

The ridicule of semi-peripheries

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The New Minister of Culture and National Heritage, and incidentally the First Deputy Prime Minister and a professor of sociology, forbade the performance of a theatre play authored by a Nobel Prize winner. He had not seen the play himself; rather he capitulated to the noisy terror of an extremist group, referred to as the Rosary Crusade, who identified the play as being 'non-Catholic'. They, too, had not seen the play but they were convinced that it was pornographic, spitting on 'Catholic values', whatever that means. As such, they decided to act in accordance with the tradition of the crusades (cf. Szałański 2013). The minister announced he would not finance the play from the public budget; he dislikes 'pornographic' plays (Smith 2015) that violate the 'universally accepted principles of social coexistence' (Premiera..., 2015), despite the fact that the budget comes from the taxes of citizens, including from 'those whose tastes and aesthetic needs are different' (Prof. Wachowski..., 2015) than the minister's and the crusaders'. In this way, the minister transgressed the tradition of the crusades by including in the repertoire of his behaviours the traditions of the inquisition, including holding possession of the index of prohibited works. One fears that this is the first step in transforming the Ministry into one of Culture and National Virginhood, all the more so in the original Polish given the difference between heritage (*dziedzictwo*) and virginhood (*dziewictwo*) is linguistically slight.

His brother quickly distanced himself from the minister's activities by calling his sibling an 'idiot' (Robert Gliński..., 2016). As Julian Tuwim prophetically stated in 1932, 'The Minister was late on the play / By five minutes and fifteen years' (Julian Tuwim..., b.d.). Nor can it be argued that the Ministry has no cultural programme.

As Wojciech Młynarski (2015) pointed out, they 'are not without a programme, / They possess their programme great. / And this programme [...] / in such words be explained: / first, shit, let's brothel, / then, shit, we'll see!'. Meanwhile it also appears that in present-day Poland, though of course not only there, one can 'get out of the education system with a master's degree, not knowing what art is' (Bendyk 2015).

The new Prime Minister supported her deputy by denouncing the spread of pornography (Komisja etyki..., 2015) and eagerly taking on the role of movie rather than theatre reviewer. The Prime Minister critically assessed a Polish film, which was recently awarded an Oscar (Beata Szydło..., 2015). This is rather surprising since part of her government's programme included vigorous actions to promote Polish culture by persuading Hollywood to make movies advocating it. The Prime Minister apparently did not notice that Oscars are the best form of such promotion.

The government's actions form part of a more extensive political performance. The new President pardoned an innocent man at the beginning of his tenure, who is incidentally his party fellow. The man had been convicted of an abuse of power which carries a custodial sentence; which is a good recommendation for his appointment as a cabinet minister. A consequent political philosophy can be seen in this behaviour as pardon before the judgment resonates with forbidding a play before its premiere.

In fact, this is a part of an even more extensive performance, within which the new President broke the constitution three times while in power for four months, and his own party did it six times (Siedlecka 2015), establishing a hard to beat European record and exposing himself to a public criticism by the law faculties of leading Polish universities (Stanowisko pracowników..., 2015), including his own (Uchwała..., 2015), as well as the adviser of his Ph.D. (Promotor..., 2015).

The presidential political milieu after they won the general election decided, in the manner of folk justice, to implement Jean-Jacques Rousseau's programme involving the cancellation of the whole prevailing legal order, to be replaced by the will of the people as the supreme sovereign, wherein the party which 81% of the citizens did not vote for was to be the emanation of the people.

All of these phenomena can be recognised as dangerous, fun, and/or peculiar. They seem to be manifestations of the semi-peripheral mentality. They clearly also arise from the frustrations and complexes that such a location entails. In this case it was compounded by the fact that the new parliamentary majority took power after losing eight successive elections.

In some respects this fits in with the phenomenon of the clash of civilisations, but within a single nation. Zbigniew Mikołajko argues (Kowalska 2015) that social groups and categories whose interests seems to represent the current government are descending from the historical stage into parochial traditionalists who manifest the fear of their decline in such swansongs or – as can also be thought – in the roar of a wounded beast before its agonising death.

Marek Jerzy Minakowski (2014) argues, however, that this might be part of a much more extensive phenomenon of a social revolution which took place elsewhere from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, but only took place in Poland in 1990. This was the revolution of the peasant class, or at least a plebeian strata – which had been admitted to higher education en masse – against the intelligentsia's ethos whose bearers were the descendants of the lesser nobility and the weak Polish bourgeoisie. Throughout the twentieth century the intelligentsia was reproduced according to Pierre Bourdieu's scheme by their habitus to which the elites of the communist regime also adapted.

