poland as basically an operation carried out by foreign "paratroopers."<sup>30</sup> The author adopts this metanarrative and justifies the reasons, or the grounds, for such feelings and conceptions: communism did not "take root" in Poland because firstly, before the war there were no good socio-economic grounds for communism in Poland ("foreign capital was not an issue"), secondly, communism came from Russia, and in Poland there is a long tradition of uprisings directed against it, especially that the Soviet Union did not manage to claim credit for defeating fascism, and moreover "the template of nationalistic thought is deeply rooted" and "through sheer coincidence of historical events, which is not that hard to explain, there were many Poles of Jewish descent among the communist leaders, which lent itself to interpretations of communism as a foreign (Jewish) invention."<sup>31</sup> This passage exhibits a characteristic confusion of narrative perspectives, it is unclear whether the historian shows objective facts and relations, his own interpretation of these facts, or the way society interprets them; therefore we cannot be certain if he refers to someone's opinion or presents his own. An auctorial narrator, restating somebody else's views and seeking to distance himself from the presented world would paraphrase the above arguments this way: Polish society rejected communist rule, because its worldview and political inclinations can be categorized as nationalistic ("the template of nationalistic

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30 With the legendary image of parachuting communists.

31 Kula, *Komunizm*, 30-31. The first reason is especially worth further consideration. The term "foreign capital," was not unknown to pre-war political and social discourse, especially in its nationalistic, anti-Semitic form that sees "Jewish capital" and "Jewish money" as coming from outside (of Polish society) with the backing of international financiers. In addition, one more rather general observation pertaining to the socio-economic background of the new Polish regime: one cannot fail to notice that the strong economic and social disagreements in pre-war Poland, the scale of poverty and prominent leftist critique of social relations provided a foothold for the new power and helped it secure a substantial social backing, though not of the whole society, of course. This is attested to in detailed research and also in literature, and in any case this is not new knowledge. I consider overlooking this aspect to be a significant smoothing of the picture, retouching it to fit the basic narrative of rejection and resistance.

thought”), anti-Russian (the second point) and anti-Semitic (the presence of Jews disqualifies anything out of hand as foreign). But this would be an altogether different narrative, irrespective of whether the main thesis holds true and the observations are correct. This confusion of perspectives, shortening of distance, and an unclear relationship with the presented world lend themselves to a peculiar end – they bestow the credibility of science to past opinions and judgements without considering their merit, therefore objectivizing nationalistic and anti-Semitic attitudes as comprehensible to our “Polish” outlook. The unfamiliarity of communism to the Polish national character is reinforced by the impression of abnormality, a strange experiment, something construed that opposes a supposedly organic tradition, destroys order, and impairs fundamental values. Therefore, communism appears as a curiosity, an aberration, that disrupts the proper course of history, fortunately for only a short while.



There is a visible tendency in contemporary historical research on communism to simplify the picture, to unify it. This is not the result of distancing from the not as yet distant subject. On the contrary, it results from its perceived proximity. This is a subject which still highly engages its researchers not only due to its significance, but also its actuality. It becomes a stake in the contemporary game for the lawfulness of the cultural and social order that came into being after the fall of communism in 1989 as the antithesis of the previous order, its reversal. Therefore, a complete appropriation of the pre-1989 symbolic capital seems necessary in order to legitimize the present, its ontological and axiological difference from the pre-fall era. A homogenization of the image entails not only its simplification but also significant displacements and omissions. To satisfy the macrostructure of the heroic narrative, the actors must be created in a purely agonistic fashion, their axiological status must be clearly outlined (communist power as pure evil that defies any empathetic description which would elucidate its social, or even moral, reasons). Any possible nuances and doubts must be removed from view, any non-antagonistic relations between both sides must be obscured, so as not to disrupt the central narrative. “Power” in particular, and communism in general, must be depicted as completely external and foreign to “society”, as a strange and incomprehensible aberration that needs to be exorcised time and again.

*Translation: Rafał Pawluk*