This adaptation should, however, be considered in historical context. Under the Nazi and Soviet occupations, 'the traditional intelligentsia was decimated and the liquidation was completed' (Jałowicki 2016) under communism. The traditional intelligentsia was replaced by the 'working intelligentsia' who had no 'secular traditions, ethos, manners or lingual competences. Society began to be peasant to a great extent' (ibidem). 'The swansong of the Polish intelligentsia' (Minakowski 2014) was the round table talks and the contract election of 1989. The symbol of the Polish proletarian revolution was the victory of Lech Wałęsa over Tadeusz Mazowiecki during the presidential election of 1990 (ibidem; cf. Jałowicki 2016). Even more importantly structurally-speaking, although less spectacular symbolically, the same year was 'the retirement age [...] for professors who had passed the GCE exam

in the 1938/9 school year. The generation to which rectors of universities and ministries of higher education belonged [...] [then] lost direct influence on the education of the successive generations of students. Their places were taken by' (Minakowski 2014) those who were promoted after 1968 for political rather than scientific reasons.

This coincided in time with the massification of university studies. The approved masses entering formal higher education from the plebeian strata did not take over the intelligentsia's ethos, which preferred cultural over economic capital, instead they concentrated on acquiring the latter by sacrificing freedom for the superficial attributes of success offered by the consumer society. Young people studying after 1990 have none of the intelligentsia's aspirations (Minakowski 2014), which is both the result and a symptom of the death of the 'intelligentsia as an elite-creation force' (Jałowicki 2016).

Z. Mikolejko refers to the feudal division between noble and peasant Poland in the context of the concept of neo-tribes (Maffesoli 1998; Kowalska 2015). The nobility's culture was taken over at the turn of the twentieth century by the intelligentsia, and peasant culture – through socialist industrialisation – by workers. A spectacular expression of the conflict between the neo-tribes occurred in 2015 'removal of the clock in the Prime Minister's Office and its replacement by a cross' (Kowalska 2015). This was a symbolic turning back of the wheel of history as in the nineteenth century when the positivist-minded Greater Polish noblemen replaced the ancestral coats of arms in their courts by clocks.

The symbolic change of the clock into a cross is the very reflection of the clash of civilisations where the clock represents linear, chronological, mechanic, measurable time defined by the Enlightenment and modern civilisation, while the cross represents the time of the archaic civilisation of symbols, rites and rituals, 'removed from the normal turn of hours' (Kowalska 2015), i.e. 'the pathetic time of a spiritual [...] emergency state' (ibidem), i.e. the New Testament's *kairós* (*Καῖρός*) – the opposite of the classical *chronos* (*Χρόνος*) – (ibidem). The supporters of the *kairós* civilisation come from 'frozen cultural and social realities' (Kowalska 2015), accepting – 'as radical Islamists do – technologies of modernity' (ibidem), while not accepting the

modern mentality, i.e. openness, mobility, diversity and differences with the understanding, and especially the acceptance, of the *other* (cf. Kowalska 2015). They hold therefore 'the solidified worlds in which they were once ensconced' (ibidem) and they do not want to pay 'the price of the loss of their cultural home' (ibidem) for the technologies of modernity.

They treat the symptoms of cultural and mental changes, challenges of progress and 'openness to the immensely diverse world, with its multiplicity of lifestyles and ways of thinking, [...] as a threat, [...] an attack on their domestication in [...] the archaic world of eternally repetitive gestures, behaviours, symbols, rituals, external religiosity [... and] mythical stories' (Kowalska 2015). The changes are painful for them, as they represent a challenge to both the 'experience of feudal and folk Catholicism, and communism' (ibidem). Paradoxically, the latter had been for decades the home of traditionalists – uncomfortable but homely. Leftists and liberals, requiring 'reasonable accommodation, opening up for multiplicity and diversity, different forms of existence' (ibidem), are destroying this homeliness. To the neo-tribe of traditionalists the social world is thus collapsing, which they are resisting. They will not pass into extinction without a fight. This activates the 'huge amount of fear' (Kowalska 2015) and aggression on display. The first object of aggression is television journalists. This is because the medium of television is cool (McLuhan 1964). It exposes what is not always obvious, the absurdity of the traditionalist existence, its 'cheap emotionality' (Kowalska 2015) constructed by 'a few symbols, some myths [... and] threadbare words' (ibidem) – '[o]ne great Polish rosary, recited with devotion, but not too wisely' (ibidem).

It remains open for discussion how much the latter phenomenon is associated with the spread of certain attitudes, according to which any form of criticism, even jokes, are perceived as a personal attack, the attitude being a manifestation of the deep complexes of parochial collectivities. In a provincial primary school on the door of the women's toilet a critical (and vulgar) inscription was discovered. It was addressed to a schoolmate of the author (Wulgarny napis..., 2016). Unfortunately for the pupil, the schoolmate's forename was the same as the President of the Republic, and the vulgarism differed from the President's surname by only one letter. On

account of this, the local teaching staff, and later the prosecutor, made a detailed investigation into the possibility of a Presidential insult. Soon detailed investigations began into numerous vulgar inscriptions on the walls of the town; the frequency of potentially offending graffiti being the result of the President's forename – it is one of the most popular male names in the country (Wulgarny napis..., 2016). Meanwhile, the President himself willingly indulged in conversation on Twitter with teenage girls who used vulgar vocabulary and nicknames (Świętochowicz 2016).

The District Prosecutor in Białystok called in a local university professor as a witness in a case concerning public incitement to commit genocide during an anti-government demonstration. This alleged crime was based on the fact that the professor had stated that 'we are ruled by haunted crazy' people (Bielska 2016a). He had expressed his hope that 'this hydra's head can be wrung' (ibidem), encouraging the public to 'begin exercises in this direction' (ibidem). These statements outraged representatives of a pro-governmental association who in fact had not participated in the manifestation, but filed a notice of offense with the prosecutor (Bielska 2016a). The prosecutor opened an investigation 'into the public incitement to exterminate a political group by the person who had called for the killing of members of the Government' (ibidem). It was hypothesised that the suspect 'called for riots and encouraged a rebellion as well as to [...] eliminate a certain social group by wringing the hydra's head' (ibidem). According to the applicants, the hydra is the government (Bielska 2016a), which – as a pro-governmental association – they know better. The applicants overlooked the fact that their comrades were holding a demonstration banner reading 'There will be found a stick to a pest's snout' (ibidem), which could hardly be interpreted as an incitement to charity. Pairing the facts is, however, not the strongest point of this milieu who seem not to know that the wringing of the hydra's head is a quotation from 'The Ode to Youth' by Adam Mickiewicz of 1820. As a result, prosecutors dropped the investigation (Bielska 2016b), considering that the wringing of the hydra's head does not constitute genocide. Stupidity and ignorance have not been held accountable, however, as in liberal legal systems they are not punishable.

The peculiarity of the core was manifested somewhat earlier in legal regulations in the United States. In California, a provision was introduced under which the only sexual activities not recognised as rape are those which are not objected to by a partner who agrees for them implicitly, but which he, or rather she, explicitly accepts (Milewski 2014). This seems, however, in contradiction to the moral norm, according to which a woman's verbal refusal during sexual activities is a subjective expression of her self-esteem rather than an expression of her refusal. A question also arises of whether oral consent is sufficient or a written form is required. The latter would be safer for men, de facto discriminated against in this field of contemporary American judicial practice, because it would guarantee the contracting parties not change their assessment of the situation after emotions taper, e.g. the day after. The introduced regulation assumes that women are, by definition, not willing to make illegal, i.e. unsanctioned by law, sexual activities. Any change in form of (Milewski 2014), or even position in, sexual behaviour requires, therefore, a separate consent, preferably notarised, it is not certain, however, how long in advance. This thus resembles legal regulations of California to the principles of the planned economy, while it simultaneously discourages citizens to morally suspect sexual behaviours, what should please crusaders, including rosary.

What unites the latter with the legal tradition of the United States is Christian fundamentalism, including the tendency to control the sex life of citizens. The Supreme Court of the United States considered unconstitutional the ban on oral and anal sex only in 2003 (Milewski 2014) while state and local regulations still contain sexual fantasies of their authors, e.g. a ban on sexual relations in the ambulance or with Satan unprotected by a condom (ibidem). Polish Catholic fundamentalists – 'already outstanding "Catholics", / but not yet Christians' – as Julian Tuwim accurately named them in 'The Polish flowers' of the early 1940s – who declare their unwillingness to pornography, deliberately gather in places awakening their revulsion in order to spread hatred in the name of charity rather than avoiding those places a wide berth. The Minister of Culture, on the contrary, seems to confuse social coexistence with sexual intercourses, earning incidentally the title of the Minister of the Lack of Culture (Sierakowski 2015).

The nature of the semi-periphery is to share aspirations with the core, with the possibilities of their implementation characteristic of the periphery. It results from this that forms of ridicule in the core are different than in the semi-peripheries, but – as is known – the American province is very far from the norms of the core.

In our journal *Przestrzeń Społeczna (Social Space)*, the relations between the core, semi-peripheries and peripheries are – and seem long to be – a subject of scientific interest.

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